

Izzat Amin Iskandar

IZZAT AMIN ISKANDAR was my classmate in First Preparatory. He was on the short side, his body strong and broad, his head large, his hair black and smooth. He wore glasses, along with a slight meek smile, almost of supplication, and that Coptic look—sometimes shifty, misgiving, and frightened, sometimes profound, submissive, and burdened with guilt and distress. He also had an artificial leg and a crutch. The crutch ended in a piece of rubber that prevented it from making a noise or slipping, and his artificial leg he covered with his school pants and a sock and shoe to make it look normal.

Each morning Izzat limped into the classroom leaning on his crutch, dragging his artificial leg and swinging from one side to the other with every step until he reached the end of his bench. There, in the corner next to the window, he would sit down and lay his crutch on the ground, paying it no further attention. He would completely absorb himself in the lesson,

writing down carefully everything that the teacher said, listening alertly and knitting his brow in concentration and then raising his hand with a question—as though by becoming so involved in the lesson he could insinuate himself into the throng, hide himself in our midst, and become, for a few hours, just one student among the others, stigmatized by neither crutch nor limp.

When the bell sounded for break, the moment its splendid tones rang out, the students would all cheer for joy, throw down whatever they were holding, and push and shove their way, sometimes even knocking one another over, to the door of the classroom, from where they descended to the playground. Only Izzat Amin Iskandar would receive the sound as though it was the fulfillment of some ancient, awaited prophecy, close his exercise book, bend quietly down, and then take the sandwich and the comic from his bag and spend the break seated where he was, reading and eating. If any of the other students were to look at him and show any curiosity or pity, Izzat would smile broadly while continuing to read, to make it clear how much he was enjoying himself, as though it was the pleasure of reading and that alone that kept him from going down to the playground.

It was the first time I'd taken my bike to school. It was a Thursday afternoon and the playground was empty of all but a few students playing soccer on the far side. I started riding my bike. I would cross the playground back and forth, making circles round the trees, imagining myself in a bike race and yelling at the top of my lungs, "Ladies and gentlemen,

and now for the World Cycling Championship!" In my mind's eye, I could see the public, the important people, and the riders with whom I was competing and hear the shouts and whistles of the fans. I was always in first place, reaching the finishing line before the others and receiving bunches of flowers and kisses of congratulation.

I continued to play like this for some time and then suddenly I got a feeling that I was being observed. I turned and saw Izzat Amin Iskandar sitting on the laboratory steps. He'd been watching me from the beginning and when our eyes met he smiled and waved, so I set off toward him and he started his standing up process, leaning on one hand against the wall of the steps and grasping his crutch under his arm; then he raised his body slowly until he was upright and came down the steps one by one. When he reached me, he started examining the bicycle closely. He took hold of the handle bar, rang the bell a number of times, and then bent and ran his fingers over the spokes of the front wheel, muttering in a low voice, "Nice bike."

I was quick to say with pride, "It's a Raleigh 24, racing wheels, three-speed."

He gave the bike another look over, as though to test the truth of what I'd said, then asked, "Do you know how to ride with your hands in the air?"

I nodded and set off on the bike. I was an expert rider and happy to show off in front of him. I pedaled hard until I got to top speed and could feel the bike shaking beneath me. Then I raised my hands carefully from the handlebar, until my arms were straight up in the air. I stayed that way for a bit, then turned, and came back to where he'd taken a

few steps forward to the middle of the playground. Coming to a halt in front of him, I said as I got off, "Happy now?"

He didn't answer me, but bent his head and started looking at the bike as though weighing something profound and surprising in his mind. He struck the ground with his crutch and moved forward a step until he was up against the bike. Then he grasped the handlebar in his hand, bent toward me, and whispered, "Let me have a ride, please" and went on insistently repeating, "Please, please."

I didn't take in what he was saying and stared at him. At that moment he looked like someone swept by a wave of such longing that he couldn't stop himself or go back, and when he found I didn't reply he started shaking the handle bar violently and shouting, in anger this time, "I said give me a ride!" Then he tried to jump up and get on and we both lost our balance and almost fell over.

I don't remember what I was thinking right then but something propelled me toward him and I found myself helping him onto the bike. He leaned his weight on my shoulder and the crutch and after several strenuous attempts was able to raise his body up high and then get his sound leg over to the other side of the bike and sit on the saddle. His plan was to hold his artificial leg out in front to avoid the pedal and at the same time to push the other pedal hard with his sound leg. This was extremely difficult but, in the end, possible. Izzat settled himself on the bike and with my hand on his back I started to push him forward gently and carefully, and when the bike started to move and he began pedaling, I let go. He lost his balance and wobbled violently but quickly recovered his poise, straightened out, and started to control

the bike. He had to make a huge effort to pedal with one leg while keeping his balance but moments passed and the bike proceeded slowly and Izzat passed first the big tree and then the canteen kiosk and I found myself clapping and shouting, "Well done, Izzat!"

He kept going in a straight line until he had almost reached the end of the playground where he had to make a turn, which scared me. But he made the turn carefully and skillfully and when he came back the other way he seemed confident and in complete control of the bike—so much so that he changed gear once, and then again, until the rushing air made his hair fly.

The bicycle was charging ahead at great speed now and Izzat passed down the pathway that extended between the trees, his form appearing and disappearing amid the criss-crossing foliage. He'd done it, and I watched him as he leaned back on the bike, which was flying like an arrow now, raised his head, and let out a long, loud cry that echoed around the playground—a strange, drawn-out, cracked cry that sounded as though it had been long imprisoned within his chest. He was shouting, "See! Seeeeeeeeee!"

A little later, when I ran over to him, the bike was on its side on the ground, the front wheel still spinning and whirring, and the dull-colored artificial leg, with its sock, shoe, and dark, hollow inside, lying separated from his body at a distance, looking as though it had just been cut off or was a separate creature with its own independent life. Izzat was lying face down, his hand on the place where the leg had been amputated

and which had started to bleed and make a stain that was spreading over his ripped pants. I called to him and he slowly raised his head. There were cuts on his forehead and lips and his face looked strange to me without the glasses. He gazed at me for a moment as though gathering his wits, then said in a weak voice, with the ghost of a smile, "Did you see me ride the bike?"