

Joe Runt

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THE TWO GIRLS decided to meet there, right where Liberty Street widens out to make a small square. They decided to meet at one o'clock because courses at the stenography school begin at two o'clock, and that left them all the time they needed. And so what - even if they were late, even if they did get expelled from school - what difference did it make? That's what Titi, the older of the two, said, and Martine shrugged her shoulders, just as she always did when she agreed with something but didn't want to say so. Martine is two years younger than Titi, which means she'll be seventeen in a month, even though she looks the same age. But she's a bit of a wimp, as they say, and she tries to conceal her shyness by putting on gloomy airs, by shrugging her shoulders over the smallest things, for instance.

At any rate, it wasn't Martine who thought it up. Maybe it wasn't Titi either, but it was she who spoke of it first. Martine didn't seem very surprised; she didn't voice any loud objections. She simply shrugged her shoulders, and that's how the two young girls had reached an agreement. Even so, there had been a bit of a discussion regarding the place. Martine wanted it to be done out of town - at Les Moulins - for instance, out where there weren't too many people around, but Titi said, on the contrary, it was better right downtown, where people were walking around, and she was so insistent about it that Martine finally shrugged her shoulders. In the end, right in town or out at Les Moulins, it was all the same, it was simply a matter of luck. That's what Martine thought, but she didn't feel it wise to say so to her friend.

All during lunch with her mother, Martine hardly thought about the meeting. When it did cross her mind, she was surprised to find that it really didn't matter to her. It must not have been the same at all for Titi. She'd been going over the whole thing for days now. She probably even talked about it, sitting on a bench beside her boyfriend, eating her sandwich. As a matter of fact, he was the one who had first suggested lending his moped to Martine because she didn't have one. But

it's impossible to tell what he really thinks about it all. He has narrow little eyes that are completely impenetrable, even when he's furious or bored.

And yet, as she turned into Liberty Street, not far from the square, Martine suddenly felt her heart thumping wildly. It's a funny thing, a heart that's frightened; it goes "boom, boom, boom" so hard inside of your chest and your legs get all weak, as if you were going to collapse. Why is she frightened? She doesn't really know; her head is cool, her thoughts detached, even a little bored; but it's as if there's another person who's panicking deep within her. In any case, she purses her lips tightly together and breathes carefully so that the others won't know what she's going through inside. Titi and her boyfriend are there, straddling their mopeds. Martine doesn't like Titi's boyfriend and she keeps her distance so that she won't have to greet him with a kiss. With Titi, it's different; she and Martine are real friends, especially this past year, and everything has changed for Martine now that she has a friend. Now she's less afraid of boys, and it seems as if nothing can harm her since she has a friend. Titi isn't pretty, but she knows how to have a good laugh, and she has nice, gray-green eyes; of course her red hair is a bit wild, but it suits her well. She always protects Martine from boys. Since Martine is a pretty girl, she often has problems with boys, and Titi helps her out; sometimes she even kicks or punches them.

Maybe it was Titi's boyfriend who had thought it up first. It's hard to say because they've all more or less been wanting to try it for a long time now, but boys are always full of talk, and they never do much of anything. So Titi had said that we were going to show them, we wouldn't back down, they could all just hang it up, all the boys and girls in the gang, and that after this Martine would have nothing to be afraid of anymore. That's why Martine can feel her heart pounding so wildly in her rib cage, because this is a test, a trial. She hadn't thought

of that before but suddenly, seeing Titi and the boy sitting there on their mopeds at the street corner, in the sunshine, smoking cigarettes, she understands that the world is waiting for something, that something has to happen. And yet, things on Liberty Street are quiet; there aren't many people on the street. The pigeons are strutting about in the sunshine on the curb and in the gutter, moving their heads mechanically. But it's as if a profound void has crept in from all sides, brimming with anxiety, shrilling in the ears, a threatening void looming over the seven-story buildings, over the balconies, behind all the windows, or in every parked car.

Martine is standing still; she can feel the chill of the void within her, deep down in the center of her chest, and the palms of her hands are growing slightly moist with sweat. Titi and the boy are looking at her squint-eyed from the sunlight. They're talking to her and she can't hear them. She's undoubtedly looking very pale and wide-eyed with trembling lips. Then all of a sudden, it's gone, and now she's talking, her voice a bit hoarse, without really knowing what she's saying.

"Okay. Well, ready? Ready now?"

The boy gets off his moped. He kisses Titi on the mouth, then he goes over to Martine, who abruptly shoves him away.

"Go on, leave her alone."

Titi jump-starts her moped with a roar and steers it over next to Martine. Then they take off together, revving the motors. They ride along on the sidewalk for a minute, then both go down into the street, staying side by side in the bus lane.

Now that she's off on the moped, Martine no longer feels the fear in her body. Maybe the vibrations of the moped, the smell and warmth of the gas fumes have filled up all the empty places in her. Martine really loves riding mopeds, especially on a day like today, when the sun is shining brightly and the air isn't chilly. She loves to slip through the automobiles, her face turned a bit sideways to avoid breathing in

the wind, and go fast! Titi had been lucky; her brother gave her his moped; well, he didn't really give it to her; he was waiting until Tin got some money to pay him back. Titi's brother isn't like most other boys.

He's all right; he knows what he wants; he doesn't spend all his time talking a lot of nonsense like the others do, just to show off. Martine doesn't really think about him, but just for a few seconds it's as if she were with him on the big Guzzi, hurtling along the empty street at top speed. She can feel the wind pressing heavily against her face, when she's holding onto the boy's body with both hands, and the thrill of the curves when the earth upturns, like in an airplane.

The two girls are riding along by the sidewalk. The sun is at its peak, blazing down, and despite the fresh air there is a sort of drowsiness hanging heavily over the asphalt streets and cement sidewalks. The shops are closed, their iron gratings pulled down, and that too accentuates the feeling of torpor. Even with the noise of the mopeds, at times Martine can hear the gurgling of television sets talking to themselves on the first floors of the buildings she passes. There is a man's voice and then music that echoes strangely in the drowsy street, as if in a cave.

Titi's out in front now, sitting up nice and straight on the seat of her moped. Her red hair is floating in the wind, and her aviator jacket is billowing out from her back. Martine is riding directly behind her, and as they drive by the display windows of the garages, she glimpses their silhouettes slipping along out of the corner of her eye, like the silhouettes of horsemen in the cowboy movies.

Then suddenly Martine can feel the fear again, and her throat goes dry. She's just realized that the street isn't really empty; it's as if everything were already set up ahead of time, and they're moving toward what is going to happen without being able to change their course. She's filled with such terrible anxiety that everything begins to swim before her eyes, as if she were going to be sick. She'd like to stop, like

down somewhere - anywhere, on the ground, up against the corner of a wall - with her knees pulled up into her stomach to hold in the thumping of her heart, which is sending waves through her entire body. Her moped slows down, weaving a bit on the pavement. Far out ahead of her, Titi keeps on going without looking back, sitting up nice and straight on the seat of her moped, with the sunlight sparkling in her red hair.

The worst thing of all is the people waiting. Martine doesn't know who nor where they are, but she knows they're there, on all sides, up and down the street, following with their ruthless eyes as the cavalcade of two mopeds rides past the sidewalk.

What are they waiting for? What do they want? Maybe they're on the rooftops of the white buildings, on the balconies, hiding behind the curtains in the windows? Maybe they're far away, sitting in some parked car and watching with binoculars? Martine sees all of this in the space of a few seconds as her machine slows down, weaving on the pavement near the intersection. But in a minute Titi is going to turn around, come back; she's going to say, "Well? Well? What's wrong? What are you stopping for?"

Martine closes her eyes, savoring those few seconds of red night in the long, cruel day. When she looks again, the street is even more deserted and still whiter, with the great river of black asphalt melting in the sun. Martine purses her lips tightly, just as she'd done a little earlier, to hold in the fear. All of them out there, the ones that are watching, the ones skulking behind their shutters, behind their cars - she hates them so much that her lips start trembling again, and her heart is pounding wildly. All of these impressions come and go so quickly that Martine's head is reeling, as if she'd had too much to drink and to smoke. Out of the corner of her eye, she can still see the faces waiting, watching - the dirty skulkers behind their curtains, behind their cars. Thick-faced men with sunken eyes, bloated men with vague smiles,

and in their eyes that glimmer of desire, that cruel glimmer. Women, hard-featured women, looking at her with envy and contempt, with fear also; and then the faces of the girls from the stenography school, faces of boys looking round, coming up, leering. They're all there; Martine can feel their presence in the bar windows, in the far recesses of the empty, sun-swept street.

When she starts out again, she sees Titi pulled up at the bus stop near the next intersection. Titi is turned halfway around on the seat of her moped; her red hair is blowing across her face. She too is very pale, because fear is racking her insides and making a knot in her throat. It must be the blazing sun that's causing the fear, and the blank, cloudless sky above the seventh floors of all the new buildings. Martine brings her moped to a stop beside Titi, and they both sit there very still, throttle in hand, not saying a word. They don't talk to one another; they don't look at one another, but they know that the round is going to start now, and their hearts are beating very fast, not from anxiety any longer, but from impatience.

Liberty Street is empty and white, with the sun high at its peak, crushing the shadows, the deserted sidewalks, the buildings with their windows like blank eyes, the cars slipping slowly along. How can everything be so calm, so far away? Martine thinks of the motors of some mopeds that explode like a thunderclap, and for an instant she sees the street opening out, fleeing under the tires engulfing it, as the windows shatter into a thousand bits, strewn small triangles of glass over the pavement.

It's all because of her, just her; the woman in the blue suit is waiting for the bus, not looking at the girls, a bit as if she were sleeping. Her face is red because she's been walking in the sun, and the white blouse under her blue suit jacket clings to her skin. Her small eyes are set deeply in their sockets; they don't see anything, or just barely, furtively, down at the end of the street, where the bus should be coming from. A

black leather handbag, set with a gilt clasp that gleams sharply in the light, dangles lightly from her right hand. Her shoes are black too, yawning somewhat under her body weight, worn on the inside.

Martine looks at the woman in the blue suit so insistently that she turns. But her tiny eyes are hidden in the shadow of her brow, and Martine can't find them. Why does she want to catch the woman's eye? Martine doesn't understand what's happening to her, what's bothering her, what both worries and irritates her at the same time. Perhaps it's because there is too much cruel, harsh light here, weighing down the woman's face, making her skin perspire, shining sharply off the gilt clasp of her handbag?

All of a sudden Martine races the engine, and the moped lunges forward on the pavement. She immediately feels the air on her face and the sluggishness disappears. She's going fast, with Titi close behind. The two mopeds speed noisily along the deserted street and are off. The woman in blue looks after them for an instant, she sees the mopeds make a turn two streets farther down, to the right. The whining sound of the motors is suddenly cut short.

Several blocks away, not far from the train station, the blue moving van is pulling slowly away, loaded with furniture and boxes. It's an old truck that sits up high on its wheels, painted an ugly color of blue, that successive drivers have brutalized for over a million miles, slamming on the brakes and grinding the gears into place. Ahead of the blue truck, the narrow street is crowded with parked cars. As he goes past the bars, the driver leans out but can see only dark shadows in the backs of the rooms. He feels tired and hungry, or maybe it's just the terribly harsh light bouncing off the asphalt. Screwing up his eyes, he frowns. The blue truck speeds along the narrow street, and its motor rumbles louder each time it passes a carriage gateway. Behind, on the fat bed of the truck, furniture creaks, objects bump together in packing boxes. The heavy smell of diesel fuel fills the cab and spills out into

she sits in a blue trail of smoke that lingers along the street. The old truck pitches and rolls over the bumps; it bows along somewhat like an angry animal. Pigeons fly up before its hood. It goes across one street, another street, hardly slowing down at all; perhaps the million miles it's traveled through the streets of the city have given it the right-of-way.

Second, third, second. The gears grind, the motor hammers on, misfiring. The blue silhouette flies over the shop windows, like some mad animal.

Back there, on the curb, the woman in the blue suit is still waiting. She's just checked her watch for the third time, but the hands seem to be stuck insignificantly at one twenty-five. What is she thinking about? Her red face is impassive; the sunlight barely traces the shadows of her eye sockets, her nose, her chin. With the light shining directly into her face, she looks like a plaster statue standing so very still on the curb. Only the black leather of her handbag and shoes seems to be alive, flashing sharply in the hard light. At her feet, her shadow is all crumpled up like a dead skin cast off just behind her. Maybe she's not thinking about anything, not even about the no. 7 bus, which should surely be coming soon, which is running along somewhere past the empty sidewalks, which stops to pick up two youths on their way to high school, then, farther along, an old man in a gray suit. But her thoughts are stopped; they're waiting, just as she is, in silence. She's simply watching - sometimes a moped as it goes by, making that cranklike noise, sometimes an automobile slipping over the asphalt, with that warm sound of wet streets.

Everything is so slow, and yet there's something like flashes of lightning striking the earth, signals blazing out all over the whole city, crazy bursts of light. Everything is so calm, seems on the verge of sleep, and yet there is this rumor, these stifled cries, this violence. Martine is riding out in front of Titi; she's speeding along through

the empty streets, leaning the moped so far into the curves that the pedals scrape on the ground, throwing out showers of sparks. The warm air brings tears to her eyes, presses against her mouth and nostrils, and she must turn her head slightly sideways in order to breathe. Titi is following a few yards behind, her red hair pulled back in the wind; she too is feeling high, from the speed and the smell of gas fumes. The round takes them far across town, then brings them slowly back, street by street, toward the bus stop where the lady with the black bag is waiting. It's the circular motion that makes them feel high too. The motion that goes against the white buildings, against the cruel blinding light. The round that the mopeds make wears a path down into the indifferent ground, etches out a cry, and that is also why, in order to put an end to this dizzy spin, that the blue truck and the green bus are driving down the streets, so that the circle will be completed.

In the new buildings, behind the windows like so many lifeless eyes, are strangers who are barely alive, hidden by the membranes of their curtains, blinded by the pearly screens of their television sets. They don't see the cruel light or the sky; they don't hear the sharp cry of the mopeds that sounds something like a scream. Maybe they don't even know that these are their very own children that are riding along, making the round like this - their daughters, with wind-mussed hair and faces still sweet with childhood.

Inside the cells of their locked apartments, the adults don't know what goes on outside; they don't want to know who's going around in the empty streets, on the frenzied mopeds. How could they know about it? They're imprisoned in plaster and stone; cement has eaten into their flesh, clogged their arteries. On the gray television screen there are faces, landscapes, characters. The pictures light up, flicker off, make the blue glow dance on the motionless faces. Outside in the sunlight, there can only be room for dreams.

And so the round that the mopeds are making comes to an end here, on this wide Liberty Street. Now the mopeds are speeding along in a straight line, flinging all the buildings, the trees, the squares, the intersections swiftly behind them. The woman in the blue suit is alone on the curb, as if she were sleeping. The mopeds are running right along by the sidewalk, in the gutter. Martine's heart isn't beating wildly anymore. On the contrary, it's calm, and her legs don't feel weak now; her hands aren't sweating. The mopeds are both moving along at the same pace, right beside one another, and the sound of their motors is vibrating in such close unison that it could make the overpasses and the walls of the houses crumble. There are the men skulking in their stopped cars, hiding behind the curtains in their rooms. Let them go on spying with their narrow eyes; what difference does it make?

Almost without slowing, the first moped is up on the sidewalk, heading toward the woman in blue. When it happens and before she falls, the woman looks at Martine riding past her in the gutter; she finally looks at her with her eyes wide open, showing the color of her irises, the light in her eyes. But that lasts only a fraction of a second, and then there is that scream echoing through the empty street, that pained and surprised scream, as the two mopeds flee toward the intersection.

Once again the warm wind is blowing, making your heart leap about in your rib cage, and Martine's hand grasping the black handbag is sweating. Above all, she feels a great emptiness deep inside of her, because now the round is finished, and she can't have that high feeling anymore. Far out in front, Titi is getting away, her red hair floating in the wind. Her moped is faster, and she makes it through the intersection; she's riding off. But just as the second moped is passing the intersection, the blue moving van comes out of a side street, just like an animal, and its hood catches the moped up and smashes it

to the ground in a terrific crash of metal and glass. The tires screech as they brake.

Silence settles back down on the street, in the middle of the intersection. On the pavement, behind the blue truck, Martine's body is sprawled, flopped over on itself like a rag. There's no pain, not yet as she lies there looking up at the sky, eyes wide, lips trembling slightly. Instead, an unbearably intense emptiness is slowly creeping over her as dark rivulets of blood trickle from her crushed legs. Lying on the pavement not far from her arm, as if someone had stupidly forgotten it there on the ground, is the black leather bag, with its gilt metal clasp glinting murderously.