

King of the Mountain

by Kevin Myrick

Daniel told himself to push. -- push harder than he'd ever pushed himself before. He reminded himself of what his father once told him: don't give in to pain. Be a real man. You can take it.

But his arms felt like they were full of petroleum jelly; they were cramped from the already ten minute long struggle up the switchbacks of the rounded peak that overlooked his boyhood home. He cranked the pedals as fast as he could to make it up the next set of curves.

"Daniel I think you should slow down honey," Rebekah shouted from behind him. She couldn't keep up her bicycle. "Please."

He couldn't stop now, couldn't hold anything back. No pain, no gain; this alone was the only message he heard in his mind. He had to conquer the peak the same way he did as a kid playing king of the mountain on buried tire on the playground.

Finally the sweat in his gloved hands was too much for his grip to take; his fingers slipped from the pedal and that was all it took for him roll backward. Before he knew what was happening he went into the ditch, where he struck his helmet on a rock. The light faded from the world and he was taken back to dark times.

A violent burst of memory blew through his mind -- before his eyes was the smoke and fire of an IED strike. He ran from the passenger seat of his Humvee toward the flaming heap, his legs moving as fast as they could under the weight of combat gear. His friend Amos Moses was in that Humvee ahead. The men had nothing more than half-inch steel plate to armor the doors with - they'd stolen it from the base where they had assembled in Kuwait.

Men huddled around the body of his friend. He looked on in horror as he watched his friend die. The medic tried to stop the bleeding; it was no use. The next thing Daniel knew, he was on the ground and his ears were full of bells. Men shouted to others to get him out, off to the medivac station; all he heard were whispers as the bells tolled away. "Everything is going to be OK sir," the new young corporal had told him. There was a look of fear in the man's eyes when he said it.

"Don't worry about it sir, you're OK. Just hang on with us." Someone put a cigarette in his mouth and lit it. He didn't smoke but that didn't matter. The platoon's doc gave him a shot of painkillers and tightened the tourniquets above his knees. Daniel looked down for a moment before a man pushed his head down and he couldn't see his feet. He wondered where they went. He tried to get up again to see as the Humvee sped down a dirt road back toward their base, where a chopper would be waiting to whisk him away to Baghdad, then Germany. "Why so tight doc?"

"Sir I need you to stay still," Doc said.

As he drifted off in the Humvee, he heard one of his men say that he was lucky to be alive. "Why?" Another asked. "He ain't never gonna stand on his own two feet again."

When he woke to the blurred image of Rebekah, the vision of his guardian angel, her head was shrouded in a halo formed by the afternoon sun.

"Jesus Christ," she said. "I thought you were dead."

"I'm fine," he said. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry isn't going to fix that arm of yours Daniel," Rebekah said. "Come on, we're going to the hospital."

On the ride home from Allendale General, Rebekah told Daniel he wasn't allowed to hand cycle on the mountain anymore.

"That's not fair," he said. "I have to do this."

"What? To prove your some big shot on that contraption? That you're King of the Mountain? If that's the case, you can keep it up. But I'm not going with you anymore."

Daniel sulked on the ride home as he listened to Rebekah nag at him about what happened. She kept it up, kept telling him he could be dead at the dinner table. He just stared and poked at the quarter pounder from McDonalds as his left arm hung useless in a sling. Later that night he scratched at his knees with his one good arm, the nerves still tingled as if he had a mosquito bite on his right ankle.

He wondered if maybe he was trying to race this for the wrong reasons. He whispered that no, he was doing this to prove he still could do something than just sit in a chair. If he could he would plant an American flag on Mount Everest. In an earlier era he would have been a patriot or an explorer. Now he was just a man with no legs - a person of pity in the eyes of others. He couldn't stand the looks he got in church on Sundays or at a restaurant when he went out. He felt their stares on the back of his neck.

Sometimes at night he'd wake in the darkness and in the dim light he would look down at the bed at the blanket where his legs used to push down to the end. He remembered how he used to wiggle his toes as a child and watch the covers shift back and forth. Now there was nothing left to move. All he had were his stumps. On nights like this -- when he felt like life was nothing more than a cruel mistress -- Daniel cried himself to sleep. He buried his face in the pillow and let out agonizing groans, all of these thoughts too much for him to bear anymore. He didn't want Rebekah to see him like this, in such pain.

She would never understand what it was like to sit all the time.

When the tears finally subsided, he drifted off to the world of his dreams where his life was one full of spark and energy. Over hills and through valleys Daniel ran, drove and rode all over. He stood tall on a boat before jumping into the clear blue seas and explored the reefs of the Caribbean. That was the world he wished to live in, a world in where he was once again a champion.

Race day passed with Daniel on the sidelines doing his part to cheer on what was supposed to be his competition. Handicapped by the sling, all he could do was watch as man after man crossed the finish line. Because he couldn't clap, he squeezed a bicycle horn as they sped by on their hand cycles covered in sweat. Their brakes squealed as the road flattened on top of the mountain. A few of the guys he'd met at a race in Atlanta the year before came over and asked him what happened to his arm. He told them the truth.

"Its hard to conquer this mountain, don't feel bad."

The nameless man told him that it took him three years to even finish the race; he only accomplished the feat by moving to town for six weeks of intensive training.

"But you know what the real trick was that first time I made it?"

"What's that?" Daniel asked.

"You've got to put velcro on your gloves and on the inside of the pedals. It will give you much better grip on those really tough switchbacks."

"You shouldn't encourage him," Rebekah said as she stood beside her husband. "If he keeps this up he's going to roll right off the mountain and kill himself."

Six weeks later, he sat in his hand cycle and looked up at the peak from the stop sign that marked the beginning of his trek up the mountain road. Even with all of her ranting and raving against it, Rebekah sat beside him on her bicycle and looked down on him. "You have to do this?"

"I'll be ready for next year," he said. "Come on, I'll race you to the top."

