

One bicycle too many

When I got off the train she was waiting for me at the end of the track, smiling, a wool cap on her head, cheeks and nose pink from the cold, and a bicycle under arm. Just enough time for an awkward kiss and a short exchange I didn't understand, and I found myself sitting on the bike crossbar. While she pedalled with a power I didn't think she possessed, we were silently sliding away in the cold October night.

We stopped a little way ahead, in a dark alley. She confessed that we couldn't go on like that... we needed to buy a bike for me. Ten euro, standard price, smuggled. Detecting some perplexity in my eye, she explained that it was normal in Amsterdam: you can find hashish in coffee shops, and dark alley pushers sell you old used bicycles, one of the most relinquished items around here. Having dispelled my doubts, I handed a ten-euro bill to the guy who, besides the bike, was offering to sell me a couple more things, and I hopped onto "Rocinante", so I christened a pedal-brake green wrech – me, Don Quijote amid wind mills.

Getting to her house wasn't easy: it wasn't so close as I thought and she was a female version of the "flying Dutchman" in a race. She didn't even turn around to check if I was still alive, especially since I had never used a pedal-brake before, and it's worse than using an automatic when you're used to stick shifts.

Once we got home, I was already telling Rocinante to lock itself to a pole, 'cause I was too tired to do it myself, when I got hit by Oukie's cautioning glance, who'd already propped her bike over her shoulder: better take them home (the attic: very cute, but very high up, on the fourth floor), because, you know, they steal them. You don't say?

Oukie and I met a couple of month earlier, during a safari trip in Namibia, with tents and all. One of those organized tours, where you don't know anybody when you get there, and when you leave you still don't know anybody, but you have a whole lot of addresses written on a piece of paper you lose on the airplane that takes you home. In that great family of strangers we had found each other: she had a passion for everything that was Italian, from Paolo Conte to espresso. I had a passion for everything that have two tits. The beginning of our affair had nothing romantic: we'd spend the night under the starry skies of the African desert, engaging in belch competition with Trevor, our guide, a blond Big Jim, veteran of the Angola war, gulping down as much beer as possible. So, maybe by mistake, we ended up in the same sleeping bag after three days. But, I swear, I didn't know she was a bicycle fan. And, unaware of this devious perversion of hers, I kept in touch with her, up until I found myself holding a bike over my shoulder in an attic in Jordan.

I just stood there, in the middle of the room, sweaty breathing hard, expecting to hear her say she had to put her loved bike to bed, when her Nordic, passionate spirit took the best of her: she leapt towards me like a wildcat, to do it there, on the ground, in the doorway; real sex, raw and untamed, in memory of the lions of the savanna. But this time the Great Erg wasn't going to be our alcove. Just old, loose wood planks: we fell crashing over my green jalopy bike. I got a pedal stuck in a kidney, she hit her lip on the handlebar. It's painful, at times, to see how imagination meets reality.

The next morning Oukie showed me around the entire city. Running at 60 miles an hour, an invisible hand stabbing my aching kidney at every stride, and few, rational stops, so that we could be at the train station by three ten p.m. At the station? It's a surprise, she says, smiling through her new harelip. A beautiful surprise.

At three ten on the dot we took a train towards unpronounceable destination, and I even had to pay a ticket for those goddamn bikes, which we obviously took with us and were starting to become a disquieting presence in our relationship.

While the train pressed forward through the flat Dutch countryside, Oukie finally decided to tell me where she was taking me, maybe because the doors were locked and there was no way of running off. Devilish mind. The beautiful surprise turned out to be a week-end to her parents' house, planned down to the smallest details, including a Sunday excursion and picnic with the whole family... on bike, of course. I needn't worry, because everyone was gonna be there: her brother

with his wife and little Adam, her aunts... in short, we'd have real fun. So the next day, a beautiful sunny Sunday, while lagging behind the cheerful troop (you try keeping up with a hoard of happy and famished Dutchmen riding their bike), I was already thinking "baby, you see, there's something I need to tell you..."

Those words stayed with me the whole day, until, after dinner, mom Nelleke and dad Arnaut showed me with pride, as if it were a family treasure, little Oukie's first bicycle: pink, with a basket, and colourful streamers on the handles. And that's when I understood what destiny required of me... I'm sorry, an unexpected work engagement requires my presence in Milan as soon as possible.

The next morning we were back in Amsterdam, at the station. I returned Rocinante to freedom, in the square, certain she'd soon find a new owner who'd take care of her.

My train for Milan was about to leave. Oukie was teary eyed and was trying to organize our next get-together. I cleverly avoided straight answers. Right as the train conductor whistled, I did it, I told her: "Baby, you see, there's something I need to tell you: I don't think it's gonna work out, because... (why?)... because between you and me there's one bike too many". That's when the train doors closed and the train left. She stood right there, stunned, unable to say a word. The total inanity of the rubbish I had just uttered left her luckily speechless, indecisive on whether to be consumed by despair or kick my teeth out. Even I was surprised of the genius of such of unbelievable excuse. But, after all, a relationship born during a burp competition couldn't have had a finer ending.

I have never seen her again.

Now I am with Laura, I have been living with her for the past two years. She has a car and a garage under the house. I don't believe we'll get married, our laziness prevents us from planning anything beyond the day after tomorrow. But for now it's working out fine, me, her, and my flaming-red bicycle I called Oukie.