

## Peter Ewart

### The Chain

His father had brought it home in the back of the truck and told him about it at supper. The boy thanked him in his soft, throaty voice, but remained seated, shoulders pulled back, as was required of the kids when eating at the kitchen table.

“What did you say?” his father asked, hand to his ear. “Did I hear someone say something?”

“Thank you,” the boy repeated, louder.

“That’s better.” His father picked up a piece of bread, and began chewing on it.

“So what are you waiting for?”

The boy set down his glass, carefully put his chair back in place, skirted around the table, and exited out the screen door.

Outside, the heat of afternoon had cooled into the freshness that comes with early evening in the North. A faint whine—like a distant and wayward siren—drifted over the rooftops of the town from the sawmills down on planer row. Against the sun-streaked blue sky, a pallid moon grew stronger.

No one was in the street. Approaching the box of the ‘55 Fargo half-ton, the boy caught a glimpse of whitewall tires, chromed handlebars, and the curved thumb of a gearshift lever. It looked new.

He pulled open the tailgate of the truck and slid the bike out, fingers fumbling for a grip on the back wheel and, while doing so, feeling, for an instant, the powdery crust of dried mud on the inside of the fender. Second hand. He had wanted a brand new one for so long; but, still, it looked in pretty good shape—three speed, hand brakes that worked, metallic orange paint. One of the spokes was loose, but he could fix that. His mother watched from the front window, her figure elusive and scattered in the glass, as if only a reflection.

He fell over a couple of times before he got the hang of backpedaling while changing gears. With a crescent wrench, he adjusted the seat and

turned down the handlebars. There was no doubt; it was a decent bike. His father must have got a deal at the auction; he was good at that.

All next day, he rode like a kite in the wind — swooping down four post hill, by the weather beaten school and the open air swimming pool, over the parking lots and littered lanes of downtown Prince George, and then pumping up the rise on the east side, past the rows of wartime housing. He even flew through the rundown area of town, something his friends from school never liked to do—the neighbourhood was too rough. But the boy didn't worry much about that. With his slim, wiry frame and the cloud of freckles across his face, he didn't look much older than his twelve years; but he had a sullenness about him, caused more by a tendency to be lost in thought than any meanness of spirit, that caused kids who did not know him to think twice about bothering him.

By mid-afternoon, winded and sweaty, he found his way to the new park by the river, just down from the iron bridge. He leaned his bike against a rock and squatted on the edge of the steep bank overlooking the waters. He had always been drawn to the Fraser—so wide, so deep—stretching a quarter of a mile across, from the bank where he was sitting to the pine-tipped slash of cutbanks on the other side. Yet there was fear.

In grade three, one of his classmates had fallen into the river when a path that ran along the bank gave way. One day she was there in the playground. The next day—gone. He wasn't sure exactly where on the riverbank it happened. Her body was never found.

Sitting there, he marvelled at how deceptively fast the river moved, its milky brown waters, rippled, like braids of muscle, with eddies and whirlpools. But no sound. Only a strange, ominous silence that, to him, was not an absence, but a transcendence—to some other world, unfathomable, running deeper than earth or sky.

His mother was sitting on the steps of their army-style house with its steep sloped roof and painted wood siding, when he rode into the yard. He waved, and she smiled back. Her face was pale and worn, as if the colour had been drained away by repeated washings, like the dye in one of her silk kerchiefs. However, she was still an attractive woman. The eyes, when not straying off, were bright and intelligent, and the auburn hair had only a sprinkle of grey. Even her nose, which was slightly crooked, as if broken once, retained a fineness of shape.

"I've made your supper, Georgie. But you had better go out back. Your Dad wants you."

He laid the bike on the grass and, passing by the old metal swing at the side of the house, wandered around to the shed. Squinting through

the open door, he could see his father bending over some wooden boxes, piled haphazardly along the wall. Dusty beams of sunlight penetrated the shadowy interior through a small window, passing through the links of a bicycle chain that hung suspended in the air from a hook of twisted wire, and these links casting a shadow like a line of giant teeth along the plywood wall.

His father turned his head. "Where the hell have you been?"

There was no reply from the boy. A fly buzzed mindlessly against a dirty pane of glass. His father swiped idly at the chain with a knuckle.

"I don't want you coming home late for supper. Your aunt and uncle are here tomorrow—so be on time."

The boy, shoulder against the doorsill, took a deep breath. The shed smelled of dry wood and engine oil, of spider webs and dust.

"Give me a hand."

The boxes were overflowing with chunks of rock. Ducking away from the bicycle chain, the boy grabbed the handle of one and helped his father move it to the back of the shed.

"Watch your toes when you set it down."

They stacked the rest of the boxes, somewhat precariously, against the back wall, both man and boy breathing heavy when they finished. The chunks of rock were ore samples, veined with what looked to be a yellow-brown metal. Four years before, in September of 1953, his father and a logger friend lugged the broken rock out of the claim they had staked a few miles from Prince George, down the Blackwater Road. The boy remembered the night the geologist came to supper and how, later, his father had taken him outside, to look at the samples. The geologist tinked away at the rock for a while using a small hammer he carried on his belt.

"Not much here," he said with a puff of his pipe, sliding the hammer back in its leather sheath. "Mostly pyrites."

A year later at an auction, his father bought a loader and an old crusher—with a loan from the bank—and started up a small sand and gravel company. As time passed, he lost interest in the boxes of cobwebbed rock piled on the floor of the shed.

The boy sat down on a stool by the work bench. "Now we got more space for your bike," his father said, lighting a cigarette.

He was wearing khaki work pants, the ones that always looked so clean, with a crease as sharp as a razor, just like in the military. There were photos of him in the family album when he was a soldier—strong jaw, unwavering eyes, short clipped moustache, and the trim, powerful build. In the dozen years since the end of the war, he had put on weight,

the contours of his face had softened, and his once thick, curly hair was combed back over a bald spot. But, like a well-circulated coin that still retains an image, he had the stamp of a service man.

“Run into any pretty girls today, Georgie?” His father asked, the teasing glint in his eye.

“I bet they were giving you a look-see, riding around on your new bike.”

“No, I didn’t Dad,” the boy replied in his low rasp, grinding the toe of his running shoe into the floor. His father grinned. They remained silent for a minute, the only sound the sizzle of the fly against the window pane. Then the man snuffed out his cigarette, and, whistling, walked off towards the house.

The yelling started a few minutes later, drifting out in snatches from the bedroom window.

“Where are my shirts? Is it too goddamn much to ask?”

The boy knew his father was going out for the night—he always changed into his good clothes when he did.

The boy came in through the back by the kitchen. Laundry was strewn over the floor, and the old wicker hamper, usually tucked up against the wringer washer, was tipped on its side. He caught a glimpse of his father in front of the mirror in the cramped hallway, hair shiny with Brylcreem, struggling to button up a shirt that looked too tight around the waist, muttering through clenched teeth. Later, upstairs in his bedroom, he felt the house shake as the front door slammed.

That night he played checkers upstairs with his little brother, Ray, both boys sprawled on the coolness of the worn linoleum. They pored intently over the game, Ray sucking on his turned-in front tooth, foot tapping against the floor. Then a pillow was thrown, and they were into a full-blown pillow fight, pummeling each other from one end of the slant-ceiling bedroom to the other. Ray let out a peal of laughter as the boy chased him into the hallway at the top of the stairs. Sometimes the boy swung the pillow too hard, but Ray took it all without complaint. Neither of them liked to cry, and they had an unspoken rule never to tell on one another.

Their mother called up the staircase. “Keep the noise down, now. Your Dad will be home soon.”

The boys stopped and went downstairs. The radio on the kitchen counter was playing a country music show from somewhere out east. Their mother laid out mugs of steaming hot cocoa and a plate of buttered

toast on the table. This time of evening she liked to sit and smoke, listening to the radio station— it was the only one in town—or mending pants and shirts with the Singer sewing machine her parents gave her as a wedding present. She made most of her own clothing, ordering bolts of beautifully sheened fabrics and spools of coloured thread from a mail order house in Ontario. It was cheaper than buying from local stores.

Sometimes if the news came on, she would talk with them about some current event like Sputnik, the atomic bomb testing, or the election of John Diefenbaker. Or she would tell them about her days growing up in southern BC, in the sunny, warm Okanagan. He especially liked those stories. Although memories of a distant time, each had, to the boy, the keenness and tang of a freshly picked apple.

This Friday night, his older sister called long distance. She had left home right after finishing high school and was working as a bank clerk in Vancouver.

“Yes, you’re better off where you are,” his mother spoke into the heavy black receiver, “You’ll make out just fine.”

After she finished, the boys were allowed to talk for a minute or two, speaking in the flat, monosyllabic language that boys use when they talk to older relatives on the phone.

By the time they finished talking, the clock on the wall chimed ten o’clock and it was time for bed.

“My two little soldiers,” his mother said, running a hand through their crew cut hair.

Later, in his pyjamas, the boy laid on his bed, reading, flashlight propped against the pillow. He no longer read children’s books, but lost himself in stories of science fiction, fantasy and terror—alien planets with ringed, malevolent moons; rivers of glittering stars; ruby-eyed creatures, horrible, wonderful, strange—tales that sucked him in to their world, his mind soaring like a night bird lost in a mansion of infinite darkness.

But sometimes there was a price to pay for his flights of imagination. This night, every creak, every shadow in the room became magnified and took on a lurking immanence, seductive and menacing. A nameless, formless apprehension, one he had known from an early age, rolled out of the darkness like a fog. Heart racing, he turned over on his stomach and buried his head in the crook of his arm. The feeling rose to an almost unbearable point, as if he was holding his breath under water. Then, just as mysteriously as it had come, it subsided, and he dropped off into the deep, merciful sleep of a child.

It wasn't any one noise that woke him up. But, opening his eyes to the moonlit room, he knew. Rising from bed, he tiptoed into the hallway and crouched down by the heat register—carefully opening the metal flap. Thin, clawing fingers of sound floated up from the vent hole—a table scraping, a muffled oath, a voice pleading—rising and falling. Then dull, flat, heavy smacks. The boy pressed his hands against his ears. The sounds moved inside his head, pounding like a hammer.

An insane crash—jumbled, jangling—rang through the house as if a drawer of cutlery had been flung across the kitchen.

“Pick it up! Pick it up, you whore!”

Several loud thumps shivered the walls. Then quiet. Then a low moaning. The boy stood up, head in a swirl. A taunting rasp of a voice whispered incomprehensibly in his ear, the same one he used to hear when delirious with fever. Stretching downward was the long, dark tunnel of the staircase, a thin strip of yellow light glowing under the closed door at the bottom. He took a step.

“What’s the matter, Georgie?” His brother peered out from the bedroom, holding up his pyjama bottoms.

“Go back to bed. It’s alright.”

The day was hot and dry. Smoke from forest fires west of town curdled the sky, turning the sun pale and sickly. A baseball tournament was running at the school playground, and, when the boy got home from the last game of the afternoon, his mother was already cooking the evening meal, roast in the oven, carrots and potatoes neatly peeled and sliced. She had her sapphire blue dress on, the one for when company came; and, around her waist, a white apron. Her face was heavy with makeup and lipstick. The boy stared at her for a moment.

“You look nice, Mom.”

She smiled her nervous smile.

“Get washed up, your aunt and uncle will be here at six. Mimi will be staying with us for a few days while they go down to the Coast.”

The boy heaved his baseball glove up the stairs, happy that his little cousin was coming. She was only five years old, full of energy. Like a Halloween sparkler, he had told her once. Things were better when she was around.

“Drinkie. Drinkie. Who wants a drinkie.”

His father waved a fistful of gold-rimmed glasses and a bottle of rye in the air. Aunt Eileen and his father’s half-brother, Uncle John, were sitting at

the kitchen table, slouched in their chairs. Mimi, all blue eyes and pigtails, had run off outside. Trays of ice were pulled from the fridge, and soon the adults were heavy into the rye and water. Even his mother, still working on dinner, had a glass at her elbow.

The kitchen sweltered, pots of vegetables gurgling on the stove and the oven ticking with heat. Aunt Eileen, wearing a tight black dress, fanned her face with a napkin. She beckoned the boy over, drawing him close.

"Aren't you the handsome one. Just like your dad." The boy smelled her heavy, sweet perfume, and underneath, the faint sourness of alcohol.

"Go and see if that front door is open," his father called down the table to him. "It's too blasted hot in here."

One round of drinks followed another. His father was in one of his better moods, delivering punch lines like the crack of a whip and telling funny stories about the good times and wild parties they had during the war. He didn't often talk about the combat he had seen. And the boy wondered why, as he had been decorated for bravery and had a jewelry box full of old medals. At a younger age, the boy had sometimes stolen into his parents' bedroom and laid out the medals on the bed, weighing their heaviness in his hand and running his fingers over their smooth surfaces.

The children hung around in the hallway outside the kitchen watching the adults sitting at the table. The boy could tell his aunt was getting sloshed, her voice was slurring and she was laughing too loud. She put a wobbly cigarette in her mouth and leaned across the table to get a light from his father, clasping his cuff-linked, freckled wrist to steady herself. Uncle John kept knocking back the rye, nodding as the other two bantered on, a drunken smile frozen on his face.

His father got up for more ice and, sliding by his mother at the sink, grabbed her around the waist.

"I've got a lovely bunch of coconuts ..."

His mother tried to pull away, smiling.

"Oh Bill ..."

Supper was ready. His mother, perspiring, poured the pan of steaming gravy into a tureen. The roast, oozing a pool of drippings, was on a platter in front of his father.

"How the hell can I cut the meat if I don't have a knife?" he demanded. "What am I supposed to use – my bloody fork?"

Shaking his head, he looked over at Aunt Eileen.

"Did you ever see anything like it?"

His mother took a long bone-handled carving knife out of the cutlery drawer. Coming from behind, her hand grazed his father's cheek as she placed the glittering blade, bright as a shard of mirrored glass, down before him. The three children sat themselves around the card table that had been unfolded and jammed up against the far end of the kitchen table.

"What about grace?" Mimi asked, looking saucy.

All of them bowed their heads, while his aunt made an attempt at leading the prayer.

"Thank you Lord, for what we receive today ..." Halfway through she got lost. Looking upwards to the sky, she exclaimed: "You know what I mean." Both father and uncle chuckled, shaking their heads.

Soon a platter of carved meat was passed around, along with steaming bowls of mashed potatoes, buttered carrots and canned peas.

His mother dabbed at her temple with a dishtowel and took a seat at the end of the table by the children. Mimi, sitting across from the boy, was focused curiously on his mother's face.

"Auntie, did you fall down?"

Beneath the thick, pasty makeup now beginning to run, a spot of blackness had emerged on his mother's left cheek like the surface of some inner skin long hidden from light. On the forehead was another discolouration, leprous grey.

"Did you fall down the stairs? I did one time and I hurt my leg."

No one spoke. His father was looking down at his plate, face flushed, jaw clicking rhythmically as he chewed.

"Did you, Auntie?"

His mother pressed her lips together, blinking rapidly, eyes desperate.

The boy felt the muscles of his legs tingling, and a crush in his chest. Words, not fully formed, rose up inside him, pressing against his throat, as if he were powerless to stop their articulation, as if, strangely, this powerlessness was a power in itself, that could be channelled, but not controlled. The words blurted out.

"She got hit."

Eileen and John flicked a glance at each other, then averted their eyes. The boy could hear his father's jaw clicking louder.

"Who hit you, Auntie?"

His mother stood up, hand against mouth, and rushed out of the room. Aunt Eileen moved over to shush up Mimi, whispering sternly in her ear. For the rest of the meal, his father and uncle made small talk, while his aunt vainly tried to engage the two boys in conversation.

His mother came back in the room, face freshly made up, eyes bright, a little unsteady in her high heels.

"Would anyone like some dessert?" she inquired, her face twisted into a cheery smile.

The boy asked to be excused from the table. "I've got to put my bike away," he said softly to no one in particular. His father said nothing, staring down the table at him, rocking back and forth ever so slightly on the legs of his chair. His mother, with flitting eyes, quickly nodded okay.

Later, another couple came over—friends of his parents. Upstairs, the boy lay awake for a long time; then drifted off into a fitful sleep, laughter and voices tinkling up from below. The last glow of sunset disappeared from the horizon, and night, once again prevailed. Later, the moon, stained orange-red from the smoke of forest fires, rose full and powerful. There were only a few stars.

Just before dawn he awoke. The house was quiet. With baseball and glove in hand, he tiptoed down the creaky stairs and out the screen door of the kitchen towards the shed where his bike was. The sound of a toilet flushing came from inside the house. Then footsteps. He hesitated at the bottom of the porch, looking back over his shoulder and then at the latched-up shed. Abruptly, he turned and ran off down the alley. He did not return until late afternoon.

As he approached the front of the house, he saw the half-ton, parked at an odd angle, front wheels on the grass. He stopped and stared, as if trying to peer through the walls of the home, tossing the scuffed ball from hand to glove, hand to glove. His face was pale and drawn, and he felt weak. He hadn't eaten since the night before, and his insides were gnawing. Slowly, his feet began to wend their way towards the gate which stood ajar.

Mimi was on the sidewalk skipping, his brother, Ray, turning one end of the rope, the other end tied to a fence post. Ray looked up at him with a mischievous grin and twirled the rope faster and faster. Mimi shrieked with laughter, pigtails bouncing wildly. For a moment, the rope disappeared into the air, singing like a whip.

He carefully turned the doorknob, and squeezed through the front door. His father and mother were in the hallway leading out of the living room, she against the wall.

"No, Bill. No ..."

His father grabbed her shoulder and pushed her down the hallway into the bathroom, her shoes sliding on the linoleum floor as she was propelled backwards. For a second, the boy saw her pressed against the

sink, her face, pale and contorted, floating. The man shut the door and turned to face the boy.

"Outside," he said, jaw hard, jerking his thumb over his shoulder. The boy shuffled out the door, clasping his baseball glove to his chest, his heart pounding.

He was waiting in the shadows of the shed when his father entered. Splinters of light shone through the cracks in the boarding. The man glanced at the wire hook by the window. The chain that had hung there was gone, the bare hook swinging inexplicably in the still air. His teeth flashed.

"Where the fuck is it?" he demanded, knotting the boy's shirt in his fist. "Tell me where you hid it, you little bastard."

The boy said nothing. Shoving him out of the way, the man yanked open a drawer in the work bench and rifled through the tools inside, spilling several onto the floor. He tossed a screwdriver and a pair of pliers onto the bench top; then, grabbing the seat and handlebars, flipped the bike upside down. In a minute, prying and twisting, he had it off.

His father wound one end of the glistening bicycle chain around his fist. The boy began to whimper.

*Flushed, panting, the man unravels the dangling chain from his hand and strings it back around the sprocket of the bike. The boy lies curled in the corner by the boxes of ore, crying, legs quivering, a line of spit and blood bubbling from his mouth. Holding an oil can with one hand, the man slowly turns the bike pedal with the other, squeezing drops of oil, a link at a time, until the whole chain is dripping. He cleans each finger with a rag, and checks his pants for stains. On his cheek, a smear of grease shines. Outside, the younger children chatter incessantly; the old swing—mindless, like a metronome—creaking.*

From his bedroom window early the next morning, the boy watched as his father backed the truck off the grass and left for work. After putting on his shoes with difficulty, the boy went down to the shed, undid the latch, and brought out the bike. As he wheeled it through the dewy weeds of the backyard, he looked up at the kitchen window. No one was there. In the window on the side of the house—his parents' bedroom—the drapes were still drawn.

Once on the street, he tried to ride the bike, rolling up his pant leg, so the cuff wouldn't catch. But it was impossible to lift his leg over the bar. Limping, he pushed the bike along the sidewalk through town, pulling the pant leg down, hiding the purple welt that coiled around his naked calf

like the tail of a snake. Grey clouds stretched across the sky, threatening rain, sucking the summer green out of the surrounding hills.

The river was beside him now, a bird skimming over its moody silence. Ahead, he could hear the clanking of metal plates as a car rode slowly over the uneven roadbed of the iron bridge. A wooden walkway, twenty feet above the water, jutted out from one of the lanes. The boy wheeled his bike onto its creosoted planks, caked with oily sand. The water in the right fork of the river was low, rock exposed like ancient vertebrae. He passed the sliver of island near the middle, tree roots dangling from its banks, and, over the deepest part, stopped.

With one violent motion, eyes flashing, he hoisted the bicycle onto the railing and pushed it over, pedals spinning, into the river below. A muffled splash. For an instant, the front wheel reared up, then slipped away beneath the surface.