

GOD ON A BICYCLE

STUDENT EDITION - ADVANCED

PART ONE

1 THE CRAB AND THE HORSES

In the darkness, the man walked carefully along the riverbank. The moonlight shone for a moment off the water and he shook himself in the cold. As he moved toward the iron fence, he sensed the horse on the other side. He reached through and offered her pieces of chopped-up apple to eat.

The man tied a rope to the collar around the horse's head and tied the other end to the fence. Talking to her softly, he climbed over the fence. He rubbed her neck up and down softly with his fingers. Breathing slowly, he took a long knife from his belt and gently pressed it against her neck. He closed his eyes and heard her solid breathing, felt that connection to another life.

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

The horse screamed, thrashed her head and threw the man sideways across the ground. She threw the force of her body against the rope with her head going this way and that. Thick blood pumped from her neck and she was panicking in its smell.

The man crawled away and sat observing with his back against the fence.

She stumbled forward on her face, then sideways and lay with her legs straight out. For a long while she lay there and there were gurgling breathing sounds. Finally, she was still.

There was only the quiet sound of water hitting against the riverbank. The moon was just reappearing from behind some clouds. The man sighed.

As dawn broke by the river, nine men sat into the narrow boat and went through the familiar preparation routines. From the bow end of the boat forward, they called out their numbers.

“Five ready,” said Evan.

Evan yawned as a freezing wind slapped off the river and the flagpole above the *Fianna* boathouse clattered loudly. The men pushed the boat out into the river. With sleep in his eyes, Evan glanced back 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 then looked to the south bank, where the Memorial Gardens sloped upwards, not cared for and full of rubbish. On the top of the hill, Evan imagined as much as saw the shapes of three horses that always stood there at this time. He didn’t notice that there were only two horses today.

‘Something has happened to my Da,’ Evan thought suddenly.

The rowers started slowly, firstly in pairs, then fours and then all eight. The Cox’s instructions through the boat’s speaker system echoed across the cold water.

In the middle of the boat, Evan’s rowing movements mirrored the rhythm of Six-man in front of him. Evan wondered how many oar strokes he’d pulled in his life 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.

It was impossible for Evan to realise that in a few moments one single stroke out of all those millions would change everything.

The men rowed as far as the green fence just before the blocks of flats on the south bank. They all looked to the bank 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, rub his bald head and then his loud voice would boom across the water at them.

A blackened circle in the grass near the green fence was covered with beer cans and bottles. A shopping trolley was sticking up out of the shallow water near the bank. Evan felt anxiety rise in his stomach. Everything along the river seemed watchful, like animals in a forest waiting.

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

The eight oars smacked hard into water of the River Liffey.

“DRIVING WITH THE LEGS. THERE!”

They rowed past the yellow house at Boo House Bend.

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

The sound of eight blades and athletes in unison.

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 trees closed around the river on both sides at the Concrete Wall. Three minutes gone.

A young swan was sheltering under a tree between the boathouses of *Rock* and *Municipal*. Four minutes gone.

“SOLID AT THE FINISH. THERE!”

Evan’s heart and breathing rates increased, more blood was flowing to his lungs and heart. In a tiny part of his mind detached from the pain, he thought of the girl. The moment was close now.

“Hello Evan,” she’d smiled at him through the car window.

Evan was not self-confident around the opposite sex and she was not the type of girl he ever expected to smile in his direction. Her straight black hair, streaked with red, was pushed behind her ears and her dark eyes seemed large through the glass window.

“LAST TWENTY STROKES.”

Evan’s attention snapped back to rowing. The boat surged forward.

“DO IT NOW!” howled the Cox.

The swan turned to look.

A solitary ray of sunshine escaped through the cloud cover across the river into Evan’s eyes and he moved his head towards the north bank. There he saw the girl, standing alone and she seemed some vision from another world.

‘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 annoyed with herself for leaving her coat back in the car. She shook out her numb fingers.

She had her little notepad in her hand and she was drawing quickly. She was concentrating hard and didn’t notice the man approaching behind her.

When, finally, she turned and saw him, it was that dreadful moment when you realise a dream has changed to a nightmare.

“COURSE COX!” Evan heard someone shout.

He turned his head towards the voice on the south bank and saw his father Rocky there standing up on the pedals of his bicycle.

“WATCH YOUR COURSE!”

Evan’s stroke slowed. It seemed as if a shadow passed through his oxygen lacking brain. He saw a horse come running towards his father from out of the trees along the bank. Rocky was watching the boat and turned too late. The horse reared up and the metal hooves on its feet came for his head. Rocky fell beneath his bicycle.

“BOW-SIDE!” shouted the Cox. “WATCH YOUR OARS!”

If the oar blade goes too deep into the water, this forces the handle to fly back and hit the rower. This is known as catching a ‘crab’.

CLUD!

Evan’s oar hit something hard and the handle came violently back into his ribcage, got caught under his right arm and lifted him out of the boat. He twisted in the air like a fish. On the south bank, he saw Rocky on his back beneath the horse. Higher up on the hill, another horse and two men were running down towards the river. On the north bank, he saw the girl wasn’t looking anymore. She was in a man’s arms turned towards him.

Zuriñe could sense some acidic smell from Aiert as he put his arms around her. Her shock at finding herself again in his embrace equalled Evan’s as the freezing water of the river closed around him.

