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The Bike Route

By Morganne Armstrong

This is a place you've always known, river flats and roads you've always recognized from plane windows. It's a town you've left many times and will always return to. The bike path from your house to town is a smooth seven-mile trek. It's never been repaved since it was created. You've learned what potholes to avoid, what hills to get speed on beforehand, what dogs will jump their fences in fearless, fruitless pursuit.

The deep ravine that houses a wrecked 1972 Buick. Its' body is rusted shut and filled with moss and branches. You used to believe that the driver's body was still in the front seat, that the whole area was haunted. After your family moved in, your mother had recurring dreams of driving her car off the cliff and she, your brother and you, held hands and prayed before hitting the water below, grey and hard as concrete.

The first slope houses the lethal rottweilers. You taunted them when you were young, running breathless, feet popping at the sound of their growling, their nails clicking on the road.

The expat multi-million mansion clinging to the cliff-side with stilts. It's a creation of two oncologists who want their roof to reflect the river's waves. It's taken years to build, giving you a place to climb into on summer nights, to smoke packs of construction worker's cigarettes, to watch the river, to see sunset illuminate red hues in a self-conscious boy's hair; the place where he got the nerve to ask if he could kiss you.

The dirt pull-out where the river splits, where there's always a car waiting to be towed, where neighborhood kids come to smoke pot and talk about their exes. This is where you pictured your oldest, closest friend calling you, leaving you that hysterical message saying she hoped you'd die. You two never talked again.

The hill where your dad and you watched a SUV lose control and ram into a sedan. You should wear a helmet, but the air rushes past you recklessly and tangles your hair.

The old hippie commune where a man went from cabin to cabin in dead winter and shot as many people as he could. You like to sneak into a different cabin every summer and take something: a thin t-shirt, a yellow suitcase, a glass bottle of ketchup.

The campground where your father tightened your life-vest straps and pushed his red boat into the water, where you found scraps of Playboy magazines teenagers had used to fuel their campfires the night before, where, after a heated encounter with an ex-boyfriend's older brother, you told him his spirit animal was a goat.

The twin brothers, the Cheeks, who had buck-teeth and played Dungeons and Dragons in high school now have shiny BMW motorcycles parked outside. Their younger twin sisters have become beautiful, coveted girls, who arrive home late, taking the back-trail to their window.

The once densely wooded lot, albeit, densely wooded with Alaska's most pitiful tree, the black spruce, is now a pre-made cabin dealer. The only change the owners have made that your family appreciates is buying the old KFC chicken bucket and planting it in the middle of the lot. Your family's 2008 Christmas photo was taken around it.

This road is called Ludecker; it does a swampy loop around the Tanana riverbank. There was a beautiful native girl named Lessa whose huge family lived here. You watched the Yukon Quest with them in 2000, and you girls sat in the snow and sucked on pastel marshmallows. She was shy growing up, but always gave you a gift at Christmas. She grew up tall and beautiful and lives in L.A. now.

A girl named Frankie lived here. You spent your sixteenth birthday with her and two other girls. Your house was empty, so you girls smoked pot and made a cake there; ended up eating the batter, stealing your dad's beer and biking to Frankie's. You sat on her family's dock with your toes in the water, your beers hiding in tall grass. You hadn't seen your parents in a month because your dad was in a hospital three-hundred miles away, but you had a great birthday. Frankie lives in Portland now, where she paints old-fashioned dolls and sells them

on eBay.

The yellow barn house where you practiced soccer every summer. It wasn't an ideal field, stuck between the road and a pond where a VW bug crashed one winter, mixing water with gasoline. Soccer balls would surface from it slick, shining like fish scales.

Another pond, with delicate lily-pads and a busted-up trailer where Caitlin Mosely lived. You were on the cover of the Daily News-Miner together in 1998 and afterward she became a punk and moved into a group home.

The dog-yard of Lance Mackey, who's won both the Iditarod and Yukon Quest four times. The scrawny pack yips at the sound of your pedal strokes, and his wife flirts with high school boys who come into their feed store.

Grebe Street, where you saw a car engulfed in flames from the back of a pick-up. You and some girls were headed to a party, lying on your backs in truck bed when the smoke trail started, heavy black air that sank into your chests. Ash fell in your eyes and you sat up and saw an old sedan broiling, rubber melting into four tar pits. Firemen and cops swarmed the street and they momentarily didn't mind that you kids were out past curfew.

The abandoned school bus where the strawberry-blond football player sat next to you in a rotting brown seat and asked politely if he could kiss you.

The curve where your father drunkenly tried to pass five cars at once. The tractor that hit him belongs to M&M, the company across the street.

The Boat Shop, the yard filled with shiny, nameless boats. In the apartment upstairs, a quiet boy with olive skin and drunk parents heats with the oven in winter.

Your childhood best friend's house. She lives in Anchorage now, with a boyfriend named Bradford. She swallowed two bottles of her father's pills when you two were fifteen and was sent away to Post Falls, Idaho, for rehab. When she came back she said you had changed and she didn't like who you'd become.

The house of the boy who would only make-out with you in his little brother's room. When he found out his high-

school girlfriend cheated on him he drove from Fairbanks to Bozeman to make her cry and then drove home.

The girl you went to Honduras with and hardly talked to. She was named after a certain cut of diamond.

The house that was never completed, where the religious girl you did gymnastics with lived. She had a great smile and oily skin. She went on exchange to France in college, fell in love, and her mother jokes she may never come back.

The Baptist Church where you voted every year with your mom. Their sign always says they are praying for some family in Fairbanks.

The rich man's unnecessary pond house. You see him walk a schnauzer in the morning, hand full of bread crumbs, watching the pond expectantly.

The trailer your first crush lived in, Robert Stugart. He had a blonde bowl-cut and both ears pierced. He would tease you on the bus ride home, but eventually pull your long hair over the seat so he could thread his fingers delicately through your curls. He had a beautiful older sister who worked at Burger King and a younger brother named Kenny. One of them set the trailer on fire last summer, and the charred remains decay by the riverbank. Robert hasn't been seen for years.

The field where you set free the butterfly you raised from a chrysalis. Your mother took a photo of you holding it on your finger timidly, you with your gapped teeth and striped tank top, stroking the velvet wings as lightly as you could.