

*the*  
**BICYCLE  
SPY**

YONA ZELDIS McDONOUGH



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# ONE

A gust of wind cut across Marcel's face as he cycled furiously down the street. He was riding as fast as he could, and he pushed even harder on the pedals of his trusty blue bike, but the bumpy cobblestone streets of Aucoin were not exactly made for speed. Still, he had to hurry. Just a little while ago his mother had come into his tiny room, with its narrow iron-framed bed, desk, and old armoire crammed in the corner, demanding that he get up and run this errand for her. She said it was very important.

“Can't it wait?” he had said. “It's so cold out.” It was late Sunday morning, and he and his family were back from church. He was warm and cozy under a small blanket, reading an out-of-date magazine about French-born René Vietto, the second-place winner of the 1939 Tour de France.

“No,” she said. “It can’t. You have to bring this loaf of bread to Madame Trottier right now.” Her tone was unusually stern.

So with a big sigh, Marcel set aside the magazine, ran his fingers through his mop of curly hair, straightened his tortoiseshell glasses on his nose, and reached for his jacket. He’d have to finish the article later.

Ever since Marcel had gone with his cousins and his father to see the Tour three years ago, he’d been practically obsessed with the big bicycle race and was looking forward to seeing it again. Riders from all over the world participated in the grueling competition, which was broken up into stages and went on for days. But in the spring of 1940, Germany invaded France, and shortly after that, the German army marched into Paris. The Tours de France had been canceled indefinitely. Now it was 1942, and the Occupation had dragged on for two long years. Who knew how long it would last or when the race would start up again?

The bumpy cobblestones made the bike shake. But Marcel wouldn’t let that stop him. He knew that in 1939, the spring classic Paris-Roubaix bicycle race

included fifteen or more cobbled sections as part of the grueling 200-plus kilometer course. Some were even steep hills.

He had just rounded the corner of the street where Madame Trottier lived when suddenly a streak of orange flashed across the road. *Zut alors!* He jammed his feet on the brakes hard and swerved just in time to miss hitting a very large ginger cat. The cat looked annoyed but not especially alarmed. What a relief. He would have hated to be responsible for squashing a cat on the cobblestones. He liked cats—his parents kept a pair of tabbies in the bakery over which they lived because they were good mousers. Sometimes when his mother wasn't looking, he would feed them scraps from his plate. They would lick his fingers with their rough, pink tongues and purr almost too softly to hear.

The ginger cat padded away unharmed but a girl darted out into the street and scooped the cat up in her arms. She had blue eyes and black hair plaited into two tight braids. Under her gray coat, he could see the hem of her dress, which was also blue.

“Bad kitty!” she said. “You could have been hurt.”

“Is he okay?” Marcel asked. He thought so, but he wanted to be sure.

“It’s a she,” said the girl. “And she’s fine, thanks.” Still cradling the cat in her arms, she walked away.

Marcel stood staring after her. He had never seen her before. Maybe she was new in town. She looked like she was around his age, and she was pretty—not that he cared about stuff like that. He wasn’t interested in girls. He thought they were bossy and gossiped too much. Also, they cried at the least provocation. And not one of them he knew had the slightest interest in what he considered the most important thing in life: cycling.

But why was he even standing here thinking about this? He’d promised his mother he’d hurry, and if he didn’t, she would be annoyed. He loved his mom, but she did have a tendency to nag—about cleaning up, washing his hair, helping out in the bakery. Moms were like that.

When he finally reached Madame Trottier’s house, he’d been pedaling so hard that despite the chilly day, he was sweating. “*Merci*,” she said, taking the bread from him. “Tell your mother I appreciate it very much.”

“I will,” said Marcel. He pedaled home more slowly, passing the string of shops that lined the street: butcher, cheese store, greengrocer, café, and, on the corner, bakery. On the other side of the street was a store that sold clothes, another that sold hats, and a third that sold toys. That one used to be his favorite, but now that he was twelve, he was a little too old to stop in anymore. There was also a tailor, a tiny shop that sold used books, and the town’s old church, St. Vincent de Paul. He passed a few other people on bicycles as well. Bicycles were just a part of life here, and a good way to get around quickly. People young and old rode them almost everywhere.

The only thing that was unfamiliar in all this was the presence of the soldiers.

When the Germans had invaded France, they swarmed all over Paris and lots of other cities in the north. Marcel had seen the headlines in the newspapers and heard about it on the radio that Papa kept on a table in the front room. Aucoin, however, had been in the Free Zone since the invasion in 1940. That meant it was not occupied by Germans and they had not seen many soldiers here.

But in the last two weeks, that had all changed. On November 11, the Germans invaded the Free Zone, too, and now soldiers from France and even Germany had started to appear in the town square or at the market. He also noticed more gendarmes—police—patrolling the town.

The French soldiers wore belted olive green jackets and helmets. In other circumstances, he might have admired them. But given the presence of the Germans and the gendarmes, they made his little village seem like a strange and scary place. A lot of other people thought so, too, and quietly cursed the soldiers when they were not in earshot. People said that they were working hand in hand with the Germans and called them *collabos*, which was short for *collaborators*. Whatever they were called, Marcel feared and distrusted them. He wished they would all go away.

He slowed when he got to the bakery. His mother was outside, scanning the street for him. “Did you deliver the bread?”

“Yes, and Madame Trottier said to say thank you.”