



The Man on the Bicycle

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YOU'VE BEGUN TO READ A NEW STORY entitled, "The Man on the Bicycle," by a yet-to-be-known writer. The writer has no books published in the local bookstore but there is something familiar about the name or at least familiar in its unfamiliarity. For that reason you are certain that you have met a composite of this author before out on the street most likely slacking about with his hands stuffed in his pockets. But he looked like so many other young and up-and-coming writers with thick glasses and shaggy haircuts that you barely gave him a second look. You know everything there is to know about this writer. When given a manuscript from one of these I'm-Young-and-Don't-Want-to-Get-a-Real-Job-So-I'll-Be-an-Artist-Why-Not-a-Writer types you usually take a glance at the title and see if an eye-catching, funny, or raunchy word comes up like, let's say, teabags. If there isn't one, then you either throw it to the wayside or flip through the first couple of pages, skimming for fresh dialogue or any allusions to teabags, and then toss it into the nearest recycling bin, because if your friends had only two words to describe you with they would be with the following: tree friendly. The only remotely interesting word that you see, however, is bicycle. You flip through and notice some dialogue but find no mention of teabags anywhere. On this occasion you decide that bicycle will have to do, since you have already resigned yourself to reading the story, funny word or not.

There is something about the title, "The Man on the Bicycle," that brings you back to simpler times. You suddenly see yourself in striped red shorts and

Velcro sneakers watching your father in his hiked-up brown slacks riding a too-small bicycle with training wheels stuck on the sides. It is comical to see him like a giant clown when he was always so serious. You want to laugh but nothing comes out. Nothing was ever good enough for him.

You have favorable expectations for this new title. This may surprise you given that you look at optimistic people in general to be a few bulbs short of a Christmas tree. But since you have already decided to read the story from beginning to end, you believe it is better to look at the entry into the world of “The Man on the Bicycle” to be a promising one rather than a shamefully disappointing one. That way it will be easier for you to get through to the end. You are your own cheerleader in this reading providing moral support and a pat on the back for getting through yet another sentence. Good for you.

You have sufficiently gathered enough enthusiasm to dive headlong into the unknown writer’s story. But before you read another line, you take yet another look at the name of the author in hopes that somehow you might be mistaken and “The Man on the Bicycle” is on second glance written not by an unknown writer but by a famous one whose work you can’t wait to devour. You long to be surrounded by the all-too-well-known plot devices and be guided by the sure and steady, professional hand whose identifiable tone lets you know, yes, this is a work by a *New York Times* best-selling author. You look at the cover and there under the title is the writer’s name. You don’t recognize it at all. Sadly, the name is not even Italian.

The story begins as a man rides a bicycle down a city street. He wears a short-sleeved Oxford button down and half thigh-length cut shorts, white. All his clothes are white, even his underwear. He has a suntan and close-cropped dark hair. His eyes squint under the heavy sun. Judging from his appearance alone, you think he may be stationed in the navy or is a sailor of some sort. But there is no telltale sailor’s cap to indicate precisely his profession. He may just be a man riding a bicycle.

The scene is bright with late morning sun and is filled with gentle, lulling movement like laundry billowing in the breeze. A boy with two front teeth missing sits at the bottom of steps with an ice cream cone. A young woman, draped in a patterned yellow dress spotted with blue lilacs, pushes a baby in a stroller and hums a lullaby. A policeman stands in the middle of traffic and

blows his whistle. Every now and again he waves his gloved hand toward the approaching cars. At the corner of the street is a restaurant. Tables, chairs, and umbrellas line the sidewalk facing the restaurant. Waiters in white jackets pour water from green shimmering bottles. Small panting dogs sit at the foot of one table. Two men in Panama hats erupt in laughter and boast of a coming wind-fall from the east. A woman caked with powder, festooned in a plumed hat, fans herself with a menu.

A man pedals barefoot across this scene. If you look closely you can see sores on the bottoms of his feet. But no one is looking. No one sees the man on the bicycle.

There are sounds: the policeman's whistle toot-toots, the baby cries, traffic groans, the powdered woman sighs, the two men guffaw, a beige Chihuahua yips. Taken simultaneously, as if crumpled together into a ball, the sounds are transformed into that everyday city noise where one sound is indistinguishable from the next. It is all one noise. Everyone hears it and is calmed by it. Without it there would be a disturbance. If perhaps just then there were an explosion from an atomic bomb, that sound would disappear and become sucked into the air and flames; the crumpled ball would unfold and tighten at the edges, revealing a smooth white plane.

This story appears to you as merely photographs. Not a story at all really. You don't see the characters grow, not at all, and so they are merely snapshots. They, therefore, abide by the rules of the snapshot. They exist as clipped moments of time. The world at that exact moment was captured and exhibited. You can see who was there and what they were doing, but you have no concept of time, looking at these pictures. The only thing you are sure of is that the pictures were taken in the past because no one can take a photograph of the present. Once the shutter is released, the moment has already left. You can't get it back. But they must be changed, these characters that you barely know. You witness only a tiny glimpse of the lives that they had then. Their lives after that snapshot are obscured. What you do know is that they are older now or they are dead. A lot can happen between now and then.

There were too many tourists. He couldn't help but feel distracted by them and their constant moving, snapping pictures, and yelling to hear themselves

over the peace and quiet. They all looked the same. The men wore plaid shirts tucked into tight-fitting jeans. The women wore sunglasses and waved hello from high precipices. He wanted to scream at them. He wanted to throw them off the cliffsides and watch them as they slowly disappeared a thousand feet below.

He was on a trip to the Grand Canyon. It was not a trip to cross off his bucket list. He just wanted to get away and have some time to himself. He wanted to go where there was lots of wide open space for him to breathe the air and drink the sky. He wanted to be alone.

With the back of his hand, he wiped the sweat from his brow. He was not expecting the weather to be so hot. When he arrived at the Grand Canyon, he noticed the heat was different. Instead of absorbing into the air the heat became its own layer, completely sheathing his body. It was a coat he could never take off. He saw the heat in front of him blurring the edges of everything. He reached his hand out and touched a tree to make sure it was there.

He found it difficult to appreciate the landscape. When he looked out into the great wide open and the painted cliffs all around, he wanted to feel ownership over nature; he wanted to feel he had something to do with its creation, that he was somehow important. But he couldn't. He could think only of the crowds, the noise, and the heat.

One man in a pink plaid shirt and cowboy hat stood next to him. Leaning over the canyon's railing, the man peered through his binoculars and admired a bald eagle, twenty yards away, feeding its young.

He watched the man with the cowboy hat for a long time. He stared at his crow's feet and his cracked leather skin that could crumble into dust at any moment. He observed how he went back and forth from looking through his binoculars at the eagle to looking through his binoculars at the Grand Canyon. He envied the man. For one, the heat didn't seem to bother him.

"Aren't you burning up? I am soaked from head to toe."

The man looked amused in his pink shirt and cowboy hat. He rubbed his chin like he was measuring the question and finally said, "It's hot but it's more of a dry heat."

"Do you think that's funny?"

"No."

"Fucking liar."

You struggle to find a connection between the man on vacation and the man on the bicycle. Remember that man on the bicycle. He'll be important later on. What could that possibly mean? You take the manuscript in your hands or perhaps you set it down on your desk and you peer down at these words and wonder when will this guy get on with it. You hate him. And by now you are sure that the writer is indeed a he. Only a man can be so conceited. When are you supposed to start paying attention? You try to relax. You take a deep breath. You are confused but you think that he'll have to return to some semblance of a story soon. And if he doesn't? A voice inside shouts, "This is unfair! So many starts and stops and these interruptions from the real story are getting annoying!" You think that the writer may be an ass. You want to break something. Maybe the coffee mug or, better yet, the window. Now is not the time to be angry or frustrated, you tell yourself. You read for leisure and that curiosity to find out what happens next wins out in the end. This must have something to do with that attractive man on the bicycle. You were told to remember him after all.

Before you go on with the story, you realize there are simply too many distractions to deal with while reading. You are at home or were at home at one point during this reading. You have a cat. And right now she is ignoring you. Your hand is under your chin and your teeth are clicking in time: one-two-three and stop. You give out a sigh of frustration. Music plays behind you: a soft guitar riff from star-crossed neo-hippies. The lamp in the corner that you bought at the little novelty stand in St. Louis is too dim, you think. Everything in the room is too dim. The paint on the walls only heightens your dissatisfaction with your home. How are you supposed to read this story in such a dark room? There is no justice in the world. There is no God.

You feel alone reading this story. A slight desperation to reach out to someone clutches at your heart. If only you could hold someone's hand while you read this, maybe then it would be all right. This story wouldn't seem so god-damned arrogant to you with its oh-so-clever metanarrative if you were only holding someone's hand. Or maybe if you could have someone read this story with you, someone with whom you can commiserate while following the ever-changing narrative and ask when will the guy from the Grand Canyon return?

One thing is certain, as you imagine looking into your reading partner's eyes you state with confidence, "I bet a different story is about to begin."

A woman walks over to the nightstand and grabs a matchbox. She shakes it and hears two, maybe three, matches inside. The phone rings. She opens the matchbox and sees two matches, picks up the phone and says, hello.

—Gracie, where were you?

—Nowhere. I was here straightening the room.

She leans her shoulder against the phone, balancing a cigarette between her fingers.

—I tried calling three times already with no answer. I lost my appetite waiting for you to pick up the phone and I haven't had lunch yet. I thought I might have a sandwich before I tried calling again, but I'm just not hungry anymore. I was going to give up and drive right over to see if you were okay.

—Mother, there's a buzz on your side of the phone. I don't know what to tell you, I must have been in the bathroom. I can't hear a thing with the fan. It turns on with the lights. And Donny, well, he's not going to answer the phone.

—I was worried. Is he there?

She glances around at the clock on the nightstand.

—Jesus, Mother. I'm running late for my four o'clock. Can this wait?

She runs her hand through her long hair, gathers the ends, and pulls her hair back against her scalp.

—No it can't. I want to know if you're all right.

—Uh-huh.

—So you're sure? He's not listening in, is he?

—Yes, I'm sure, and, no, he's not listening. He went for a swim.

She picks up a match and weighs it in her palm. She taps the match against her arm and subsequently draws the match across, slowly rubbing against skin, revealing a thin red line.

—Gracie, honey, wait a second. Your father wants to talk to you. Now be nice to him, he just got back from you-know-where so he's a little excitable.

—Have you ever ridden a donkey on the edge of a cliff and looked down at the hundreds of feet that separated you from the bottom? It is a long way down and can be difficult to keep your eyes on.

—Hi, Daddy. Mother says you just got back. How are you feeling?

—I was in the middle of the Grand Canyon—no, I was on the edge of the Grand Canyon, the part that wasn't fenced off. I was admiring the view and these Japanese tourists came and they started taking pictures and blinded me with their flashes and I fell in and I became part of the Grand Canyon—

—Okay, that's nice, Harry. We're so happy you're feeling better. I'm sorry you had to hear that, Gracie. I'm not sure how much longer I can take this. He got back on Tuesday and I don't think he's stopped ever since. You don't know what it's like here. It's just Grand Canyon this or Grand Canyon that. If it's not one of those cockamamie stories where he's riding a donkey and falling into the Grand Canyon, he goes on about Vietnam.

—Daddy was in Vietnam?

—No, sweetie. That's the point. He just makes it up. I don't know where it's coming from. You would think your father and Donny were in cahoots.

—Mother, please don't start. Donny's been behaving all morning. He brought me a flower today—a tulip. He said it matched my eyes.

—But your eyes are brown.

—He was telling a joke.

The young woman bites down on her fingernail. She works her way clockwise from her pointer finger biting one nail at a time.

—You know how I feel about him. I can't condone the way he treats you. Gracie, you're not biting your nails, are you?

—No, of course not.

—I can hear you doing it.

—It's just the phone making noises.

You were told that the man on the bicycle was important. Well, he is the title of the story! But there was no mention of the man on the bicycle as the story diverted into vignettes about a man on a trip to the Grand Canyon and a woman on the phone with her parents. So what happened to the man on the bicycle? You had such high hopes for something interesting to happen to him. Now you think it foolish to hope for anything ever again. You imagine there's still time for the man on the bicycle to return, but you have your doubts. He's been gone for so long. He left without telling you where he was going or when he would be back. Why do people always leave you?

Perhaps there's another way to look at this. Perhaps the man on the bicycle

existed throughout your reading regardless of whether there was any mention of him. But how can that be? You were told to remember him and you have. While reading the passages about the man at the Grand Canyon and the woman on the phone you were wondering what any of these departures from the real story has to do with the man on the bicycle. Perhaps he was on his way to the Grand Canyon or perhaps he was the son of the man in the cowboy hat or perhaps he was Donny or perhaps the man on the bicycle was hiding, crouched in the corner, watching the young lady about to light a cigarette. Whatever the case may be, the man on the bicycle was in the middle of the story all along as you recalled him throughout your reading. He never left, and so he will end the story.

You stop to reflect on whether you buy any of this and decide to read on anyway.

A man loses control of his bicycle. As he releases his hands from the handlebars, he lifts up off the pedals and floats high above the ground. Like an acrobat performing an aerial somersault, he spirals forward, tucks his head under his chin, and thrusts his arms out toward the heavens, ready for someone to grab hold and pull him up. But no one sees him. The realization spreads from his eyes to his gaping mouth. He claws at the air and falls. When he hits the ground, he rolls over once, twice, and, mercifully, comes to a stop.