

## Bicycle Boy

Griff gestured with a limp French fry.

“And so you say that you are a reader?”

The boy was maybe 25 years old. He wore kaki pants and a blue windbreaker. Old acne scars pitted his face. His hair was cut short, revealing the shape of his skull. He stared at the space between Griff and Frank, who was talking to Tom. Griff angled his head into the space but the boy would not look at him.

“We have a lot of books. They are in the room in the basement. That is where we watch TV, down there. My room is upstairs over the corner of the basement where we have the books. They are all lined up. There are four rows, one on top of the other. I have two windows. When the leaves go away I can see here.”

The boy pointed across the parking lot toward the East. He never smiled. Griff twisted on his stool to peer out the window; teetered, waved the French fry to regain his balance and said, “Umm, yes. I see.”

“I like the books about history, about England and history. I read about the Queen.”

Griff folded the French fry into a loop; picked up a red squeeze tube of mayonnaise, and squirted a single white blob at the apex of the curve. Exposing large yellow teeth, he carefully bit the loop, leaving two severed ends between his fingers. Waving those, he said, “And which of the queens do you favor? I personally think that Victoria has been underrated. I mean there was more to her than a fashion or a style. She was the symbol of an empire, for God’s sake.”

“Queen Elizabeth was in the book.”

Griff frowned and nodded. “Well of course her. She didn’t just symbolize an empire; she presided over an empire – over the formation of an empire really.”

“I like books about Greeks and about myths. I like the one about cleaning the stables. I cleaned stables. His name was Charley. ”

Griff frowned and shook his head as if there was an insect buzzing around. “Ah, who, what?”

“Charley the horse. I rode him once because somebody else was on Viki. They put a single-rein bit on but he was a double-rein horse and he wouldn’t stop. I held around his neck and the hair blew in my face. Rob got out in front and waved his arms and Charley ran over to the fence where I could get off.”

Griff nodded, "I once rode horses."

Tom interrupted. Pointing to the bicycle resting on a kick stand, just beyond the window, he said, "That's a pretty neat bicycle. You ride it all over town?"

"Yes. That's a pretty neat bicycle. I ride it all over town."

Indicating the black and gold streamers hanging down from the handle bars, Tom added, "What about those?"

"I put them on."

Tom said, "Well they look fine."

"I rode to Boiling Springs and back."

"That's a long way."

"I didn't get tired."

The boy pointed to the pedals. "See those things that you push down that go around and make the chain go and turn the back wheel. I got new ones with red dots that shine so that a car coming up behind can see me at night."

"That's a good idea."

"Sometimes I work late and ride home at night."

"From the grocery store, like tonight?"

"I have to go home now."

"It's getting late?"

"It's getting late."

When the boy got up to leave, several people at the nearby tables told him to be careful out there.

The boy walked out the door. He did not look back. Griff sipped his coffee which by now was as cold as his fries. He rapped his breast bone with his knuckles to help the coffee go down and said, "Am I missing something here?"