

Race for Change

(Written by Matilda Stafford)

I take a hasty look around before the starter's gun fires. I see myself surrounded by girls on their billycarts. This'll be easy. The bang startles me but I push off and briefly wave at Norm, walking stick in the air, yelling garbled instructions. All I hear is "Let's go, Hugo!"

My confidence is growing – I'm in front. The weight of Norm's old billycart drags me down the hill thanks to the law of gravity, and the tunnel is approaching, fast.

The shadowy entrance of the tunnel swallows me up and I'm flying through.

That's when I make the fatal mistake of looking back. I hit a pothole. The billycart flips. I'm suddenly airborne - cartwheeling.

The landing is not as soft as the flight.

Somebody is helping me up. A voice in my ear says; "Are you alright, mate?"

Strong hands pull me to my feet. My vision is fuzzy, but I see a green chequered cap. "I'm alright, thanks."

My rescuer gets back on their cart and bolts.

I hurriedly follow. Like Norm said – the billycart is sturdy. I'm more damaged than it is.

But there's no chance now – I can see the chequered cap way ahead. He cruises over the finish line, somebody waves a flag, and I roll in second. My brain is too blurred to be bothered.

The crowd applauds and claps. Some bloke yells through an old-fashioned tin speaking trumpet, "The winner of the final heat is – what's yer name, son?"

Chequered cap lifts it off – a single long plait falls. "My name's Lores."

The crowd laughs and hoots.

The race official is fuming. "Ladies and gentlemen, we've got a disqualification here. No girls allowed."

"What!" she yells. "It didn't say that on the sign-up sheet! That's unfair!"

The man ignores her and looks at me. "What's *your* name? You're the heat winner!"

"Hugo," I stutter.

The girl is as cranky as a magpie in nesting season.

"Finals in one hour," the man announces.

Nothing seems familiar. There's something wrong. The road that was tarred is now dirt. The only cars look like vintage ones from a museum. There's no skyscrapers – the tallest buildings are two stories high. Even the power lines look different. Everyone is dressed in drab clothes – no colour, no brands. All the adults are wearing hats and the women are wearing gloves. Most men are in suits – all the women are in dresses. There's no t-shirts, no sneakers. And the strangest thing of all – nobody is filming on their smartphone.

What is this?

Suddenly the girl is in my face. "That's not fair. I won that heat."

I shrug. "I know. I didn't make the rules. Why can't girls race anyway? They do everything else."

It was the girl's turn to look bewildered.

We get talking. She doesn't like school – all they learn is cooking and sewing, stuff like that. She wants to work with machines. She looks embarrassed, reluctant to continue, but I coax it out.

"... My real dream is to ... fly... an aeroplane." She hangs her head like a dying flower. "Aren't you gonna laugh?"

"No. Why?"

"Because girls aren't allowed to do those things."

"Why not? They go into space. They drive race cars. They even fight in wars."

Lores' mouth hangs open. "Where are you *from*?"

She nearly didn't believe me, and I don't blame her – I don't believe myself. But we worked out whatever happened must have happened in the tunnel.

"We need to get you back through that tunnel," says Lores. "You've won a spot in the final heat – *my* spot – so race the way you did last time."

I can't see any other way. But I did see a way for Lores to still have a chance in her battle. "How badly do you want to compete in this race?"

"Really bad."

"Bad enough to lose your plait?"

We share a complicit grin. Lores jerks her pocketknife out. I open it and hack vigorously – there's no turning back now. One swift movement and the plait's gone.

"Looking good," I say. "And now a new name. What's your surname?"

"Bonny."

“So, Larry Bonny, maybe?”

“Larry it is.”

I’m up at the starter line, glancing around. It’s all boys. Their bilycarts are handmade from scrap timber just like mine, with solid steel wheels recycled from busted train luggage trolleys. Just before the starter’s gun, I think about my last words to Lores; “Don’t let anyone tell you what you can and can’t do. If it’s your dream – go for it.”

The gun fires. All the bilycarts jolt forward. The carts move deftly, like ripples through water.

Again, gravity pulls me down the hill, in front of the others, just like Lores predicted. We screech toward the tunnel. I hope our plan works. Lores is in there, waiting, hiding in the dusty gloom. I disappear into the dim opening not daring to look back, eyeballing the entrance straight ahead. There’s no crash this time, but as the tunnel ends, I see Lores racing in front of me.

I lock my eyes shut.

Then, hesitating, I open them. I’m staring at a cream coloured ceiling, lying on a pull-out bed.

Through the clear glass window of the nurse’s station I see Norm hobbling in.

“I crashed your bilycart, Norm. I’m really sorry – I didn’t even place.”

“Don’t worry about that old thing, mate,” Norm chortled, waving a hand. “It’s tough as nails. And yer wouldn’t have stood a chance against them girls anyway. Reminds me of a girl who snuck into *our* bilycart race. She flogged us boys. Determined thing she was. Grew up to be the first woman to fly solo from Australia to England. Lores Bonney was her name. I’ll never forget it.”

Neither will I.

THE END