

Deliverance

“Click!”

My father closes the worn-out leather purse in which the silver coin has disappeared and mounts the cargo bicycle with which we are delivering freshly baked bread to farmers in the countryside. I am sitting on the luggage rack and brace myself for the departure while the cold metal bars painfully press into my buttocks. As we take off, the bike shoots left and right until it gains enough speed and goes straight ahead. From that moment on, I change my position to resist the push and pull movements that my father causes by turning the pedals. At each push, the wheels speed up with a force, before rolling out until the next push. This repetitive movement induces a carnival-like nausea and a tickling of the stomach, which I try to withstand in vain.

If only I had learned how to ride a bike...

A few weeks ago, my father had tried to teach me. On my birthday my parents gave me a second-hand fixed gear bike, the biggest birthday present I had ever received! My older brother displayed a nasty smile and said:

“I bet you’re too cowardly to try it, like the roller skates you got last year.”

But this time my brother's sarcastic reference to one of my many failures did not affect me, as I was overwhelmed by the beauty of the bike, all shiny and sparkling. The bright blue, red and silver colours of the frame captivated me.

Full of pride, a feeling I hardly ever dared to allow (*my father will teach me how to ride!*), accompanied by my all-too-common fear (*if only I don't mess up!*), I mounted my bike. My father held on to the saddle, running along for a few meters, before giving me a last push and letting me go. We finally played the father-son game I had witnessed so often at friend's homes. I now really, really needed to prove I could ride this bike.

"Hold the handlebar straight! Keep pedaling! Maintain your speed!" My father had walked off and was leaning against the doorpost of our home, a cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth.

I made my wobbly turns, struggling to keep the bike going forward and not 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? Pain was torturing my muscles, all tense in the effort of keeping the bike going.

"Now turn around, slow down, and get off!" my father continued.

I didn't have any idea how to dismount and went rigid. I tried to take a firm hold of the handlebar, but my hands were sweaty, and the rubber became slippery. Step off? How was I supposed to do that? My father hadn't explained to me how. The intimacy we had

experienced only a few moments ago was gone. I hated him; I hated him! Not knowing what to do, I just kept on riding ridiculous rounds, the stupid commands of my father ringing in my ears. Finally, 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 whisper. The neighbors who had seen the crash came to the rescue and carried me into the house. They laid me on the sofa in the living room where my mother stood wringing her hands in silence.

My father looked upon the scene with a disapproving expression on his face 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 disastrous attempt, I saw my brother stealthily taking the bike out of the shed and making his first rounds. He struggled but didn’t fall off.

Whzz, whzz, whzz...

The cargo bike’s tires speed over the smooth asphalt road that shines deep black in the early morning light. The cold air causes goosebumps to appear on my bare legs. I shiver. My father wears a brown jacket of a crude fabric, the back piece of which falls just below the edge of the saddle. Although terrified that I will fall off, I do not dare to hold on to it. Still, in an impulse, I again and again move my hands toward the saddle where the two rigid coil springs

are squeezed alternately under the weight of my father's body. But each time I shy away from grabbing the coils at the last moment, afraid of the pain my father's movements would provoke. At each push of the pedals, the scene unfolds before my eyes and I feel the pain as if my hands are caught. As the coils squeeze, it seems as if they are winking and grinning maliciously.

Yesterday evening my father told me I was to accompany him on his delivery round the next morning. It was a penalty for my behavior earlier that same day during lunch. We ate cooked endive, which I loathed but was my father's favorite dish. 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. My hope that my mother would save me was in vain: she remained silent. 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, giving me a last push and leaving without saying another word. The back door slammed shut. Silently, my mother took the plate away and served me a sandwich instead.

"Now don't you assume I forgot all about your childish behavior this afternoon, boy," my 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 real 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. And when we left home this morning, she watched us from behind the living room window, wearing her pale dressing gown. Her arms dangled beside her body, like a lifeless doll. She didn't wave goodbye.

Despite the nausea, I am hungry now. The light of the rising sun is blinding, forcing me to look down. Under my feet, the road flashes by, increasing the giddiness in my stomach even more. At each address, my father chats with the farmers. Progress is slow and the delivery round takes ages.

At one farm, an old woman smiles at me, then looks at my father and says: "Is this your son? What a brave boy!"

"Yes, this is my ten-year-old son," my father replies. His hand lands on my shoulder. Involuntarily, I stretch my body and stand straight like a serviceman.

"Almost as tall as his dad already!" the woman exclaims and hands me a slice of sausage. "I am sure you'll like this." A yellow slimy string of spittle stretches itself between palate and tongue in the woman's mouth before snapping in soundless slow motion. I gag, grab the slice, and quickly turn away to run off.

“Hey, can’t you say ‘Thank you’?” my father shouts. Without looking at the old woman, I produce a pinched ‘thank you’. But the slice disgusts me, and I throw it away while we are on our way again, making sure my father doesn’t notice.

We move to the next address. The wicker basket attached at the front of the bike creaks and the lid rattles. To me, it sounds as if it tries to warn us, but the leather strap that ties it to the basket doesn’t leave enough space and what it attempts to say smothers to a grumble.

In the area where we ride now, the farms are further apart. On the flatland, the wind takes a firm run-up, as if attempting to hold us back. The sky is full of cumulus clouds, threatening, towering high. My father toils and curses under his breath. We are swaying again. Around us, there are wide green pastures and dead straight blue ditches in which the morning light glares.

A row of tall trees indicates the road to a lonely farm. The bike makes a sharp turn and we ride over a gravel pathway to the courtyard of a large farm. A dog barks. The bike comes to a standstill and I get off. The bars of the metal luggage rack have left painful dents in my behind, and my legs are stiff.

“Now don’t you dare touch the bread!” my father says before walking off. I make a stroll to ease the wooden feeling and forget the hunger. At the front door of the farmhouse, my father is talking with a young girl. The tough attitude he displays at home has melted into a soft, welcoming demeanor. He gesticulates and talks his head off. The girl laughs.

I move off to the large barn that is situated beside the farm. A heavy growl stops me in my tracks. Behind a high fence at the end of a fallow terrain, something is moving. It seems a bundle of hair, and at first I cannot discern what it is. Then I recognize two dogs, one behind the other. They are connected, the one at the back leaning on the other one with his legs while moving his hips back and forth. The scene frightens me, but I cannot take my eyes from it. The excitement makes my throat run dry. The silence is overwhelming. Time appears to have come to a standstill. From a doghouse at the front, near the fence, a puppy comes forward. I turn my head in its direction, but as I kneel to cuddle the little dog, a deep growl stops me. The dog at the back of the two has come loose and now looks at me with sallow eyes, showing his sharp teeth. Under its belly, a piece of pink flesh is dangling. With disgust, I turn around and run off.

The front door of the farmhouse is ajar. My father and the girl have disappeared. Where have they gone? I sneak into the farmhouse, afraid to make a noise. I don't want to get caught. The dark long hallway is paved with black-and-white tiles like a large stretched out chessboard. At the end, a feeble light shines through a door, silhouettes moving behind it, voices whispering, giggling. I smell baked bread and meat and swallow. Step by step I move in the door's direction, pushed forward by the hunger, making sure to tread on the white tiles only. I convince myself that things will be okay as long as I stay on the white tiles. But if I touch a black tile, my father will surely appear and scorn me for disobeying and having entered the farmhouse. Zigzagging and hopscotching, I go deeper and deeper into the corridor. If only I can reach the door at the end of the corridor. If only I can avoid the stupid mistakes I always make. If only this once...

A loud cry bursts into my ears. A girl starts shrieking. The heavy sound of chairs tumbling.

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

I lose my balance and step on a black tile. The door at the end flings open. A sudden flash of light blind me and steps are approaching. I quickly turn and run outside. My father stumbles behind me. We mount the bike and fly out of the courtyard, swaying left and right. At the sharp turn, I notice an old woman raging and shaking a clenched fist. The young girl is nowhere to be seen.

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

What is she mad about? Have I done something wrong? Will I get punished for having entered the corridor? It is as if the old woman’s fist clenches my stomach.

The bike zigzags like a drunkard and the ditches shoot at us from the left and the right. The lid of the wicker basket has come loose and rattles like a madman, but my father fails to listen. I will now have to grab the coils if I don’t want to fall off the bike. I pinch my eyes, stretch my arms in the saddle’s direction and...

The world has tilted, and I am lying at the edge of a ditch. I raise my upper body and look around. The bike is a few feet away in the grass, the lid of the wicker basket wide open, torn askew. The saddle has turned on its axis and points to the heavens. The leather purse has fallen on the ground and shamelessly displays its empty inside.

Below, on the other side of the ditch, my father struggles to get up. Blinking pieces of silver are lying about in the grass. He is cursing and there is a hole in his pants. He casts me a look with an expression that I have never seen before. It's pure shame. My father suddenly seems small, the bleeding red scratches on his knee just like mine when I fall during play: those of a boy. Embarrassed, I turn away my head.

Around me, the little loaves of bread are strewn, golden and fragrant. Unafraid, I pick one up and take a firm bite.

I lie down again and look at the sky. It has turned a spotless, peaceful blue. I take a deep, reassuring, and relaxing breath. There isn't a cloud in heaven.

Tomorrow I'll ride my bike. Tomorrow I'll take my bike and ride it like a king.