

# A MAN OF THE ROAD

THE ADVENTURE TALE FOR BIG PEOPLE



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AUTHOR OF STRANGE FISH

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[Strange Fish](#)

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## GLOSSARY

**boer:** farmer, rebel farmer

**boetie:** little brother

**bobotie:** curry dish

**koeksister:** sweet pastry

**rooibos:** red bush; tea plant

**skaapbos:** sheepbush

**sommer:** just because; because, why not?

“I don't know where my road is going, but I know that I walk  
better when I hold your hand.”

– *Alfred de Musset*





# PART 1



## Chapter 1

**I**t is a grey morning in the town of Freeburg. Little Mikey plays beneath an old oak tree, its branches bare in winter's cold. He has a small plastic motorcycle with rider between his fingers, painted yellow but for a blue helmet, and he somersaults it between the gnarled roots.

'Mikey Stansfield is up next!' he mutters, charging the bike down an imaginary hill. 'He will attempt the triple!' He whispers, a stadium a hundred thousand strong blaring in his mind. 'This is the moment, ladies and gents. If he lands this, it will be a new world record ...'

Above him, heavy white sheets are draped on lines between the branches, hoping for a touch of warmth. Little Mikey careers the bike around a bend in the root, preparing the little rider, a bright spotlight following the figure in his mind, a tower of earth rising in a ramp in front of it. 'He is about to do it!' He holds the little rider tight, ready for the moment of release. 'Now!'

He launches the tiny bike into the air. It spins between his fingers. 'One ...' he whispers, and the rider turns. 'Two ...' And he spins again, the crowd hushed. 'A triple!' The little boy whoops, landing the bike on the edge of a damp sheet above him and

tracking it round in a victory lap, a trail of mud behind it. 'He's done it! Mikey Stansfield is the king of the world!'

The rider leaps from the sheet, the boy pirouetting with it, somersaulting the bike onto the next as they fly. He peers at the head of the figure between his fingers, mesmerised by his bravery.

'Mr Stansfield will now perform the greatest feat,' he whispers into the rider's ear. 'He will make the ultimate jump, leaving the very atmosphere. If he does this, no rider in history can touch him.'

The rider nods, and together they take up their station on the edge of the world, looking out at the universe, the earth blue and massive beneath them. He is about to go, to sail off into the unknown--

'Mikey!'

The voice is a shout, causing cold reality to rush back.

'Momma, I ...'

'You've dirtied my sheets!'

*Smack!*

His bum stings as he skits away from her open hand.

'Come, here!'

Little Mikey stops, knowing that he can't disobey *that* voice.

'Momma ...'

'Come here!'

He turns. She is wearing a white cotton dress, her body hot from work, and her dark curls dancing about her face.

'Come and stand here.'

He does so, picking his way carefully through the mud, knowing what is coming. He looks up at her, she not so much taller than him any more. Her beautiful eyes are boiling with rage.

'What did I tell you?'

'Hang the sheets, Momma.'

'What did you do?'

'I ...'

Her hand clasps his shoulder, her work-hardened fingers digging in. 'This took me hours Mikey!' She shakes him, and he closes his eyes. 'You've got mud all over my sheets!'

He is waiting, his body tensed for the blow, but it doesn't come. He opens his eyes. His momma is looking straight into him.

'Mikey, you've got to concentrate.'

Tears are welling in her eyes, and his heart freezes.

'I can't be late like this!'

'I'm sorry, Momma! I was playing ...'

She shakes her head, and turns, and reaches out to take down the muddy sheets and bundles them, and then she walks toward a cabin standing wooden upon green fields.

'Come on!'

He is about to run after her.

'And leave that toy! I don't want to see any more playing today.'

'Yes, Momma,' he calls, watching her receding. He waits a moment, and then bends to snatch the yellow man up from the ground.

The inside of his momma's cabin churns with sound, and the air steams. Four washing machines are stacked one on top of the other on the far side of the room, and beside them are two big dryers. All of them are spinning, sending their banging and their hot breath into the little home. Little Mikey takes a step

towards them, wanting to put his hands on their hot sides and listen to the worlds spinning inside.

‘Oh, look at you!’

She has dropped the dirty sheets beside the basin and has spied his dirty knees. Quickly she yanks off his yellow trousers, tossing them onto the sheets, and pulls a fresh pair down from their shared cupboard.

‘How did you get so dirty!’

‘I was jumping, Momma.’

She pushes him to the counter and helps him up onto it.

‘I don’t have time today, Mikey.’

‘I did a triple!’

‘Where’re your shoes?’ She looks around and spies them by the door. She pushes a cloth into the warm suds in the basin and begins to sponge his muddy feet. ‘I’m too busy today, Mikey.’

He reaches out, pushing his fingers into her curls.

‘I have something you must do for me.’ She dries his feet and slips fresh, hot socks onto each foot.

‘What’s it?’ He strokes her ears, letting their sides brush against his palms.

‘I need you to take an envelope to Mr Langeveld. He must get it by four.’

‘But what about the show?’

‘Mikey, please.’

‘Momma, you promised!’

She slips a clean white tennis shoe onto his right foot, and then the other. She begins to twist the laces, not looking up at him.

‘He must get it by four. No playing, and no visiting. Straight up the hill and straight back.’ She looks up at him sharply.

‘Mikey. Are you listening to me?’

He nods, visions of the show swirling through his mind.  
'Straight there, and straight back. Promise me.'  
'But, the trick riders are going to be there.'  
She looks down to the laces, already tight. 'We can go tomorrow.'

'They won't be there tomorrow! Only today.'

'Well, that's the best I can do.'

'You always say that.'

'And I always mean it, too.' She takes both shoed feet in her hands, squeezing them. 'Just, please help me. Okay?'

'Okay, Momma,' he whispers, running his fingers through her curls.

She raises her beautiful eyes to him, dark-ringed from work, and her smile lightens them. Her smile brings summer with it. 'I'm going to try my best. If you get back early and I'm finished, then we can go and see. Okay?'

The little boy nods.

'Mikey. Okay?'

She runs her fingers up to his ankles, tickling them.

'Okay, Momma!' He laughs, his mouth wide open and his eyes shining.

'Straight there, and straight back?'

'Yes, Momma.'

'My brave boy.'

She puts her arms around him, sliding him off the counter, then kisses him on the cheek. She slips a folded brown envelope into his pocket.

He turns to the door and does not see the fresh tears that well in her eyes.

'Straight there, and straight back.'

'Yes, Momma.' He reaches for the handle and steps out.

It seems the air has grown colder, despite the clear sky. A breeze is blowing across the farmlands, driving all memory of heat before it. He closes the door gently, and looks at the cold vista spread before him.

Set upon a hill, the town of Freeburg rises up. The way there begins with the path that leads straight from his momma's door, winding across Mr Langeveld's open farmland made soft by rain, through the smear of labourers' huts strung east and west along the dark highway, jinking left and right through the settlement, crossing the highway and going up, through the smaller houses of the factory workers and machinists, and higher, among the bright houses of the clerks and teachers and shopkeepers, up and up, to the very top, where men like Mr Langeveld live.

'Well, Mr Stansfield,' says Little Mikey, opening his hand to reveal the yellow rider, his mouth below his silver visor drawn in an ever-determined line. 'We have a difficult mission ahead of us today. We've got to deliver momma's envelope, and see you jump.'

And so Little Mikey steps off of the top step of his momma's cabin, and then he runs, his feet flying over the wintry grass, his white shoes already covered in mud.

Instead of following the path straight on across the highway and all the way up the distant hill, like his momma said, he veers away, leaving the main path for another that tracks away through the grass, heading for the distant bustle of Main Street, the centre of Freeburg town itself.

Inside the cabin a song begins. It is the song his momma sings when the hours merge with the churning of the machines, and she too slips off to an adventure while the soap suds hold



the world. The song is sweet. A memory of a different time, and place.

## Chapter 2

**I**t is Saturday and Freeburg's Main Street is buzzing. Cars of all shapes cruise up and down, searching for parking, while families stream in and out of the two big supermarkets, stocking up for the week ahead. Between the grocery shopping is the coffee sipping and cake eating, the clothes browsing, and the younger ones piling into the games shop to play. But this day is special. The crowds are quicker, the clinking of spoons on cups louder, because today is the day of the show.

Little Mikey makes his way carefully up Main Street, sticking to the quieter alleys between the bustling shops, knowing that little boys on their own find trouble, if they're not careful. While he walks he watches the traffic, his rider clutched in his palm. 'Mission showtime is underway,' he murmurs. His rider stares straight ahead.

A little green pickup trundles up the street. *J&A Liquor, Deliveries* reads the writing on the side. Little Mikey shakes his head. 'Nope,' he murmurs to his rider, his eyes moving on.

*Morton Landscaping, For All Your Gardening Needs.* This one is cruising in the opposite direction, a white panel van with a

green logo trailing along it like a vine. Again Mikey's eyes flicker away. 'Not the one.' The rider nods.

*Van Staden's Meats & Delicacies, Brought to you Fresh.* A small blue van is cruising up the street directly in front of him. It slides past Little Mikey, obviously looking for a rare parking spot on the busy road. The van is an odd one, it seems canted at an angle. Little Mikey watches.

A lucky parking spot opens up and the van slides out of traffic, one indicator blinking, waiting for the spot to clear. White reverse lights wink on and the little van slides in snug. It rocks on its axel, left and right, and then bounces as if a weight has been pulled out of it.

'Big Jan,' Little Mikey breathes.

A huge man comes lumbering around the far side of the vehicle. On his feet are size fourteen steel-capped work boots, around his body is wrapped a 4XL denim overall, and on his face is a grizzly red beard. His red grizzly hair is held down by a blue-and-red baseball cap.

He lumbers slowly, sweat beading in his hair despite the cold. When he reaches the pavement, he leans back against his little van and looks up to the sky, reaching into his pocket. Absently, he pops a mint into his mouth and begins to chew.

Little Mikey pushes himself off the wall. He carefully smooths his clean blue pullover over his bright yellow trousers, and then takes a breath himself. 'Let's go, Mr Stansfield,' he murmurs, as he enters the bustling sidewalk fray.

'Big Jan!' he calls, scurrying through the crowd.

Big Jan turns, and his grizzly face lights up with a smile.

'Mikey!' He booms, startling a pedestrian with the sound. He reaches a huge arm into the crowd, making a way for the boy to

reach him. 'High five,' he rumbles, touching Mikey's tiny palm with his own soup plate. 'How's Freeburg's bravest rider?'

'Ready to fly! And you, Big Jan? Are you feeling strong?'

Big Jan winks at him. 'Of course.'

'I bought you something.' Little Mikey pulls his hand from his pocket, revealing a wrapped serviette. 'It's petrol, for the champ!' He peels the serviette aside, revealing a piece of sweet-and-sticky *koeksister*.

'Lovely!' purrs Big Jan, plucking the bundle from Mikey's palm. His meaty fingers prize the *koeksister* from the tissue and it sails into his mouth. He chews slowly. 'Oooh. That's good.' He turns to the boy, the pleasure of the pastry still in his eyes. 'You on your way to the show?'

'Yes. But I got something to do first.'

'You and me both. I got a ton of deliveries, all for before one!' He pushes himself off the van and begins to lumber around it. 'Where you off to?'

'My momma wants me to make a delivery, to Mr Langeveld.'

Big Jan whistles. 'I got a delivery at the Fritz house, just near there, all the way up the bloody hill.' He clanks the back of his delivery van open, a blast of frigid air wafting out, reaches in and grabs a frozen pack of sausage. He tucks the heavy bag under his arm then peers into the back of the van for the next. 'I hear there's going to be some trick riders?'

'I don't even know if I'll make the show.'

'What was that?' Big Jan's grizzled head pops out again, this time with a second pack dangling from his fist. He finds a worried-looking boy looking up at him.

'I was saying ... I don't even know if I'm going to make the show.' Little Mikey's hands are clasped before him. He wrings

them together. 'Um. I was wondering If I could ask a favour. See, if I walk all the way up the hill, I'll probably miss the bikes ...'

Big Jan assumes a grave expression. 'Hmm. That's bad.'

'Yes. So, I was wondering, if I could maybe help you with your deliveries, maybe you give me a lift to the top? Just ... when it suits you.'

Big Jan frowns. 'Well ... I mean, you're a little guy. Do you think there's really much help that you can give me?'

Little Mikey steps forward and takes the bag dangling from Big Jan's fist. He staggers under the weight of it, the ice burning his bare hands. 'I can handle it, Jan. I won't let you down.'

'Well, I don't know ...' Big Jan scratches his head.

'I'll carry every single bag! You can just talk to the customers.'

Big Jan frowns a moment more, then a beaming smile appears on his face. 'Hell, Mikey. I was only joking. Of course I'll give you a lift. You don't have to help me.' He reaches for the bag but the boy swerves and totters into the busy stream of pedestrians. 'A deal's a deal!' he shouts, shuffling towards a sign in big red letters on the shopfront opposite: *Mr D's Hot Takeaways*.

'Good kid,' Big Jan mutters, reaching into the van for another bag and then banging the door closed. He steps into the bustling foot traffic, following the boy.

Three bags later, the two are piling into Big Jan's van. The inside is littered with sweet wrappers. As Little Mikey clammers into the passenger seat he sees the big man has a fresh packet of fudge open on his lap.

'Now this is proper energy,' says Big Jan, popping a slice into his mouth. 'We got to keep this pace up!' He reaches forward and twists the key and the van judders to life. 'We got a full slate

this morning, everyone wants their meat before they go down to the show.' He slides the van into the traffic.

'Do you think we can get there by one?' Little Mikey asks, swinging his feet in front of him. He loves riding in Big Jan's van. It feels good to be so high off the street, the world sliding by in silence, and none of the kids to bother him.

'We have to. I'm pulling a truck at two, and I got to warm up.'

Little Mikey giggles, taking his rider out of his pocket. 'I'm going to see someone fly.'

'Hey! What kind of a fan are you? You should be looking forward to seeing me!'

'I am!' Little Mikey leans over and punches Jan on his massive shoulder, a crab tapping a whale. 'For everything on the ground, I'm watching you. But anything in the sky, I'm for the bikes!'

'Well okay,' says the big man. 'I'll take it.'

'It's shooooow day!' He shouts out the window, banging on his hooter.

'It's show day!' the whole town seems to be shouting, as the little van clears the dip at the bottom of Potgieter Road, gearing down to begin the winding climb up Freeburg Hill.

A moment later the two are turning into Schoon Street, Big Jan peering at the houses on the right, looking for the number. 'This's a new delivery, a Ms Darling,' he mutters, 'we looking for seventeen ...'

'There!' Little Mikey jams his hand out, the rider clutched in his fist, pointing at a home a little way ahead. The place is as neat as a pin, painted lilac, with petunias twirling up from the soil in front.

'Gotcha,' grunts Jan, swinging the wheel so that the van swerves straight onto the patch of lawn. 'She wants just one bag of unfrozen chops. Let's get it done.'

Little Mikey nods, already having clicked his door open. He jumps just as the van comes to a stop. The front door of the little home opens.

'Morning ma'am,' bustles Big Jan, speaking to the woman standing in front of the house. She is dressed in lilac too, a skirt and blouse and neat pumps and a helmet of grey spray-frozen hair. She beams as her house does, her hands clasped in front of her.

'Good morning! Is it ... are you Mr Van Staden?'

'Oh no, lady,' booms Big Jan. 'I'm just his appy. I'm Jan, Strongman Jan if you don't know, or even Big Jan. Pleased to meet you.' He holds out his massive paw.

'Oh, you're a ... strongman?' she smiles gently as she touches his fingers with her own.

'That I am, ma'am. I am performing at the show this afternoon. Will you be there?'

'Well! I hadn't planned on going to the show, it's so noisy, you see.' She looks up at him, light dancing in her eyes. 'What will you be doing at the show?'

'Oh, various things. Truck pull, log toss, that sort of thing.' Big Jan pulls his clipboard out from the cab. 'You're looking for one bag of unfrozen chops this morning?'

'Yes, that's right. I have some guests coming over later. After the show.'

'Very good! My assistant is just getting that for you.'

'Your appy?' She smiles.

Jan smiles too, catching the woman's humour. 'Ha-ha. Yes, ma'am. It seems I too have an appy now. How you doing there, Mikey?'

'Coming!' Little Mikey appears, careering around the back of the van, a big, squishy bag of chops threatening to spill out between his clasped hands.

'Oh, look at you!' Cries Ms Darling, bending to the boy. 'What an angel you are. Please would you bring it inside and put it on my kitchen counter. Can you manage?'

'Yes, ma'am!' Little Mikey wobbles his way through the front door.

'But he's so small!' Ms Darling whispers to Big Jan. 'Are you sure he can manage?'

'Definitely, ma'am. My little buddy is the best delivery boy in Freeburg.'

Inside, Little Mikey props himself against the white cupboards of the kitchen, tripodding his right foot as, swaying, he lifts the big pack of chops to his shoulder and slides it onto the counter.

'Oh, well done, Michael,' calls Ms Darling, entering the kitchen. She tip-taps across the tiles, taking hold of the refrigerator door and opening it wide.

Both Big Jan and Little Mikey pause at the sight of it. Big Jan's eyebrows shoot up as he peers inside. The refrigerator is full of food, containers and containers of it, all neatly placed and sealed.

'Wow, missus, that's a good stock of chow you have in there.'

'Oh, thank you, Jan.' Ms Darling beams. 'I love to cook. And I'm alone, so it does pile up. I hope my guests this afternoon will polish some of it off for me.' She looks sideways at him. 'You look like you could handle a good portion.'



Big Jan's meaty palm comes up to cover the blush on his face. 'Ag, you got me, missus. I do like to eat.'

'Especially with your sport. I'm sure you have to work hard to make sure you have the right nutrition?'

Big Jan grins. 'That's true. Strongman-ing is a big food business. I got to eat constantly.' He reaches into his overall pocket, searching for his invoice book. He fishes it out and immediately drops it on the floor.

'Jan, we got to go,' whispers Little Mikey, passing the book back up to his friend.

'Yup, yup. Ms Darling, thank you for your business. We must get going. It's a very busy day today.'

'Oh no, really? I was hoping you would join me for a little feed. I get so few visitors.'

She tip-taps over to the oven. Both watch as she reaches down and cracks the door. Immediately a smell fills the room, a scent so delicious that it wobbles the delivering pair.

'I'm making some eclairs, I'm sure you two would like one.' She opens the door all the way, peering in, and there they are: a tray of eight perfect eclairs browning in the heat. Big Jan's eyes widen.

'Sjoe,' he mutters. 'Mikey. I'm sure we've got time to wait for just one of these eclairs.'

Little Mikey glares at the big man. 'We don't!' he whispers. 'We still have Mr Pantsill in Waverly.'

'It'll only take five minutes,' murmurs Ms Darling. 'Why don't you have a seat at the table, Jan, and while we wait I can warm you up some *bobotie*?'

Big Jan's eyebrows shoot up another notch. 'Bobotie?' His giant feet are moving toward the little dining table. 'I'm sorry, little buddy, but I'm going to have to accept this challenge.'

Little Mikey steps in front of him, but the lumbering ship of Big Jan doesn't stop at all. Ms Darling's chair groans as he lowers his bulk into it.

'I made it just last night,' sighs Ms Darling as she sweeps the door of her refrigerator open. 'I haven't touched it yet.' She pulls out a tray. On it is a pristine bobotie, its creamy yellow surface unbroken, simply demanding that somebody dig in. She sends a smug smile to Little Mikey as a spoon appears in her hand. 'Would you like a taste, Jan?' With a flick, she slices through the soft surface, and in a flash she has the bite at Big Jan's mouth. 'Now, tell me you *don't* want me to warm you a tiny slice?'

Without losing sight of the bite, Big Jan murmurs: 'Sorry little buddy, I'm afraid we taking a detour.'

'But what about Mr Pantsill?'

'Just because you're not hungry, doesn't mean you should stop your boss from getting his nourishment,' declares Ms Darling.

Big Jan leans forward and swallows the offered bite. He groans in pleasure. Ms Darling taps her spoon happily and turns to her refrigerator, triumphantly pressing it closed.

'Tell you what,' says Big Jan, his eyes on the plate Ms Darling is laying out for him. 'Why don't you take Mr Pantsill's delivery? He's just around the corner here. When you finish, I'll be finished too, and then I'll come pick you up. I'll meet you on the corner of Schoon.'

The smell of warming bobotie reaches both of their nostrils, joining the swirling scent of eclairs from the oven.

Big Jan's hand curls around Little Mikey's forearm; his eyes find the boy's. 'I promise, we'll go down to the grounds at one. If I have to, I'll do the other deliveries later.'

Little Mikey steals a glance at Ms Darling. The woman is humming a tune as she spoons salad onto a plate while her microwave hums along too. 'No, it's okay,' he sighs. 'I'll take Mr Pantsill's delivery, and I'll meet you at the corner. Then at least we'll be ahead.'

Little Mikey turns to go.

'Buddy.'

He turns.

'Mr Van Staden is doing some catering at the show. Take this armband. It will get you in, down to the pits. Just in case.' Big Jan slips the band around the boy's wrist, twisting it double to make it tight. 'You never know,' he says, as the microwave pings and the smell of the bobotie weaves all around them.

Little Mikey makes for the door, just as Ms Darling places a plate piled high with steaming bobotie in front of the big man. She looks at him with happy eyes. 'Now, Jan, tell me, just how heavy is this truck you are going to pull?'

She leans forward, her smile lighting her sweet face.

## Chapter 3

**L**ittle Mikey struggles along Schoon Street, a big bag of sausage squishing between his arms and fingers. He reaches the top where Scotts Street runs perpendicular. It is a long one and Mr Pantsill's house is right at the top, on the corner. Milkey turns left, struggling upward.

The houses here are different to Schoon. They're bigger, placed on the western edge of the town, some of them rising to a second or even a third storey, seeking out the view over the fields, perhaps even all the way to the distant ocean. Mikey is nervous walking in this neighbourhood. He's only been here the few times he's joined his momma when she was housecleaning. Being here on his own feels like trouble.

There's a huge house to his right, double-storey, with a double garage and a wide balcony above it. He's seen fires flickering on balconies like these on summer evenings, when he and his momma would take their long walk back to the cabin after a day's cleaning, both smelling the sizzling meat, and hearing the drifting laughter.

He hefts the packet up over his stomach so that he can lean back and look. It may as well be a castle, this house, a hundred times bigger than the cabin he and his momma share. 'I'll cook

for you up there, one day,' he whispers, the words spoken aloud making the thought more real. He can see it: He's standing up there, looking out over the open lands to the sunset, meat sizzling on *their* fire, and his momma is sitting quietly on one of *their* chairs, watching the sun set also, never having to work again. He lets the image settle into his memory. 'One day,' he repeats, before turning to walk on.

He stops. Beside the giant house is a small alley. In front of the alley is a white-painted metal gate, and behind the gate is a BMX bicycle. A trick bike. A bright thing. A beautiful thing.

Little Mikey stares, the package heavy in his arms.

He looks left down the street and then right. The whole neighbourhood is deserted; everyone is at the show. He takes a single, wobbling step closer.

He puts the package down and pulls his rider from his pocket. The two of them step up to the gate. He threads his fingers through the bars, pressing his face against them, wanting to see the bike as clearly as possible. It shines, perched there like a bird ready to step off the earth.

He is leaning against the gate and suddenly, it clicks open.

'What do we do?' Little Mikey whispers to his expressionless rider.

An answer isn't necessary.

*I'll bring it straight back.*

He puts the rider in his pocket and reaches for the bike.

*I will.*

He wheels it through the gate and out onto the street.

Nobody shouts, nobody calls him back.

With both hands on the handlebars, he places his right foot on the pedal too big for his shoe. He hefts himself up. He wobbles for a moment, his eyes wide, every fleck of tar looming

bright in his vision, and then the bike begins to wheel gently down Scotts Street, following the soft gradient of the hill.

*You're doing it! You're riding!*

The crowd roars as he sails the bike left and right, glorying at the sound of the tyres hissing beneath him.

*'He's brilliant! We've never seen speed like it!'*

He stands up on the pedals, readying himself for the great jump, and then the bike jiggles beneath him, and he's falling.

*Clump.*

Silence. Pain in his hands and feet and ankles, his shins and bones singing.

Silence.

*You're okay.*

He sits up, blinking, looking at the bike lying on its side, its back wheel spinning. He licks his lips and drags his left foot to him. It aches, but he heaves himself up. With a furrowed brow he limps to the bicycle and struggles it upright.

He runs his eyes all along it, from the front wheel to the rear, over the handlebars, nearly at head height, and the pedals and the gleaming sprocket. The right pedal is scratched where it scraped the tar, but otherwise there seems to be no damage.

He looks left down the street and then right. Empty.

*'We're not surprised to see Stansfield up on his feet, ladies and gents. He's going to try the big jump again!'*

Little Mikey hops on. It's easier this time. Already he is getting better.

*'And now, he'll go for the record!'*

The bike is gaining speed as it rolls down Scotts Street. He's flying, swooping from one side of the road to the other.

*'He's riding like the wind!'*

Scotts Street bends round and down towards Fairlands, the bicycle picking up speed. Little Mikey doesn't notice. He sails around a corner, faster. He sees a dip ahead, a steep dip, almost straight down, and a canal at the bottom. Fear busts through his heart.

*No!*

He pulls hard on the brakes, jamming them all the way back against the handlebars, but the bike hardly pauses at all. He is no longer flying, he's falling.

'Help!'

A car is crossing the canal on the single-lane bridge below. He can see the face of the driver creased in fright, eyes wide at the boy careering down.

*Help!*

The pavement runs to his left, and beyond it bush and rock. There's nothing for it – it's the pavement or the car. He's going to have to jump. Excitement steals through his legs. Despite his fear, despite the speed, he feels it. He's going to jump!

*You can do this.*

He gathers himself, feeling the moment rising before him, standing up on the pedals and gathering the weight of the bike in his legs. Committed now, all fear is gone, only concentration. He swoops down towards the car, leaning left, picking up speed, the motorist too shocked to hoot, and then it's happening. He pulls back on the handlebars, pulling the bike up with his hips, with his toes, into the air! His front wheel is leaving the tar, up, up ...

*You're flying!*

The back wheel clips the pavement.

*Bash!*

The bike turns out from under him, his body turning too, and then his hip hits, and then his shoulder, and he boils into the gravel, rock and bush.

He lies in a crumpled pile, breathing.

'Are you okay?'

Little Mikey opens his eyes.

The driver of the car is leaning out of her open window, eyes wide in fright. 'What are you doing?'

He moves slightly, groaning.

'I'm okay, ma'am.'

'Well, be careful. You'll hurt somebody!'

The engine roars and she's gone. Little Mikey sits up, and then the ache begins. His left trouser leg is torn and his ankle pulses. He tries to put a little weight on it.

*Argh!*

He looks to the bicycle lying just beyond him and his heart sinks. The front wheel is bent, as clear as his own left foot. It won't ride. Carefully he stands and limps to the bike, righting it, and slowly begins the walk back up the hill.



## Chapter 4

**I**t is after dark by the time Little Mikey returns to the cabin, and night's cold is settling in. What was quick and easy in Big Jan's van was a nightmare with only one working foot.

The door of his momma's house is shut and all is quiet inside.

'Momma?' he knocks, putting his ear to the door. 'Momma?'

He knocks again.

He pushes and the door opens. He peers into the gloom.

'Momma?'

He can hear the dripping of her washcloths hung above the sink. As his eyes adjust, he sees the last of her washing work strung up above the single bed, hoping to avoid the night's dew.

'Momma?'

A groan.

He takes a step towards the bed.

'Momma?'

'Mikey.' Her voice is thick with sleep. 'Where have you been?'

'I had an accident.'

The bed shifts; she is sitting up. 'What happened?'

The distant lights of cars on the highway rotate across the wall, across his momma's form.

'I hurt my foot. I got a lift, and then I tried to take a bicycle.  
But ...'

'You were riding a bicycle?'

'Yes ...'

'I told you to go straight there.'

'Yes, Momma. I was on my way. I asked Big Jan for a lift, to get there quicker for you ...'

Her hand rises in the gloom. He takes it. She draws him to her, into her blankets, into her smell, her bones beneath winter's wrappings.

'I told you to go straight there. I asked you to.' She groans. 'You promised me.'

'I'm sorry,' he whispers to her thudding heart.

'Where is it?'

'What, Momma?'

'The envelope.'

'It's here.'

He reaches into his pocket and finds nothing. 'I couldn't make it up the hill. My foot was too sore.' He pushes his same hand into the other pocket, his other hand locked around her. That pocket is empty too.

'I ... I can't find it.'

Her lungs expand as a breath fills her body, her shoulders climbing, her chest rising, and then she sighs, all of it dropping away.

'It must have fallen out of my pocket. I'm sorry, Momma. I'll take another one tomorrow. I'll walk all the way.'

'Oh, Mikey.'

'Momma?'

'It's a pity. It's a damn pity.'

She squeezes him, and he hears her whooshing lungs.

'Momma?'

'Mr Langeveld.' She sits up and she is a patch of deeper dark above him. Her curls twist as the moving lights of the highway play on them. He wishes he could see her eyes. He puts his hands out to her, but she turns away.

'Momma?'

The softest sigh, so soft he is not sure he heard it.

'I told you to take it to him.'

'I was trying.'

'Why didn't you listen to me?'

'I did! The hill, it's far, Momma.'

He reaches out to turn on the light. 'I'll go tomorrow, Momma.'

'It's too late.'

His hand does not reach the switch.

'We can't stay here anymore.'

'Momma?'

He tries to put his arms around her, but she shrugs him away. He can see well in the dark now. She is standing, her back stooped by the burden of living. His momma. She clicks on the light. White sears his eyes.

He blinks quickly, searching for her, his hands out.

'I told you to go straight up the hill, Mikey.' She opens their shared cupboard and he sees her hands taking things out, packing them into his pack: his yellow trousers, his T-shirts and his jersey.

'We can't stay here anymore.'

'Why?'

She shakes her head. 'We can't.'

'*Why?*' He goes to her.

She turns her back on him, shaking her head. 'You are going to have to go to your daddy.'

He struggles up against the side of the bed, confused. 'My daddy?'

'He lives in Goudstad. He knows about you.'

'Who is my daddy?'

'You have to go to him now. You're a big boy now.'

'I'm not!'

'Come, let me dress you.'

'Why, Momma?'

But he can't fight her because she is not fighting. There is a curtain drawn over her heart.

She pulls off his T-shirt, his trousers, his underpants, his remaining shoe and socks.

She checks his pockets.

'What's wrong, Momma?'

She uses a dripping cloth to wipe him down. His teeth begin to chatter.

'What did I do?'

She puts a fresh T-shirt onto him, sliding across his skin.

'Where are we going?'

She doesn't answer, helping him step into fresh underpants. Standing one foot on the bed, his sore foot in the air, one hand on her shoulder, Little Mikey begins to cry.

'Little boys should live with their fathers. You should have lived with him long ago.'

'I want to live with you!'

She works his trousers up over his legs and then covers both of his feet with fresh socks. Soon she is slipping a fresh pair of tennis shoes onto his feet.

'Momma, please!'

'I'm sorry,' he whispers, clutching at her curls.

She pulls his fingers from her hair and lifts him from the bed.

He pulls at her heavy jersey. 'Why?'

She does not look at him. She holds out a brown envelope.

'This is for your daddy. His address is written there. Go to his house.' She lifts a bundle from the kitchen table, already packed and neatly tied. 'You must be careful with your food. You must make it last.'

'Momma!'

She takes him by the hand and leads him to the door, opening it to the freezing wind.

'Go, Mikey. Go to the highway; ask someone to take you to Goudstad. That money in the envelope is all I have. We don't have anything else.'

'I won't.' He plants his feet, stubborn.

She kneels, her beloved face right before his own. 'Mikey, we can't stay here any more. This house isn't ours any more.' She puts her hands on his shoulders, holding him tight. 'Promise me that you will go to your father.'

'No!'

'You must.'

'Don't you love me?' He puts his arms around her neck. 'I'm sorry!'

'I do love you.'

'Then why must I go?'

'I don't have any more, Mikey.' She shakes her head. 'I told you to go straight up the hill.'

Suddenly her eyes burn, her teeth clench. He shies away from her, her eyes terrible.

She looks away, letting the blaze dim.

'I'm sorry, Momma,' he whispers. 'I'm sorry.'

'I'm going to meet you at your daddy's house,' she says, turning back to him. 'But it's going to take me some time. So I need you to go there first. You must help me with this. Do you promise me?'

He shakes his head, reaching for her.

She pulls away, not allowing him to touch her. 'Do you promise me?'

'No, Momma. No!'

Her face clenches, tears springing to her eyes.

'Mikey, please. You must. You must help me.' She puts her face in her hands. 'Why won't you help me?' Sobs begin to wrack through her.

'I will help you, Momma!'

'Please, Mikey. You must do this for me.'

'But isn't it better if we are together?'

Suddenly she grabs his wrist, her hand like a claw, madness in her eyes. 'Promise me!' she shrieks, her fingers digging into his skin. 'Promise me!'

Her eyes are mad, the world is mad.

'Answer!'

'Momma ...'

'Promise me!'

'I promise!'

'Look in my eyes! Do you promise?'

He stares into those horrible eyes. 'I promise.'

'Now go.'

He doesn't move, rooted to the earth, frozen by fear.

Her face disintegrates as her mouth opens wide, his momma gone inside that horrible mask. 'Go!' She screams at him. 'Go!'

His momma is not there, this is someone else. He can only run.

'Go to your father!' Her terrible cry rings out behind him as he runs through the freezing cold. And after it is sobbing, he can hear it, but he is too afraid to turn around.

And so he runs, tracking across winter's wet fields, in winter's cold night, running from that terrible howl behind him.



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Milton Schorr was born in 1981 in Cape Town, South Africa. He attended the University of Cape Town as a student of theatre, thereafter creating theatre works across South Africa. As a writer and actor he has received the Imbewu Scriptwriting award for his play *The Heroin Diaries*, and both the 'IDIDTHAT Best of Reel for Direction Craft' and 'Vimeo Staff Pick' award for his short film *Surrender*, and has appeared in blockbuster film productions such as *Resident Evil: The Final Chapter*, *Outlander*, *Tomb Raider*, and *Redeeming Love*. He is a renowned travel and sports writer, with credits in many of South Africa's major publications. *A Man Of The Road* is his second novel.

### ALSO BY MILTON SCHORR - *Strange Fish*

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## COMING SOON – ‘Strange Fish’ 2 & 3

The tale of Strange Fish is not complete. ‘I wrote what I thought was a third act for Strange Fish during July of 2020,’ says author Milton Schorr. ‘Eventually I realised that what I thought was the third act must in fact be the final part of a trilogy. This means that Strange Fish Part Three is largely already written, while Strange Fish Part Two is yet to be put to paper. I plan to do this during 2022.’

Look out for Strange Fish 2 & 3 in 2023.

### FIND OUT MORE

To stay abreast of Milton Schorr’s coming works, tours and author activities, as well access information on audiobooks, visit [www.pilgrimspressbooks.com](http://www.pilgrimspressbooks.com) or follow us on social media at [@pilgrimspressbooks](https://twitter.com/pilgrimspressbooks). Alternatively, scan the QR Code below by simply pointing your camera phone at it and hitting the link that appears.



