

The Hills Are Alive

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I uncharacteristically rose early. Lots to do. After my morning ablution, breakfast and a little reading to catch up on some assignments since I knew I wouldn't be doing any for the rest of the day, I started to assemble what I needed for the trip. I grabbed backpack, and filled it with a few necessities. Of course my snack and lunch. Better take my down vest since I may be sitting still for a while, and it sometimes gets chilly in Boston in early October. I looked around the room, checking to see what I forgot. God, what a pigsty. My apartment and contents were small, dreary, ratty, dingy, dusty, grungy—in short, perfect as grad student housing. Both roommates were out at work or school, but I had the day off. And I was going to take advantage of it. I had arranged to borrow Mike's bicycle and I was getting out of this rattrap of a city, rattrap of an apartment, at least for a day. 'Gotta get out of this place, if it's the last thing I ever do...' rolled around my mind. Finally, for some fresh air.

I shouldered the pack, donned the helmet, opened the door, lofted the bike, set it on the landing, locked the door behind me, carried it down the two flights to the street. I lived on Buswell near BU campus, so took the Fenway. It was sweet to stay off the roads and ride the wide sidewalk. But then out to Tremont to begin a more urban trek. Too many cars. Densely packed houses and office buildings, occasional trees. Green with dabs of yellow and red. Winter on the way.

I focused carefully. I was not one of those bikers who whipped in and out of traffic. I liked my knees and other favored parts. I was super careful each time I neared an intersection or a parked car forcing me into traffic. I was super wary of the parker opening his door. I was super wary of the cars whizzed by, occasionally honking. Aggressive assholes. Exhaust smoke filled my face. May as well be sitting on top of a smokestack. Occasional pretty women pedestrians tempted my attention, yet I could not afford the luxury. All time and attention on the road. Let's get there in one piece, thank you ladies. The sky was clear blue. The wind was refreshing. The exercise exhilarating. HooAh. 'On the road again, can't wait to get on the road again...' Here I am.

Finally I got onto Blue Hills Road and then parkway. Offices and houses had drifted away, and more suburban housing lots dotted my path. Green grass lawns. Green trees rainbowed with autumn. Finally, trees. Fewer houses, more trees. The wind became exhilarating. I rounded a curve to begin a long, straight, uphill trek. The road was solidly bounded by trees. Definitely heading towards the hills. I put my back into it, legs pumping, pushing the gear limits to feel my calves and thighs awakening. Face down towards my racer handlebars, blood pumping with exercise endorphins, the trees on the right opened suddenly to reveal a policeman standing beside his cruiser, holding his radar gun pointed at—me. Ha, a speed trap! The cop called out, matter of fact "you're going 22 miles per hour". I chuckled, and pumped onward.

Finally, I got to the top of the road which peaked at the foot of a major hill. Birches, spruce, bushes, leaves, dirt. Good clean dirt. I stopped, walked the bike into the woods about 10 feet to hide it from the road, and chained it to a thin birch. I then trekked towards the top. It was a hike, not a true climb, but was steep at a few spots. I got to the

top and looked. The Blue Hills Reservation spread out before me, barely ten miles from downtown Boston and open wilderness woods filled my view. There were four hills in the foreground, more in back. I could see the valley of woods below, the peaks of woods above. This was a good spot. I found comfy ground, doffed my pack, set down, took out water and snack. The first bites were not tasty—but it wasn't for taste, it was for nutrition. haha. The second bits were sweet and yummy. My watch confirmed the sun's zenith at noon.

I breathed in the fresh earth. Fresh air. Fresh smells, musty only with real dirt. Open skies. Green. Brown. Blue. Birds calling. Birds flying. Birds soaring. Is that a hawk? My gaze followed it cutting through the blue backdrop, ridding the thermals. Clouds drifting by. High cirrus wisps—cold front coming. I sat. I cleared my mind. I felt the ground I sat on. The hills sat and looked back at me. Chitters and squawks. Caws. Rustling leaves in the gentle breeze. Time passed. Time stood still.

My attention shifted to my immediate area. Low bushes, a small trail. One nearby bush caught my eye. I was not a botanist, so didn't know its species. It was about 3 feet tall, hence its peak was around eye-level for me. It extended branches down in a curve towards the ground to a diameter of about 5 feet in a circle around its center. Each branch had leaves on it. Below the end of each branch was a little seedling, clearly of the same bush. Each branch was protecting its baby. How sweet. I contemplated the glory of this circle of life for a while, and then my gaze returned to the broad landscape of rolling hills. Suddenly I heard footsteps and human chatting. A young man and woman appeared on the trail. They stopped, somewhat startled by my presence sitting on the ground. He nodded. She smiled. Cute. Nice. They walked on and away. I returned to the hills. They returned to me. It was starting to get chilly as the sun fell slowly. I put on my down vest. I opened my mind again.

Motion caught my eye down and to the left. It was a single goose down feather floating in the air near my knee. Hey, little fella! I put out a finger and it clung. Static charge or a hug. I took the hug. Free from the vest, eh? Well, go on your way. I waved my finger so the wind took the feather and returned its freedom. It floated away. Thanks for the hug.

Time stood still. Yet the sun fell. Time warp. I looked at my watch. Six o'clock. Time to go. I got up, stretched, looked around for the last time and started in the general direction from whence I came. Or tried to. Where was that? I started down and didn't like the steepness and rocks. Too insecure. It must have been a different way. I searched around for an easy way down. Going down was always more risky than going up. I finally weaved down around rocks and trees and bushes. I looked for my bike, but to no avail. I looked more. Nada. I went to the road and looked up the hill but still no bike. The sun refused to hold still. I walked around a bit more, still nothing. Time to go. I waited and popped up my thumb to a pickup that dutifully picked me up. He was a hippie, thank goodness. Rednecks are more risky around me, since I was rather shaggy myself. We chatted mindlessly. The hills receded as cultivated suburban homes popped up. He dropped me at a bus stop. Exhausts choked my lungs.

Eventually, a bus came. What can you say about a city bus? Middle aged driver caring little about his job. Portuguese maids leaving their suburban jobs for home. Teens heading into the city. Black, brown, white. They gave me little attention. I sat and looked out as the suburbs melded into the urbs. Darker, grayer, more concrete. More garbage.

Cute women. I exited at the trolley stop, waited, got on. Again black, brown, white. Gray. Dirty but without clean dirt. Clacketa clacketa clacketa. We went in towards town, and the trolley became a subway, down into the bowels of the city. Black, black. Roaring like ocean waves crashing on rocks. Roaring like a hurricane. Roaring like a subway. Stinking of oil.

I got out at my stop, walked slowly up to sunlight, to my apartment, head down, tired, drained, feeling the day weighing on my shoulders. My backpack was filled with bricks. I went up and told Mike that I would have to drive out tomorrow to find his bike. No problema. I contemplated my trip. I complemented Mike's concoctions. Powerful mushrooms and brownies. Thanks so much, mon ami.