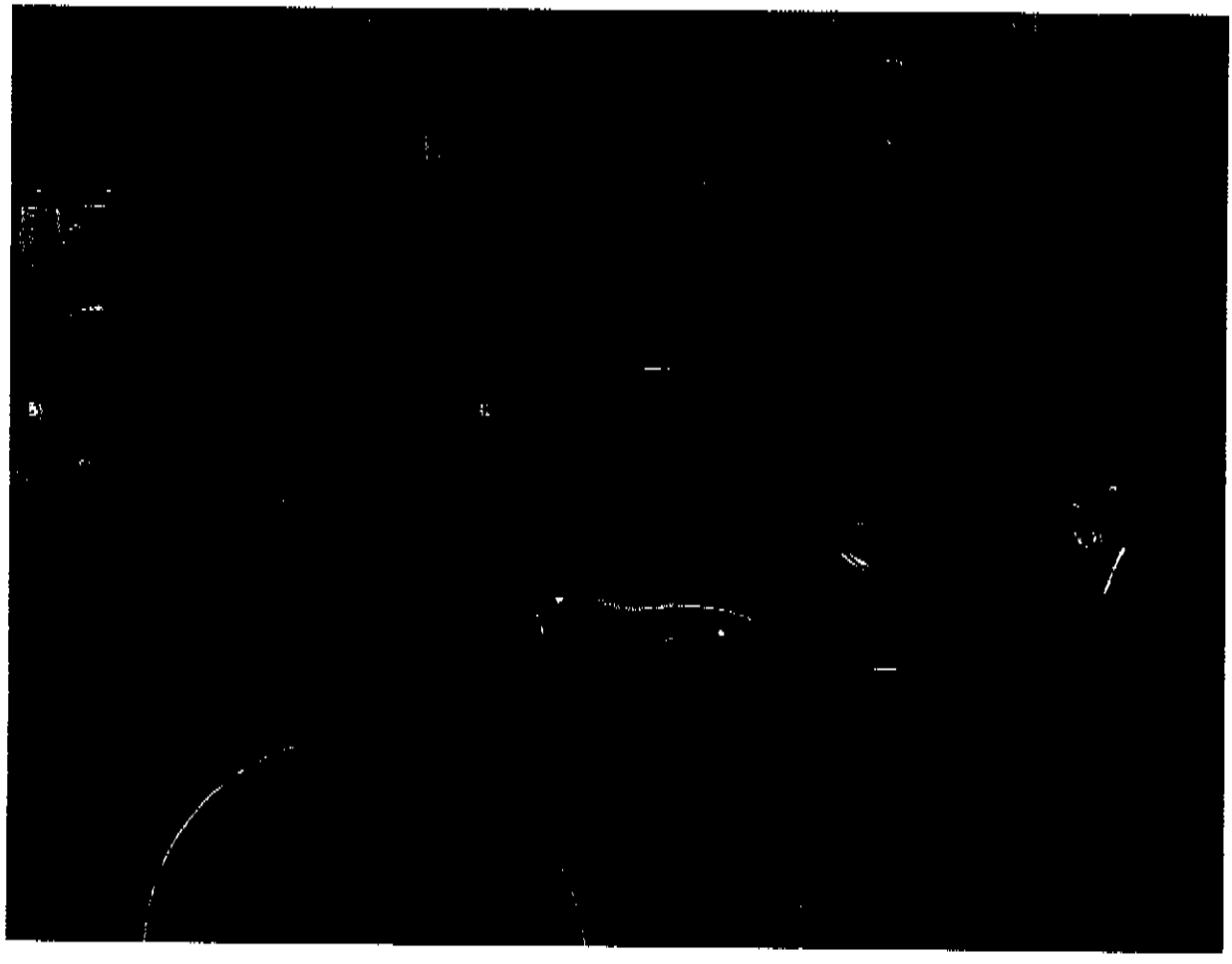
The Bicycle

a short story by Jillian Horton



FOR YOUR LEARNING

Reading this short story will help you:

- consider your own talents
- write a journal entry
- consider alternatives for a character
- identify and explain examples of foreshadowing

Tante Rose had promised me at a very early age that if I studied my piano lessons very hard, she would some day send me to New York to take lessons at a school where I would study to become a concert pianist.

Tante Rose was a concert pianist. She was my mother's older sister and my only aunt. She was tall, thin, and pale, with thick, black hair that she wore cropped at the back of her neck. Tante Rose was older than my mother but younger than my father. She had never married, choosing instead to live a private life with few acquaintances and still fewer friends. If I ever asked her why she had chosen to remain single, she laughed at me and said with a strange smile, "One day, Hannah, you will understand why I made that choice. One day you will understand how all choices are made."

When I was ten, Tante Rose had to give up performing as a pianist. Arthritis, coupled with an old injury to nerves under her collarbone, had sent her slender fingers curling in toward themselves and had swollen her knuckles so they were like knotted wood. She settled five blocks from us, in the north end of Winnipeg. Every year she joined us for the Jewish holidays of Passover, Yom Kippur, and Chanukah. In her small second-storey apartment, she gave piano lessons. She was my teacher; I was her favourite pupil. Late some nights, Tante Rose sat in our living room, drinking strong, black coffee and talking with my parents. Though I was supposed to be at my desk studying Hebrew lessons, I would press my face tight up against the bedroom door and listen to hear Tante Rose tell my parents that I had a brilliant future as a concert pianist. I was eleven and in love with the life of music she described to me in so much detail. I dreamed of myself in flowing dresses with my long black hair grown out to my waist and a string of pearls at my throat. I saw myself travelling on airplanes to giant concert halls where people threw me flowers and chocolates and shouted my name. Tante Rose told my mother I had a special gift and that gift must be nourished. Tante Rose said if I made a few sacrifices and worked hard, I would be famous.

I practised every day for Tante Rose. After school I sat at the piano bench in the living room and studied finger exercises and simple Chopin études and little pieces by Bach and Mozart. Each was like a small, beautiful trinket to me. On Wednesdays I had my lesson with Tante Rose in her apartment. She had a grand piano that was like a magical animal; it was big and intriguing. She sat next to me on the bench, circling in the music when I played wrong notes, telling me when to play soft and when to play loud and sometimes speaking under her breath in Hebrew (which I knew) or Yiddish (which I did not). Always she looked pleased with my progress.

By my thirteenth birthday I was playing the music of Beethoven and Liszt with proficiency. I was a hard worker. I had to work if I was going to be a concert pianist like Tante Rose. I had no choice.

When I was fourteen I moved in to share Tante Rose's apartment. The move would allow me to devote all my free time to my studies in piano. It was decided that I would spend Saturday and Sunday night with my parents and brothers, but the rest of my week would belong to Tante Rose. I packed all my things into two big leather bags and carried them the five blocks to her apartment.

Tante Rose was at the apartment every day when I arrived from school. We sat down at four-thirty and worked together at the piano until seven at night. Then we stopped for soup and bread and tea. We began our work again at eight-thirty and went until ten. If I had homework it had to be done in the morning, before my classes began. Tante Rose demanded of me total commitment and devotion.

On Fridays, before sundown, Tante Rose insisted that I should close the piano and not open it again until nightfall on Saturday. She said that it was my duty to keep the Jewish Sabbath as a holy day for myself. On Friday nights she lit Sabbath candles, praying and singing the traditional songs while gently swaying back and forth to the music. She taught me to make the traditional Jewish bread, *challah*. Tante Rose braided the three strands of dough almost magically, her hands spinning the ropes around until she had two loaves that always seemed to come out of the oven crisp and perfect. The next morning, we got ready for synagogue, and we sat in the second row from the back. Tante Rose wore plain black dresses and crinkled soft scarves. She prayed in a soft voice and she knew all the prayers by heart. Saturday night, after the sun had gone down and we had eaten our evening meal, we went right back to work, feeling somehow refreshed for the week to come.

Once a month, Tante Rose took me to Eaton's downtown where she bought me clothes and shoes and things for school. My mother and father always seemed to be occupied with my three younger brothers. I once heard Tante Rose say to my parents, "Don't worry about Hannah. I will see that she gets all she needs in this life. I will take care of her."

At Eaton's, Tante Rose would buy me any dress I liked. She favoured long velvet skirts and white blouses with collars that made me feel like a queen. Once she bought me a gold chain with my name on it. "You are beautiful—my Hannah has grown up so fast," she said to me one day as we rode the bus home. "I will send you to New York in a year. You will be ready."

I worked hard that winter. It seemed as though I spent all my time practising. Sometimes it seemed there was nothing else in the world but Tante Rose and me and Tante Rose's piano. Tante Rose's piano became my friend, a familiar presence. When my fingers rushed over its flat white keys, from one end of the keyboard to the other, the instrument laughed like I was tickling it or cried like I was hurting it. Always Tante Rose was there with her pen, marking the wrong notes in red ink and promising me that soon I would be ready to study in America with the best teachers, to take my place in life. I listened to her trustingly, lovingly. I loved my Tante Rose so much.

Tante Rose had only ever forbidden me to do two things. One thing she forbade me to do was break the Sabbath in any way. This meant no piano, no homework, no playing with friends. The second thing she forbade me to do was ride on a bicycle. Tante Rose had hurt herself badly once when she was pitched from a bicycle. Her collarbone had been broken and it had never healed properly. She worried constantly about my having an accident that would cost me my career. It was perhaps an irrational fear on

her part, but I knew it was important to Tante Rose. Consequently, she never allowed me even so much as to sit on my brother Avi's bicycle. I never thought much of this when I was young. It seemed a small price to pay for Tante Rose's devotion.

Yet in my mind there was always the memory of how it felt to ride a bicycle. Until my seventh birthday, I had navigated the neighbourhood streets on a two-wheeler, just like all of my friends. When I began to study piano with Tante Rose, she said I must stop riding a bicycle. I stopped, but I still liked looking at bicycles, I liked touching them. My friends passed me on their way home from school, riding as fast as cars, then dragging their feet along the pavement to make themselves slow down, scuffing their good shoes. When the girls rode bicycles, their hair streamed out behind them and looked the way hair looks when you float motionless in the bath. I could never help staring at their hair. I had black hair like Tante Rose, only mine was long and braided from the temple down. I remembered what it felt like to have your hair fly out behind you. I wanted to feel the wind in my hair.

By my fifteenth birthday I was obsessed with the idea of riding a bicycle. I closed my eyes in class and thought about how it would be to be perched up on the leather seat and pedalling until I was out of breath. I looked at the pictures of the bikes in the Eaton's catalogue and I desperately, passionately, wanted a bicycle.

At the same time, I had begun to notice puzzling differences between myself and the other girls in my class. My friends Ilana and Leah, I observed, rode bikes and talked about movies and books and had dates and dance classes and Hebrew lessons. And after school, when Ilana and Leah went to Israel club or to the library, I went home to Tante Rose. Leah and Ilana sometimes telephoned me, but Tante Rose didn't like it when I talked on the phone because she thought it was a waste of time. Even on Friday, the one night when I did not practise, Tante Rose insisted that I stay *home* to celebrate the Sabbath. I felt lonely and isolated, increasingly aware of the differences between myself and girls like Ilana and Leah. I vowed that I would break my promise to Tante Rose. I would ride a bicycle, just once, to prove that I was at least a little bit like Ilana and Leah, to prove that I had some control over my own life. I needed somehow to prove this to myself.

I would have to decide on a time and a place. It was spring, and the melting snow meant I couldn't sneak a ride down the back lane because the lanes were too full of mud. I could ride through the park, but the park would be full of my friends, and someone might see me and tell Tante Rose. I would have to ride the bike on the path by the river, which was a ten-minute walk from my house. I would take my brother Avi's bike and if caught, I would say I had been returning it to him.

On a clear Friday afternoon in April, Tante Rose asked me to go to my parents' house to get my mother's recipe for potato kugel while she took a short nap. I walked there quickly, hurriedly. When I arrived and called out to my parents from the kitchen, Avi came around the corner of the stairs and told me they were at the dentist with my brother David. Then Avi went back up to his room.

Was this the chance I had been waiting for? I stood in the kitchen for a moment and thought very hard. Then I snuck out to the back yard, still in my velvet skirt and top, wearing my patent leather shoes with buckles. I felt my heart pounding inside my chest and I wondered about what would happen if Avi came out to get his bike and it was gone.

I pulled the bicycle, with its gleaming chrome handlebars and polished metal frame, out of the shed. My hands gripped it firmly; I saw my knuckles go white. It was such a strange thing to want to do, and yet, more than anything, I wanted to do it...

I pushed the bicycle to the end of my street and turned it around the corner. My family was occupied and Tante Rose was at home in bed, napping. I would be back at the house just before sundown, in time for Shabbat. Who would see me?

When I got to the corner I swung one of my legs over the bar at the top of the bike so that I was sitting on the seat. I put a hand on each of the brakes and flexed them. I had seen Avi use the brakes. I would use them too.

Placing a foot on each of the pedals, I strained with my knees to push each one down to the ground. I felt the wheels move as this happened, and a second later the bicycle was moving down the street, creeping slowly along the curb toward the road.

I wouldn't be able to feel the wind in my hair unless I was going faster, and so I pushed, harder and harder, against the pedals with my feet. I felt my legs sinking each time, then rising with the motion. I rode down to the river. I shook my head and felt my hair fly out behind me, and I went faster and faster until it was like a cape at my back. It was a good feeling. It was not as good as I thought it would be, but it was still a good feeling.

When I finally thought to look at my watch it said five-thirty. The sun would be going down in twenty minutes. With a sigh, I turned the bike back toward my house and rode it there slowly and reluctantly.

At the corner of Moon Street I noticed a man leaning up against a dark blue car. He had a beard and a round wide face. I had never seen him before. Out of my other eye I saw our neighbour, Mrs. Solomon, sitting on her front porch. She waved at me but I pretended not to see. As I passed the man with the beard, I had the strange feeling that he was pointing something at me. A minute later I turned around and saw that he had gone

over to Mrs. Solomon and they were talking on her porch. I could barely make out their figures in the dim light.

It was late; the sky was visibly darkening. I locked the bike in the shed and went into the house to say hello to my parents. Tante Rose was in the kitchen with them; she looked irritated.

"Where do you go on Shabbos that you don't tell anyone where you're going?" she said in Hebrew.

"I had an errand to run," I replied hurriedly, coming over to kiss her and my mother on the cheek. I slid in next to Avi at the table.

"Go wash your hands and say the blessing," Tante Rose barked at me. "You should be home Friday right at sundown."

"I'm sorry," I said softly. Tante Rose cleared her throat. She got up to wash her hands for the meal and didn't mention my lateness again.

I looked at her during dinner and wondered if I should feel guilt for what I had done. I did not; I knew I would not do it again. I was only sorry that I had unconsciously marred the Sabbath. I thought to myself that in one evening I had broken both the promises I had ever made to Tante Rose.

The next morning Tante Rose and I dressed for synagogue as usual. We walked the two blocks in a friendly silence, the offences of the previous night all but forgotten.

We entered the synagogue through the carved wooden doors at the front of the building. As we stepped inside, we each nodded hello to a number of our friends and acquaintances. I saw my schoolmates, Ilana and Leah, come toward us with broad smiles on their faces.

Ilana nodded to my aunt. "Hello, Miss Lutterman."

Leah turned to me. "Good Shabbos," she said, kissing me on the cheek. Then she giggled. "You're so famous now!"

I felt a wave of alarm rush through my body. I had not the slightest idea what Leah was talking about—until it suddenly occurred to me that Mrs. Solomon must have told everyone in the synagogue that she had seen me riding the bicycle. I smiled faintly at Leah and waved at her parents before taking my seat next to my aunt.

As soon as the service was over, I told Tante Rose I was not feeling well and would like to leave the synagogue quickly.

She looked at me with some sympathy. "We'll have our lunch and then you may have a short rest if you like." I nodded again. I felt sick to think that Mrs. Solomon might tell Tante Rose I had been riding the bicycle. I took a deep breath and let it out silently. I must have misunderstood Leah. It was all just a mistake.

When we arrived at Tante Rose's apartment, I unlocked the door with the key she had given me. As I pushed it open she bent down to pick up

the Saturday newspaper from the floor. She seemed to stand stooped over, looking at it, for a long time.

"Hannah," she said in a barely audible voice. "Hannah, what is this?"

"That's the newspaper, Tante Rose," I said without thinking.

"Hannah, what is this photo on the front page of the newspaper?" I took the paper from her hand and froze suddenly.

In the upper left-hand corner was a photo of me, Hannah Golandsky, riding a bicycle down Moon Street on Friday night at dusk. My hair was streaming out behind me and my velvet skirt was dangling around the pedals. In bold letters below was the caption *Spring is Finally Here...*

Tante Rose was absolutely silent. She pushed past me into the apartment without even looking at my face. I followed behind her, feeling numb. I shut the door.

"Tante Rose..." I started to say. She turned around and held up a finger for me to stop speaking. Then she stood with her hand across her mouth, forehead knotted.

She did not shout at me. Instead she came toward me so that she was only a few inches from my face, and then she spoke.

"I do not ask so much of you, Hannah. I buy the things you need. I let you share my house. I have only two rules in this house. You will be observant of the Sabbath and you will not ride a bicycle." She held up the photo and waved it in front of my face. "I do not make these rules up to test you. I ask you to observe the Sabbath out of respect for your family and your people. I ask you not to ride a bicycle because you have a gift. I did not want you to foolishly jeopardize your gift." She threw the paper down and turned away from me. "It is not the danger of riding a bicycle that I am concerned about. It is the discipline that you needed, Hannah, to stop yourself from doing what you wanted to do. It is about discipline."

"But Tante Rose, why does it matter that I rode a bicycle?" I said feebly, my voice trembling.

"It matters that you should take foolish risks." She stared into my eyes and her face was red like fire. "When God gives you a gift you cherish it. You showed me today that you do not yet cherish yours."

"I just wanted to be like my friends," I said to her, my voice nothing more than a whisper.

"And, Hannah, how many of your friends would like to be like you...but will never be pianists because they lack a gift?"

I had no answer for Tante Rose. I stood staring at her, feeling worse than I had ever felt in my life.

"Go home, Hannah," she said. "You cannot stay with me any more."

My eyes opened in utter disbelief. Never had I dreamed that Tante Rose would punish me in such a way.

"Tante Rose, I'm sorry! I had to know what it was like." I felt my insides begin to tremble and stared at the tips of my red shoes. "I wanted to be like the other kids."

"Then go!" she shouted at me. "Be like the other kids! You made your choice!"

I began to weep. "Don't make me go, Tante Rose."

We stood staring at each other for a long time; I remember thinking that there was not a trace of emotion on her face. Anger had hardened her skin into a mask of stone.

She went into her bedroom and locked the door behind her. Then a dreadful silence descended on the house. I stood still for a moment, then ran out the front door, down the stairs, and out of Tante Rose's building into the street. In my good shoes I ran the five blocks to my house and, breathless, entered the kitchen.

My father was standing over the sink drinking orange juice.

"Tante Rose said I can't live with her any more!" I sobbed out loud. "I rode the bicycle."

My father smiled slightly. "Yes, I know you rode the bicycle. We saw in the paper."

My brothers Avi and David came into the hall, laughing. "We saw your picture!" they shouted in unison.

I looked at my father. "Are you angry that I rode a bicycle on Shabbos?"

He looked thoughtful, then shook his head.

"Hannah, your mother is perhaps angry. But I would be lying if I said that I had never done something I should not have done on the Sabbath. I have no opinion."

I heard my mother's shoes scratching on the stairs and suddenly felt unable to face her or her anger. I backed out the door and ran blindly to the shed, grabbing Avi's bicycle. I threw myself onto the seat and rode down the back lane. I went down to the park and rode along all the streets and I even rode in front of Tante Rose's apartment but the blinds were closed.

I'm not strong like you, Tante Rose, I thought to myself. I can't give up everything because I have a gift.

When I came back to the house there was a white envelope on the table.

"What's that?" I asked my father.

He scratched his chin. "It's from your Aunt Rose."

I gasped. "She came here?"

"While you were riding the bike."

My face reddened. "What did she say?"

"Open the envelope," said my father.

My fingers shook as I pried the paper apart. I was shocked to find inside one airplane ticket to New York for the following week in April.

"Tante Rose said it was time for you to go, to audition at the school, and they will take you in September," said my father.

"Because she's angry at me?" I said, my eyes filling with tears.

"No," he said softly. "Not because she's angry. Just because it's time, Hannah."

"I'm not going," I said to him.

"Hannah," he said gently, "of course you'll go. You have a gift."

I shook my head; it was very clear to me now. "I am not going to New York."

My father sat at the table, looking at me. He seemed suddenly to sense that I had aged in the years I had been living with Tante Rose—that I had aged in a way he would never understand.

Tante Rose had said one day *I* would understand how choices were made. I understood as of that moment. I did not go to New York. ■