

One Hundred and Two

With a slow movement her hand started drawing the arc from the armchair to the back of a nearby chair, while the other hand was pressing on the armrest. Her feet, pointed firmly on the rug, seemed to be pushing her down again rather than being the hinge of her standing up. Not enough calf-back action, not enough swing in her movements.

There was a reason for the chair to be there, close by her, separated from the living room table with a slant that looked accidental, but was planned precisely to help her leave the embrace of the armchair. She enjoyed spending her afternoons sitting in that nest, her den; but getting up to prepare some dinner was a daily challenge. Her days of cycling up and down the hills were far behind now.

That morning in the park a wispy little child, hair blond and brown with mud, started counting one by one all her years. For him it was a formidable task, a feat celebrating his mastery of numbers, a party piece to play even to strangers. He had a go at it with serious intent, at his own pace, only skipping or repeating a number here and there whenever the kids playing ball on the other end of the meadow scored a point and screamed with glee.

One hundred and two. Many years, many more than anyone else she knew, way more than she had ever wished for herself. Every year brought her a new story, a new face, a new worry.

Seven, eight — washing neck, ears and face with the icy water from the bucket, wearing the same unshapely shoes until they could not be mended anymore, helping adults to turn the hay. Eighteen, nineteen, twenty — serving wine to

uncouth men much older than her, the bicycle trips with Joseph in the summer, the modest, simple celebration for their wedding day.

Twenty-six, twenty-seven, the child was now spelling out slowly, emphatically.

The night when Joseph picked up the bike and left her and their newborn daughter to go and find some provisions had been long, drawn out. Almost like that war — it hadn't affected them directly until then, but it was now leaving their remote mountain village short of supplies. Out of desperation he decided he would cycle somewhere far down the valley where goods were more easily smuggled thanks to the river, look for the black market, bring something back.

She ensured he was properly covered, a second jumper over the first, the prickly scarf well tucked in, a sheet of newspaper under his jacket to shield him from the shard-like air of the night. At the back of a worryingly empty cupboard Joseph found a wizened onion and took a bite. He had to kneel down to hide a wincing grimace from her eyes, on the pretext of pulling his socks over his trousers so they wouldn't catch while pedalling.

Joseph's bicycle was like everyone else's, heavily-framed, single speed, the handlebars sticking out like horns pointing backwards. It made the noise of a windmill when it acquired enough speed, and a dull metallic sound rang out each time the pedal hit the deformed chain guard. He pushed the bike out of the hallway, and a wintry gust of air got in, making the flame in the stove retreat for a second.

Their daughter was crying, surely for a hunger she could not satisfy, when he closed the door behind him. She followed him from the window — he was now a shadow in the dark, leaving a faint, flickering red trail for the dynamo that he had engaged on the wheel.

Cycling at night, alone, gave him an indefinable sense of freedom and purpose, in spite of the bitter cold. His breath was turning into greyish clouds of vapour that disappeared behind his ears, which he could not feel anymore as his hands got so numb he could hardly brake. At home, she kept the embers glowing in the

hearth all night as if they could keep Joseph warm, or bring him a light he could follow on his way back.

The sun was high when he dropped a few bags of rice and potatoes on the doorstep, pushed the bike through the empty hallway, crashed exhausted on the bed, looking ghostly thin, spent. But he was smiling — he always did when he cycled.

Leaving the old house, surrendering the license for the tavern, the birth of the first niece while Joseph was already in hospital. And by then she was just seventy-two, the blond child was running out of steam. She wanted to help him get through it, so he could get away from there, be in the places he wanted to be — perhaps cycling somewhere with her, or tinkering alone in the shed where he spent so many hours every day. He didn't manage.

She was thinking again of Joseph, the child had not reached ninety yet. The shed was still there, with tools that looked so simple and plain, all lined up ready for use. Her grandson had cleaned up the space after a few years in which nobody dared or cared to enter. Of the old, decrepit bike he found stashed in there, he only kept the bell, a long clapper that pushed against a chromed dome, which took good part of an hour to polish up.

One hundred, one hundred and one, one hundred and two. The child had run away waving his arm, crusts on the elbow, trousers streaked with the green of grass, happy to have gained his freedom after all that effort.

Standing up with both hands on the chair she could now align it with the other ones, walk to the kitchen, peel an onion and chop it finely with a knife, look out of the window, dry a tear in her handkerchief, push it back up her sleeve, lay the table.