

# Hoot

Once I was a boy. Love and loyalty were more important then. I'm sorry to report that as life lumbered on they became less so as everyone around me fought for their own portion. I got mine. Some of us never did.

I arrived home one beautiful summer evening from a Little League game at which my friend George was the starting pitcher. Mom said my older brother Hoot and two of his friends had headed out on their bikes and were on their way up to a place called The Eagle that overlooked the city. Mom said I was not to follow them.

"Well, if he can go, why can't I? I'm old enough," I said. "You let me go downtown on the bus by myself." (She wouldn't in *this* century.)

"David, they didn't act like they wanted any company," she said "They're older than you and they want to be by themselves." She said it gently, but I wasn't appeased by her manner.

Hoot was two years older than I, but only when we were boys did our age difference matter much. I naturally acceded to his leadership when I was ten years old, but I was beginning to question why his two year head start in life allowed him the respect he demanded of me.

"If he can go, I should be able to," I persisted. "He's no one special."

"He's twelve, and your older brother," she said, looking up at the ceiling, exasperation showing on her face.

"So? I won't bother them. I probably won't catch up with them anyway."

She turned from me to the kitchen window. On tiptoe, she leaned in over the sink and tilted her head up to see how much light was left in the patch of sky between the

houses.

"Can you get up there and back in a hour?" she said.

"Sure, yeah." I ran out the back door of the house. I flew down the driveway on my bike and turned up the street, pedaling like mad. I sure as heck *would* catch up with the boys. And then thumb my nose while I zoomed past like they were standing still. That would annoy them and allow me to feel just as special as them.

My parents never called my brother Hoot, of course, but out of their hearing I did. He insisted his friends call him Hoot and he carried the name all through his life without ever explaining where it came from.

Hoot's life was beginning to puzzle me at that age. He was the smartest kid I ever met, until we ended our boyhood years and the world's measurement system took over. He could take down a bicycle to its hundreds of parts, but never did very well in school. He would eventually memorize the words to every song ever recorded by Bill Haley And His Comets, but flunked a grade at school when he did horribly in English. He was a loyal friend and advisor to many of the neighborhood kids, but he could not accept authority and would never get along very well with employers.

I was the family whiz kid who succeeded, and I think he sometimes resented it. But at home when we were boys he was able to answer all the questions of a little brother when he had the time for me, which as we grew toward our teens wasn't often. He even taught me my first prayers, and I can't imagine how that happened. To get to me before my overly religious parents must have been pure luck.

As a younger brother I sought his approval most of the time and although we often wrangled over one thing or another, in the end he was the brother with the biggest heart. And that continued into his manhood. Quite simply, even when I didn't like him, I loved him.

Despite what I told my mother, I would have trouble catching up with Hoot and his friends. Their paper routes had made the older boys independently wealthy, enough to purchase their new bikes. The kid's bicycle given to me a few years before was an old Columbia of the style popular in the 1940's and early 1950's, before the lightweight "English" bikes became popular in America. It weighed twice as much as the new bikes that Hoot and his friends had bought with their earnings earlier in the summer. The lightweights had three speeds, including a high gear that allowed the rider to pedal in a slow luxurious manner while the bike sped along at over twenty miles per hour. I could barely reach 10 mph while my legs furiously pumped as though I was trying to escape from a swarm of killer bees.

Hoot and his friends' new bikes had a low gear that allowed them to pedal up the steep hill through the cemetery on the road that led to the statue of the Eagle. Even when I stood on the pedals of my old Columbia, the road was too steep and the bike too heavy to pedal up to the top. I had to get off and push the old bike.

Terribly out of breath, I got the bike up the hill. I jumped back on and rode along until I reached the little circle of pavement where the monument to the Eagle stood. The three boys were nowhere in sight. As the sun dropped toward the horizon in the west I felt a twinge of disappointment in my chest. The trio would have just enough time to get down the other road and arrive home before dark. Even if I flew down the hill at top speed, I'd never catch up with them.

Unless.

I knew of a short cut that would allow me to beat them to the boulder by the side of the road where the park ended at the edge of the city. It might even put me in front of them, in which case I planned to be casually lounging on the grass next to the huge rock when they came around the turn. They'd be shocked to see me, like I'd come out of



nowhere to beat them to the bottom of the hill. It never occurred to me they might not care at all and would ignore me, even had I descended from the sky in a balloon.

I looked out over the city from the hilltop and considered my shortcut. I had tried it only once with poor results, but I was quite sure I could sail down the grassy slope of the hill without killing myself and barrel into the trees beyond the field. Once inside the woods I'd follow a narrow deer path through the trees, slowing my descent down the hill only slightly as I weaved between the pines and spruces. On an earlier attempt my front tire slipped on a tree root crossing the trail and sent me headlong into a bushy young hemlock. I sustained cuts and scratches, but at least my head wasn't slammed into the trunk of a tall pine.

I began to fervently recite a Hail Mary. When I realized I was stalling more than praying, I launched the old Columbia off the road into the field and headed downhill.

The evening dew had settled on the grass and the bike tires slid to the left and right. I held on and rode the foot brake as I sat high in the saddle. There! I could see the slight break in the tree line coming fast toward me and at an ungodly speed I steered between two trees into the gloomy woods. It was darker than I had anticipated. I slowed, very afraid I would hit a tree and crack my skull open and lay all night dying while my family wondered where the hell I was.

I lost the deer trail in the darkness and was soon crashing over rocks and debris on

the forest floor. I've never had a great sense of direction and could easily get lost in the woods, but I was capable of telling which direction was uphill and which was down, even in the dark. I got off the bike and walked it downhill. After what seemed an eternity I came out of the woods into the open to see that wonderful pink glow from a summer evening sky. Another expanse of grass lay before me with a narrow old cow path meandering down to where I would intercept Hoot and his friends.

I stood still and held my breath, listening for the boys. I heard nothing. They had either not yet arrived at the boulder or had been there and gone. In the latter case, I might have a chance to catch up with them from behind.

The pink and blue sky began to darken and for an instant I wished I was home on the front porch sipping a cool glass of lemonade, enjoying the sunset. Later I'd go inside and continue reading my Boy Scout Handbook. I would have most of the 400 pages all but memorized by the time I was old enough to join them in the fall.

I was now unsure why I wanted to be with the three boys who surely didn't want my company. And I felt Hoot's friends were complete idiots, frankly. But I wanted to impress my older brother and to show him .... something. I think I wanted to show him I was better than him. Finally, competitiveness was winning out over brotherly love. I knew I could take care of myself, and I didn't want to ask him questions all the time or depend on his approval of me. I resented him being older, though it made no sense.

I heard the boys coming and I got going. On my way to the boulder, I passed beside a reedy marsh that separated the cow path from the park road by about fifty feet. Pedaling like crazy I drew up even with the boys across the marsh. They didn't notice me through the tall grass as they laughed and joked among themselves. They rode

slowly as they talked, and I furiously pedaled toward the boulder to beat them. I moved ahead and looked back over my shoulder to see how far behind they were and drove my bike right off the cow path into the marsh.

I don't know which laws of physics were in play that evening, but somehow I wound up flat on my back in about three inches of water with the old Columbia completely upside down on top of me, perfectly upright, as if someone had decided to change a tire and to hold me captive at the same time. The old-style wide handle bars spanned my chest and pinned me to the wet ground. With all the strength I had left, I pushed the bike over on its side and crawled out of the marsh, sopping wet in a T-Shirt now torn completely down the front. The boys kept going and may not have even noticed me.

I sat crying. My heart was broken. I had owned the T-shirt only a week, a souvenir from an amusement park we visited on vacation. I loved that T-shirt. I still think of it. If it had survived my childhood, today my seventy year old wife would come across it from time to time in my dresser and ask if we had a ten year old living with us she hadn't noticed.

I pulled my bike out of the marsh and rode off, dejected. The trio had to cross the lower part of the cemetery again to get home and maybe they would stop there. I might catch up with them after all. When I reached the cemetery the boys were not there. I got off my bike and sat down on a convenient headstone. I tried to repair my special t-shirt by tediously tying some of the loose threads together.

On the front of the shirt was a pretty girl standing next to a huge cigar. A stylized owl perched on the cigar leered at the young lady, his huge eyes devouring her. "You're a HOOT!" was emblazoned in large letters across the scene. The word "Hoot" stood out much larger than the rest. Mom had at first said No when I asked if I could buy it

with money I'd been given for vacation. After my whining and carrying on she finally relented and said I could have it if I promised to never wear it in the vicinity of the nuns and our Catholic school.

At ten years of age I wanted my older brother and I to always be close, and I'd planned to have the T-shirt with his name on it for the rest of my life. But any closeness we had would not outlast the summer of our youth. As Hoot and I grew older we saw each other dimly, like colors fading away in the sunset, leaving only shadows. We kept in touch but we were never confidantes. We were too different.

We would have a disjointed relationship all through our lives. He would never acknowledge my worth and I would never ask his advice. His life did not go well. We loved each other and visited, but we could never bridge the divide that began to widen as we entered our teens.

On that evening long ago, as the sky darkened to black and the stars came out, I continued to sit on the headstone, not far from where we stood in the same cemetery last year when we buried Hoot. I will always feel the loss.

Soft summer evenings don't come often enough. At night I sit out back and watch the sky darken to indigo and then black. I feel the warm breeze hug me with memories of days long ago. I try to remember the feeling of a full heart, when love could hurt, but hope allowed that more love would heal.

Tonight I think of all the summer evenings that went by and the relatively few times Hoot and I had the opportunity to share them. Nothing special prevented us, just a lack of awareness their number would be limited.

We regrettably walked through our lives on different sides of the marsh. I remember there were reasons for that, but I can no longer bring them to mind. In a way we were quite different. But in other ways we

were quite the same. We were, after all, brothers.

Rest In Peace, Paul G. Griffin,  
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