

Riding to the Sea

Many years ago, a man lived on the edge of large city. His house sat on a small hill above some train tracks. He was surrounded by other small, sooty houses and factories, which belched smoke into the air 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Because of this, he was unable to see very far beyond the train tracks. Sometimes after a storm, the wind and rain cleared the air long enough for him to see a bit further. He could make out some rooftops in the distance, and even some trees, but not much else.

The man was born in the house and because he was very poor, he had never gone far beyond the neighborhood. He had few friends and was for the most part, a recluse who had become comfortable in his routine, even if it was dreary and monotonous. As time passed, the thought of varying from his routine became more and more frightening. He walked to his job at one of the factories and made enough money to pay the bills, without much left over. One of his few indulgences was a subscription to a travel magazine with stories and pictures of exotic, beautiful lands around the globe. Even this he maintained more out of habit than the dream he once had to travel the world. These pictures in the magazine were his only contacts with the world outside of his own little world, except for the radio, which occupied a prominent place in the living room. In the evenings, he enjoyed listening to the detective stories, westerns and an occasional comedy.

One Saturday afternoon, the sky grew very dark, nearly the color of tea. The clouds rolled over one another like ocean

waves and some began to take the form of funnels. Rain burst from the sky and crashed to the ground in tremendous sheets. The wind howled and began to pick up debris slamming it against the man's house. He was terrified and retreated to the basement. He could hear what sounded like a freight train and loud crashing noises. The small electric bulb, which was burdened with the task of lighting the basement, blinked and then went out altogether. The noise grew louder and the man feared that his house would be ripped from its foundation. In the next few minutes, which seemed like hours, the winds grew to a ferocious intensity.

As quickly as the winds came, they departed. The man slowly moved out from under the workbench where he had been huddled and cautiously climbed the stairs, fearing what he would see when he opened the door at the top. He sighed with relief when he saw that his house was intact. Some rain had soaked the floor near an open window and a few items had blown off the mantel and broken on the floor, but everything else was untouched. He walked outside to inspect the exterior. The sturdy house appeared to be largely spared by the storm, but the yard was strewn with litter. He looked around and saw that some houses in his neighborhood had been destroyed. Even some of the factories had been damaged and none were operating because of the downed power lines everywhere.

The man was in shock. He had never seen such destruction before. He walked around the nearby streets and saw more of the same. He helped where he could, but there was not much that could be done. Many people were homeless and would need to stay with relatives. Others would have to

make significant repairs to their homes and property. After a few hours he walked back to his home and stood on his front porch. The rain and wind had cleared the air and the factories were silent for the first time in his memory. The clouds opened and the sun broke through. As the man looked off into the distance, he saw a vivid blue stripe across the horizon. For a minute, he didn't know what he was looking at until it dawned on him that it must be the sea. He knew that the city was a major port, but he had never been down to the shore. He couldn't stop staring at it. He could also make out some tall white buildings with red tile roofs clustered along the coast. He even thought he could make out sailboats on the water, little white dots here and there. "The storm must have missed the coast completely", he thought to himself.

Evening gave way to nightfall. The next few days were overcast and before long, the factories were open and running again. The neighborhood began to rebuild itself and the wreckage was soon cleared. The man returned to his routine, but something was different. He found his surroundings to be stifling, almost unbearable. He remembered how fresh the air was after the storm and he now noticed the foul smell of the sooty air that he had regarded as normal. But most of all, he could not stop thinking about the sea and the shining white buildings he had seen and the little boats which were just bright specks on the deep blue horizon.

The days came and went, the weeks rolled by. One morning, the man could not bring himself to get out of bed and go to work. He was not ill exactly, but he simply could

not harness the energy to once again begin his workday routine. He called in sick. His boss was surprised but did not argue since the man almost never called off.

The man managed to get up and make breakfast. He felt his strength return a bit. Then an idea leapt into his mind that would not be ignored. "What if I went to the coast?" he said out loud. He heard his own voice echo through his simple, bare-floored house. He was at once terrified and exhilarated. He trembled, but was filled with an energy he had not felt since his youth. He walked out to the garage and found his old bicycle buried behind some boards and yard tools. The tires were flat, the chain was dry and the whole thing was covered with grit. He cleaned, and oiled the bike and made sure the tires could hold air. He wasn't even sure he could still ride it. After a few trial runs up and down his street, it all came back to him.

The man showered, shaved and put on his best summer linen suit. He wore his shirt open-collared and slipped on his loafers. He got on the bike. The sun glistened off of the chrome fenders as he turned onto the main road to the coast. It was busy and dangerous. Drivers of large trucks honked at him and cursed him for getting in their way. A wild-eyed man in an old rusty sedan crashed through a red traffic light and nearly hit him. Several times, he almost turned back, but the gravity of the sea tugged at his heart giving him strength and courage to peddle on.

As he traveled further down the road, the scenery changed

from factories to ever larger, more beautiful homes. The road itself became a wide, tree-lined boulevard and less busy. Sporty convertibles replaced trucks. The air became fresh and he could smell the sea in the distance. At a level high point in the road, he could see the blue water on the horizon, and he could make out the boats clearly now. The sails were not only white, but a rainbow of colors against a glistening background of indigo and gold, as the sun touched the crests of the waves.

He passed the tall white buildings he saw from his porch the day of the storm. They were six, eight, ten stories and more, covered in white stucco with many balconies and canvass awnings. At ground level, the buildings housed fashionable boutiques, cafes, and shops of all kinds. People casually sipped coffee under umbrella tables and their chatter filled the air as he rode by.

The boulevard was teeming with activity; people window shopping, young women in pastel summer dresses, a quartet playing classical music on the sidewalk. Just ahead, the road split to the left and right, opening to a coastal vista. The man turned right and before him stretched a long beach lined with Mediterranean style buildings. Fishermen, sunbathers and strolling couples looked out at the water. Vendors selling food, flowers and sun tan lotion set up bicycle carts here and there.

The man's legs ached from the long ride, but he hardly noticed as the energy of the place soaked into him like the warmth of the sun. He found a spot where some rocks jutted out through the sand and leaned the bike against

them. He climbed the rocks, found a comfortable depression to sit in and gazed out at the sea. The world he had left behind, the only one he had known seemed like a drab and distant dream now. He closed his eyes, breathing deeply the fresh sea air. "I've wasted such a precious gift", he said silently to himself. "I will waste it no more."

A little money can go a long way for one whose needs are simple. The man had very simple needs indeed. The view from his balcony filled him more than any expensive meal ever could. He did not even bring the radio. He didn't need it any more. The music from the street musicians and the laughter of young children drifted from the boulevard below. A desk where he wrote poetry, a camera, a well-played guitar, an overstuffed sofa which doubled as a bed; these were all the man needed. It never ceased to amaze him that people gave him money for the things he loved to create down on the beach under the sun. It was always enough, his daily bread. It was always enough, what each day gave him, so he never looked very far past the next sunset.