

Like a king

The bike was standing in the back garden, flaming red, all shiny and wonderful, precisely as I had imagined it. This was the birthday present I had so longed for. But now that the bike was there, reality sank in. My older brother read my feelings with the instinct of a predator, grinned, and said:

“I bet you’re too scared to ride it, like with the roller skates you got for your birthday last year.”

And there it was, the image of the sorry skates, dusted over and rusty, lying in a corner of the shed, the ones I had begged for but never once tried out of fear of falling. How could I have been so stupid to do the same thing again?

“Come with me, now, and I’ll teach you,” my father said, and I had no choice but to follow him to the parking lot in front of our house. Oh no, I thought, I will fail! I can’t ride it! I will fall off and cry! My father will be mad! He’ll laugh at me!

“Get on,” my father commanded, noticing my hesitation. “Don’t be a coward. We didn’t buy you a bike to leave it standing in the shed. You’ll never get a present again if you don’t use it.”

I lifted my right leg, but as I tried to swing it over the back of the bike, I hit the frame and almost fell over.

“Come on, you klutz, lift your leg high,” my father cried, “you’re as stiff as a pole.”

My second attempt succeeded, and I landed on the saddle, sitting lopsided, with the seat painfully jammed against my crotch.

“Put your feet on the pedals! How else are you going to ride the bloody thing!”

My father held on to the saddle and pushed the bike forward. He ran along for a few meters, gave me a forceful shove, and let go. Then he walked off, eyeing from a distance how I made my wobbly turns. I struggled to keep the bike going forward and to avoid hitting the curb or bumping into a parked car. Why had my father left me alone instead of assisting me, catching me in case I would fall off?

“Hold the handlebar straight! Keep pedaling! Maintain your speed!”

My father was leaning against the doorpost of our home, a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth. I was all tense in the effort of keeping the bike going. How long was I supposed to keep riding?

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

Step off? How? My father hadn't explained to me how. I went rigid and tried to take a firm hold of the handlebar, but my hands were sweaty, and the rubber became slippery. How can you want me to do something I haven't done before? YOU should have taught me, instead of walking away and laughing at me! I hate you!

Not knowing what to do, I just kept on riding my ridiculous rounds, the commands of my father ringing in my ears. In a panic, I ran the bike full speed into a set of bushes alongside the road and was catapulted over the handlebar. My head slammed against the hard soil and for a moment I was out.

“I can't breathe. I can't breathe,” I tried to shout when I came to, but the shock of the fall had caused me to hyperventilate, and my words came out as a wheeze. The neighbors came to the rescue and carried me into the house. They laid me on the sofa in the living room, where my mother looked at me in distress, wringing her hands in silence.

My father shook his head and said:

“The stupid boy can’t even ride a bike without falling off.”

Subsequently, he lost interest in coaching me, and I was too ashamed to mount the bike on my own. One afternoon, a few weeks after my failure, my brother took the bike out of the shed and made his first rounds. He struggled but didn’t fall off.

The evening of my birthday we ate cooked endive, which my father had ordered my mother to prepare. It was his favorite dish, but I loathed it. The mucous gunk on my plate made me gag, and I couldn’t bring myself to take a bite.

“You will eat what your mother has served! You won’t leave the table before you have finished your plate!” my father shouted. I picked up a spoonful of the food, but the sight of the slimy stuff made me gag again.

“Eat it!” my father cried, grabbing me by the neck and pushing my head down, close to the plate. I started crying.

“Oh my God,” my father grumbled. “First the bike drama, and now this. You’re such a pussy.” He gave me another push and left. The back door slammed shut. Without saying a word, my mother took the plate away and served me a sandwich instead.

An hour later, my father returned.

“Tomorrow morning,” he announced in a loud voice, “you will accompany me at my delivery round. You’ll sit at the back, and I will show you how to ride a bike like a man. We’ll leave early and you won’t have breakfast. That’ll teach you what genuine hunger 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,” my mother started, but she didn’t finish her line.

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Click! My father closed the worn-out leather purse in which the silver coin had disappeared and remounted the cargo bicycle. We had just delivered freshly baked bread to a farmer in the countryside. I sat on the luggage rack and braced myself for the departure while the cold metal bars pressed into my buttocks. As we took off, the bike shot left and right until it gained enough speed and went straight ahead. From that moment on, I changed my position to resist the push and pull movements that my father caused by turning the pedals. At each push, the wheels sped up with a force, before rolling out until the next push. This repetitive movement induced a carnival-like nausea and a tickle of the stomach, which I tried to withstand in vain.

We had left home early this morning, my mother watching us from behind the living room window. She wore a pale dressing gown and her arms dangled beside her body. She looked like a lifeless doll and didn't wave goodbye. Despite the nausea, I was hungry now. The light of the rising sun was blinding and forced me to look down. Under my feet, the road flashed by, increasing the giddiness in my stomach even more. At each address, my father chatted with the farmers. Progress was slow and the delivery round took ages.

Whzz, whzz, whzz...

The cargo bike's tires sped over the smooth asphalt road that shone deep black in the morning light. The cold air caused goosebumps to appear on my bare legs. I shivered. My father wore a brown jacket of a crude fabric, the back piece of which fell just below the edge of the

saddle. Although terrified that I would fall off, I did not dare to hold on to it. Still, on an impulse, I again and again moved my hands toward the saddle where the two rigid coil springs were squeezed alternately under the weight of my father's body. But each time I shied away from grabbing the coils at the last moment, afraid of the pain if my fingers got caught. At each push of the pedals, the scene unfolded before my eyes. The coils squeezed and squeezed, winking and grinning maliciously.

At one farm, an old woman smiled at me, and said to my father: "Is this your son? What a brave boy!"

"Yes, this is my son," my father replied. "He became ten yesterday!"

His hand landed on my shoulder. I stretched my body and stood straight, like a serviceman.

"Almost as tall as his dad already!"

She handed me a slice of sausage.

"I am sure you'll like this."

A yellow slimy string of spittle stretched between palate and tongue in the woman's mouth before snapping in soundless slow motion. I gagged, grabbed the slice, and turned away to run off.

"Hey, can't you say 'Thank you'?" my father shouted. Without looking at the old woman, I produced a pinched 'thank you'. But the slice disgusted me, and I threw it away while we were on our way again, making sure my father didn't notice.

We moved to the next address. The wicker basket attached at the front of the bike creaked and the lid rattled. It sounded as if it tried to warn us, 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 we rode now, the farms were lying further apart. On the flatland, the wind took a firm run-up, as if attempting to hold us back. The sky was full of cumulus clouds, threatening, towering high. My father toiled and cursed under his breath. We were swaying again. Around us, there were wide green pastures and dead straight blue ditches in which the morning light glared.

A row of tall trees indicated the road to an isolated peasant's house. The bike made a sharp turn, and we rode over a gravel pathway to the courtyard of the farm. A dog barked. The bike came to a standstill and I got off. The bars of the metal luggage rack left painful dents in my behind, and my legs were stiff.

"Now don't you dare touch the bread!" my father said and walked off. I took a stroll to ease the wooden feeling and forget the hunger. At the front door of the farmhouse, my father started talking to a young girl. The tough attitude he displayed at home melted into a soft, welcoming demeanor. He gesticulated and talked his head off. The girl laughed.

I moved off to the large barn that was situated beside the farm. A heavy growl stopped me in my tracks. Behind a high fence at the end of a fallow terrain, something was moving. It seemed like a bundle of hair, and at first, I couldn't discern what it was. Then I recognized two dogs, one behind the other. They were connected, the one at the back leaning on the other one with his legs while moving his hips back and forth. The scene frightened me, but I couldn't take my eyes off it. My throat ran dry. The silence was overwhelming, and time seemed to stand still. From a doghouse at the front, near the fence, a puppy came forward. As I knelt to cuddle the little dog, a deep growl stopped me. The dog at the back of the two had come loose and now looked at me with sallow eyes, showing his sharp teeth. Under its belly, a piece of pink flesh was dangling. With disgust, I turned around and ran off.

The front door of the farmhouse was ajar. My father and the girl had disappeared. Where had they gone? I sneaked into the farmhouse, afraid to make a noise. 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. I smelt baked bread and swallowed. Step by step I moved in the door's direction, pushed forward by hunger, making sure to tread on the white tiles only. I was convinced that things would be okay as long as I stayed on the white tiles. If I touched a black tile, my father would surely appear and scorn me for disobeying and having entered the farmhouse. Zigzagging and hopscotching, I went deeper and deeper into the corridor. If only I could reach the door at the end of the corridor. If only I could avoid the stupid mistakes I always made. If only this once...

A loud cry burst into my ears. A girl shrieked. The heavy sound of chairs tumbling bounced through the hallway.

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

I lost my balance and stepped on a black tile. The door at the end flung open. A sudden flash of light blinded me, and steps were approaching. I quickly turned and ran outside. My father stumbled behind me. We mounted the bike and flew out of the courtyard, swaying left and right. At the sharp turn, I 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 is she mad about? I thought. Have I done something wrong? Will I get punished for having entered the corridor? It was as if the old woman's fist clenched my stomach.

The bike zigzagged like a drunkard, and we shot toward the ditches left and right. The lid of the wicker basket had come loose and rattled like a madman, but my father failed to listen. I would now have to grab the coils if I didn't want to fall off the bike. I pinched my eyes, stretched my arms in the saddle's direction and...

The world had tilted, and I was lying on the ground, in a patch of grass alongside the road. The bike was several feet away in the ditch, the lid of the wicker basket wide open, torn askew. The saddle had turned on its axis and pointed to the heavens. The leather purse had fallen on the ground, displaying its empty inside.

On the other side of the ditch, my father was struggling to get up. Blinking pieces of silver were lying about him in the grass. He was cursing and there was a hole in his pants, white skin shining through. He cast me a hurt look and suddenly seemed small, the bleeding red scratches on his knee like mine when I fell during play.

Around me, loaves of bread were strewn, golden and fragrant, like manna from heaven. I picked one up and took a firm bite.

Then I lay down and took a deep, reassuring, and relaxing breath. The sky had turned a spotless, peaceful blue. There wasn't a cloud in heaven.

Tomorrow I'll ride my bike, I thought. Tomorrow I'll ride it up and down in front of our house, in front of the living room window where my mother can see me. Tomorrow I'll ride my bike like a king and make her smile.