

## **The Squeaking Tricycle**

I'd only just stirred the brown sugar in to my coffee, and plucked my chipped and paint-fading “#1 Mum” mug that all my friends had (the pound shop were always stocked with them, but drinking from it always made me feel rich as anything). Then pulling my house robe tight against the naked chill, I tottered in to the living room – my fluffy little slippers muffling my light steps to a pink whisper – letting the familiar tendril of caffeinated steam tickle at my nose.

I fell in to my corner of the couch, tucked my legs beneath me, wrapped the fleecy throw snugly around my shoulders, and hugged the nearby cushion as I groaned with contented relief... then frustration; I forgot to turn the fire on. David had taken the kids out, so I knew I shouldn't be wasting the gas, but, this evening of fizzling winter had brought an early darkness and pervasively icy air.

I bit my lip, and thought, *If I rush, I could always use the last of the boiled kettle to fill up my hot water bot-*

My thought halted, jolted, froze. I heard the familiar noise outside.

Every day, like clockwork, as I sat to watch my Soaps, I'd hear the same *squeak, squeak, squeak* of my neighbours' son's trike. Rain or shine, torrid scorch or turbulent storm, he'd be out, no matter what, making me physically wince with each *squeak, squeak, squeak*.

It was annoying at first, but barely audible – I just had to higher the volume to drown it out. You could still hear it if you strained, but I plied my focus on avoiding just that. Which, of course, inevitably made me focus on it all the more.

Usually, he'd just go around in endless circles within his own garden – a sorry state, it was; cracked flagstones, invading weeds, permanent home to a detritus of ever-growing fag ends and discarded beers. It broke my admittedly overly-empathetic heart, when I'd peek from my girl's bedroom window to see the little angel weaving in and out of crushed and pierced Stella cans, and glistening smashed glass stains - like shooting stars of failed wishes. Poor boy, using what he could to repair the broken shards of childhood from the littered negligence of those who shattered it.

The trike itself was old, tattered, more rust than toy; the seat puffing out foam and one handlebar missing the once-yellow rubber grip. Probably stolen - permit me room to judge - given to him as a rare present that cost them nothing. And him, I could just picture his face lighting up at the retired old thing, not realising another little'un had trailed many a days of joy behind those worn out wheels, until it was no longer fit for purpose. One kid's trash is another kid's treasure.

My son would argue with him often, and I'd try and explain to him that not all mummies and daddies were the same. We were lower class as any definition goes, so my babies were never spoiled. But, what we did offer them, in abundance, was time, nurturing, love. I tried to explain that the things we did as a family, the movie nights, or puzzle nights, or visits to the beach - some families didn't do this, and because of that, their kids would... Well, I can't remember the exact words, but I'm almost certain I said jealous, bitter, nasty. Awful that, as if the poor lad harboured the taint rather than having it injected. I explained that when the neighbour's kid was lashing out, he was just sad that he didn't have what we had, and that he shouldn't argue, but just come home and hug us.

The amount of times he came to hug us, *oh my heart*.

I'd peek out, after, to see their little boy just sitting cross-legged (scabbed and bruised, they were, never a plaster in sight) in a foul mood, elbow on knee, propping up head in palm,

yanking aggressively at the blooms of weeds in an attempt to pour out the anger in the only way he'd been taught how – physical force aimed at an unwanted invader.

The squeaking was annoying, but my gosh, I took it as a metronome of desperate escapism for a boy who couldn't conceptualise just what he was escaping. Not realising that his norm was tragic, unfair.

I tried to offer little kindnesses, whenever he was out in the front at the same time as me. Tell him he was a handsome boy, a good kid, a smart kid - that my boy is happy to have a friend in him. Oh, he'd beam; showing a chequered, yellowing smile. I'd make David jr. bring sweets out to share, more sandwiches than I thought they could finish (yet, they always did) so it was innocent, friendly, rather than charity. I'd always ask if he was okay, if he was happy today. He'd nod, looking at the ground in the way children tend to do when they lie, as if the truth may exacerbate his reality. "You let me know if I can help," I'd often say! "Neighbours *always* want each other to be happy." He'd nod to the ground again.

That was my way of helping, without overstepping my mark. Letting him know someone cared if he was doing alright. I knew it wasn't enough; children are too scared to talk. But I convinced myself I'd done my bit.

If I knew it was as bad as it was, then, perhaps I would have got involved. Perhaps. People around these parts are often nosy, myself included. But, there were families you knew to stay away from – the people they mingled with, the 'guests' they invited over, the acts they got up to. It wasn't worth risking. If David or I confronted them when they were high on, god, any one of their endless vices, it could end in tears.

I suppose that means we were complicit in the neglect. But so, too, were the teachers, and other parents who noticed the bruises, or the cuts, and said nothing. I don't mean to shed blame, not by any stretch of the imagination- coping mechanism if anything.

*squeak, squeak, squeak.*

I remember hearing the argument that night; booming roars spiking up out of blaring music. Half-eleven at night it was. Shuddering thumps against walls, piercing shrieks and peeling squeals, as the couple beat each other near in to the maw of death. The arguments were common, their fighting less so. David and I were up, listening- no doubt the kids were, too. I'm ashamed to say I didn't spare a thought for their little boy, having to be in the same house. Just me and mine.

We were constantly delaying action, "Five more minutes and we'll go knock." But, someone else must have had enough. Maybe old Lori who lived on the other side. It could have been anyone. It wasn't us. As much as I'd think it, or threaten it, I never got involved.

In the distance, rising wails heralded authority. Soon, the faint orange embers of the polyester diluted lamppost outside met with a sudden invasion of brightness; the night stubbornly refused as the world was plunged in to a repeating blinding blue as constant as the *squeak, squeak, squeaking* of a rusted, old trike.

Knocking, then shouting, then thumping as the door was barged down. The music snuffed out moments later, and through the walls we could hear the deep, commanding voices of the policeman and woman who had forced entry.

Ignoring David's protestations, I crept in to our girl's room. She was sitting awake in bed – pale and scared. I felt a flame of frustration lick at my mood. My poor baby, confused as to what was happening – having to experience such chaos at that age. I pecked a wet kiss on her clammy forehead, told her to lay back, tucked her in. Then roosted on the toy box which let me peek out without having to stand. My presence was soothing enough, it seemed, as I could hear her breathing deepen in to a lax, comfortable rhythm.

I looked out at a still night for near half an hour, the only hint of life was the twitching curtains of dark rooms – inculpated by the same orange glow that marched down the street. It was almost silent next door, by then, except for muffled dialogue pregnant with concern and burning consternation.

Another car, no lights.

Another car, no lights.

Another car, no lights.

An ambulance.

Lights.

The parents were brought out to the police cars, stumbling and bloodied, cuffed and slumped.

*About time*, I thought. Glad that someone had finally forced action.

About ten minutes later, having no coherent parents to discuss with, the paramedics emerged, sombre and sullen, with a stretcher much too large for the small, covered bulk laying still in the centre. The medic at the front, stepping over the unwanted weeds, gave the little abandoned trike a nudge so it wouldn't trip the others, and I heard the last *squeak, squeak, squeak* for a long time.

I brought my babies in to our room that night, placed them between David and myself, and I wept until I passed out. Then woke and wept some more. I wept from guilt, from disconnected grief, from inaction, from drooping heart and the absence of that familiar noise - much louder and intrusive than its presence - well in to the following two years.

But tonight, the tears that are streaming are tracing down to moisten the tips of a smile.

I'm unsure if I believe in ghosts, but hearing that familiar *squeak, squeak, squeak* at just the right time... I would like to believe that's a message from him – finally telling the truth. Telling me to rest assured knowing he, at last, has the escapism he could never quite grasp in life. That, come rain or shine, torrid scorch or turbulent storm, perhaps even life or death – he is now at peace.