

Ewout Storm van Leeuwen



CYCLING

novella

What do you do with sudden, uncontrollable outbursts of energy? Theo went cycling. Just as lonely as working from home, but at least while cycling there was a landscape passing by. A near collision earned him a cycling buddy. This will be something...

Cycling

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Actually, in writing these stories,
I proceed like a painter: in front of
me is a white canvas that I want to fill
with color.

That blank canvas in these novellas is
mostly a man with a limited existence,
colorless, lonely and withdrawn.

Then he encounters a cat, dog, child,
horse or woman who colors that blank
canvas.

The man comes to life, which he puts
at the service of the other. This
delights his atrophied *altro*.

A kind of reset and play, given to him
bestowed by the gods or fate, or sim-
ply by his own desire.

The city began to come alive. Faint sounds of doors opening and closing, the echo of children's voices, car doors slamming, unintelligible talking, quick footsteps on the stairs, a child's temper. Then it had to be after eight.

The man on the fourth floor shivered with delight as he put on his chamois leather cycling shorts. The smooth fabric of the brightly colored shirt against his skin, the chamois leather gloves, the supple cycling shoes... sensuality translated into explosive energy.

With the carbon fiber bike on his shoulder, he descended the stairs in a kind of dance, not touching anything but the steps with his feet. The outside door opened to a bayous of sounds: cars, voices, streetcars, shouting children. He slid the bike under his bottom and dismounted. The pent-up energy discharged in a sprint between traffic. At the first traffic lights, he jumped off his bike and turned right across the sidewalk running without slowing down and was just ahead of the oncoming cyclists from the left at full speed. He pulled the trick again. A little further on he wanted to turn left, but a streetcar was behind him and one was making the turn into the street where he wanted to go. Orange. In a millisecond he decided, swerved to the right and with a sharp 180° turn entered the stream of cyclists from the right that just pulled up at the green light.

Then he was able to pick up speed, rode through

orange a few times and reached the bridge after the last traffic light. He downshifted and accelerated up the slope, his legs pedaling like mad; a less solid bike might have bent.

At the exit he threw up his hands as if he had crossed the finish line first and whizzed down. Calmer now, he zoomed on to where a bike path branched off into the polder. Here he slowed down and his temperature dropped as the sweat evaporated. It had been an orgasmic ride, like surfing a wave that could also have been his death.

Gluttonously he drank his breakfast drink, calmly paddling along the wetland, satisfied that his body had drawn the energy from his reserves rather than from a bulky breakfast. He still found himself overweight.

He had also calmed his almost insufferable inner electric volcano, without having to take a pill. Shocks still ran through his body, but that was relaxation, he knew. He accelerated to get to the drawbridge faster where he could take the bike path on the other side; it was crowded on this side with cars and troops of cycling children.

He had not been paying attention; a loud screech alerted him that a collision was about to take place. In a millisecond he braked and put his bike sideways. The cyclist from the right did the same and they slammed sideways against each other, consuming their last kinetic energy; they stood still, handlebars,

shoulders, legs and hips against each other.

'Goddamn,' screamed a female voice not a hand's length from his ear. 'Road pirate! Can't you look out, stupid dog! I'm coming from the right, mad monkey!'

He was quick at thinking and conjuring up images.

'Sorry, I didn't see you just behind that row of conifers.' It was only after this statement that he realized what had happened and terror shot into his legs.

'I hadn't seen that whole side road,' he muttered.

They detached themselves from each other and walked their bikes to the side; there were some cars waiting for them to pass.

'So what are these stupid conifers doing in this bog landscape,' the woman grumbled. 'They don't belong here at all.'

Adrenaline from the near collision dissolved further and the man sank into a sad hole; as he actually knew partly caused by skipping his breakfast and the sweet 'breakfast' drink, which was now giving him a blood sugar dip.

'What's wrong with you? Aren't you getting well?'

'I need to eat something,' he muttered almost unintelligibly. 'I haven't had anything yet.'

The woman looked around.

'There's a café-restaurant across the canal by the bridge, but the terrace isn't open yet. We can walk there and see if they have some food for you. There are no stores for miles around.'

She had seen that he was no longer able to ride a bicycle and was concerned. That was ingrained in her; as the daughter of a minister, she had grown up with the message that she was responsible for the wellbeing of her fellow man. That was why she had become a nurse.

The man allowed himself to be taken away. The woman, born in the village, knew the manager and his wife who was the cook and managed to get two bouncers out. She herself set out the chairs and tables on the terrace. Her bike ride had been interrupted at the beginning and she was bursting with energy. She had had a hearty breakfast, though. A bouncer on top of that she didn't turn down. She could eat an unlimited amount and not get fat.

She saw him watching while she was so occupied and when they finished their plates she asked what he saw about her anyway. She had noticed a kind of yearning in his gaze.

'Oh um, your um... vitality.'

'You had the sock in it yourself otherwise.'

'That only lasts a short time with me,' he replied gloomily. 'When I wake up I'm under high voltage and have to cycle that out, otherwise I'd go crazy. But it's like a straw fire: burned out quickly.'

'Next time, if you take a lot of whole-grain sandwiches with peanut butter and eat them every 15 minutes, you'll keep your energy up. You have to eat well.'

'Would that help?'

'Sure. What kind of work do you do?'

'I currently work freelance from home, but I was working at a financial institution on the South Axis. Actually, I moved to a different firm every so often.'

'Why?'

The man looked at her. Why did she want to know? Did he even want to tell her? Yes, he decided, she was a caring woman; he dared to pour his heart out to her.

'Early in the morning I am unbearable to others with my adhd. Then it subsides a bit and I work out everything in a short time. After that I fall into a slump. The rest of the day I suck.'

'What kind of work do you do?' She knew about holding on.

'I'm a legal assistant, contracts and all that.'

She looked at him appraisingly. 'Shall we ride up together for a bit? What's your name?'

'Theo.'

'Hi Theo, I'm Carola.'

She kept a high but steady pace, which forced him to conserve his energy for the first dozen minutes, allowing him to last longer. The high-protein food continued to provide him with energy. In fact, he was already getting a craving for a bouncer or something else hearty and let her know.

'I know a nice terrace down the road,' she called back. He didn't mind riding behind her: she had an

attractive hindquarters under which firm, well-proportioned bare legs moved, and her pace was steady, which made it easier for him.

He managed to maintain speed, but with difficulty. When he confessed this to her as they dismounted, she said cheerfully: 'Then you were cycling on your fat reserves. That's called ketosis, which sets in only when all the easy sugars have been consumed.'

After the bouncer, he said he wanted to go home. She was just about to go deeper into the polder.

He hesitated and finally shook his head.

'I'd love to ride further with you, but I have work to do. Um, do you bike every day?'

'Yes; do you like to ride together?'

'Gladly.'

She smiled and pinched his cheek for a moment. 'Bring enough sandwiches, then we'll go into the polder. There are no terraces there.'

Her touch inflamed desire, which, however, disappeared just as quickly. A self-protective mechanism he had to learn by trial and error. It happened automatically.

They agreed on time and place and each went in a different direction.

The road along the water was crowded with cyclists, school children and cars, and he adjusted his pace. Overtaking he found too nerve-wracking.

At home, he climbed the stairs with his bicycle on

his shoulder much less viciously than he had descended them. He showered and went to work on his computer.

By lunchtime it struck him that they didn't even know each other's addresses.

Mindful of her instructions, he bought the recommended foods. Actually, a whole wheat sandwich with cheese was quite doable instead of those crazy things he bought before.

In the afternoon, the weather took hold of him and he worked off his flashing energy in the gym.

'Ketosis huh?' said the gym owner. 'That's fat burning. That's what makes you really slim.' He poked Theo in the stomach. 'Eating healthier also helps. And especially no sugar and energy drinks.'

There were new assignments in his inbox. Unlike other days, for once he wasn't counted out and working the chores. Phone. His supervisor. She expressed appreciation for his quick response; it turned out the client was suddenly in a hurry and now she could send him the corrected attachments immediately.

The next morning he was up before dawn and decided first to jog around the quiet streets to get rid of his overexertion. Back in the house – he took the stairs two steps at a time – he showered and, for the first time in years, made breakfast for himself, for which he set a table on the balcony. Now it would be nice if Carola sat across from him. He pretended and

ate uneasily of the granola and sandwiches. His stomach responded well to it and he sat down more easily.

He had dozed off for a moment and was startled awake when his head snapped to the side. That had never happened to him before. His watch indicated it was still too early. To have something to do, he looked at his inbox. Yes, his project manager often worked late and had sent him work. It was less straightforward than the assignments from the afternoon before, but he couldn't consult others yet. He could ride his bike first. He made bread for the road and filled a thermos with cold drinking yogurt.

He more or less floated down the stairs with his fiber bike on his shoulder. The prospect of meeting Carola made him walk on pink clouds.

He rode at ease to the rendezvous and had opportunity to look around on the straights, where he could take his hands off the handlebars.

His timing was perfect: she arrived at the appointed place at the same time as him. Without stopping, they drove on. She accelerated, probably also having a burst of energy so early on.

After a while, she reduced speed so that they rode side by side on the polder road.

'Now some food!' she cried with a happy face and put her money where her mouth was, steering her bike with her body. After the sandwich, a few sips of unsweetened diluted yogurt and forward again.

When they had to wait for a ferry she told them she was on afternoon/evening shift and wanted to be home by noon.

'I can't do that long,' Theo said, chewing on his next sandwich. 'It's now at nine, I'd like to be home by ten, I've gotten more work because I can work longer thanks to your advice.'

'Hm, too bad. Then it's best to stay on this side and follow the dike for a bit until the first bridge. I'd like to ride some more. Will I see you again tomorrow?'

The ferry came and she boarded it amid cackling and joking schoolchildren who arrived just in time to be ferried across.

He waved after the departing vessel and climbed his bike a little sadly. Everything that was fun and lively seemed to go away from him and leave him here motherly alone on the waterfront.

The way back brought him back to himself; he experienced intensely the steady effort of his body, the legs pumping like a steam locomotive in an easy cadence, the lungs that could take in enough clean air without panting, his strong heart pumping blood around to his toes and red ears.

This time, his bike on his shoulder, he was able to climb all the stairs without fainting halfway up. He showered, spread another sandwich, made coffee and went to work. It had just been ten o'clock; he felt like he had already lived a whole day.

He received compliments from his supervisor and more work, which also meant more income. It even included a request to answer a client's complaint in draft form. That meant more confidence in his abilities; he was moving forward!

By mid-afternoon the euphoria dropped below zero and beyond. It couldn't have been because of the food; he had faithfully eaten a sandwich every hour. Or was that not enough? He had been drinking a lot of coffee, though. He was getting deeper and deeper into the valley of gloomy thoughts. Carola must have had a suitor, maybe she was married and had children. Or else she was a lesbian. He took an energy drink, but that only added to the tension.

Alcoholic beverages he did not like, he had never smoked ... then just a pill. In his misery, he took two and had to restrain himself from taking the whole strip. If it had been a jar, he would have swallowed the entire contents; however, the pushing through, pill by pill, was too much for him.

He felt increasingly lousy and panicked. He tried to vomit, but he couldn't; he didn't dare, afraid of choking on it. Greying, he sought his bed and pulled the cover over his head. His brain seemed to spin around inside his skull.

Hours later, he woke up from stuffy dreams and just managed to make it to the toilet, where his cramping