

## To Steal a Bike

by Blaise Weller

Green Dick lived in the middle of town where all the houses looked the same. Rows and rows of brick houses with small brick porches on the front. Only they weren't all exactly alike, but just with small differences, like the awnings were a different color or there were none, or some had flower pots and wrought iron fencing and some had chain link. I didn't like that chain link. People got rid of their wrought iron and replaced it with chain link to keep their dogs penned in. Stupid thing to do if you asked me. It made the whole damn town look ugly. Most of the people in my town were pretty stupid. God, it was ugly.

No one was on the street and I didn't see anyone in any of the windows I passed by.

God Almighty, was it hot. The whole damn town must have gone to sleep in front of their fans or something.

Sometimes while I walked, I got the feeling that someone was watching me, but I think I was just making it up in my head.

Behind all the brick houses was an alley. I cut in, real quick, like I had just disappeared off the street. As soon as I stepped foot into the alley, everything changed—garbage cans and garage doors got bigger, then came closer, then they settled back again. It was like space was trying to open up and then it did and then there was more space. Space within space; space that I didn't know about before. My heart started pumping too hard and I thought I was gonna piss myself. For a few minutes, I thought I was gonna faint. I wasn't scared. I guess I was just really high or something from the heat and from what I was about to do.

Inside the alley, there was a long line of garages and high fences. The fences were good for hiding behind. No one could see you had they happened to be in their back yard or looking out a window in the back of their house. Alleys were just like the railroad tracks, you didn't have to worry about running into too many people. You knew no one was here. It was nice like that. I liked it that way.

I counted the houses down to Green's . . . two, three, four, *five*. I had to. They looked pretty much alike from the back, too. You could really tell who took care of their stuff from the shape the garage was in. Not too many people bothered to paint them. Green's garage had paint just beginning to crack, but they all did. Most of them were chipping all over the place. Some were even worse—faded wood with almost all the paint gone, ready to rot or just beginning to rot. But Green's wasn't too bad. The windows had been kept clean and all the weeds had been pulled from the cracks in the cement, and everything was swept up real nice.

I heard some voices in his yard, so I cut in real quick under the eave of the garage, pretending I was a spy on a mission, and made myself disappear again, all inconspicuous like. I made myself real flat, with my back and my head, my arms and my palms up against Green's garage. The wood was real warm and it smelled like that—like old, old wood being warmed by the sun all morning, mixed with my sweat. I smashed myself up against it and sucked in my belly up under my ribs to make myself thinner. I stood as still as a tree trunk, listening, making myself camouflaged as part of the garage door. You'd think it'd be cooler under the shade of the eave, but it wasn't because the wood had been baked all morning long into the afternoon and now the heat was radiating from the wood.

I didn't hear a damn thing. *Jeese*. I was going nuts. Probably made myself believe I heard something. I always did shit like that.

"He'll gather us up in his arms, he will, he'll gather us up in his arms, he will...hmm, hmm, hmm, hm, hm, hm, hm . . ." *Damn, I did hear it*. I wasn't just making it up. I got down on my hands and knees and I crawled to the end of the garage where the fence began. Green's mom was taking in the laundry and humming away. I was afraid she would hear me breathing and then that would be it for me, so I held my breath in and let it out real slow so no one could hear it. But the garages and fences started shrinking and expanding again and it made me dizzy. I tried to make myself believe I was on a mission for the army like I did before, but I couldn't do it. I was getting too old to believe in that crap. To tell you the truth, I still liked to, but this time for some reason I just couldn't.

I still wanted Green's bike. Still had to get it for Brooks. He deserved it. Or at the very least, I deserved it. One thing for sure, Green sure as hell didn't. Besides, as Brooks would say, whoever steals it, gets it last. I could see Brooks standing right there, right before my eyes, saying this, grinning at me with his big goofy grin, almost hearing him snort.

I peeked through the space between the wood slats of the fence. Green's mom stood in the middle of the yard, surrounded by sheets and pillow cases pinned to the line. But she wasn't even in the yard. You could see on her face, she was thinking so hard she was somewhere else. Man, could she hum. It was pretty nice what with the heat and all and not another soul around. Too hot for dogs to even bark, hearing her hum like that. I wondered where all the dogs were. Usually they were running at the fence as you walked by, baring their teeth and barking at you, or wandering the streets looking for one another. It was so goddamned hot, I hadn't even seen one dog. I watched through the fence as she unclipped another sheet and folded it, putting the clothespins in her mouth so she wouldn't get the sheet dirty by letting it touch the grass or the small concrete walkway that led from the back stoop of the house, split the lawn in half, and ended at my hands and my knees where I was crouched down in the alley. She hummed just like my grandma. I looked down at the concrete. There weren't even any ants crawling around, it was so hot.

She folded the sheets real nice, too. I watched my grandmother do this same thing a thousand times and I could tell Mrs. Green was just as good at it, I think maybe even better. I liked how after she folded it down into a square, she held it in her arm and smoothed it out real nice with her other hand. Then after that, she laid it in her wicker basket as careful and gentle as if it was a baby. I could smell the sheets, too. They smelled like wet cotton getting dried by the sun, and lemons. You could even smell the clothespins, the little pieces of wood getting wet from holding the sheets to the line, also getting baked by the sun.

You could tell by Mrs. Green's humming, how she put the pins all the way into the cloth bag and didn't even try to drop 'em or toss 'em in, that she was nice. Real nice. You could just tell.

But man was she a fat pig. A goddamn heifer. A mastodon. Just like the pictures we had hung up at school depicting the Paleolithic Age. First there were the dinosaurs and then the dinosaurs got smaller and lesser, and then came Neanderthal man and the animals he hunted. She looked just like the mastodon with his giant, scared and angry eyes, looking back at the ape men surrounding her, coming at her with stones and spears. I could see the fat hanging down from under her arms as she raised them to unclip the sheets. Gross. She was a real two-ton Tessy.

Her dress had flowers on it like the one my grandmother wore. It was just like hers. Except it was different. Bigger. And Mrs. Green's flowers were smaller and all crowded together. It was a darker color than what my grandma would wear too. It was navy blue. My grandmother always wore tan or pink, only with bigger flowers, and with more space in between. And my grandma usually wore blouses, not dresses. Cotton blouses with flowers on them and pants. Usually, plain old navy blue. You could always tell that the pink was at one time red and had faded, but I liked it that way. I liked it better faded. Besides they always looked nice. Mrs. Green's dress was nice too, but she had sweat spots all over it. Under the arms and in the back, stuck to her butt too. She was a goddamn fat pig. A heifer if you want to know the truth, and her dress was faded too. Boy was it thin. You could see right through it. You could see her bra and the big old panties she was wearing.

But she was alright like that. I mean it was fine. She was fat, but she wasn't too fat, I guess, and seeing through her dress didn't really gross me out or anything, either. Not really. I mean I didn't want to see it or anything, but it was okay on her. I mean it seemed to fit—on her.

She bent down from her waist to pick up the basket and her face turned real red. That basket was pretty full and she had a hard time lifting it, but she got it up alright. I watched her wipe the sweat off her brow and tuck the loose hairs that got out from under her pin back in, while she rested the basket under her other arm on her hip. Then she opened the back door and went inside. I turned myself around with my back to the fence and just sat in the alley for a while. It was nice sitting there like that in the shade from the garage. I stared at my shoes and then at the garage across from me on the other side of the alley. It was in pretty bad shape. If I'd had a paintbrush and a scraper, some paint, I'd a scraped and painted that garage right then.

I heard Mrs. Green drawing water, getting ready to do the dishes. I couldn't see her, I was in the alley, but I saw her put her hand under the spigot to feel for the temperature when I heard the water interrupted for a moment. Then I saw her look right through the water just like she did with the sheets and the basket and the lawn when she was folding the sheets, and then outside, right through the screen, through all the garages and fences and the houses on the other side, too. I heard her humming get a little more clear when she turned the water off. I could see her moving dishes around, putting some into the water. Then I heard her humming fade, and what I thought was a door opening. It was so hot and quiet, I could hear her open the door to the basement and walk down the steps. I saw her make her way to the bottom, one hand on the banister, the other hand holding her dress up and watching as she took each step carefully. I counted ten steps. And then her humming disappeared. I listened real hard until I couldn't hear anything. Nothing, except for the sun. That's when I noticed the heat again.

It was so damn hot you couldn't bear it. It was so hot, you could *hear* it. The sun

seemed to be shouting at me, angrily, through a megaphone. Somehow, listening to Mrs. Green hum, and do her chores made the heat bearable, like you didn't even notice it unless you stared at the sun and tried to breathe and made yourself notice it. She was something, that Mrs. Green. Even breathing in that heat when she was around was nice. It was like you didn't even have to breathe, really. It was so damn nice I almost forgot what I came for. I almost thought better of it.

But I had to do it. For Brooks. To see him smile again. He needed to smile and so did I. Brooks deserved it. And Green deserved to have it stolen from him. Mrs. Green was real nice, but if she had followed her son, Green Dick, to school, if she could see him there, inside the classroom or after, when school was let out, he'd get ten whippings a day—easy. *I know it.* And you could tell, she'd whip him good too for as mean as he was. For the things he'd done. How he beat up Brooks like that. How he mangled him almost. And how Brooks got it too from his dad when he saw him like that. Told him no son of his lost like that. Said he was yellow and started beatin' on him good until Brooks had to run away.

It was up to me. I had to steal it. I had to. It didn't matter if it was carved in stone by God's own hand as one of the commandments or not. It wouldn't have been right to leave without it. Even if Green Dick and the whole goddamned basketball team were there. Even if some folks thought better of it. But seeing Mrs. Green, hearing her hum like that, didn't make it too easy.

I tried to make myself remember all the bad things Green did. I tried to hate him, but sitting in the alley with Mrs. Green just inside the house, I couldn't even do that. I was a real goofball. I could barely believe he came from her, but still, I had to steal his bike.

The gate wasn't latched. I pushed it open slowly. It didn't make a sound—not a creak, not even a whine—nothing. I bet it was Mrs. Green herself that kept those hinges oiled. She ran a tight ship. All the better for me. The grass was soft, boy, and green. So green it hurt . . . green . . . pain in my eyes. Green. I couldn't get over how soft it was. How nice it was in that backyard. How nice it would have been to lay down in the grass with just the sounds of Green's mom inside, humming and doing the dishes, or cooking supper, moving pots and pans, setting plates and utensils on the table, and stare up into the sky, even take a nap on that lawn with those white sheets blowing all around me, the smell of them drying in the sun.

Goddamn, I was weird. I had to tell myself to snap out of it. *Damn it, Paul, get on with it. Goddamn weirdo.* Anybody that called me that was right. No use in denying it anymore. They were right about that.

I made myself grab the bike. I grabbed it right off the lawn. It felt like it weighed ten times what it should've. I almost fell over with it.

I got the shivers the whole time. A hundred degrees out and I'm gettin' the shivers. I prayed she hadn't somehow come back up the steps from the basement. I really prayed hard, talking right to God, and his son, Jesus. I could see him in his white robe, right before my eyes, standing amongst the sheets, watching me. *Please God, dear Jesus, don't let her come up and see me.* I was really afraid she'd catch me in the act and I knew more than anything else in the world, I didn't want her to see me do it.

The shivers stayed. Especially when I got to the gate, open for any goddamn thief to come in. I bet that Green Dick never bothered to lock it and I bet his mom always told him better of it, too. I don't know how I knew it, I just did. Serves him right.

I shook the worse just as I got around that gate and hid myself behind the garage, finally breathing, trying to do it silently again because I was afraid someone would hear it. I had to piss myself again. I think some, maybe just a couple drops or something

might have come out. I made myself breathe, gripping the seat and the handlebars with my back up against Green's garage. I was dripping wet now, the sweat falling down into my pants, so bad I thought my pants were gonna slide off. I felt the heat all over again, even radiating through me in the shade. It was bad.

I wasn't about to wait around now. I got on the bike and I hunched down extra low, so no one would see me behind the fences. It was real hard to pedal at first, I didn't think I would get it to budge, but after I got her moving it wasn't too bad. The wind from the air moving against the sweat on my collar and my back felt good.

I didn't go back the way I came either. I was too smart to do that. I took the long way out. I pedaled out the other side of the alley just in case someone saw me come in on foot and now they'd see me leave on a bike. They wouldn't know the difference with me coming out on the other side, since they hadn't seen me go in in the first place. As far as they knew, I was just another kid on a bike.

That and it felt right. Riding through the alley.

I wished it were longer. I wished that alley were about two-hundred-million miles long and I'd just keep riding with the wind blowing on me, passing all those old garbage cans, and all the old garages with their chipped paint and fading wood, and all the backs of those brick houses with their windows to look out onto the alleys and the backs of the other houses across the way. I thought it would be a great job to have. Riding through all the alleys all over America. I could inspect people's garages and the backs of their houses and advise everyone on what work needed to be done, whose gutters were hanging down and in need of repair, what windows were broken and needed to be replaced, and what needed to be painted and when. As I rode through the alley, I noticed that one or two of the houses were made of yellow brick, not red like the rest. It was kind of nice to see that somebody had taken the time to change things around and mix it up a bit.

Green's bike felt good. It had three gears on it and the thickest, newest set of tires I'd ever seen. I don't know why, but I hated him now. He was a real jerk. His bike fit me perfect. It felt so good, I didn't want to give it to Brooks anymore. I might just have to keep it for myself. I always liked the backs of houses better than their fronts. I'd take an alley any day over the bigger, wider street. The way they felt. How quiet they were. Something about them. It always felt better in an alley than out on the streets. I just liked them better is all.

I thought about Mrs. Green as I rode down the alley. I shouldn't have called her a fat pig or a heifer like I did. Or even thought it in my head. It wasn't right. She wasn't even really that fat. She was a real nice lady. She made me happy. It was a different kind of happy. I was so happy that I thought I was gonna cry. I think I might've even cried a little bit on that bike. Even thinking about her now. I don't know why, but she made me. She was a real nice lady, that Mrs. Green.

He didn't deserve to have her.