

By the time the girls saw the little beach near the boathouse, Marta's arms were almost numb with fatigue. Linnea paddled now with short, ineffective dips into the water forcing Marta to double her effort as she focused on strong paddling to move them through the chop and splash. The empty boat tied behind them sometimes caught the wind and yanked them backwards.

"C'mon Linnea, we're almost there. Follow my count. Stroke. Stroke. Stroke."

The canoe surged forward, cutting through the water. Marta saw Linnea shudder when an especially large wave crashed over the bow, slapping water against her sheepskin vest.

"Stroke. Stroke. Stroke."

The shore grew closer and Marta could see the fence and Napos standing under a tree.

"Stroke. Stroke. Stroke."

The canoe rushed toward the little bay and jerked to a stop on the sand. Linnea pitched forward, her braid alive on her back. She caught herself with her arms. The empty boat bumped into them, its wooden gunwale tapping against the lead canoe.

They sat for a moment, both of them too tired to stand up. Marta looked over at the boathouse and imagined a warm welcome inside it—a potbellied woodstove and soft bunks against the wall. Too bad it was actually a cold, moldy place with narrow platforms for boats to rest, not humans.

Napos saw the boat and ran to the fence, tossing his head.

"*Jó napot* Napos," Marta said.

The horse neighed and pawed the ground.

"You have a talking horse," Linnea laughed.

"But he only understands Hungarian." Marta said. Their joking gave her a lift, and Linnea seemed invigorated, too. They flexed their cold hands and crept forward in the canoe, staggering onto the beach.

"Can you help carry the canoes?" Marta asked. Linnea looked so small and thin.

"Of course."

They carried the first canoe to the boathouse, their legs wobbly. After they put away the second boat Marta retrieved her saddle and Linnea helped her heave it up onto the gray horse's back. While Marta cinched it up Linnea wheeled the silver bicycle out of the woodshed.

"That is one beautiful machine," Marta said. "Too bad it doesn't have any lights."

"Do you have a candle lantern?" Linnea asked.

"Nope." Marta shrugged. "I planned on being home before dark."

Linnea drew in a deep, ragged breath as she hopped onto the bike.

"We'll be fine," Marta said, trying to sound confident.

When they left the lake Napos didn't like the bicycle behind him, so Linnea led the way. Marta watched her navigate the trail, pedaling on an easy gear so her legs were always moving. The girls didn't talk, both of them concentrating on moving forward as the gray sky deepened toward black.

At first the trail followed the outlet stream from the lake, and a small amount of daylight reflected off the water. The trail was narrow but Napos was sure footed. Marta kept a lookout for low hanging branches and twice she ducked just in time.

Ahead of her, Linnea pedaled more slowly as the daylight faded. When the trail veered into the cedar woods, Marta watched her head into the trees. She seemed to be pedaling into a patch of black ink.

Napos hesitated at the edge of the darkness until Marta urged him on, “C’mon Napos. The trail will be wider in the woods, and not as steep. You’ll really like it.”

At first it did seem easier, with a smooth trail, and very little vegetation under the tall trees. It was quiet away from the sound of the water and Marta could hear little clicking sounds from the silver bike as Linnea turned the pedals. She felt her shoulders relax and her grip on the reins soften.

A whoosh of wind pushed against Marta, bringing a cold rattle of precipitation. Hail. She bent her head, trying to avoid the sharp tap of the icy pellets against her cheeks.

“What?” Ahead in the dark, she heard Linnea’s surprise.

The hammer of the hail increased until Marta had to hide her hands against her belly to keep them out of the freezing pellets. Napos stopped moving.

“I can’t see...” Linnea began to speak then her voice cut off.

Marta heard the jangle of metal followed by a moan.