

GOD ON A BICYCLE

PART ONE

REMO ERGO SUM - I row therefore I am.

1 THE CRAB AND THE HORSES

In the darkness, the man picked his way along the riverbank. He stopped, turned his head sideways and listened. Then he heard again a low, breathy whinnying ahead of him. The moonlight glinted for a moment off the water and he shook himself against the cold.

As he moved forward to the iron fence, he sensed the mare on the other side easing towards him. He reached through the fence and felt her twist her head up against him, her strength as she rubbed and wet his hand with her lips and nose. He opened his hand and offered her the pieces of chopped-up apple.

As he fed her, he gazed for a moment up into the dark waste of Memorial Gardens above him. He felt the mare's hot eager breath on his face and he looked back into the vivid, black orb of her eye so close in front of him now.

The man took hold of the mare's head collar. There was a cheek-piece on either side down to the muzzle around her nose. Using a clip at one end, he attached a length of rope to the brass ring on the head collar

under her chin. He tied the other end of the rope to the fence. Talking to her soothingly, he climbed over the fence.

From his pocket he took more pieces of apple and waited as the mare fed from his hand. He felt under the muzzle for the jugular groove on the right side where her carotid artery lay. He rubbed the artery up and down softly with his fingers getting her used to the sensation.

His breath slow, he slowly drew a long Stanley knife from his belt, gently pressing it against her neck and holding it there as he whispered to her. He closed his eyes and heard her sturdy breathing, felt that physical closeness and connection to another life.

With a swift stabbing action, he drove the knife deep and downwards.

The mare screamed, thrashed her head and flung the man sideways, full-length across the ground. She threw the force of her body against the tether that held her to the iron fence. Thick blood thumped from her neck and she was panicking in its smell. Her back legs gave way beneath her and she sat for a moment on her rear.

The man crawled away and sat observing with his back propped against the fence. Her blood gave an iron tang to the air. He licked the tip of his index finger.

The mare staggered back on her feet like a newborn. Her head went this way and that, pulling on the rope. She squealed, screeched, stumbled forward on her face, then sideways and lay with her legs straight out. For a long while she lay there twitching and there were gurgling and sniffing sounds. Finally, she was still.

The man looked around. There was a sound of water lapping against the riverbank. The moon was just reappearing from behind some clouds. He sighed.

As dawn broke by the river, the wind was beginning to rise. The nine men sat into the narrow boat and went through the familiar routine –

locking oars in the gates, tightening foot-stretchers and closing bung-holes. From the bow of the boat forward, they called out their numbers one-by-one.

“Five ready,” said Evan.

Light was spreading slowly across the sky and pale spider-webbing was becoming visible, laid out across the hedges that separated their club, *Fianna*, from their neighbours. Dark clouds huddled over Phoenix Park. There was the sound of the flagpole above the boathouse clattering in the rising wind.

Evan stretched forward in the boat until his forehead was almost touching his shins and felt the pain through his hamstrings, lower back and into his neck. In his rush to get here, he’d put on odd socks again.

“Good pain,” said Evan to himself and there was the promise of more.

He released the stretch and yawned nervously as a freezing gust of wind slapped suddenly off the river. With sleep in his eyes, he glanced again towards the car by the side of the boathouse where the girl who’d said hello to him was sitting in the passenger seat. He shook his head.

The men pushed their oars through the headless winter weeds close to the bank and levered themselves out into the river. The wind from down-river carried whispers of Dublin’s city centre and the sea beyond.

Evan looked to the far bank, where the Memorial Gardens sloped upwards, dotted and scarred with rubbish and debris. On the crest of the hill, barely distinguishable against the lighter colour of the sky, Evan imagined as much as saw the statuesque shapes of three horses because they always stood there at this time. He didn’t register that there were only two horses today.

‘Something has happened to my Da,’ Evan thought suddenly and the unstable boat wobbled beneath him.

Cold spray leapt up into his face and the flow sucked the boat out towards the middle of the river.

The rowers started slowly, firstly in pairs, then fours and then all eight.

“SQUARE BLADES. HOLDING IN THE FINISHES.”

The Cox's instructions through the boat's speaker system echoed weirdly across the water.

"LOOKING FOR THE CONTROL. EVERY STROKE,"

In the middle of the boat, Evan's movements mirrored the easy rhythm of Six-man in front of him and his eyes were fixed ahead on a point just above Six-man's head.

During a rowing stroke the blade must be covered as quickly as possible and power applied to it as it bites the water. The blade is driven horizontally, just covered all the way, before a quick and clean release at back-stops that neither allows water to strike the back of the blade nor throws water sternwards. During the recovery, the blade is first horizontal and then squares again, so that it is just above the water surface at front-stops in order to minimise the vertical movement required for the catch.

"ALL EIGHT. STRAIGHT IN AT FRONT-STOPS."

Evan confronted every single stroke, seeking to eliminate flaws and maximise power application. He felt for the correct hand-height to balance the boat, listened for the sharp coordinated whoosh and bang of the blade in and out of the water and glanced at the quality of the puddles left in their wake.

Practice makes permanent. With repeated training the body adapts and movement patterns become easy, smooth and automatic. The best teacher is the boat itself.

Evan wondered how many oar strokes he'd pulled already this season in a boat together with this crew of men. Four months training since early October... Nearly one hundred hour-and-a-half sessions, thirty strokes per minute by ninety minutes... Maybe more than two-hundred-and-fifty-thousand strokes already this season.

How many oar strokes in his whole rowing career since his father first lifted him into a boat as an eight-year-old? Less than two months after his mother was killed. It had to be millions of oar strokes.

For year after year since that time, Evan's calloused hands had wrapped around an oar and driven boats through lake and river,

floodwater and waves, through heat, cold, rain and wind, aches and exhaustion, through puberty and adolescence into manhood. Backwards, focusing on each stroke and edging towards what was always out of sight. Evan relished the bitter aftertaste of all those strokes that lingered in the muscle memory of his body.

It was impossible for him to realise that in a few moments, as subtle as famous butterfly wings causing hurricanes, one single sweep of his oar through the water out of all those millions would shatter everything. Afterwards, looking back, he would ask himself if things would really have been so different if that one stroke didn't happen. His answer to himself was always the same - yes, it would've been different.

The men rowed as far as the green fence just short of the dilapidated blocks of flats on the south bank and stopped there. Gossamer hung over tree branches and the river smelled of weeds and decay.

Evan looked to the bank. All the men in the boat looked. That's where their coach Rocky O'Gorman, Evan's father, would normally be. They all had the same mental image. He would throw down his bicycle and stand there, legs planted, glaring at them. He'd take off his hat and discard it on the grass beside him, rub his bald head and then his voice would boom across the water at them.

Instead, there was just the waves hitting against the boat and the buffeting of the bare trees. Traceries of branches stripped of their leaves stood out against the morning sky like veins. A blackened circle in the grass near the green fence was strewn with beer cans and bottles. Behind the trees and scrubland, an early bus spluttered on Chapelizod Road. A shopping trolley was in the shallows near the bank, half of it sticking up out of the water like some statement of anarchy to come.

Evan felt anxiety rise in his stomach. Everything along the river seemed a biding stillness, a watchfulness, like animals in a forest scrutinising and scanning. As tightly as everything was wound into a caricature of attention and quietness, soon it would shatter noisily free.

"FIVE FIVE-MINUTE PIECES," said the Cox and they rowed away.

The eight oars propelled the boat forwards, squeezing the first strokes.

“BUILDING...” breathed the Cox. “NEXT STROKE...”

The oars quickened.

“THERE!”

The blades smacked into the River Liffey.

“DRIVING AWAY WITH THE LEGS. THERE!”

Past the yellow house at Boo House Bend, down the centre of the river.

“POWER THROUGH THE WATER. CATCHING THE WATER.
THERE!”

They passed Temple boathouse on the north bank.

“ONE MINUTE GONE. AND AGAIN... THERE!”

The eight blades entered the water in unison, like the sound of a lock clicking. Then the watery doors were flung open as the blades resounded out at back-stops with eight straining athletes exhaling their lungs together.

Tch- aaaarrgh. Vrum. Tch- aaaarrgh. Vrum.

Beads of water broke and fell in a silvery string from the tips of the oars.

Two minutes gone.

The north bank curved away from the road and the trees closed around the river on both sides at the Concrete Wall. Evan’s heart and breathing rates increased, more blood was flowing to his lungs and torso.

Three minutes gone.

A young swan was sheltering under a tree between the boathouses of *Rock* and *Municipal*. A lone plastic bag was caught in the leafless branches of a tree that hung out over the river.

Four minutes gone.

“SOLID AT THE FINISH. DRIIIIVING THROUGH THE WATER.
THERE!”

In a tiny part of his mind detached from the pain and everything else, Evan thought of the girl back in the boathouse car park, wondering with

a boyish innocence how she knew his name and blithely unaware of the sound of lips being licked somewhere, the moment was so close.

“Hello Evan,” she’d smiled at him through the car window before, as he walked towards the boat.

Evan was not someone overburdened with self-confidence around the opposite sex and she was not the type of girl he ever expected to smile in his direction. The unexpectedness of it had made him stub his toes on the stones underfoot and he stopped by the car. Her straight black hair, streaked with red, was pushed behind her ears and her dark eyes seemed large through the glass window. He mumbled, raised his eyebrows and indicated vaguely towards the river with a circular motion of his thumb. Aware of her eyes on him, he turned away feeling as if he was walking like the ducks that spent the winter between the slips of the boat clubs. Like most rowers, Evan’s walking style lacked fluidity. He bounced. The muscles in his hips and buttocks, so used to rowing, tightened and rebelled against the ‘unnatural’ movements of walking.

“LAST TWENTY STROKES.”

Evan’s attention snapped back. In a boat, with his buttocks placed evenly in the hollows of the hard wooden seat and the texture of a worn oar handle in his hands, grace entered his body. The water glided below him with a speed that belied the fluidity of his effort.

The boat surged as eight pairs of knuckles whitened and eight pairs of legs drove powerfully against the foot-stretchers. The boat sliced through the water, leaving a narrow v-shaped trail behind.

“DO IT NOW!” howled the Cox.

The ducks and the swan turned.

“SEE IT IN THE WATER. THERE! CONTROL ON THE SLIDE. THERE!”

Evan reached out his aching arms. His lips were dragged back from his teeth.

Although in theory it makes no difference where one’s eyes are looking during the rowing stroke, in practice it is generally true that head position and therefore

much else depends on where one looks. It is best to look straight ahead. One's body tends to follow one's line of sight.

A solitary ray of early morning sunshine escaped through the cloud cover and angled across the river into Evan's eyes and he moved his head towards the north bank. There he saw the girl, standing alone watching. In his overexcited mind she seemed some vision from another world with her slim body and her black hair with red streaks swirling in the wind. Evan felt a tiny melting sensation inside, so different from the harshness of the pain enveloping him.

'Oh,' he thought. 'She's pretty.'

Zuriñe, the girl herself, didn't feel at all like a vision from another world, more someone from a country warmer than this one who was cursing herself for leaving her coat back in the car. She shook out her numb fingers.

"Por Dios," she frowned, feeling the puffy tiredness under her eyes.

Yet, she had her little pad in her hand and she was determinedly sketching at the passing boat. She wanted to start capturing this new experience, impressions flooding in which she would otherwise miss and so, in turn, she didn't notice the man approaching behind her.

Through the cold, she held the lid of the pen against the pad with her thumb and drew against it to create straight lines of the boat and oars.

When finally she turned and saw the man, it was that abrupt moment dread when you realise a dream has slipped irrevocably into a nightmare.

Above the anaerobic threshold, extreme effort brings about a fall in blood pH and it becomes more acidic. First carbon dioxide and then lactic acid diffuse into the blood from the muscles. There is a marked increase in subjective feelings of distress. How you view the world is affected.

Evan felt a tiny jerk in the boat's equilibrium and eight pairs of hands made tiny simultaneous adjustments of oar handle heights.

"COURSE COX!" he heard someone bellow.

Evan snapped his head towards the voice on the south bank and saw his father Rocky there standing up on the pedals of his bicycle. In the suspended moment, the ducks seemed to quack more furiously in the rushes near the bank as Rocky's next words reached the boat.

"WATCH YOUR COURSE!"

Evan's stroke slowed. It seemed as if a shadow passed through his oxygen-starved brain and images were distorting. Everything was silent and grainy now like an old black-and-white film, and all happening at once. Evan saw a horse that came running towards his father from out of the trees along the bank. It tossed its head and reared. Rocky was watching the boat and turned too late as the hooves of the horse's front legs clawed for his head. For a moment, Rocky struggled to hold his balance on his bicycle. Then his mouth opened and his body fell sideways beneath the bicycle frame.

"BOW-SIDE!" shouted the Cox. "WATCH YOUR OARS!"

Evan ripped his oar out of the water at back-stops.

It is essential that the correct sequence be followed in the rowing stroke. If your hands go up for any reason, the blade drops and hits the water. This can lead to the blade burying itself, forcing the handle to fly back. This is known as catching a crab.

CLUD!

Evan's oar hit something hard and the button clattered in its gate. The whole boat shuddered and the impact ran through the keel, a sound of metal and fibreglass tearing.

The oar handle whacked violently back into Evan's ribcage. The boat leered over on bow-side and the oar handle wedged into his right armpit and lifted him. His buttocks lost contact with his wooden seat, his feet twisted inside the foot-stretcher and came loose. The backs of his legs scraped along the gunnels of the hull as his body rose up and left the boat.

Evan was airborne and twisted in the air like a fish. For a moment everything slowed and everything was visible. The stern of the boat

glided past a dark shape in the water. Rocky was on his back on the south bank beneath the iron hooves of the frenzied horse. Higher up, on the ridge, another horse was bolting and two men were coming down after it towards the river. On the north bank, the girl wasn't looking anymore. She was in a man's arms turned towards him.

Zuriñe could faintly detect something of the acidic smell of horse's blood from Aiert as he put his arms around her. Her shock and dismay at finding herself once more in his embrace equalled Evan's as he fell hard upon the surface of the freezing water and it closed around him.

