

**Delaware River** by Michael Colbert

Colin Kinkle and his father, Jerry, biked to watch Washington and his Continental Army cross the Delaware every year on Christmas Day. Jerry Kinkle had grown up doing this with *his* father. They were a long line of New Jersey Kinkles. They were the only sons their fathers dreamed of raising.

They'd left before seven to account for their slower pace this year. Mr. Kinkle pedaled in syncopation until his knee was sufficiently lubricated. To all appearances, the surgery had left him undaunted. Colin asked around his father's tender knee when they discussed their plan for Christmas morning, placing feelers to see how much he needed to scale back tradition. Mr. Kinkle responded ardently, their river ride something he would not concede.

Colin eased his legs into his father's rhythm. He and Jason biked all summer when they shared an apartment, kept it up a bit through the fall. But Jason didn't get it. Because the day they'd driven to Lambertville and found dinner by the canal and walked across the river to New Hope as the sun flooded the water pink, Colin stole a glance of Jason and found nothing in his face. They were only friends going off campus for a night. When fall semester started, Jason kept texting and Colin let the messages collect until they ceased.

Because everything with Jason caught Colin off guard. He'd only been with women, hadn't even thought he might like men. But it was undeniable, how they talked to each other across the dark of their bedroom before going to sleep, how sometimes they'd shoot hoops shirtless and would catch each other looking. Maybe it was just posturing. Maybe it was just a need to compare your body to another man's, a need you were too afraid to ever admit having.

Colin's body did not succumb to the hills as his father's did. He anticipated the dips in the concrete, glided over smooches of gravel as they came. His dad clawed the handlebars.

"Let's take a water break," he called, and Colin jerked the brakes.

Straddling their bikes, Mr. Kinkle unzipped Colin's backpack and slipped out two water bottles, tossing one to Colin underhand like a softball.

"You been biking a lot?" he asked.

Colin nodded. He would go for twenty miles on Saturday morning until the pines of New Jersey shaded riverside roads. At first he might have thought to invite Jason. Now he just went alone, biking until salt stung his eyes. "Have you?"

"Here and there," Jerry said.

They'd almost talked about it last night. Watching the news, about the bakery in Colorado where a baker would not serve gay customers, Colin asked, "What do you think?" He had braced himself for an ardent response, something about freedom of religion or else a surprise rant in support of gay rights. He hadn't envisioned a milquetoast response.

"It's the baker's business," he said, "but he doesn't have to be an asshole."

He could hide behind logic, semantics. It's not *homophobia*, it's about *decency*, it's *bad business* to turn paying customers away. Colin had wanted his dad to ask his opinion—they always had the news on while doing the crossword and would exchange opinions on current affairs. Jerry Kinkle didn't ask. He grabbed a pillow to elevate his knee. "Big ride tomorrow," he'd said. Colin went to the garage to pack their bags.

His dad thumped the water bottles into Colin's backpack. Colin pushed off before Mr. Kinkle got his knee working.

If Jason came over would his dad suspect them? Would Jason be sussing out Colin? Or was there really nothing there? Jason and his dad would be two guys, fighting Philly or New York sports franchises. Somewhere existed a dividing line, and they straddled it. Colin biked until a wind stream sucked him in, air whirring in the straps of his helmets, over his ears.

Biking to the Delaware was their father-son activity, one presented to Colin for the first time in fourth grade, with his grandfather joining their rank. He would have to pass this onto his son, reenacting their ancestors' trip year after year—the aching knee, the pounding of water bottles against your back, everything unspoken floating limpid in the air. Once, his mom drove his sisters to meet them at the reenactment camp. Another year, his older sister had joined their dad before Colin could, but they biked tandem and she spent the rest of the day in her room, their mom telling Jerry he needed to think about the tone in which he gave instructions. The tradition had been different but now it stayed the same.

And so taking up tradition, Colin pedaled. Because pedaling, he rode the hills and valleys, swerved into the street where he bore down, sweat kissing his forehead before rolling off his temples in the rush of his release, braking when the clearing came into view. He wiped sweat from his forehead, felt more soak his shirt underneath his backpack. Wiping sweat from his nose, he tasted hickory smoke in the air.

On the river, already tricorne hats cut through the fog. The boats slunk catlike along the glassy river, cutting through sleepy crowds to mythologize this place, this story another year and cut down discussions and wedding cakes. And when he looked over his shoulder, Colin didn't even find a trace of his father. The doctor would have said no strenuous activity, yet Jerry hadn't ever considered foregoing their bike trip. He'd be heaving into the hills, panting, looking for Colin, for another water break. He'd want to ask where his son had gone, but maybe he had lost the way.