

Deliverance

“Click!”

Martin’s father closed the worn-out brown leather purse in which the silver florin had disappeared and mounted the bicycle. Martin sat on the luggage rack and braced himself for the departure. A few times the bike shot left and right until it gained enough speed and went straight ahead. From that moment on, Martin changed his position to resist the push and pull movements that his father caused by turning the pedals. At each push, the wheels sped up with a force, before slowly running out till the next push. This repetitive movement induced a carnival-like nausea, a tickling of the stomach which Martin tried to withstand in vain.

If only he had learned how to ride a bike himself...

A few weeks ago, his father had tried to teach him. On his birthday Martin had received a second hand fixed gear bike. Full of pride, a feeling he hardly knew (my father will teach me how to ride!) and the all too common fear (if only I don’t mess up!) he mounted his first bike. His father held on to the saddle, running along for a few meters, before giving him a last push and letting him go.

“Hold the handlebar straight! Keep pedaling! Maintain your speed! Yes, okay!” Martin’s father shouted.

Leaning against the doorpost of their home, he watched his son riding, a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth. Martin made his wobbly turns and didn’t know what to do next.

“Now turn around, slow down and get off!”

Martin went rigid, tried to take a firm hold of the handlebar, but his hands were sweaty and the rubber became slippery. Step off? How was he supposed to do that? He just kept on riding, not knowing how to slow down, the senseless screams of his father ringing in his ears. Not knowing what else to do, he ran the bike full speed into a set of bushes alongside the road. He was catapulted over the handlebar and slammed his head against the hard soil.

“I can’t breathe. I can’t breathe,” he tried to shout, but the shock of the fall had caused him to hyperventilate and his words came out as a whisper. The neighbors who had seen him crash came to the rescue and carried him into the house. They laid him on the sofa in the living room where Martin’s mother stood wringing her hands. His father looked upon the scene and said: “The stupid boy can’t even ride a bike without falling off.” He lost interest in coaching his son, and Martin was too afraid to mount the bike on his own.

Whzz, whzz, whzz...

The bike’s tires sped over the smooth asphalt road that shone deep black in the early morning light. Martin’s father wore a brown jacket of a crude fabric of which the back piece fell just below the edge of the saddle. Although Martin was terrified he might fall off, he didn’t dare to hold on to his father’s jacket. Still, in an impulse he again and again moved his hands toward the saddle where the two rigid coil springs were squeezed alternately under the weight of Martin’s father’s body. But each time, Martin shied away from grabbing the coils, afraid of the pain his father’s movements would provoke. At each push of the pedals, the scene

unfolded before his eyes and he felt the pain as if his hands were really caught. As the coils squeezed, it seemed to Martin they were winking and grinning at him.

Yesterday evening his father had told Martin he was to accompany him on his bread delivery round the next morning. It was meant to be a punishment for his failure during lunch yesterday afternoon...

“You will eat what your mother has served! You won’t leave the table before you have finished your plate!” his father shouted at him. But the mucous gunk on his plate made him gag: cooked endive, the only vegetable he loathed but also his father’s favorite dish. Martin hoped his mother would save him, but she remained silent.

“Eat it!” his father continued, grabbing him by the neck and pushing his head down, close to the plate. The smell of the endive made Martin gag again. He just couldn’t eat it and started crying. ‘Oh my God,’ his father grumbled, gave him a last push and left without saying another word. The back door slammed shut. Martin’s mother silently took the plate away and served him a sandwich instead.

“Now don’t you assume that I forgot all about your childish behavior this afternoon, boy,” Martin’s father said that evening, his voice loud and stern. “Tomorrow morning you will accompany me at my delivery round.”

“We’ll leave early and you won’t eat breakfast. That’ll teach you what being hungry really means, as we experienced during the war. If you’re starving, you won’t be so picky anymore, you’ll eat anything, even things you do not ‘like’.”

“But Louis,” Martin’s mother started, but she didn’t finish her line. And when they left home this morning, she watched them behind the living room window, wearing her pale dressing gown. Her arms dangled weakly beside her body, like a lifeless doll. She didn’t wave goodbye.

Despite the nausea, Martin was hungry now. The light of the rising sun was blinding, forcing him to look down. Under his feet the road flashed by, increasing the giddiness in his stomach even more. At each address, his father chatted with the farmer’s wife. The men were busy working on the land or in the stables. Progress was slow and the delivery round seemed endless.

At one farm, an old woman had offered him a slice of sausage.

“Would you like this?” she asked and handed him the slice. In the woman’s mouth, a yellow slimy string of spittle stretched itself in slow motion between palate and tongue before snapping without a sound. Martin gagged. He took the slice and quickly turned away.

“Hey, can’t you say ‘Thank you’?” his father shouted. Without looking at the old woman, he produced a pinched ‘thank you’. But the slice disgusted him, and he secretly threw it away while they were on their way again.

They moved to the next address. The wicker basket attached at the front of the bike creaked and the lid rattled. It was as if it tried to warn them, but the leather strap that tied it to the basket didn’t leave enough space and what it attempted to say smothered to a grumble.

In the area where they rode now, the farms were further apart. On the flatland, the wind took a firm run-up, as if attempting to hold them back. The sky was full of cumulus clouds, threatening, towering high. Martin's father toiled and cursed under his breath. They were swaying again. Around them, there were wide green pastures and dead straight blue ditches in which the morning light glared. Here and there a row of tall trees indicated the road to a lonely farm.

Suddenly, the bike made a sharp turn over a pathway of grating gravel. They had arrived at the courtyard of a large farm. A dog barked. The bike came to a standstill and Martin got off. The bars of the metal luggage rack had left painful dents in his behind, and his legs were stiff.

"Now don't you dare touch the bread!" his father warned him before walking off. Martin made a stroll to ease the wooden feeling and forget the hunger. At the front door of the farmhouse, his father was talking with a young girl. The tough attitude he displayed at home had melted into a soft, welcoming demeanor. He gesticulated and talked his head off. The girl laughed.

Martin moved off to the large barn that was situated beside the farm. A heavy growl stopped him in his tracks. Behind a high fence at the end of a fallow terrain, something was moving. It seemed a bundle of hair, and at first he couldn't discern what it was. Then he recognized two dogs, one behind the other. They seemed connected, the one at the back leaning on the other one with his legs while moving his hips back and forth. Martin's throat ran dry and time seemed to come to a standstill. From a doghouse at the front, near the fence, a puppy appeared. Martin turned his head in its direction, but at the moment he knelt down to cuddle the little dog, a deep growl stopped him. The dog at the back of the two had come loose and

now looked at him with sallow eyes, showing his sharp teeth. Under its belly, a piece of pink flesh was dangling. With disgust, Martin turned around and ran off.

The front door of the farmhouse was ajar. His father and the girl had disappeared. Where had they gone? Martin slowly entered the farmhouse, afraid to make a noise. He didn't want to get caught. The dark long hallway was paved with black and white tiles like a large stretched out chessboard. At the end, a feeble light shone through a door, silhouettes moving behind it, voices whispering, giggling. Martin smelled baked bread and meat and swallowed. Step by step he moved in the door's direction, pushed forward by the hunger, making sure to tread on the white tiles only. He convinced himself that things would be okay as long as he stayed on the white tiles. But if he touched a black tile, his father would certainly appear and scorn him for disobeying and having entered the farmhouse. Zigzagging and hopscotching, Martin went deeper and deeper into the corridor. If only he could reach the door at the end of the corridor. If only he could avoid the stupid mistakes he always made. If only this once...

A loud cry burst into his ears. A girl started shrieking. The heavy sound of chairs tumbling.

“What the heck do you think you're doing with my daughter?” a woman's voice cried.

Martin lost his balance and stepped on a black tile. The door at the end flung open. A sudden flash of light blinded him and steps were approaching. Martin turned and ran outside. His father stumbled after him. They mounted the bike and flew out of the courtyard, swaying left and right. At the sharp turn, Martin noticed an old woman raging and shaking a clenched fist. The young girl was nowhere to be seen.

“Don’t you dare to come back!” the woman shouted.

What she was mad about? Martin thought. Had he done something wrong? Would he get punished for having entered the corridor? It was as if the old woman’s fist clenched his stomach.

The bike was swaying dangerously now, and the ditches shot at them from the left and the right. The lid of the wicker basket had come loose and rattled like a madman, but Martin’s father failed to listen. Martin now really had to grab the coils if he didn’t want to fall off the bike. He pinched his eyes and stretched his arms in the saddle’s direction...

The world had tilted, and Martin was lying at the edge of a ditch. He got up and looked around. The bike was a few feet away in the grass. The lid of the wicker basket stood wide open, torn askew. The saddle had turned on its axis and pointed upwards at the heavens. The leather purse had fallen on the ground and shamelessly displayed its empty inside. At the other side of the ditch, his father struggled to get up and collect the blinking pieces of silver that were lying about in the grass. Around Martin, the little loaves of bread were strewn, golden and fragrant. He picked one up, took a bite and lay down again.

The sky had turned a spotless, peaceful blue. Martin took a deep relaxing breath. There wasn’t a cloud in heaven.