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The Great Tartakovsky

by Joe Franklin

A Novel

Chapter 1

I'd just pedaled the last of the one thousand, six hundred and seventy-two miles separating Lisbon, Iowa, from San Francisco, so that I might stand before my mythological father, Dmitri Tartakovsky -- the retired trapeze artist, sword swallower and contortionist who'd impregnated my mother on a bed of hay twenty-three years earlier -- and ask if he might enjoy spending a bit of time with the boy who'd grown to manhood idolizing him in a land of dairy cows, pigs and corn. He eased himself into the folding aluminum chair laid out in the shade of the old circus trailer -- a dilapidated fifth wheel that bore not only his image, but also his name, and asked again about this alleged letter he'd written me. I handed him the envelope and watched as he read. This was in the days before the new ballpark, when the area south of Market Street was a wasteland of dirt and broken bottles.

"You barely caught me," he said, passing me back the letter. A train creaked by in the background while the steady rush of cars on the freeway came down from above.

"One of these days soon I'm off to Mexico, see what all the fuss is about this wrestling circuit of theirs. I have an idea I'd go off big down there."

"I'm sure you would," I said, and recalled for a moment one of my earliest memories, in which I stood amongst elephant droppings and craned my neck to watch this man ride his unicycle blindfolded across the highwire.

“You need to put on some weight, kid, get yourself a haircut. How’s the foot?”

“Fine.” I wriggled my remaining good toes. “It’s been about the same since the second grade.”

Mine was a hopeful loneliness verging on desperation and I sat quietly and watched as he rotated the two brats simmering on the hibachi near his feet. He sucked from a straw that disappeared into a lime green cup and leaned back in his chair and nodded at his trailer and said that as I could see there wasn’t a whole lot of extra space. I told him I’d gotten a room in a hostel a couple hours before and figured to find an apartment soon enough. He wanted to know what I planned to do with myself while I was in town. I heard the *tkk tkk tkk* of my heel tapping into the dirt and thought about bonfires on the beach and the Golden Gate Bridge, the drone of fog horns, cable cars, the big top, steep hills and crooked streets, painted Victorians, towering redwoods, lighthouses, skyscrapers and pyramids, tea gardens and China Town.

I said, “Get a job in a bike shop and figure out what there is to see around here I guess.”

He told me that just last week a man from China had lifted a hundred-and-ten-pound column of bricks fastened by a clamp joined to his ear for just over nine seconds. I nodded as if this made perfect sense and silently ate my dinner.

“Maybe I’ll stop back around in a couple of days,” I offered, when I was finished eating. There was a plastic bag hanging off the back of the trailer and I walked over and stuffed my paper plate into it and then stood there for a moment, thinking how the ketchup-and-mustard stain smeared across it seemed to bear a striking resemblance to the state of Florida. “We could, you know, hang out for a bit if you like. No big deal.”

“Sure,” he said finally. And then, “Although my schedule’s kind of up in the air these days. In case I’m not around you can leave a message under that rock over there. Let me know how to get a hold of you.”

“Right,” I replied, and left it at that.

I hopped back on my bike, the 1970 Raleigh International he’d given me for my twelfth birthday, and pedaled off into the white-washed September afternoon, turning as I did to admire one more time the image of him when he was my age, pulling a three-foot dagger from his mouth with one hand, holding a flaming torch that dripped fire in the other. Arcing over his glistening black hair the words, “The Great Tartakovsky,” were written in brilliant red-and-yellow circus script.

Here we go, I remember thinking. Things are about to start happening.

β β β

Life goes on laboriously for months, years without anything happening, and then one day everything fucking explodes. My mother had passed away earlier that spring. Cancer rose up and spread rapidly through her ovaries, and by the time I finally convinced her to go to the hospital there was nothing to be done about it. The doctors ran a few tests, gave her an ample supply of morphine and sent her home to die. Those last few days, when she was too weak to stand up, I stayed by her bedside and held her hand as she went on about how proud I made her and apologized for not leaving me anything worthwhile. I told her she’d given me plenty and that I would be just fine, even though I wondered. And then her eyes closed and that was the end of her.

For several years I had viewed her as the witness to my life; she was the other half, the one that chose to stick around, and in the wake of her death I wasn't ready to give up that thought. I used the items in her store as collateral on a loan at the bank, and promptly purchased the best coffin available. The splendor of it was a comfort to me, and to the handful of town people, mostly customers and business acquaintances of hers, who attended. She was buried in luxury, in a coffin that seemed to say that although her life was over, it had been a grand episode. But also it was for me, to assuage the guilt I felt for not adequately loving the one person on this earth who'd valued me above all else. I stood there as she was being lowered into the ground and felt her watching me, waiting to see what I would do next.

After the funeral I went back and somehow managed to finish the final semester of my final year of college, which unfolded in a two-month fusillade of examinations and inebriated embraces with Tanya, my girlfriend of two years, whom I knew I wouldn't really miss. At the close of the term I moved back into our apartment and took my old job detassling corn for the summer and woke up at 5 a.m. every day to trudge down mile-long muddy rows and listen to the chirping and screeching of bugs and pull the tassels off the male corn to prevent them from fertilizing the female. It seemed like the hardest job a man might ever do, but I loved the thoughtless repetition of it. I pulled the tassels and dropped them on the ground behind me, over and over, all day long. Pull. Drop. Pull. Drop. I lost myself amongst stalks that rose above my head and made believe I was the only person left on the planet.

For five weeks my days followed this routine. At night I would lie stretched-out on the floor, almost too tired to sleep, and see a blue sky and green corn leaves beside me

on both sides. I lived on a diet of Coca-Cola and Chicken Ham 'N Swiss sandwiches from the QuickTrip down the block. Come the second week in August I bought a set of touring bags for my bike, along with a one-man tent and a portable stove, and headed west on Route 30 to find my father.

I was cycling just outside McCook, Nebraska, watching the gentle swerve of the white line beneath my tires and feeling free (albeit only momentarily) for the first time of all that burdensome grief, when the idea hit me -- I would find work in a bike shop. I imagined days spent truing wheels, repacking hubs, and learning all the ins and outs of the most energy efficient machine man has ever invented. Yup, that's what I would do. I came down hard on the pedals and surged ahead and was able to make the Colorado border by sunset. A warm, clear night was coming on. I found a camp ground and cooked up some food and later rolled my sleeping bag out under the stars. The change of scenery felt good as I looked up at them, hands twined behind my head, and thought of all the significant miles I'd put between me and everything that was dead and gone.

My unknown future was waiting just ahead, and I was ready for it.

β β β

After leaving my father I worked my way through a windswept neighborhood of warehouses and carpet factories, pulling twice over to the curb to consult my map. The second time the wind caught it and I could only look up and watch as it tumbled down the sidewalk, passing fast-moving taxis along its path toward oblivion. Who needed it? Not me, not the guy who'd left everything behind and found his way to the western edge of the continent by himself. So I pedaled on, asking directions here and there, until before

long I was standing in the Mission District looking up at a rather non-descript sign that read -- “Diego’s Cyclery.”

I’d leaned my bike against a parking meter and was digging into my backpack for my lock when it crashed to the pavement. As I leaned over to pick it up a second bike hit the ground right by my head. Startled, I jumped back and looked up to see a guy about my age with longish blond hair and a deep tan. He wore dark sunglasses, a white T-shirt, flip flops, and loose pants made from a light material I didn’t quite recognize.

We stared at each other for perhaps three seconds.

“Sorry,” he said. “I thought we were throwing our bikes.” He shrugged as if to say it was a mistake that could have happened to anyone.

I had no idea how to reply to this. I laughed and finished locking my bike and then stood and looked at him again, waiting to be let in on the joke. But he merely shrugged once more and walked over and held the door open for me. I scooted inside.

The smell of rubber, oil and citrus degreaser assaulted my nose as I stood there and looked at the man I took for Diego. Enormous, he wore a greasy denim apron stretched taut across his mid-section, yellow low-cut Converse All*Stars, knee-length shorts that revealed enormous, muscular calves, and white tube socks. A phone chord extended from the far wall and he had the receiver pinned between his ear and shoulder as he worked and talked at the same time.

“No, you’re not listening to me. I ordered five, ah, hold on.” He dropped the phone and foraged around on the work bench in front of him until he found the receipt he was looking for. “Trail Stompers, not, ah, Rut Busters. These bikes you’ve sent me I can do nothing with, understand? Now I’ve got three customers waiting on something it turns

out I can't give them. How'd you like to come out here and tell them what your computer says, see how that goes over?" He paused and looked over at us and I immediately looked away. The shop was small and open and I could see everything from where I stood. Along the right wall was a row of mountain bikes on the bottom, road bikes on top. Farther toward the back there were helmets and shorts and jerseys, a rack of water bottles and various other paraphernalia. A bicycle video played on a television mounted in the far corner toward the ceiling. "Right. Uh huh." He hung up the phone and came over to the counter. "So who's first?"

"He is." They both looked at me.

"My name's Milo," I said. "We spoke earlier about the mechanic job you advertised for in the newspaper? You told me I could stop by."

Diego grunted. "I thought we said tomorrow, didn't we? Anyway it doesn't matter, your timing sucks. Come back in the morning and we'll talk then."

"Oh," I said. "OK. Thanks." I turned to leave.

"Hold on." The other guy grabbed me by the elbow. "I've got this bike, see, and it's totally shit canned. I need it in a hurry, like as in by..." he looked at his watchless wrist, "tomorrow morning." Diego folded his arms across his stomach and glared. "So... I see you've got an extra repair stand back there, and what I'm thinking is, how about we let Milo here take a crack at it."

"We?" said Diego.

"Sorry. You. How about *you* let Milo take a crack at it. You know, see what he can do? I'll pay you double for the rush job."

Diego glared at him some more and let out a rush of air that sounded like wind blowing through tree tops. “Who are you, a friend of his?” He smacked his lips like he wanted to eat the guy for lunch.

“It’s OK,” I said. “Really. I’ll come back tomorrow.” I turned again to leave.

“Hang on,” said Diego.

He walked around the counter, grabbed the bike, rolled it into the back, hoisted it onto the stand and began to run through its gears. We stood in the front and watched.

“I appreciate your help,” I whispered to the other guy, “but maybe this isn’t such a good idea, you know?”

“Naw,” he replied. “Look at him,” – I did – “he’s a pussycat.”

If Diego was a cat he was an untamed, carnivorous beast. I looked on as he stuck his face close to the back wheel, listening intently as he watched it spin. After that he removed the bike from the stand and leaned his considerable weight over its handlebars, squeezed the breaks, grunted, frowned and walked back toward us.

“That thing,” he declared, “is fucked. The bearings are shot, the hubs need repacking, your cables are corroded and the bottom bracket’s a mess. You’re looking at a couple hundred bucks minimum. Better to buy a new one.”

“That’s just the thing,” said the guy. “I don’t want a new one, because I like *that* one.” He smiled again. “We have a relationship, you know?”

Diego gave him another menacing look before turning to me and beginning to chew on his puffy bottom lip. Finally he sighed once again, walked to the back and started pulling parts down off the wall – a new chain, break pads, shifters. He came back and dropped them one at a time onto the glass counter. *Crack! Crack! Crack!*

“You.” He pointed a greasy, egg roll-sized finger at him. “What’s your name?”

“Dylan,” he said pleasantly. “Dylan Mackey.”

Diego produced a carbon-backed pad and scribbled out a sales slip. He ripped off a page and handed it Dylan. “OK, Dylan Mackey, you are dismissed, which means get lost, and don’t come back before six.” Then he turned and glared my way. “Milo, it’s go time.”

β β β

Ever since I can remember I’ve been haunted by two recurring dreams, both of which involve tornadoes. The first goes something like this: I’m either crawling running or driving down a dirt-lane road. On both sides of me are threatening storm clouds while ahead of me is icy blue sky. Chasing me is an ominous tornado that forces me to go faster and faster. I’m overcome by panic throughout and know I must plod onward or be sucked into its vortex. Although the tornado never catches me, I’m never able to escape it either. In the second I’m in the basement of a house huddled beside a concrete wall. The oscillating drone of the town’s emergency siren comes from somewhere nearby, and as the ground-shaking rumble of the tornado grows closer I feel a morbid curiosity to stand and have a look just before it smashes the house to splinters. So I rise and peer out a low-level window, but nothing is there. Then I look across the basement to the opposite window and see it, no more than a foot high, skipping by like a yo-yo.

When I was young these dreams tormented me, but as I grew older they somehow evolved into becoming a sort of companion. They went from being my nemesis to being

something I sought to protect, keep quiet about, because they were mine in a way that nothing else was. Somehow.

Over time, Diego would become my tornado.

After Dylan left he walked me into the back and showed me the peg board where each tool was outlined in chalk to insure its being returned to the correct spot. These tools were his and not to be used by me, but if I passed my test he would grant me the opportunity to purchase, at a thirty percent discount, my own set, the price of which he would deduct from my paychecks the first two months. He told me straight away he was an unwavering, stubborn asshole, and that at some point in his past he'd tried to correct this, failed miserably, and come to accept it. I was advised to do the same. If I was the type who had problems taking orders I could save us both a lot of time and hassle by walking out the door and continuing on my merry way. Then he pointed to the clock on the wall and suggested I get to work.

He may as well have asked me to shit a pickle. Granted, I'd replaced nearly every part on my Raleigh International -- greased all the necessary bearings and brackets, and done a thorough enough job for it to carry me halfway across the country -- but the experience had been spread over three days of bloody knuckles and flying wrenches. It was a job I probably wouldn't have completed on my own had the machine not been a present from my father (one of only two things he'd ever given me), and had I not, at the time, been hesitant about interacting with others. If I was going to shorten that time down to three hours my learning curve would have to be steep.

To begin with, I couldn't find the correct tool to remove the freewheel and spent ten minutes quietly rummaging around before he stopped what he was doing and asked

what I was looking for. When I told him he said he had six different wrenches depending on which type of freewheel it was, went over and took a look, trudged back, got the right one and handed it to me without a word. An hour later I started in on the warped front rim. I tightened some spokes and loosened others, dimly recalling the technique I'd used only once before. But my efforts only made it worse and eventually he had to come over and help me. Things went downhill from there. I had trouble adjusting the brakes so they didn't rub continually against the rim he'd just straightened for me, took too many links out of the new chain I was trying to put on, and frayed the end off of a shifter cable, which I'd already cut to size and so had to replace yet again.

"I don't think I'm doing a very good job," I said, after perhaps two hours. I was pretty sure I'd just stripped the threads on a pedal I'd tried to screw in the wrong way.

"You want to quit, go right ahead. Save us both a big headache."

"It's not that, I just feel like I'm wasting your time, that's all."

"If you were wasting my time you wouldn't be wondering about it now."

So I went back to work, and over the next hour customers began to filter in. Diego manned the front desk or pulled bikes down off the wall for people shopping for new ones. He addressed a lot of them by name and some joked around and seemed to like him well enough. I stood at my post and kept at it until I heard the bells from above the door once again and looked up to see Dylan saunter in. When our eyes met he gave me a nod and then walked along the row of bikes against the wall, drumming his fingers on some of the tires, saying "uh huh" now and then like everything was as he expected it to be.

"Dylan Mackey," said Diego.

"Yod-ee yo ho."

Even the first time I heard him employ this greeting I recognized its purpose as a sort of catchphrase, of which I was sure he had many.

Diego came back and brushed me aside so he could look at Dylan's bike. He grunted and sighed as he made a few adjustments.

"So here's the deal," he said to Dylan after a few minutes. "Your buddy here did his best, but it's not what you'd call a top notch job. Actually, ah, it's a shit job." He snorted at his own humor. "But it's better than when you brought it in, so what I'm gonna do is..."

"Hit me!" Dylan bobbed and weaved like a boxer, blowing once into each fist. "Don't hold back."

"Right, ah, I'm only going to charge you for the parts we've put on and forget about the labor. That said, if you're planning on any long rides I still recommend a new machine. The bottom line is fifty and change. OK with you?"

"Will it make it to the beach in the morning? Because that's all I care about."

"You think I'd charge you for it if it wouldn't?"

Dylan shrugged and smiled and Diego shook his head and walked up to the counter and began to methodically stab at the numbers on the register.

"So, did he get the job?"

That stopped him. He turned to look at me and I smiled back, feeling like a loner watching a kickball game on the playground, waiting for the bell to ring so I could hurry back inside and practice some more long division. My leg started to shake again.

"I'm sure I'll regret it," he said at last, "but I've been feeling lately like I could use a new project. Yeah, he got the job."

Dylan laughed, a single ha.

“Thanks!” I smiled and stepped toward them. I was in the game.

β β β

It was a Friday night and Diego told me to come back Monday morning at 9 a.m., ready to pay attention. He warned me once again that patience wasn't his strong suit, and said if I didn't show rapid improvement he would cut me loose. If, however, things did work out, I would be expected to work every other Saturday by myself. I thanked him once again and promised not to let him down and then got the hell out of there.

Dylan was pacing along the edge of the sidewalk when I stepped outside.

He said, “What'd I tell you? The guy's a big kitten.”

“Thanks for your help,” I replied, not wanting to appear ungrateful. We shook hands.

“It looks as if we've both come out on top. Why don't you let me buy you a beer to express my gratitude?”

I thought momentarily of my father and of the dinner he might have been cooking for me if only I'd suggested it to him, if only the mere sight of me didn't make him want to pack up and drive down to Mexico so he could put on a mask and get body slammed by guys twice his size and half his age. I fought to come up with some well-considered reply for bowing out, then remembered the promise I'd made myself before leaving home, which went something like this: *I am all alone in the world, and I refuse to live a life of regret in this small Iowa town, where I will certainly grow old and die without ever*

having experienced anything substantial. My fate, my destiny, they are on their honor. I am ready to take some chances.

As it turned out I didn't have to respond at all.

"C'mon," he said, gesturing with his shoulder to indicate the path ahead.

Something within his behavior made me want to impress him, to prove my spontaneity.

That I would follow seemed to him a foregone conclusion; he was merely waiting for me to realize it. And so with a fatalistic shrug I circled around and allowed Dylan Mackey to lead me down a sidewalk that lead to his version of the world, which turned out to be infinitely larger and more mysterious than the one I had hold of.