

Ewa Mazierska
The Bike

John knew that he was a bit obsessed about cycling, but thought that Ruth should be happy that he cycled so much, as this kept him healthy, content and out of her way on Saturdays, when she was doing the weekly cleaning. Yet, she kept mocking him for it – to be contrary and show her superiority, based on her lack of excitement about anything, because she knew that everything in life was passing and especially things which one was once excited about.

Truth be told, John had plenty of such passing hobbies of which he was now embarrassed: collecting fossils, wood-carving, glass-painting, even trainspotting and trying to write a novel. Yet, cycling was different. While the other pastimes ultimately showed his inadequacy, cycling made him worthy, as despite being almost sixty, he was still able to cycle longer and faster than most people half his age. In his cycling club, which had almost a hundred members, he was the fittest Mamil and, with another guy twenty years younger than him, simply the best cyclist. Moreover, thanks to cycling he found new friends, which was important, given that he never had 'pub pals', due to not going to the pub, their daughter had moved out and their last cat died. There was really not much to do at home at weekends and he didn't want to work then either, because he already worked too much during the week.

John liked the days when he went with the club for their day-long excursions, broken up by stopping at roadside restaurants where they had breakfast and lunch. Breakfast was always a full English breakfast, which they never cooked at home because Ruth was vegan and regarded the combination of bacon, sausages and eggs obscene. Lunch was also nice, because it was also meaty and traditional: typically steak, Yorkshire pudding and gravy with profiteroles or ice cream for dessert. During the meals, they exchanged stories about different sporting trips and abandoned passions, which reassured John that he was not unusual in this respect. He felt part of this world, as he had his own stories to tell and people respected him for his extraordinary fitness and willingness to help less experienced cyclists. Equally, John liked cycling by himself, to be alone against the elements and his own weakness. He particularly liked to go on steep and curvy roads where it was easier to find a lost sheep than a motorist. Some people doubted such roads still existed in England, even in the underpopulated Cumbria, but he knew they existed, as he found many of them. The loneliness against nature put life in a different perspective. Suddenly the petty problems which poisoned his everyday life stopped to matter, as it would be in the hour of his death, except that his death was still far away, or so he thought.

Ruth didn't mind John cycling with the club, as she recognised John's need to spend time in larger company, given that they had little to talk about after almost thirty years of marriage. However, she objected to him cycling by himself, claiming this was not safe: he could have an accident or even be killed by a car, because the bikes he was collecting were, in her words, 'killer bikes'. They were not made to ride by normal people, but by freaks who will do everything to increase their speed. She particularly

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disliked the idea of having shoes attached to pedals and the narrowness of the wheels which, in her view, made these new bikes unstable.

In the light of Ruth's objections, John was forced to lie to her, telling her that he was going with the club, when he was cycling by himself. He also lied about the price of the bikes – not because she would object to him spending his money on luxuries (she never did so), but because for her the price of the bike was a measure of its safety – the more expensive the bike, the more unsafe it was, in her view. But she wouldn't check on any of these things – she never spied on him. John felt a bit uncomfortable having to be dishonest with his spouse, but he told himself that it was a different sort of lie than if he had an affair and it was all in the name of a good cause.

It was a mid-March Saturday, when John left the house very early in the morning for a solitary ride. It was meant to be about a 150-miles long journey on the hills, on his new bike, which had cost him almost two thousand pounds (despite him buying it in the sale). He thought about how lean and sexy it was, as if it was a tamed cheetah (he always thought about his bikes as if they were females), and somewhat in contrast to Ruth's body which was more and more curved as the years went by, despite her daily exercises and dieting. He put some fruit bars in his small bike bags, as it wasn't as fun going for a full English breakfast all by himself.

After less than two hours John reached his favourite part of England - the one near the Scottish border, which looked practically like Scotland. He speeded up to check the strength of his tamed cheetah, and she was certainly faster than his other bikes. It was as if he was defying gravity, when cycling downhill the road surface was only touched by the tips of the toes of his perfect companion. He was cycling like that for almost an hour when the impossible happened - rather than going down, he was flying up, to the bright sun. And then he fell. It took him some time to realise what took place, perhaps because he lost consciousness. He was lying on the edge of the road, next to a large stone and his bike was in two parts – a wheel was detached and lying some distance from the rest of the machine, which looked now like a dead cat. His right arm was numb and yet painful – he couldn't lift it. At first he thought that it was the consequence of a psychological shock, but soon he realised his arm was broken. He had some tools with him, but with only his left hand able to move, he wouldn't be able to repair his bike or ride it again. With his left hand he reached in his pocket to get his mobile phone, but it wasn't there. It must have fallen from his pocket when he had the accident. After a while he found it lying on ground broken, because it had hit a stone. He thus couldn't phone anybody for help, but had to wait for a car to pass and take pity on him. Unfortunately, there were no cars. John discovered with pride some weeks before that this was the most deserted road this side of the English-Scottish border and now he was proved right, to his peril. After a short while the bright sun hid behind the clouds and hail started to fall. It felt like a shower of stones with needles attached to them. He put on his waterproof jacket, knowing that the worst which could happen to him was to get cold, but it didn't protect his face from being hurt. He was sitting on the side of the road, propped by a large stone, surrounded by what was left of his bike. Having no book to read, no news to check on his mobile, nothing to do except to wait and eat the tasteless fruit bars, he studied

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the landscape: the hills covered with thin grass, naked at the top, tall, regular trees in the distance and nothing else, no house or single sheep. It reminded him of what Ruth (who came from Canada) said several times about the English landscape – that it was indifferent, neither did it try to woo the tourists, nor scare them; it just didn't care. In the past he disputed such claims, but now he couldn't agree with her more, thinking what a shame it would be if he was found dead on the side of the provincial road – as opposed to freezing in the Himalayas or being burnt by the sun in the Sahara. Not only did he feel great pain, but also realised that his circumstances were pathetic. Maybe Ruth warned him against cycling on his own because she wanted to save him from ridicule, as some years previously she advised him to give up on his novel.

It was almost two hours before a car appeared on the horizon. It moved slowly and an elderly woman was behind the steering wheel. She stopped and almost burst into tears seeing John and his broken bike. She said she was on the way to visit her daughter and was late, but only to underscore that he inconvenienced her, rather than that she would leave him at the mercy of the elements.

'I cannot leave you like that, can I?' she asked rhetorically. 'I must take you to the hospital.'

'There is no need,' replied John. 'It will be enough if you let me borrow your phone so I can ask my wife to pick me up.'

'How far do you live?'

'About 70 miles from here,' replied John.

'No, you cannot wait for so long. You are whiter than paper. You can phone your wife, but I'm taking you to the hospital full stop. It is not far from here.'

The woman herself packed his bike in the boot of his car, commenting how light it was and that it would have broken under her weight. The hospital was less than twenty minutes by car. John phoned Ruth on the way there and she promised to come see him as soon as she could. She didn't ask any questions apart from those which were necessary. He was grateful for Ruth's restraint, even though he knew that it was not in her style to ask superfluous things.

In the hospital they gave him some painkillers and promised to put him on the operating table in the next three hours. He was lucky with that, given all the crisis in the NHS. He now felt pain in his entire body, not just his arm and was crying, albeit not only from pain, but also relief. The nurse heard him and brought him some tissues. He was ashamed of himself, as at home he never used tissues, regarding them as unhygienic, unecological and feminine; he was a handkerchief man. But now the tissues felt like salvation from all the liquid and pain which he was able to release.

After an hour or so Ruth arrived. She brought him his pyjamas, slippers and some toiletries, as he was meant to stay in the hospital at least one extra night, plus a spare mobile phone and a couple of books. When the accident happened John thought that he would lie to Ruth that he was cycling with the group but decided to take a detour, but now saw no point in doing so. And she didn't ask why he was on his own when his accident

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happened, only informed him that she found some information about a series of faulty bikes produced in Thailand, which caused wheels to fall off when cycling downhill at great speed. She showed John a piece of paper with the name of the brand, but he told her that he forgot the name of his bike. Then she kissed him and left as John was meant to go to the operating theatre soon and she had to talk to the doctor and visit the woman who picked him up from the roadside as she still had John's bike.