

A Ride That Was Never Told

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My friends often ask me how I started mountain biking.

“I started with Dartmouth Mountain Biking Club (DMBC) in spring 2014!”

“How nice!”

But my answer is a lie. It’s like saying “hey look, if *I* can learn mountain biking with DMBC, then *you* can do it, so come to my beginner trip!” I also tell them my first downhill ride took place at Stevens Pass bike park the summer of 2014. Again, I say that in order to impress them with how awesome it feels to shred trails with a \$5000 downhill machine. “Like riding endless waves” was what I tell them, but I always skip the parts about the crashes and the injuries, about the fear and the desperation.

It’s interesting how people always love to hear these heavily filtered stories told with zero fidelity to the complete experience, and yet they can’t wait to respond with a wide-eyed “that’s *so* cool!”

I always tell stories with listeners in mind by giving them as much context as possible—most people have been to a skiway and know how it feels to be shuttled by a chair lift and to ride *something* down the hill. They also have the idea of how the trails in Oak Hill are comparable to slightly wider and smoother hiking trails. Unfortunately, my first real downhill ride took place near a small village in southwestern China, a place with so much outlandish symbolism and so little Western relevance that I simply gave up trying to establish a context for my friends. This ride thus went untold.

It was early in the morning. My parents were sipping green tea on the wooden balcony facing Lugu Lake as the village sluggishly woke itself up. I had been quickly disillusioned by the staged “folk” shows that revealed nothing about the folk culture and the same over-priced handicrafts to be found at any tourist attraction in the nation. Hoping to learn more about the village by means other than snapping photos and shopping for souvenirs, I went on a bike tour on my own. Disappointed by the village, I went up a big hill, trying to leave it behind.

On my way there, I saw tourists riding rented electric scooter bikes, one after another. They were either stopping at a scenic viewpoint, taking endless selfies, or on their way hitting the next. The road was frequented by commercial trucks spitting dark clouds of choking smoke. After coming to the US for two years, I nearly forgot that in China, bikes yield to cars. I was pissed off by the torrents of scooters and smoking trucks when I discovered what seemed to be a horse trail on the side of the road. “An escape!” I thought.

After standing still for ten minutes at the trailhead, I finally made up my mind to go down. It was more exciting than skiing the virgin snow—nobody had ever ridden a bike on this trail, and if I crash, nobody would even know there was a man down. “YOLO”, a term my Dartmouth friend taught me, was finally applicable, so off I went. The initial descent was a gnarly, steep, zigzagging, rain-washed gulley. At that time I hadn’t learned to use the front brake, nor did I have the guts. The cheap hard-tail I was riding had a head angle as steep as 70 and suspension travel as little as 100mm. Even with the saddle dropped to the bottom and my weight shifted all the way back, I still felt as if I would go over the bar.

After sliding and turning with rear wheel locked for dozens of meters, the trail straightened out. My bike lost its grip on the gravel as I picked up what turned out to be too much speed. With the incredible amount of forward momentum I simply ignored my rear wheel when it swung recklessly from side to side. “Sheer joy of gravity,” I thought. My world channeled into one dimension—I could only go forward. But what really pushed my adrenaline level to its peak were the appearance of two buffalos standing right in middle of the trail. “Sh*t!”

I slammed the brakes. Despite the harsh squeaking sound, the steep hill kept pushing me towards to buffalos until we were only a couple meters apart. I stayed still, but my heart was racing. Could this be the end? What chance do I have against *two* buffalos? If anything goes wrong, should I fight them to death or try to escape on my bike, which will eventually kill me when I crash? I snuck past the giant creatures while harboring these terrifying thoughts. Immediately after I had cleared them, I was flying like a downhill champion. As I left the danger behind me, I maintained the speed until the bottom of the hill, where I congratulated myself for what I have achieved, or more accurately, survived.

The marginal effect of raising tolerance and developing addiction for drug or alcohol abusers is maximum on the first attempt. The same goes for rides. My first ride became a gateway for many future rides. I went straight back to the trailhead after the first ride to go again.

When I reluctantly joined my parents for lunch, my dad asked about what I had been up to. I told him the same thing I would often tell my friends after indulging myself with gravity and speed at Oak Hill, Boston lot, and later on, Stevens Pass, Pisgah National Forest, and Asheville.

“I just went for a ride.”