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Author of
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SETTING FREE THE BEARS

John Irving

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SETTING FREE THE BEARS

A SON OF THE CIRCUS

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This book is for
VIOLETTE and Co
in memory of
GEORGE

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*Setting Free
The Bears*

Part One

Siggy

A STEADY DIET IN VIENNA

I could find him every noon, sitting on a bench in the Rathaus Park with a small, fat bag of hothouse radishes in his lap and a bottle of beer in one hand. He always brought his own saltshaker; he must have had a great number of them, because I can't recall a particular one from the lot. They were never very fancy saltshakers, though, and once he even threw one away; he just wrapped it up in the empty radishbag and tossed it in one of the park's trashcans.

Every noon, and always the same bench—the least splintery one, on the edge of the park nearest the university. Occasionally he had a notebook with him, but always the corduroy duckhunter's jacket with its side slash-pockets, and the great vent-pocket at the back. The radishes, the bottle of beer, a saltshaker, and sometimes the notebook—all of them from the long, bulging vent-pocket. He carried nothing in his hands when he walked. His tobacco and pipes went in the side slash-pockets of the jacket; he had at least three different pipes.

Although I assumed he was a student like myself, I hadn't seen him in any of the university buildings. Only in the Rathaus Park, every noon of the new spring days. Often I sat on the bench opposite him while he ate. I'd have my newspaper, and it was a fine spot to watch the girls come along the walk; you could peek at their pale, winter knees—the hardboned, blousy girls in their diaphanous silks. But he didn't watch them; he just perched as alertly as a squirrel over the bag of radishes. Through the bench slats, the sun zebra-striped his lap.

I'd had more than a week of such contact with him before I noticed another of his habits. He scribbled things on the radishbag, and he was always stashing little pieces of bag in his pockets, but more often he wrote in the notebook.

One day he did this: I saw him pocket a little note on a bag piece, walk away from the bench, and a bit down the path decide to have another look. He pulled out the bag

piece and read it. Then he threw it away, and this is what I read:

The fanatical maintenance of good habits is necessary.

It was later, when I read his famous notebook—his Poetry, as he spoke of it—that I realized this note hadn't been entirely thrown away. He'd simply cleaned it a little.

Good habits are worth being fanatical about.

But back in the Rathaus Park, with the little scrap from the radishbag, I couldn't tell he was a poet and a maxim-maker; I only thought he'd be an interesting fellow to know.

HARD TIMES

There's a place on Josefsgasse, behind the Parliament Building, known for its fast, suspicious turnover of secondhand motorcycles. I've Doktor Ficht to thank for my discovery of the place. It was Doktor Ficht's exam I'd just flunked, which put me in a mood to vary my usual noon habit in the Rathaus Park.

I went off through a number of little arches with boggy smells, past cellar stores with mildewy clothes and into a section of garages—tire shops and auto-parts places, where smudged men in overalls were clanking and rolling things out on the sidewalk. I came on it suddenly, a dirty showcase window with the cardboard sign FABER'S in a corner of glass; nothing more in the way of advertising, except the noise spuming from an open doorway. Fumes dark as thunderclouds, an upstarting series of blatting echo-shots, and through the showcase window I could make out the two mechanics racing the throttles of two motorcycles; there were more motorcycles on the platform nearest the window, but these were shiny and still. Scattered about on the cement floor by the doorway, and blurred in exhaust, were various tools and gas-tank caps—pieces of spoke and wheel rim, fender and cable—and these two intent mechanics bent over their cycles; playing

the throttles up and down, they looked as serious and ear-ready as any musicians tuning up for a show. I inhaled from the doorway.

Watching me, just inside, was a gray man with wide, oily lapels; the buttons were the dulllest part of his suit. A great sprocket leaned against the doorway beside him—a fallen, sawtoothed moon, so heavy with grease it absorbed light and glowed at me.

~~“Herr Faber~~ himself,” the man said, prodding his chest with his thumb. And he ushered me out the doorway and back down the street. When we were away from the din, he studied me with a tiny, gold-capped smile.

“Ah!” he said. “The university?”

“God willing,” I said, “but it’s unlikely.”

“Fallen in hard times?” said Herr Faber. “What sort of a motorcycle did you have in mind?”

“I don’t have anything in mind,” I told him.

“Oh,” said Faber, “it’s never easy to decide.”

“It’s staggering,” I said.

“Oh, don’t I know?” he said. “Some bikes are such animals beneath you, *really*—veritable beasts! And that’s exactly what some have in mind. Just what they’re looking for!”

“It’s makes you giddy to think of it,” I said.

“I agree, I agree,” said Herr Faber. “I know just what you mean. You should talk with Herr Javotnik. He’s a student—like yourself! And he’ll be back from lunch presently. Herr Javotnik is a wonder at helping people make up their minds. A virtuoso with decisions!”

“Amazing,” I said.

“And a joy and a comfort to me,” he said. “You’ll see.” Herr Faber cocked his slippery head to one side and listened lovingly to the *burt, burt, burt* of the motorcycles within.

THE BEAST BENEATH ME

I recognized Herr Javotnik by his corduroy duckhunter’s jacket with the pipes protruding from the side slash-pockets. He looked like a young man coming from a lunch that had left his mouth salty and stinging.

"Ah!" said Herr Faber, and he took two little side steps as if he would do a dance for us. "Herr Javotnik," he said, "this young man has a decision to make."

"So that's it," said Javotnik, "—why you weren't in the park?"

"Ah! Ah?" Herr Faber squealed. "You know each other?"

"Very well," Javotnik said. "I should say, very well. This will be a most personal decision, I'm sure, Herr Faber. If you'd leave us."

"Well, yes," said Faber. "Very well, very well"—and he sidled away from us, returning to the exhaust in his doorway.

He's not
"A lout, of course," said Javotnik. "You've no mind to buy a thing, have you?"

"No," I said. "I just happened along."

"Strange not to see you in the park."

"I've fallen in hard times," I told him.

"Whose exam?" he asked.

"Ficht's."

"Well, Ficht. I can tell you a bit about him. He's got rotten gums, uses a little brush between his classes—swabs his gums with some gunk from a brown jar. His breath could wilt a weed. He's fallen in hard times himself."

"It's good to know," I said.

"But you've no interest in motorcycles?" he asked. "I've an interest myself, just to hop on one and leave this city. Vienna's no spot for the spring, really. But of course, I couldn't go more than half toward any bike in there."

"I couldn't either," I said.

"That so?" he said. "What's your name?"

"Graff," I told him. "Hannes Graff."

"Well, Graff, there's one especially nice motorcycle in there, if you've any thoughts toward a trip."

"Well," I said, "I couldn't go more than half, you know, and it seems you're tied up with a job."

"I'm never tied up," said Javotnik.

"But perhaps you've gotten in the habit," I told him. "Habits aren't to be scoffed at, you know." And he braced back on his heels a moment, brought up a pipe from his jacket and clacked it against his teeth.

"I'm all for a good whim too," he said. "My name's Siggy. Siegfried Javotnik."

And although he made no note of it at the time, he

would later add this idea to his notebook, under the revised line concerning habit and fanaticism—this new maxim also rephrased.

Be blissfully guided by the veritable urge!

But that afternoon on the sidewalk he was perhaps without his notebook or a scrap of radishbag, and he must have felt the prompting of Herr Faber, who peered so anxiously at us, his head darting like a snake's tongue out of the smoggy garage.

"Come with me, Graff," said Siggy. "I'm going to sit you on a beast."

So we crossed the slick floor of the garage to a door against the back wall, a door with a dartboard on it; both the door and the dartboard hung askew. The dartboard was all chewed up, the bull's-eye indistinguishable from the matted clots of cork all over—as if it had been attacked with wrenches instead of darts, or by mad mechanics with tearing mouths.

We went out into an alley behind the garage.

"Oh now, Herr Javotnik," said Faber. "Do you really think so?"

"Absolutely," said Siegfried Javotnik.

It was covered with a glossy black tarp and leaned against the wall of the garage. The rear fender was as thick as my finger, a heavy chunk of chrome, gray on the rim where it took some of the color from the mudcleats, deep-grooved on the rear tire—tire and fender and the perfect gap between. Siggy pulled the tarp off.

It was an old, cruel-looking motorcycle, missing the gentle lines and the filled-in places; it had spaces in between its parts, a gap where some clutterer might have tried to put a toolbox, a little open triangle between the engine and the gas tank too—the tank, a sleek teardrop of black, sat like a too small head on a bulky body; it was lovely like a gun is sometimes lovely—for the obvious, ugly function showing in its most prominent parts. It weighed, all right, and seemed to suck its belly in, like a lean, hunched dog in the tall grass.

"A virtuoso, this boy!" Herr Faber said. "A joy and a comfort."

"It's British," said Siggy. "Royal Enfield, some years ago when they made the pieces look like the way they

worked. Seven hundred cubic centimeters. New tires and chains, and the clutch has been rebuilt. Like new."

"This boy, he loves this old one!" said Faber. "He worked on it all on his own time. It's like *new*!"

"It's new, all right," Siggy whispered. "I ordered from London—new clutch and sprocket, new pistons and rings—and he thought it was for his other bikes. The old thief doesn't know what it's worth."

"Sit on it!" Herr Faber said. "Oh, just sit, and feel the beast beneath you!"

"Half and half," whispered Siggy. "You pay it all now, and I'll pay you back with my wages."

"Start it up for me," I said.

"Ah well," said Faber. "Herr Javotnik, it's not quite ready to start up now, is it? Maybe it needs gas."

"Oh no," said Siggy. "It should start right up." And he came alongside me and pumped on the kick starter; there was very little fiddling—a tickle to the carburetor, the spark retard out and back. Then he rose up beside me and dropped his weight on the kicker. The engine sucked and gasped, and the stick flew back against him; but he tromped it again, and quickly again, and this time it caught—not with the *burting* of the motorcycles inside: with a lower, steadier *borp, borp, borp*, as rich as a tractor.

"Hear that?" cried Herr Faber, who suddenly listened himself—his head tilting a bit, and his hand slicking over his mouth—as if he'd expected to hear a valve tapping, but didn't; expected to hear a certain roughness in the idle, but couldn't—at least, not quite. And his head tilted more.

"A virtuoso," said Faber, who was beginning to sound as if he believed it.

HERR FABER'S BEAST

Herr Faber's office was on the second floor of the garage, which looked as if it couldn't have a second floor.

"A grim urinal of a place," said Siggy, whose manners were making Herr Faber nervous.

"Have we set a price on that one?" Faber asked.

"Oh, yes we have," said Siggy. "Twenty-one hundred schillings, it was, Herr Faber."