One more ride before winter

The bike's going under a cover soon, so I took it up the river one more time.

It's getting to that point where every ride might be the last one of the year. So Sunday I took the bike out early, before the city woke up. I'd checked the weather like five times Saturday night. Clear, cold, low forties in the morning, maybe fifty-five by the afternoon. Good enough. I laid out everything before bed so I wouldn't talk myself out of it. Thermal under the jacket, the thick gloves, the scarf I always forget and always regret forgetting. I barely slept, but that's not really news.

Got up around five. The street was empty except for one guy hosing down the sidewalk in front of the bakery on the corner. He nodded at me. I nodded back. That's our whole relationship and I love it.

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Over the bridge, up the West Side, then out of the city until the buildings got lower and the trees started. Leaves everywhere. Orange, red, the kind of yellow that looks fake. Cold enough that my hands went numb through the gloves.

The Williamsburg Bridge that early is something else. Nobody on it. The river was flat and kind of silver and the sun wasn't up yet, just this pale line over Queens behind me. Then the West Side Highway with the Hudson on the left the whole way up, and the George Washington Bridge getting bigger and bigger until you're under it. I always look up when I go under it. Every time. Like I'm going to see something new.

I crossed over into Jersey and took 9W north along the Palisades. That road in the fall is kind of unfair. The trees close in over you on both sides and the light comes through in pieces, and there are leaves blowing across the road in front of you like they're racing you. A couple of them hit my visor. One got stuck in my collar and I didn't find it until I got home.

Then up past Bear Mountain. There's a stretch there where the road curves along the edge and the river opens up below you, wide and grey and still, with the hills going purple on the other side. I pulled over on the shoulder just to look at it for a minute. Turned the engine off. It was so quiet my ears rang.

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I stopped at a gas station somewhere upstate and had the worst coffee I've ever had and it was perfect.

It was one of those places with a little general store attached. Firewood stacked outside, a hand-written sign for apple cider donuts that said SOLD OUT in a different color marker. The coffee came out of a pot that had clearly been sitting there since the day before. It tasted like burnt pennies. I drank all of it standing next to the bike with both hands wrapped around the cup, trying to feel my fingers again.

There was an older guy in there buying a lottery ticket and a bag of beef jerky, and he walked over and looked at the bike for a while. Asked how far I'd come. I said Brooklyn. He said "in this cold?" and shook his head like I'd told him something sad. Then he told me about the bike he had in 1984, in a lot of detail, for about fifteen minutes. I

didn't mind. He had a good laugh.

I sat on the curb out front after he left and ate a granola bar that had been in my jacket pocket for possibly a month. It was fine. I watched a couple trucks come and go. A dog in the back of one of them stared at me the whole time the guy was pumping gas, like he was trying to figure out what I was doing there. Honestly, same.

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I went a little further north after that, just to Cold Spring, and walked around for an hour. It's a tiny town on the river with antique shops and one main street, and everyone up there was wearing fleece vests. I got a grilled cheese at a place near the train station and sat by the window. The sun finally came out properly and warmed up the whole side of my face. I almost fell asleep in the booth.

Around three I started heading back. Took the other side of the river this time, down 9D and then the Taconic for a bit, then the Saw Mill. It gets dark so early now. By the time I hit the city line the light was already going orange and low.

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Rode back as the sun was going down. There's this moment coming back into the city when the skyline shows up all at once and you forget you were tired. I always forget that's going to happen. Every time it gets me.

This time it was right as I came down the Henry Hudson. The buildings were lit up pink on one side, and the windows were starting to turn on one by one. I was cold, my back hurt, my hands were

basically gone. And I still slowed down to look at it. I think I said something out loud inside the helmet. I don't remember what.

Got home around six. Parked the bike, came upstairs, and stood in the shower until the hot water ran out. Then I ate cereal for dinner on the floor with my back against the couch, which is my favorite way to end a long ride, it turns out. I wrote for a while after midnight, just about the road, the leaves, the guy with the bike from 1984. I'll probably never post any of it.

Bike's going under a cover next week probably. See you in April.

— Shay

Thanks for reading. There are more of these on my site, one every couple of weeks.