The Bicycle Man

I don’t remember the first time I saw him, he was just sort of always there. Ragged shirt, ripped jeans, bronzed skin from his time spent outside, wild hair that hadn’t been washed in weeks, and a big smile on his face... I usually saw him on route 64 from the comfort of my own vehicle. I recall being a young kid in a car seat, strapped in the back of my family’s red Honda Minivan, watching him ride his rusty, beaten up bicycle down the side of the busy highway.

“Mommy, there’s the bike man! Why doesn’t he ride in a car like us?” I would always ask. “Not everyone has a car, honey” she would reply in various exhausted ways each time. Those were my earliest memories of The Bicycle Man. More often than not, I would pass The Bicycle Man on the highway on my way to school growing up, wondering where he had come from, where he was going, what his story was. It became sort of a routine, a comfort, seeing his smile in my daily routine.

I remember growing up in a comfortable home and learning how to ride a bike for the first time. How patient and calm my father was, teaching his little girl to ride on two wheels, knowing that those two wheels would turn into four and that she would go off on her own one day. I learned from the best. I wonder who taught The Bicycle Man to ride his bike.

I don’t remember whose idea it was to go eat at the Riverfront Café for my thirteenth birthday, rural Kentucky’s chicest waterfront restaurant, but I do recall the scene that my friends caused as they sung happy birthday to me about 40 decibels too loud in the quaint outdoor diner. As I tore the tissue paper and bow off the new pair of expensive bedazzled Miss Me Jeans from my parents, my thirteen-year-old self couldn’t contain her shallow excitement. Taking in the scene, I looked over the balcony just in time to see The Bicycle Man, in his usual unkempt shirt,
shredded jeans, and greasy hair, whizzing down the sidewalk on his rusty, dilapidated bike. He was smiling. I thanked my parents and quickly put the suddenly less appealing, overpriced jeans back in the gift bag.

I remember how when I was seven, my parents started taking me to volunteer at the Soup Kitchen once a month with them. I learned at a young age that not everyone was as fortunate as I was, and that there were a lot of people like the Bicycle Man out in my town. *I wonder if The Bicycle Man ever eats at the soup kitchen.*

I don’t remember what trivial and, likely, gluttonous items I needed from the grocery store on that fall day in 2015, but I do remember who was standing in front of me in line: The Bicycle Man. He had but a few simple groceries in his basket: some off-brand chips, a jug of distilled water, a pack of hot dogs. I watched from behind my cart, feeling instantly guilty for the excess of frivolous food I had hoarded behind my plastic barrier on wheels. Feeling as though I was seeing a sort of childhood icon, I couldn’t take my eyes off of The Bicycle Man. He fumbled through his worn wallet, looking for enough cash to cover his total. I could tell that he didn’t have enough, and the line behind us was growing. Wanting to help without embarrassing him, I discretely dropped the only cash I had in my wallet – a crisp $20 bill – on the floor. Tapping him on the shoulder, I said “Sir, I think you dropped your money.” Proud of my fast thinking, I instantly felt as though I had saved The Bicycle Man’s day. That is, until he picked up the $20 bill, looked at it, handed it to the cashier, saying “This was on the floor and isn’t mine… you should keep it up here at the register in case someone comes back looking for it.” My jaw dropped as I watched The Bicycle Man walk away from the cash register with only half of his groceries.
I remember the advice my high school history teacher used to always preach to us students: “Nobody else in the world is better than you, you hear me? But you’ve got to remember that just the same, you are no better than anybody else.” And I used to believe him. Looking back, however, I can confidently say that my high school history teacher was wrong. *The Bicycle Man is better than I will ever be, and let me tell you why.* The Bicycle Man is humble. He has all he needs, nothing more and nothing less. He doesn’t flaunt his excess, and he doesn’t live beyond his means. *How many times have I had more than I needed, and still wanted more?* The Bicycle Man is hardworking. He rides and rides and rides with a smile on his face, never once asking for a handout or a lesser burden in life. He uses what he has to do what he needs, living for a purpose and striving to meet that purpose. *How many times have I wished for a different life, ignoring the many blessing in front of me?* The Bicycle Man is honest. He is a beacon for justice, even when it seems that justice is working against him. He takes only what is his, never accepting what he hasn’t earned. *How many times have I taken the easy way out, accepting privileges that come my way of which I haven’t earned?*

Without words, The Bicycle Man has shown me who I want to be. I want to be as humble as him. As hardworking as him. As honest as him. *I wonder if The Bicycle Man knows how incredible he is.* Not incredible because he is poor. Not incredible because he is pitiable. Not incredible because he is some ploy in a greater scheme of society glamorizing those suffering in order to make a point. The Bicycle Man is incredible because of his character. In the face of hardship, his true character remains a beacon of light and hope and goodness. His character – a humble, hardworking, honest individual – is an example for which *every single person* should strive – rich, poor, young, old, privileged, or not. He demonstrates the goodness that we are all...
called to be, yet many including myself do not reach. For this reason, I say that the Bicycle Man is, in fact, better than me, and will remain my inspiration for the rest of my existence.

Thank you, Bicycle Man, for reminding me who I am supposed to be in this world.