

The Man on the Bike – Ava, Year 6, VIC

A simple, content bike sits on the street waiting to find a home. It's rusty and old, the blue paint peeling off, the tyres are flat, the lights smashed and the basket clings to one lonesome screw. It still waits. It rests on the ground next to a growing tree and watches shadows pass by, wondering when it's to die.

Then one rainy day when there is no one to be seen, a shadow emerges. Quiet as can be, an old gruff man stumbles down the street, his green raincoat dotted with holes, the thin grey hair scraped across his head, light blue eyes flickering. He clutches an old stiff red helmet with a faded black strap and shuffles closer to the bike, stepping over the curb and for a moment puts his hand on his knees, hunched over taking a few deep breaths.

Eventually he stumbles closer. He grips the handle firmly, his wrinkled hands clutching tightly as he tries to pull the bike up. He gets the bike standing, slowly rolling it up and over the curb, and using it to keep him stable, he wheels it steadily to his house. He opens his brown rusted gate ringing out an ear piercing sound. He stumbles up his red brick path, his garden full of rosemary, sunflowers, roses and bees bustling around the garden. Slowly but surely he lifts the bikes over the two steps and leans it on the small, red brick cottage wall.

For years this man has been stuck in the past reliving his life with his wife and son. The present has been cruel and empty without them, but now he has a chance to heal the hole in his heart. He heads inside and grabs an old oil pipe and starts spinning the bike's wheels. He stumbles back inside and brings out a rusty bike pump, then slowly he starts to pump air into the flat tyres. As the bike sits in utter silence it notices a wet tear rolling down the man's wrinkled cheek and relates to that pain. The pain of not belonging, the pain of no sense of community, the pain of losing the ones you love. The man stumbles back inside and the lonesome bike is left there to soak in its thoughts.

When the sun is rising the bike perks up as he hears those familiar shuffles and immediately knows it must be him. He hears feet shuffle closer until the man has a firm grip on the handle. He rolls the old bike down the red brick path, opening the rusty iron gate which rings out yet another ear piercing sound. The bike feels its tyres on the familiar surface once again, the cold hard cement ground. The man starts to lean forward and steadily with a loud wheeze he hooks one of his legs over onto its rusted pedal. With a slow, long push the man lifts up his left peddle and starts to ride. Veering off to the side a couple times the lonesome man eventually steadies.

Ever since his beloved wife and son died this man hasn't left the nook of his house. He only ever left if he needed to get some tobacco, and he would always go the long way to avoid contact with the local primary school. This school brought back dark familiar memories that would send him into a nightmare spiral for days. But today the momentum of the bike, his deep concentration and a lack of awareness, he unknowingly steers closer and closer to the school.

As they roll nearer the man can hear the little children's yelps and screams, their footsteps thundering on the ground. The man looks up. For the first time in thirty-nine years he comes face to face with young children. Swinging on monkey bars, playing tag, kicking footies and

all the man can do is watch and let his tears pour down his face and sting his eyes. A few children stop and stare through the wire fence whispering behind their cupped hands.

His sorrowful emotion turns into anger and pain, all of a sudden there is an outburst. He starts to lose control screaming with agony as the kids streak off to find the teachers, alarmed by this man yelling things like, "You bring pain, you leave your parents with no one."

Three teachers come streaming out and attempt to calm the poor inconsolable man. The man starts to wheeze and the teachers plead with him to take a seat. He stumbles closer to the bench, challenged by his stiff back. The teachers hold his arms and slowly lower him down. He tries to speak. Words won't come, but tears pour from his eyes.

The teachers leave him after telling him to return home and passing him back his bike. His hands are shaking as he lays his familiar grip back on the bike's handle. Steadily he gets back on his feet and pulls the bike up to a stance. He rolls the bike back down to the canal receiving some side glances from the children.

As he shuffles further and further away from the school, out of his peripheral vision he sees a small shadow emerging from the dusk. It is walking with pace, determination and courage. The man stumbles faster to build a gap between himself and the strange ominous shadow. The bike can feel the man's trembling hands tightening his grip on the handle.

As the shadow comes up behind him the man can feel its cold breath. Frozen with fear, the man turns and looks to see who had just tapped his shoulder. A girl with dark brunette hair and wild green piercing eyes.

The man stares at her intensely and with a gruff dull tone he says "What the hell do you want? I'm not in the mood to speak."

The girl in a soft tone replies, "I'm not here to hurt you. I relate to your losses and pains. I went through that and even though I am younger than you I have found the sunlight again and you need to too."

With that she sprints off and doesn't look back. The man walks back not muttering to himself once, but the bike can tell the man is distraught from that conversation and the pain and the realisation that he may not be able to change the past but he can impact his future.

The walk home is dull. The rain pours and the man puts up his raincoat hood full of holes attempting to keep dry. The rain pitter patters on the bike as the man leans it back against the brick wall. The man stumbles slowly back inside, rain running down his face, but one drop is a tear of pure sorrow. The bike sits there listening to the pouring rain hoping the terrified man will realise that he needs to focus on reality. That night when the moon was coming down and the man slid out of his worn brown wool slippers he lay in bed thinking. Thinking about the sun. It will shine again. It's not too late is it?

Early the next morning the bike can hear footsteps approaching and its mood perks up. Although the man is still shuffling there is a bit of a hop in his step. The man intently and slowly hops on the waiting bike. Swiftly the bike starts to roll. With perseverance the bike edges closer to the school. With the bike's guidance the man willingly rolls towards the

primary school. The man perceives the familiar sounds of the children's thundering feet and bellowing voices, wincing at the thought of seeing them again.

As he heads down the canal with the familiar water rushing by, his eye catches the same girl sitting on a rock with a solemn face. The man slowly hops off the bike and rolls it closer to the wired fence. The girl stands up and in a hushed tone the man whispers....