

Randy's Class

14 . . . 33 . . . 22 . . . 14 . . . 33 . . . 22 . . .

I recite the combination of my new lock as I walk from the Y locker room to the spin studio, picking my way between treadmills and weight machines. I must burn these numbers into my brain. My street clothes, car keys, phone, and wallet are locked away and I can't get them back if I forget the number.

I'm surprised how crowded the gym is at 5:30 a.m. Women in baseball caps, hair gathered in ponytails, and men in gym shorts and t-shirts stride on treadmills as if they really are going somewhere. A woman wearing a weight vest walks through the gym carrying large weight plates in each hand. A blocky man on the stair-climber doggedly ascends a never-ending mountain. A gray-haired grandmother patiently cycles. A young girl does crunches and leg lifts under the tutelage of whatever speaks in her ear pods. A twenty-something ex-football player curls dumbbells I'd need two hands to pick up. It's a zoo, but it's also church. All of them are serious. I'm going to be serious, too, because aging and an office job has made my muscles atrophy, ballooned my belly fat. The mitochondria in my cells are shuttered factories. Exercise is will be my self-imposed intervention.

When I open the door to the spin studio, it's as if I'm entering a night club. The room is a square with bikes bolted to the floor in concentric semicircles facing the instructor's bike like disciples around a guru or tables around a stripper's stage. The lights are dimmed, with windows behind the back row of bikes allowing some additional light from the gym proper. Fans suspended from the ceiling blow air that eddies in mini weather patterns. Class hasn't started but

everyone's already cycling. Last time I tried to take this class, I came five minutes early but that hadn't been early enough – all bikes were taken. Because this isn't just any spin class. This is *Randy's* class. Today I get lucky. There's one bike left in the middle row. I claim it quickly.

I pull the knob behind the seat to adjust the height so my legs will circle smoothly through the nadir of the peddling, neither reaching nor cramped. I put my weight on the bike to steady myself as I mount the bike, and find the handlebars wobble badly as if about to fall off.

"You got the broken bike," the guy on the bike next to me says. He's smooth-shaven, both face and scalp, with a big chest and a friendly smile. "They're coming to fix it this afternoon."

I sense this is common knowledge among the regulars. And why no one had claimed this bike.

"Yeah, it's the only one left. I think it's just the handlebars."

"I'd be happy to trade bikes with you." I'm touched by his generosity – he's protecting a newbie.

"That's okay, I'll be careful. Thanks."

I start peddling. Suddenly, Randy himself is standing in front of me. *The Randy*, whose classes summon reverent tones when they came up in conversation. I feel an involuntary thrill.

"This bike is broken," His expression is friendly, protective. "You got it just before they came to fix it. The handlebars won't support you."

Randy has brown eyes and close-cropped brown hair. He's middle-aged, his body saying late 30s, the lines in his face saying Medicare-eligible, the truth probably somewhere in between.

"I'll put my weight in the middle," I promise, looking down at the handlebars as if I'm afraid he'll take the bike away. When I look back up, Randy is gone.

I lean forward, putting my left hand where the handlebar attaches to the frame, and slowly pedal as I program the bike's monitor. I enter my age, weight, gender. The monitor asks me to rate my general physical condition. I choose medium, the way patients lie to doctors about smoking or drinking. The menu requires me to choose a "level." I pick one just below the 50th percentile. Once I answer all the questions, the monitor's sensors spring to life, telling me my revolutions per minute, my heartrate, the calories I'm burning, and my color-coded performance "zone."

Each bike's headlight broadcasts the color of the rider's zone. Soothing pink is the lowest zone. I pedal faster and my light changes to a smooth blue. I push the lever that increases flywheel resistance and the light changes to an energetic green. I looked at bikes around me and see two higher colors – a bright yellow, like warning signals at a railroad track, and an alarming red. At the front of the studio, Randy adjusts the PA system, then climbs on his own bike. Led Zeppelin fills the room, an aroma from Randy's secret recipe.

"Okay, we're on flat road." Randy is conjuring an imaginary ride we will take together. Everyone's pace increases in response to Randy's voice.

"I'm brainwashing my kids," Randy says. "I told them Led Zeppelin is the best rock band of all time." Randy looks too old to have young kids. It must be a second marriage, I think, a new family late in life.

"Brainwashing is good," someone calls out. Encouraged, Randy responds.

"My 11-year old and my eight-year-old – if you ask them who the lead singer is for Led Zeppelin, they can tell you." Randy is home-schooling his children on the holy truths of rock-and-roll. We pedal in silence for a few minutes and then Randy says "Okay, let's raise it. About 6.5."

Years ago, before the Y had bikes with fancy monitors, imagination was the monitor and bikers would adjust resistance of the flywheel and pedaling speed based upon a subjective scale of 1 to 10 in difficulty. Randy is old-school. Monitors and zones on the new bikes are just bells and whistles. In Randy's class, what needs measuring is something inside each rider.

"Who did this song?" Randy calls out, as a new tune begins. Randy's playlist is legendary, one reason some of the older regulars are devoted to the class. People have told me Randy creates a new playlist every week, but it's always from the sixties and seventies. Randy always quizzes the class on each song. This time, no one knows the answer, so Randy tells us.

"Strawberry Alarm Clock. 1967. By the way, today is Jimmy Page's birthday. January 9. I should've mentioned that when Led Zeppelin was playing."

As I pedal, I compare my color to those of the men and women around me and feel zone-shamed. I struggle to make blue but the guy beside me pedals effortlessly in green. Another pedals yellow as if it's coasting pink, and an Asian lady is deep in ambulance red and staying there. But then I realize it doesn't matter. Each rider is focused on his or her own path with no ill-will toward anyone. Yet something unites us all. I can't put my finger on what it is.

"Out of the saddle. We have hills to climb," Randy rises from his seat to pedal while standing. "Increase resistance."

We all stand and pedal up the imaginary hill, an array of colors, an array of hills, ascending together, the colored lights of our bike monitors like a string of Christmas headlights on a fleet of starships in the dark. Suddenly, the guy beside me who'd offered to take my damaged bike jumps off his own bike and runs out of the studio. Moments later, another fellow follows behind him. I wonder what's going on. Someone says something I can't hear and Randy responds, "I think he wants to help."

None of it makes sense, so I put it out of my mind and focus on riding. The others are pedaling steadily, no slackers, and I won't be one either. We continue climbing hills together. When I cycle into the yellow zone, even though I can't stay long, I mentally pat myself on the back. But after a bit, I see Randy looking past me through the windows in back of the studio. I twist around to look, too, continuing to pedal. From where I sit, the wall blocks any view of the right side of the gym, but through windows on the left I see people outside the studio have stopped exercising and gathered together, watching something on the ground in the area I can't see. From looks of concern on their faces, it isn't something they're watching, but someone. "If you're the praying type," Randy says as we continue riding, "right now might be a good time to send a prayer."

It's unnerving to hear a comment like that in cycling class, but now I understand. Someone in the gym has had a heart attack or some life-threatening injury. That's why the two guys had dashed out of the studio. Someone just outside the door of this studio, fifteen feet away from me on the other side of the wall, is about to die. Time has passed since the two guys had hurried from the studio, so I assume paramedics have been called. I imagine them pounding the victim's chest or loading a body on a gurney. I keep twisting around to look, but, because of the wall, all I can see is the crowd watching. There's nothing I or anyone in the studio can add, so we keep pedaling. But even as he leads us up another hill, Randy, whose bike faces the windows, continues watching.

When class is over, I get off my bike and look out the window. The crowd is gone. I wipe down my bike with spray cleaner, then emerge from the dark studio into the blinding light of the gym proper. I don't see blood on the floor or other physical evidence to corroborate trauma. I look in faces around me, but they're all lost in the world of exercise.

I wander over to the free weights for wrist curls, then to the floor mats for yoga, but everything feels wrong. I feel I should call my wife, as if I just survived a plane crash she might have seen on TV. Finally, I accept that this unsettled emptiness I feel isn't fixable. I give up on working out and head for the locker room.

As I turn the corner, I see riders from Randy's class congregated outside the locker room door. Randy's there, too. I sense they're talking about the event, so I sidle up to listen. But when I get close enough to hear, they disperse. All I pick up is that "he" is at the hospital. I turn to Randy.

"Is he alright?"

Randy gives me the summary I'd been looking for. The bald guy who'd bolted out of the spin studio is a fireman. He performed CPR, but it hadn't worked. The paramedics arrived and did CPR again, reviving the victim. "He was out for at least ten minutes," Randy says, "but he was breathing when they took him away."

"What happened? Did he fall? Did he have a heart attack?"

"I don't know. He was a new guy. We hadn't seen him before." Randy nods at me, turns, and walks away.

I push through the locker room door, navigate to my locker, and sit on the hard wooden bench. I contemplate how, in a New York minute, everything can change with no color-coded warning. That sometimes the hill wins. That phoning my wife won't change a thing. That street clothes, car keys, phone, and wallet don't matter as much as I thought they did.

Bio:

Mike Wilson is the author of *Arranging Deck Chairs on the Titanic*, (Rabbit House Press, 2020), political poetry for a post-truth world. His work has appeared in *Fiction Southeast*, *Mud Season Review*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Deep South Magazine*, *Anthology of Appalachian Writers*, and other publications. Mike lives in Lexington, Kentucky.