

Two-Wheeler

“Can we play jail when we get home?” The boy asks.

“We’ll see. We’ve been outside a lot today, and it’s really hot out. Why don’t we find something to do inside?” *Like watching TV, or LeapFrog, or coloring even, if it means we can sit down.*

“But we can play jail inside! I did it before with my cousins!”

You nod. “Sure, we can. But first, we’re gonna have a drink of water and sit down for a few minutes to cool off.”

He’s satisfied with your answer, and rides ahead on his bike.

His parents got him the bike for his fourth birthday, which was almost a year ago now. He’s still getting used to it, his mother told you. The bike came with detachable training wheels that his parents kept on until he was four and a half, after his insisting that he was old enough to ride a two-wheeler. What he may lack in skill, he makes up for in confidence. He pedals ahead, thirty or so feet from you.

As you’re nearing the crosswalk, you check your phone. You know he’ll stop and wait for you.

Owen’s a good kid, but he can be a handful sometimes. He’s always on. You’re used to prying kids *away* from the TV, not the other way around. He’ll even call you out if you’re on your phone, which is why you take advantage of the moments he’s not looking. You’re halfway through a thread of texts from your friends about tonight’s plans when you glance up and see it, see him, and everything goes silent.

Why did he do it? How did I let him do it? Was it a mistake, could he not break in time? Or did he grow too confident in his ability to cross the street by himself?

Doesn’t matter. You run.

Headfirst into the black SUV you throw yourself, giving into the desire to feel your own body explode upon impact, a desire you never knew existed until it revealed itself to you, and maybe you’re mistaking fear for desire, so you can better accept that this is the end, which is useless, because *this is the end*.

But only when you’re nose to nose with the machine’s metal hood do you realize, “no, this is not what I want. This is not even about me.”

You switch course, turn right, hang your arms out in front of you, turn your head, and press your chin to your right shoulder. You close your eyes. Without sight, you must calculate based on some innate compass, biological clockwork. Your insides scream “Now! NOW!” You swoop and grab and pray.

Armpits. You feel the unmistakable crevice of two armpits. Your arms grow firmer. Your fingers clamp down on the torso, and with this your arms grow firmer yet as they adjust to the body’s mass. You open your eyes and there he is, writhing around under your iron grip, his body held up to the sky like a sacrifice to the gods, or like he’s the Son of God himself, because in this moment, he is. Gravity pulls him back down and into your chest where he sticks like a magnet.

You see a curb, you see grass and a sidewalk just beyond it. Four big strides, and you feel the sidewalk under your feet, and you drop to your knees, never letting go.

“My bike!” Owen screams in a raw, falsetto voice. This is the first noise you have heard since you saw him ride out onto the street. “My bike is *ruined!*”

You feel him wrestle and resist your embrace. He wants to see what you did, to point at his corpse of a bicycle and say “you did this!”, but every attempt to break free makes you grasp him tighter.

A car door swings open. “Is everyone okay?” A man’s voice yells. A rhythmic slapping sound, growing louder every second, tells you that he is running towards you. “I’m calling 9-1-1! Don’t worry. You’re safe.”

You have not moved. A certain paralysis grips you, as you grip the boy, for any movement may trigger a reversal of the last thirty seconds. You are protected so long as you stay on this sidewalk square. You are safe, here, now.