

Ramblers and Spinners

by Carl Wooton

IT SNOWED all day the Monday after Thanksgiving. After supper and homework, my brother, Will, and I sat in the narrowly opened window of the second floor apartment where we lived and watched the older kids run their bicycles down Sweet's Hill and hit their brakes at the corner beneath us and do four or five spins until they ended up in the next block in front of The Hoosier Cafe. Bradshaw Morgan got more spins than anyone else. He never got less than four, sometimes six, and once, although I didn't see it, he got nine complete spins. That was the winter before we moved to Roblyers Crossing, Indiana, and Bradshaw was already sixteen.

Jerry McCloskey, a fat kid, came off the bottom of the hill, hit the corner, spun, and went down, sprawling, the bike one way, him another. The others helped him up, but not without a couple of them slipping and falling on the packed snow.

I laughed and said, "I can do better than that."

Will said, "Me, too."

I said, "I bet I could get six spins, at least."

From behind us, our older sister, Angie, said, "Bet you can't."

Will and I didn't know she was there, watching us, hearing us. If we'd known, we sure wouldn't have said anything out loud. She came closer so she could watch Bradshaw Morgan and the other older boys. She was fifteen.

Will said, "I can."

She said, "You can't get six spins. You can't get any spins." Will

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was getting up to hit her. "You don't even have a bicycle."

The truth was more than Will could take, and he jumped at her. Angie yelled, and I grabbed Will and held him back. I really didn't care whether or not he clobbered Angie, but I knew if he did, I'd probably get the same punishment he did just for being there.

I sat on Will and told Angie, "You better get out while you can." She believed me and ran out of the room, calling for Momma.

I heard her say, "Will was trying to hit me," and Momma said, "Why don't you leave them alone when they're in there together?" and I knew our father wasn't in the apartment. If he had been there, Momma would have said something like, "Angie!" and our father would have been half way down the hall already, coming to set things straight. Will struggled, and I got off of him. He was strong for ten.

We went back to the open window, but the bicycle riders were all gone. The snow fell harder, and the freezing air that came through the open window made my eyes water and hurt my throat when I breathed it in. But I didn't close the window. The street light catty corner from our building shone on the tracks made by the bicycles. The falling snow was filling in the tracks, but I could see them as though they were still in the motions of being made while Bradshaw Morgan went spinning down the street toward the cafe.

Momma came into the room and said, "Shut that window, you two. You'll catch your death. I swear!" Will shut the window.

I said, "I need a bicycle."

She said, "You got a money tree?"

Will said, "They don't cost much."

I said, "You won't have to get us nothing else for Christmas."

She said, "Get to bed. We'll talk about it later." She said it in the tone of voice she used when she meant the discussion was closed.

Will said, "I'm going to ask Daddy."

She said, "He's got enough trouble without you bothering him about some bicycles we can't afford. Get to sleep. You've got school tomorrow."

After she shut the door, Will said, "Do you think we can get a bicycle for Christmas?"

I said, "We don't have a prayer."

He said, "I'm going to ask Daddy."

I wrote off any hope of finding bicycles beside the Christmas tree that year. I had heard enough talk about signs of coming hard times. Momma, in fact, had already said something about there being nothing but foolishness in wasting good money on a tree we'd just have to throw out. But Momma's talking didn't touch Will. Only a couple of nights later Will was true to his word about asking our father for the bicycles. If I'd paid a little more attention to him, I might have expected him to do it, but I never would have thought he would do it when he did.

He did it at grace. Whenever our parents had had a few days in a row without arguing about whether or not we were going to end up in the poor house, our father offered grace before supper. He never said anything more than thanks for good food and good health, but he ended it by indicating each of us should offer some kind of petition. My mother prayed for comfort for those mothers who had

lost their sons in the war and for President Truman. Angie prayed for A's on whatever tests she had to take that week. I asked for new tennis shoes and help in algebra. I wasn't worried about an A like Angie was. I just wanted help! Then Will, with his hands together, his fingers extended out straight, almost whispered, "Please let me and Mark get bicycles for Christmas."

He said it softly and with his hands up against his mouth. Our father reached over and lightly moved Will's fingers down.

He said, "I couldn't hear that, Will. Say it again, a little louder."

"Please let me and Mark get bicycles for Christmas."

Momma said, "Will! I told you we can't afford any bicycles."

Will didn't look at her. Neither me. We both watched our father, half expecting some kind of explosion that never came. He looked at Momma a half second when she'd had her say, then looked back at Will, who still had his hands folded like he was thinking he maybe had better offer another prayer.

Then our father said, "What about Angie? Don't you want a bicycle for your sister?"

Will bowed his head farther into his clasped hands and muttered, "And for Angie, too."

Our father said, "Amen," and there was a sound like someone blowing out candles on a cake. That was the first time I knew I had been holding my breath.

Momma mumbled something about people thinking they could pick money like apples, but she didn't make anymore fuss during supper about Will's prayer. Nor did she say anything when Will

asked again for bicycles for Christmas at supper every day the rest of that week. But that Sunday afternoon, I heard her talking to our father in the kitchen.

Momma said, "You hadn't ought to encourage him to go on about bicycles. He's just going to be disappointed."

Our father said, "We'll see."

"See what?"

"Maybe we can work something out."

"You're wearing two sweaters because we can't afford to keep the heat turned up and you think we can pay for bicycles? You got a special kind of garden where you grow your money trees? Where are you going?"

"Downstairs."

Our father's business was downstairs. He made venetian blinds and sold them wholesale. Momma kept the books. They talked all the time about the business, but always as though Angie and Will and I were not there. Our father kept saying he thought things would pick up in the new year. Momma said things about ostriches and fools with their heads in the sand. I didn't understand probably half of what I overheard, but I knew business wasn't good. That was why the heat was turned down and we had to wear long-sleeve shirts and sweaters in the apartment.

Momma didn't like for our father to work on Sundays, but he almost always did, unless they didn't argue or talk about how much things cost. Even I figured out that nearly every Sunday afternoon when she said something to him about money not growing on trees, he was almost halfway down the stairs before she finished.

Sometimes I wanted to ask her why she hadn't figured that out, too. But I didn't ask her, partly because I was a little bit afraid she had.

There was no grace before and hardly any talk during supper for most of the next week. Each meal grew sterner and more silent. I admit that even though I had refused to share Will's hope, I shared his dreams of descending Sweet's Hill at rocket speed and spinning through the intersection, and it seemed as though even the dreams were slipping through a crack at the edge of the stillness of those suppertimes. The only good thing about the meal time was that the kitchen where we ate was still warm from Momma's cooking.

During that week, our father came late to the table, ate his meal, thanked Momma for fixing it, and went downstairs. Sometimes I heard him come back after we had gone to bed. He and Momma talked low late at night, and I couldn't ever hear everything. But sometimes I heard him say things like, "I've got to believe we'll make it," and sometimes something like, "Christ, Goldie, I'm doing the fucking best I can."

Near the end of the week, our father came to the table first and sat with his hands in his lap while he waited for the rest of us to settle in our places. Will was the last one to the table. He came hurrying, and as he sat in his chair next to mine, he flashed some kind of paper at me and shoved it into his hip pocket.

Our father prayed his grace, and he surprised us at the end of it by adding a new petition: "Please let the County Commissioners act fairly when they award the contract for the new blinds at the Old Folks' Home." His voice stumbled through it, as though he was embarrassed to be asking for anything more than good food and good health. He cleared his throat, and Momma followed with a prayer for all the poor people who wouldn't have a proper Christmas that year.

Then Angie said, "Please let us have bicycles for Christmas."

Momma made a noise sucking in her breath. Will and I grinned and squirmed in our chairs, and our father stared at Angie and looked puzzled. Angie sat with her hands folded like she was imitating a statue of an angel. I didn't know what had possessed her, but I thought real quick that I had better, in fact, be quick and follow her example.

I said, "Please, God, let us have bicycles for Christmas."

And Will: "Please let me and Mark and Angie have a bicycle for Christmas."

Momma said, "Do you know how much a bicycle costs?"

Angie said, "\$29.95. Will and I found some in the Sears catalog."

Will pulled the paper he had shown me from his hip pocket and handed it to Momma.

Will said, "There, at the bottom. I want a red one."

Momma said, "You hadn't ought to tear pages out of my catalog without asking." She looked at the picture and said, "That's thirty dollars. Times three, that's ninety dollars. And that doesn't include carrying charges. We don't have that kind of tree." She ignored Will's open hand stretched toward her, folded the paper and put it under her plate.

Our father said, "Goldie, let's wait and see."

Momma said, "We're wondering how we're going to pay for the next tank of butane and you want to wait and see about some bicycles that nobody can pay for. I swear, Ernest. Sometimes I

wonder.”

She said that a lot, but she never explained exactly what she wondered about. Will and I used to guess late at night when we were in bed and couldn't sleep, but we never did figure out just what she meant. That night I didn't think I would ever go to sleep. Almost as soon as the light was out, Will said, “I bet we get them.”

I said, “What made Angie come around to our side?”

He said, “Bradshaw Morgan.”

“How's that?”

“I heard Ruth Ann Parker saying Bradshaw Morgan made Patsy Jukeman his girlfriend last summer because she had a bicycle and would go riding with him in the country—all the way to Raccoon Creek and the hogback—anytime he wanted her to.”

Angie made no secret about wanting to be Bradshaw Morgan's girlfriend, but I was amazed Will had figured it out, even hearing what he did. He thought girls should be treated like poisonous insects, and he didn't waste much of his time worrying about how or what they thought. But he had understood Angie this time, and he knew as well as I that our father was not going to dismiss such a prayer from her lightly.

Will and I stayed awake until long after our parents went to bed. We whispered in the light from the street lamp about all the places we would go if—when—we got our new bikes. Finally, Will stayed silent when I asked him a question and all I could hear was the sound of a car crunching the snow in the street below and after that, the soft murmur of our parents' voices circling in the dark, cold air. Then suddenly our father's voice rose.

“Goddamnit, Goldie, all I said was we'll wait and see.”

Then it was quiet for a few minutes, until their voices and sounds of them moving around came down the hall again. It was like the thinness of the cold air offered no resistance to the sounds they made, and I pulled my three blankets tighter around me. The cold air and the darkness moved together around my head, and I had a vision of Bradshaw Morgan waiting for me in front of the Hoosier Cafe as I came down Sweet's Hill, hit a new glazing of ice in the intersection and went into a string of acrobatic spins that awed even Bradshaw. I was almost into the last spin right in front of the cafe when I heard Momma's voice get almost loud, and she said, “Ernest! No! It's too cold!”

Will had to make a Christmas list at school. He printed his name at the top of his paper and the words A RED BICYCLE in the middle of the page. He told Angie about it, and she helped him to make others, some with his name at the top, some with hers, and some with mine. They all had the single item, A BICYCLE, as the total Christmas shopping list for each of us. We taped copies on the doors to our rooms, on the wall beside the bathroom mirror, and even on the bulletin board downstairs in the office of the venetian blind business.

We got a tree, but we got it less than a week before Christmas, after they were marked down. It was small, barely as tall as Will, because Momma said, “A big tree wouldn't look good with only one string of lights.” We made chains of colored construction paper and hung peppermint canes on the branches. Momma always saved the thin, metal ribbons that she peeled off the tops of coffee cans, and we twisted them and hung them to shine like store-bought icicles when the lights were turned on. And in the last days before Christmas, we watched our parents' every expression and listened for hints in their inflections. At night Will and I speculated about the meanings of their smallest gestures. He believed a Christmas

bicycle was a sure thing. I agreed that all in all, the signs were good. I did not share his faith, but since Angie's prayer, I had begun to hope.

On Christmas morning we woke to the sound of our father yodeling in the kitchen. Sharp, heavy odors of fresh coffee and biscuits and bacon filled the warm air. When I threw off the covers, I knew Momma had turned up the thermostat. She was waiting outside the door when Will looked to see if there was a clear way to the living room.

Momma said, "Breakfast first."

That was her father's rule when she was a little girl. She called it a family tradition and there was no point in arguing against it. Angie, Will and I ate as quickly as we could. We believed our parents took a great deal more deliberate time than they ever did with any other meal, but finally our father and Momma went got up from the table and went into the living room to prepare for us. We crept along the hall as far as we dared in order to be as close to the living room as we could be when they called for us. Then our father yelled, "Come on!" and Momma shouted, "Don't run!" and we nearly leaped the last short distance into the room.

Joy! Joy! The purest joy I had ever known. Three bicycles stood in front of the tree. Our parents stood to one side, and Momma tried to take a picture at the instant of our amazement. Amazement and joy! Hope fulfilled! Each bicycle had a large sign taped to the handlebars to show whose it was. Will's and Angie's were red, and mine was a bright, glisteny blue like a clear sky reflected in water.

Will flipped up the kickstand on his bike, jumped on the seat and started riding down the hall with Momma yelling and chasing after him. I followed, but Momma turned us both around and pushed us back into the living room. We had to open the rest of our presents,

the ones that had come in the mail from relatives. Sweaters. Books. Socks. One at a time. Each had a turn. Cards with notes about how sorry they were we lived so far away from everybody. And the bicycles stood at the entrance to the hall, ready, their clean lines defining speed and flowing spins on the icy streets that waited for us outside. Then, after the last package of more clothes from Grandpa Rambler, we were ready to go outside. Momma forced us into extra shirts and heavy coats and gloves with warnings not to stay out too long especially Angie because it was bitter cold. Our father helped us carry the bikes downstairs.

I wanted to go straight to the top of Sweet's Hill and come down to the intersection, but Angie and Will wanted to ride around town and make sure everybody saw our new bikes. I fussed, but I went with them. It couldn't have taken more than ten or fifteen minutes to ride past every block in town. And it didn't take a genius to figure out what Angie really wanted was to ride past Bradshaw Morgan's house. In a little while we had a crowd that wanted to ride down the hill and do tricks in the street. There were three or four other new bikes besides ours, and everybody who had one believed he had the bike that would one day break Bradshaw's record of nine spins on one ride. We were halfway up the hill when someone looked back and said, "Look!"

Bradshaw Morgan stood at the base of the hill beside his old bike, talking with Angie. Then, in a minute, he started up the hill, and Angie rode off toward the intersection to wait for us. Patsy Jukeman, Ruth Ann Parker, and some other kids who didn't have bikes were there, too.

There was no way up iced over Sweet's Hill on a bicycle except to walk and push, slip and fall, push and crawl. Fat Jerry McCloskey led the way, and it looked like he spent as much time falling as he did pushing and walking. The sky was dirty gray and looked like the snow ought to start again any time, except it was too cold to snow.

The wind blew stronger at the top of the hill, and not even extra shirts and a mackinaw kept it from slicing all the way through me. Ruth Ann Parker's little brother, Timmy, went first. The rest of us followed, with Will and me somewhere in the middle of the order. One went, and the next one counted to ten before he went because nobody wanted a collision at the bottom. Will was in place, then suddenly he was hurtling down the hill in front of me and I was counting . . . one thousand eight, one thousand nine. . . .

“Go!”

A hand pushed on my back and the cold in the wind stung my eyes and took away my breath. I pedaled at first, then held the pedals in a coasting position because the wheels were turning too fast for me to keep up with them. The back wheel hit a rut, came out of it, and I thought I was going to fall, but somehow I kept up and headed for the bottom of the hill. I looked toward the intersection and saw a blur of people and bikes standing around, keeping the center clear, and then I was there. I locked the brakes, turned the handlebars and spun, two, three, and went down. My leg caught under the bike, and I skidded along the street until I crashed into the rear wheel of a parked car.

Someone lifted my bike off of me and someone else helped me up and another voice yelled, “Look out!” Another rider spun through the intersection. This one did better than I had, at least four and a half good spins and without falling down. I saw Will on the other side of the street, standing next to Jerry McCloskey.

“How'd you do?”

He said, “I was awful,” and held up one gloved finger.

Jerry said, “He's too light. There's nothing to keep him going. You turned too tight and ran into yourself.”

I turned the handlebars of my bike and looked at the front wheel coming around and thought I understood what he meant.

Someone yelled, "Bradshaw!"

And we all looked up the street to see Bradshaw coming toward the intersection. Nobody understood how he seemed to come down the hill so much faster than everybody else. He turned his handlebars, locked his brakes, spun, spun again and again, and looked like he would have gone forever if he hadn't been too far to the side. He had to stop to keep from sliding into the steel posts that held up the metal awning in front of the cafe. Angie and all her friends jumped around him like he was some kind of war hero coming home, but they didn't impress Bradshaw. He right away started moving back toward the hill for another ride.

We tried again. Will didn't do any better, and I did worse, even though I didn't fall. We went again, and Will got two and I got a little more than three again. I didn't turn the handlebars so hard, but I leaned too far, trying to help the bike pull itself around, and went down even harder than I had the first time. But I got up and inspected my bike. Just two spokes on the front wheel were a little bent, not enough damage to keep me off the hill. Bradshaw got six really big, looping spins the third time. He looked as smooth and graceful as a figure skater.

We had started toward the hill for another run, when Angie caught up with us and said, "Momma says you've got to come."

She said it loud in front of everybody, and they all laughed.

I said, "Tell her after this one."

Angie pointed toward the building, and I looked up. The angle

was wrong to see anything, but I knew Momma was standing at the corner window, waiting for us to show we were coming home. Everyone else looked up, too, and they all laughed harder.

Angie said, "You better come," and turned away. Will followed her.

Jerry McCloskey said, "You better go home, Mark."

He said it like he was talking to a real little kid. Bradshaw looked over Ruth Ann Parker's head at me and grinned.

I said, "I'll go when I'm ready."

We climbed the hill again, but this time I hung back so I'd be one of the last. Bradshaw was always last. The wind blew harder. It had gotten colder. My face had almost no feeling in it. I went down the hill and before I hit the bottom I knew I was going to do better than three this time and maybe better than. . . . I turned the handlebars, saw the lamp post go by twice, then the bread box in front of the grocery store, three, four, I was going into five, and I could hear everyone yelling and then I felt the bike go. I hit the iced pavement hard on my left arm, felt myself slide and heard a scraping sound somewhere away from me. Everybody crowded into the street to see if I was hurt, and they kept Bradshaw Morgan, who never waited a full one thousand ten, from spinning at all.

My father came down and helped me home. Jerry McCloskey brought my bike. I kept trying to look at it while my father steered me toward the stairs at the back of the building. The handlebars were twisted out of line and ends of broken spokes stuck out of the rims of both wheels. When they got it and me to the top of the stairs and stood my bike next to Will's and Angie's, mine looked like I had tried to destroy it.

My father said, "It'll probably be a while before I can fix it."

I might have said something if it had been just him and me on the landing, but I didn't say anything because Momma already had hold of my good arm and was pulling me into the kitchen. The warm air picked at my face and made little needles run up and down in my hands and feet. As soon as she decided my left arm wasn't broken, she made me drink a cup of hot cocoa. I waited for her to say something about the bike and about my not coming in when she had said for me to, but she didn't say anything. She just told me to go on and be easy the rest of the day because I had had enough of being out in the cold. I didn't argue, and I really didn't mind that the rest of the day turned out to be sort of like a thousand other days I remembered staying inside because it was too cold. It still was Christmas. Momma cooked everything. My father said my bike could be fixed, and I had made almost five spins on just my fourth try down Sweet's Hill.

In bed that night, Will said, "You did great!"

Momma turned the thermostat down again, and the sound of the wind blowing down from the top of Sweet's Hill made the cold air in the apartment seem even thinner than usual.

I heard our father say, "I can fix it, Goldie. I'll get some spokes when I go to Terre Haute for the County Commissioners' meeting."

Momma said, "I swear! A brand new bike torn up the first day he rides it. And it's not even paid for!"

The wind brought an ice storm the day after Christmas. The temperature went below zero and stayed there for the rest of the school vacation days. The roads in and out of town were impassable, so my father could not go to Terre Haute and get the spokes he needed to fix my bike. It did not matter much, because

Momma wouldn't have let us out to ride anyway. Neither would anyone else's Momma. Will and I spent a lot of time looking out the window, waiting to see who would dare the hill with all the new ice and snow on it, but no one came. Not many cars tried the streets. There was nothing outside except the whiteness of the frozen snow that covered everything and the cold, cold air we felt when we got too close to the glass of the window pane.

We had been back in school a couple of weeks when Momma told us the snowplows had finally cleared the roads and she and our father were going the next day to Terre Haute to meet with the County Commissioners. She told us in the evening because she wanted us to pray the commissioners would make a right decision about the blinds for the old folks' home. I left that up to Angie and Will and thought real hard all night and all the next day about our father buying the spokes for my wheels. I even tried to think of ways to get out of basketball practice after school in order to get home in time to help him repair the bike.

It was already dark when I left the gym. Running was nearly impossible on the icy streets and sidewalks, but I ran when I wasn't sliding. I stumbled up the stairs to the landing. My father knelt beside my bicycle. He had put new spokes in the wheel and he was just putting the tire back on its rim. He had thick hands with short fingers that made him look clumsy when he worked with small things, but he got the tire on and handed me the small air pump. He held the wheel for me as I pumped, and when I finished he put it back on the bike. The spokes in the wheel were all in place; the handlebars were straight. It was almost like Christmas morning all over again. I wanted to take it right then and ride through the streets to show everyone my bike was fixed and I was ready for the next run down Sweet's Hill.

Momma had heard us on the stairs, and she opened the door to the kitchen and said, "Supper's ready. We're waiting for you." The

others were already sitting at the table by the time my father and I got there.

Our father prayed thanks for guiding the County Commissioners, and I knew that meant he got the order for the blinds at the old folks' home. Momma said something about hoping we would use our blessings right. I don't remember what Angie and Will prayed for, but I gave thanks for the fixing of my bicycle and asked for the weather to get better. Then I realized we were having a Sunday dinner in the middle of the week, with dessert. Two freshly baked pies rested on the counter next to the stove. Our parents laughed and talked through the whole meal. They told us about the meeting with the County Commissioners. Our father gave a detailed description of buying the spokes for my bicycle, and Momma made sure I understood how much trouble he had had putting them in my wheels so I could be surprised when I got home from basketball practice.

She said, "I hope you'll take better care of your bike now. It isn't made for doing acrobatics."

She stopped short of forbidding me to ride with the others down Sweet's Hill. She didn't warn me of dire consequences if I played what she considered the fool again. But I understood that if I wasn't what she thought was careful enough, I'd be walking the rest of my foreseeable life.

I said, "I'll be careful."

After Momma saw that our light was out and the door was closed, I got up, wrapped a blanket around me and looked out the window at the intersection. The snow and ice looked gray and colder than they did in the daylight. The chill came through the glass, and I hurried shivering back to bed and pulled up the extra quilt Momma had put at the foot. Will was snoring. Momma and my father were

making the noises they always made getting ready to go to bed, except they were talking and laughing more than they had in a long time.

Momma said, "Oh, Ernest!" and everything was real quiet until I heard Momma giggle, and my father said in a loud voice, "Goldie, everything's going to be fine, just fine."

2

That winter broke every record it could for being cold. No one went out who didn't have to. We even got unexpected holidays from school, but ten or fifteen minutes outside drove the bravest and the foolhardiest alike inside. The bicycles stayed on the landing. Momma stayed downstairs almost as much as our father. She even went with him after supper and on Sunday afternoons. We heard talk about trimming expenses and cutting back. The thermostat was turned even lower. Sometimes when it seemed if one of us—Angie or Will or I—even looked like we might ask for something, Momma reminded us there were lots of different kinds of trees in the woods, but none of them grew money.

They brought paperwork and bookkeeping upstairs to the kitchen table at night to save on heating costs downstairs. They talked about business. I didn't understand most of what they said, but I did understand that the order for the blinds at the Old Folks' Home had not turned out the way they had hoped it would. And they argued about bills that had to be paid. They yelled at each other, apologized, and yelled some more. Our father became more and more silent, except when he worked on the books with Momma. He brought his silence even to the supper table, and if Momma sat like she was waiting to say grace, he didn't seem to notice and served food onto his plate. At times he left the kitchen and went into the living room and sat in his big chair and stared out a window like he was seeing something none of us could see.

One afternoon early in February there was no basketball practice, and I returned from school with Angie and Will. When we walked into the kitchen, Momma was wearing her heavy coat. Two suitcases stood by the door.

She said, "There's no heat. We're going to Terre Haute for a couple of days." And she named some people she and our father knew who had agreed to take us in until somebody came and refilled our butane tank. Our father came in, picked up the suitcases and walked out without saying a word. Momma pretended to look for something in a cabinet the time he was in the kitchen. Then she made sure we had all our school books, pushed us out the door, and we all went downstairs to the car.

Before we got out of town, she asked, "Is there enough gas in the car to get there?"

Our father said, "Yes, goddamnit, Goldie. I'm not going to leave you stranded to freeze on the road."

"I didn't say you were. I didn't even think it."

"It's not my fault the gauge on the butane tank froze. It looked like we had plenty to last 'til next week. I would've paid the bill by then, somehow."

She said, "I'm not blaming you."

He said, "For Christ's sake, Goldie!"

Every morning our father left the house where we stayed. When I asked Momma where he went, she said, "He's taking care of business." He returned in the evenings, and they kept to themselves and whispered. Their friends seemed not to notice them. Will and I

had to sleep on a pallet made of blankets on the floor. We were glad when after nearly a week there, Momma told us we were going home the next day. The apartment was almost warm when we returned, and the first thing Momma did was to turn the thermostat down.

The best thing was the weather came round to something more like normal. It was still cold, but it wasn't that wind blowing, below zero cold that kept almost every moving thing huddled in the warmest corner it could find. The sun was out most days, with the air bright and clear, and a couple of weekends after we were back, there was a real gathering at the intersection beneath our window. They were all looking toward the top of Sweet's Hill. Even some of the grownups who didn't have anything better to do had come out to watch. Our father had come upstairs to see if we were going out.

Before I got my coat on, Momma said, "Keep in mind we can't afford to fix broken bicycles."

My father said, "Be careful."

On the way to the top of the hill, I felt all the excitement I had felt Christmas day. Everybody was happy to be out again. At the top of the hill we heard the crowd at the bottom yelling at every rider. Halfway down the hill I looked ahead at the intersection and it was like I saw myself already there, making tight, rapid spins, not even needing to count them because the crowd was counting for me. The chill in the wind burned my face, and off the bottom of the hill, leveling out, I saw my father standing in front of his business. He was in shirt sleeves in the cold air, his hands pushed deep into his pockets, as though that was all he needed to be warm. I had a flash of him kneeling on the landing, his hands holding the thin spokes of my wheels, and I did three easy spins and slid straight on toward the breadbox in front of the grocery store to keep from falling. I heard a murmur of disappointment from the crowd, and when I looked back

toward the corner, my father had gone back into the building.

Will said, "What happened?"

I said, "Nothing."

Jerry McCloskey said, "He chickened out."

"Up yours, Fatso!"

McCloskey said, "You want to eat snow, dipshit?" and looked around for somebody to hold his bike.

It might have come to something, probably big, fat McCloskey sitting on me and grinding me through the ice and snow into the pavement, but it stopped because the next rider down the hill lost control of his bike and came crashing into both of us and a half dozen others as well. By the time we got ourselves up, Bradshaw was launching his bike at the top of the hill, and we forgot about everything except watching him. He came hurtling down the hill in as straight a line as it could be. His bike didn't wobble, not even a little bit, and Bradshaw leaned over with his head cutting through the icy air. It was almost miraculous. Six, seven, eight full spins, and he would have done the mythical nine and more if a car had not turned toward us at the corner.

McCloskey and I had completely forgotten what had almost started between us, and nobody else even remembered we were there. We had eyes and thoughts only for Bradshaw. He had challenged us with something much more than just the number of spins we thought were possible. He had shown us a grace and ease that we did not know how to measure and, thus, did not know how to achieve. And he knew he had done something special. He would not ride again that day. He leaned his bike against the wall of the

cafe and became the center of the crowd still willing to watch the rest of us. We went again and again up the hill to ride down and spin through the intersection. Hardly anyone fell. We all knew we were having fun, but we—all of us, even Jerry McCloskey—rode without heart.

The effect of Bradshaw Morgan's ride went beyond that day. It marked the end of a season. We still rode, but we climbed the hill less often and without Bradshaw. Without saying anything about it, we waited for spring. Our parents talked about closing the venetian blind business. March came. One Saturday some men loaded the drills and saws and other tools belonging to our father's business onto a truck, and a deputy sheriff padlocked the doors. Our father spent the whole weekend sitting in his chair in the living room staring at something beyond the window. Monday morning, he left before we were ready for school, and Momma told us he had a new job as a salesman in a furniture store in Terre Haute.

The snowfalls stopped, and the ice melted. On Saturdays we rode four miles to the covered bridge over Raccoon Creek, and we planned how, when the dirt and gravel roads had dried out, we would go first to the bridge, then off the main road to the hogback. That was a ridge that ran for several miles parallel to the creek and formed steep bluffs along the bank that we climbed and sometimes jumped from into the water in the summer. But the water wouldn't be warm enough for that until June, and in April Momma told us our father had taken another job in a town called Sullivan and we were moving when school was out. Nights in the apartment were quieter, and Will and I talked in the dark about the place called Sullivan. We agreed it had to be better than Roblyers Crossing, although we didn't know why it had to be. Sometimes when I stayed awake long enough, I heard a soft, soft sound like Momma trying not to cry.

Will and I collected empty boxes from the grocery store and stacked them on the landing and in the hall and some in every room

in the apartment. Momma packed our winter clothes and other things she knew we wouldn't need first. She made us help every evening after supper. We filled the empty boxes, stacked them in the hall and the kitchen, and went back to the grocery store for more. By the time our father came home a couple of days before the last day of school to help us finish packing, we were living around, in, and out of boxes. Momma looked tired, and there wasn't much finishing left to do when he got there. Then two days after school was out, two trucks drove up and parked on the street that ran beside the building.

They didn't come together. The first one there was a big stake-body job, with lettering on the cab that said APEX FURNITURE, SULLIVAN, IND. The driver was a little man with gaps between his teeth that showed a lot because he was always grinning. Our father called him Norman, and he called our father "Mr. Rambler," and "Sir."

Norman wanted to start loading right away, and Will and I were eager to help him, even though most of the boxes probably were too heavy for us to carry down the stairs and lift onto the back of the truck. But our father said we had to wait, and he told Norman to come upstairs and get some coffee. Will and I stayed down and climbed over the staked sides of the truck. We were figuring out how to walk all the way around the outside of the truck without getting on the ground when the second truck drove up. It was a van, all closed in with big double doors in the back. ESTES BROTHERS, AUCTIONEERS was painted in big, black letters on the side of the van, and two men sat in the high cab.

The driver got out. He carried a clipboard with papers on it. He shouted, "Hey, kid. Is this where the Ramblers live?"

I said, "Yes," and he started walking toward the front of the building. I called to him and pointed toward the double door sized

opening for the stairs at the rear corner just as my father and Norman came through it onto the sidewalk.

The driver said, "Is one of you Mr. Rambler?"

He didn't say "Mr." in the respectful way Norman did.

My father said, "I am."

The driver looked at the opening, then at the windows on the second floor, and said,

"Nobody told me this was a damned upstairs job."

Our father looked at Will and me and said, "Come down from there." When we were on the ground, he said, "I want you two to go play."

I said, "I want to help."

"There'll be plenty for you to help with later. This morning I want you and Will to go play. Find some of your friends and get up a baseball game."

I started toward the stairs.

He said, "Where are you going?"

"To get my bike."

"No. Leave your bikes here."

I said, "What about Angie?"

"Go play!"

He looked like he wanted to say something else, but the two men with the second truck were already starting upstairs and he turned and followed them.

Will said, "Come on." I went, but I didn't hurry.

We walked to the baseball field. A half dozen boys were already there hitting and chasing flies and grounders. Will and I didn't have gloves, so we went into the outfield and shagged the balls nobody could catch. After awhile, there were enough for us to pick six on a side, with one left over. That one was Will because he was the youngest. I felt bad about him not playing, but he didn't seem to mind much. My side was picked to go in the field first, and by the time we got to come in to bat, Will had gone.

I remember very little about the game except what happened the next time I saw Will. I was playing second base, which meant I faced the road. We had played at least three or four innings when I saw Will running toward the field. He was calling my name at the top of his voice. Everybody turned and watched him for a moment, until somebody got impatient and called us back to the game. The batter hit the ball on the ground toward me. I moved into position to field it, but a runner ran in front of me and I lost sight of the ball. It went past me into the outfield, and everybody started yelling and screaming. Then I realized it was not a base runner who had blocked my view, but Will who had come onto the field. He was standing in front of me, and he was crying.

He yelled, "They're taking everything!"

I said, "What are you talking about?"

"They're taking everything away. Even our bicycles. And that man and Daddy almost got in a fight because that man called our

things a pile of junk!"

The others shouted at Will to get off the field. Somebody shouted at me to get Will out of the way and to get back into the game.

Will said, "Come on!" and I ran with him off the field.

Somebody yelled, "Don't come back!"

Once we hit the road, I ran ahead of Will. It was only four long blocks from the baseball field to the apartment. Nothing in Roblyers Crossing was more than seven or eight blocks from the apartment. Will called to me to wait for him, but I kept on running. When I got to where I could see the side of the building we lived in, my father, Norman, and the two men who came in the second truck were standing in the street behind the van with the rear, double doors wide open. Momma and Angie stood together on the sidewalk. I ran around the front of the truck and stood on the edge of the sidewalk between Momma and the men in the street.

Momma said, "Come here, Mark."

I ignored her.

"Mark!"

I stepped back beside her. Her eyes were red and she kept wiping at her nose with a wadded up handkerchief. Angie had big streaks of tears on her cheeks. Will came up. He wasn't crying anymore. He squeezed in between me and Momma. The two men with the truck lifted the bicycles into the back of the van, closed the double doors and pulled a heavy metal bar down across them. The driver handed his clipboard and a pencil to my father.

He said, "Sign there, at the bottom."

My father said, "Do you know when the auction will be?"

The driver said, "Have no idea."

My father signed, and the two men got into the truck. We all stood there and watched as the van turned the corner and disappeared. My father stood in the middle of the street, and I thought he looked almost as old as Grandpa Rambler.

Norman said, "I'll back up to the door, so's we can load the boxes."

Without going upstairs, I knew the men in the van had left the boxes we had packed. I knew that everything else was gone, that it was going somewhere to be auctioned. I knew that what was happening had something to do with my father's business failing, with him going bankrupt, with bills that didn't, couldn't, get paid. I knew that was why he and Momma both looked old and tired, too tired even to argue. And I knew that all that was why Momma stood stiff and still when he came up and put his arm around her shoulder like he was trying to shield her from a bitter wind. There wasn't any wind that day.

The truck Norman was backing up to the stairway backfired, and our father said, "We better get to work. It's a long way to go if we're going to get there before dark."

Momma said, "Everybody carries something, but don't try to carry anything too heavy for you."

Norman kept Will in the back of the truck with him to help stack and arrange the boxes the rest of us carried down to them. We worked slowly at first. Momma and our father stopped every now and then and just looked at each other before one of them picked up

another box and went down the stairs. But emptying one room seemed to make us eager to empty another, and we worked faster and faster.

We were nearly finished when a small crowd of kids, led by Jerry McCloskey, showed up at the corner. Most of them were on bikes, and they rode around, doing figure eights in the intersection. Ruth Ann Parker and Patsy Jukeman came to our side of the corner and Angie went to meet them. They acted like girls and hugged each other and cried.

My father asked me, "Do you want to go tell anyone goodbye?"

I looked toward the corner. Jerry McCloskey was playing chicken with another kid Will's age and rammed his rear wheel.

I said, "No. Can Will and I ride in the back of the truck?"

He had planned for us to ride in the car with Momma and Angie.

Norman said, "I'll ride with 'em."

That was enough. Our father drove the truck. Momma and Angie went ahead in the car so our father would know if they had trouble. When our father started the motor, the kids at the corner moved in front of the cafe. We turned and drove past them, and Jerry McCloskey and the other bigger kids on bikes rode into the middle of the street and followed us. Will sat with Norman on some boxes in the middle, but I found a small space where I could stand against the back stake panel to watch the blurring motion of the road underneath me smooth out into a fine, black line in the distance. The kids on their bikes spread across the road and pedaled hard. They had found a new game for the moment as they raced and maneuvered for position to lead the pack. The distance between them and the truck gradually increased, but the way my father

drove the truck slowly through town kept them from falling very far behind.

I looked over their heads at the intersection and at Sweet's Hill rising beyond it. Both receded, getting smaller and smaller until the hill looked like a narrow strip of ribbon that hung straight down from the sky and stiffened when it met the pavement at the bottom. I thought for a moment that I could even see the figure of a lone rider at the top. I imagined it looked like Bradshaw, as though he were already waiting for the next winter's snow and ice. The truck went around a sharp curve, and Sweet's Hill vanished. At the edge of town, the riders who had followed us turned off and disappeared behind a fencerow overgrown with blackberry bushes. They were headed for the creek and the hogback. No one had waved or shouted.

Then there was nothing but the noise of dual tires on the blacktop and a broken white line in the center of the road, a line of diminishing dashes that pointed to some place we had lived in once. We were moving to a place called Sullivan. I had no idea where it was, except that by the sun I knew we were headed south. We were moving because my father had gone bankrupt and because my mother sometimes cried in the night. We were moving because two men in a truck took away the things my parents called theirs and the bicycle that was the only thing I had ever called mine. No grownups had come to say goodbye to my parents. We had lived in Roblyers Crossing less than two years, and that was not long enough for anyone to believe our coming or going was any great matter. We were moving on a warm, cloudless day with a sky the same color my bike had been on that Christmas morning. It had not been said, but we all knew we would soon move again. I told myself that that, too, would be no great matter.

I climbed carefully over the boxes to the front of the truck. I stood against the cab and let the warm wind strike me full in the

face. The narrow stripe of road and the tiny dashes of white down the middle widened and passed blurred beneath the front of the truck. Momma and Angie were well ahead of us so that whenever there was any kind of curve in the road they were out of sight for a moment. The truck seemed to speed up when that happened. There was a small space where I could look through the back window of the cab and see my father. He hunched his shoulders like he was trying to push the truck toward whatever was ahead with his own weight. He drove with both hands tight on the wheel.

