

CAN MARCEL MAKE THE RIDE OF HIS LIFE?

Marcel loves riding his bicycle, whether he's racing through the streets of his small town in France or making bread deliveries for his parents' bakery. He dreams of someday competing in the Tour de France, the greatest bicycle race. But ever since Germany's occupation of France began two years ago, in 1940, the race has been canceled. Now there are soldiers everywhere, interrupting Marcel's rides with checkpoints and questioning.

Then Marcel learns two big secrets, and he realizes there are worse things about the war than a canceled race. When he later discovers that his friend's entire family is in imminent danger, Marcel knows he can help—but it will involve taking a risky bicycle ride to pass along covert information. And when nothing ends up going according to plan, it's up to him to keep pedaling and think quickly . . . because his friend, her family, and his own future hang in the balance.

978-1-338-28147-7

Cover art © 2016 by Mike Heath

Cover design by Ellen Duda



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the
**BICYCLE
SPY**

 YONA ZELDIS McDONOUGH

SCHOLASTIC INC.

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 He was warm and cozy under a small blanket, reading an out-of-date magazine about French-born René Vietto, the second-place winner of the 1939 Tour de France.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.”

Only then did her expression soften. “Good. Thank you for getting it to her.”

“I’m going to keep on riding for a while,” he said. His mother nodded and went back into the bakery. She’d seemed so anxious lately, more so than usual. He wondered what was wrong, but when he’d asked, she’d said she was fine.

The bicycle bumped along until Marcel reached the end of the cobblestones; then he was able to pick up speed. Soon he was outside the town, pedaling faster and faster still. The houses rushed by, and the trees arched overhead, only a few dried leaves left on their tall branches. What if one day he could actually ride in the Tour de France? He’d be speeding along, just like this. As he rode, the red-roofed houses gave way to farms and pastures in which he saw horses, cows, sheep, and pigs. For a few seconds, he imagined the road lined not with animals but with crowds of spectators cheering him on as he flew along to victory.

Then he had to slow down for a gaggle of geese crossing the road, their noisy honks echoing in his ears as he

passed. That ended his dreams of the Tour de France, at least for now. After a while, he grew hot and tired, so he let the bike slow to a stop and hopped off, flopping down in the dry grass. He would rest here a few minutes before heading home.

Marcel was small for his age and not the best cyclist, either. And he wore glasses. He didn't like being the smallest kid in class, the one who got picked on and teased. He couldn't do anything about growing taller or needing glasses—those things were beyond his control. But he could get stronger and faster. He *could*. That was why he'd vowed to try to ride every day, to build up his speed, his endurance, and his strength. Then the other kids would think twice about teasing him.

And that was what the Tour de France riders did. He'd been reading all about them. Most recently, the entire racecourse was 4,224 kilometers! You had to work up to a distance like that. Of course, the race was divided into stages of a certain number of kilometers each day, to make it possible to finish. There were eighteen stages in all. He also learned that the cyclists had developed special strategies, like eating certain foods

and taking vitamins, all in an effort to improve their performances.

Marcel reached for his canteen, took a long drink, and climbed back onto the bike. He still felt bitter about missing what was now three years of the race; it was another reason to resent the Germans. His parents shared his resentment. They detested the Occupation, which had brought the soldiers here. It also brought rationing and shortages of food and gas. And his parents especially detested Adolf Hitler, the leader of the German people and the man responsible for the invasion and the war. But what could they do about it? Not a whole lot.

As Marcel headed back toward town, he came to a small bridge where a French soldier stood patrolling. Under his helmet, his expression was stern. The gun slung over his shoulder looked big and heavy. Marcel slowed down the way he'd been taught.

The soldier stepped out into the road and raised his hand. Marcel came to a full stop and waited while the soldier walked over and slowly looked him up and down. After a few seconds, he waved his hand, indicating Marcel could continue on his way. It was only when

Marcel had gone a little distance away that he realized he'd been holding his breath. Exhaling was a relief.

When he got back to town, he locked up his bike and went into the bakery, where he helped his mother stack the fresh loaves, swept the floor, and waited on a couple of customers before the shop closed up for lunch. Then he followed his parents upstairs to their apartment above the bakery.

“How far did you ride today?” asked his father once they were seated at the round table in the space that served as kitchen and dining room. A gas stove, sink, and small icebox lined one wall. The other held an open hutch where all their dishes were stored.

“About three kilometers,” Marcel said. His father was interested in cycling and the Tour de France, too, and they liked talking about it. If France had not been occupied by the Germans, they would have gone to see this year's Tour de France together.

Marcel took a bite of his food. Last night, his mother had made a cassoulet—a stew of sausage, beans, and bacon. With all the food shortages and rationing in town, he didn't know how she'd managed to get the

ingredients. But there wasn't all that much left today, and there was no bread. All the loaves from the bakery had been sold, forcing her to close early, and they had even gone through the stale loaves his mother saved to toast.

"And did you run into any soldiers?" his mother asked.

"Just one." Marcel ate eagerly. Not only was he hungry, he also hoped that if he ate more, he would grow taller. "Over by the bridge."

He caught the look his parents exchanged. "Was he French? Did he stop you?" his father asked.

"Yes, but then he let me go ahead."

"That's the second time now," his mother said. "Or is it the third?"

"I don't know," Marcel said. "Does it matter?"

There was a weighted silence during which the clink of the cutlery could be heard. Finally, his father said, "After lunch, I'd like you to deliver something to Marie Pierre and Benoit." The question about the guard was left unanswered.

"All right." Marie Pierre was his father's sister and

Benoit was her husband. They lived in a town that was a few kilometers away, and Marcel often brought them bread or pastries. He did wonder why his father hadn't asked him to do it earlier, when he'd gone on the errand for his mother. But this time, he did not protest.

When lunch was over, Marcel went back outside to get his bicycle.

"These are the two loaves of bread for your aunt and uncle," said his father, handing him a parcel wrapped in white cloth.

That was another strange thing. His mother had said there was no bread for lunch. Why didn't she serve one of these loaves? His aunt and uncle had no children and they could have easily done with just one loaf.

"...and this is for the soldiers, in case you get stopped again," his father was saying.

"For the soldiers? Why?" Marcel asked. The package, wrapped in a red-and-white-checked dish towel, contained *pain d'épice*—gingerbread. He recognized the smell.

"It doesn't hurt to be polite," his father said. "And if you give them some cake, they might be less likely to bother you."

Marcel put both parcels in the basket of his bike. He was just about to leave when his mother came outside. The worried look was on her face again. “Don’t give them the bread,” she said.

“Why not?”

“They’ll like the cake better,” she said sharply.

He looked at his mother in surprise. What was wrong with her these days? Whatever it was, she wasn’t telling.

Marcel swung his leg over the slightly beat-up bike. How he wished he had a brand-new racing bicycle, a Peugeot or a Gitane, like the Tour de France riders used. On his bedroom wall was a big poster of Victor Cosson, the third-place winner from 1938. Marcel wanted this poster because unlike the first- and second-place winners, Cosson was French. Cosson stood holding a sleek bicycle with curved silver handles. Maybe one day Marcel would have a bike like that. Maybe one day he’d even be able to enter the race . . .

Pedaling along the cobblestones, he once again reached the edge of town. He traveled in the same direction he had this morning, only when he came to the

bridge, he took a right turn, not a left. As he approached, Marcel saw the soldier he had seen earlier in the day.

“*Arrêtez!*” the soldier called out. *Stop right here.* Marcel slowed his bicycle down and stopped in front of the soldier.

“I saw you before.” The man had a different kind of accent than Marcel was accustomed to hearing. Maybe he came from somewhere near the French-German border. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m on my way to visit my aunt and uncle. To bring them some bread.” His heart banged hard in his chest, but he tried to look nonchalant as he gestured to the white parcel.

“And what’s that?” The soldier pointed to the red-and-white-checked parcel.

“*Pain d’épice.*” He lifted it out of the basket and peeled back the towel. The *pain d’épice*, just baked that morning and smelling of cinnamon, ginger, and cloves, was very tempting. Marcel’s mouth watered, but he remembered what his father had said, and held the cake up. “Here, take it. It’s really good.”

The soldier looked down suspiciously, but he broke

off a piece of the moist, spicy cake and ate it. Though he did not actually smile, his expression softened.

“You can go.” He took another, larger piece and put it in his mouth.

Marcel got back on his bicycle and sped along as fast as he could, away from the bridge. As he pedaled, he felt himself calming down, but his stomach rumbled and grumbled. There had been no bread at lunch and he was still hungry. But the loaves of bread were still inside the basket . . . and his mother had only said *not* to give the bread to the soldiers; she didn’t say *he* couldn’t have a piece. He brought the bicycle to a stop, hopped off, and untied the white cloth.

Inside, the two round loaves looked fresh and delicious. The dark, chewy peasant breads were one of the specialties of the bakery. Marcel couldn’t help himself. He had to have a big piece right now. Aunt Marie Pierre wouldn’t mind. She always fussed over him when he went to visit.

Marcel sat down by the side of the road and, using the little penknife his father had given him for his last birthday, he began to cut through the bread. He ate the

first piece quickly and was still hungry, so he tried to cut another piece. But this time, he was having trouble—the knife wasn't cutting. It seemed to be caught on something. He peered closely at the bread and wriggled the knife around. It looked like it was stuck on a piece of paper, tightly folded and wadded up. What was paper doing in there?

Marcel extracted it and unfolded it. It was a note, and he recognized his father's bold, quick handwriting on the page.

The St. Sulpice Bridge has gotten very crowded with visitors from all over. Need to change plans for our picnic and find another spot.

Marcel read this once, twice, and then a third time. Picnics, bridges... what could it mean? The Saint Sulpice bridge was where he'd been stopped by the soldier. Could the message have something to do with that? But even if that were so, why hide a message about a picnic in a loaf of bread? Unless... maybe it was a *code*

of some kind. He read it yet again. It *did* seem like a coded message.

Marcel pondered this. Who used codes? Secret groups who didn't want their communications to be easily understood. The Resistance, the French freedom fighters secretly pledged to resist the Germans, was such a group. He knew about them from kids at school and from conversations he'd heard among the grown-ups. He'd seen some of the leaflets, too, passed swiftly and quietly from hand to hand. Could his *parents* have something to do with all that? Suddenly, he wasn't hungry anymore.

The Germans had invaded the Free Zone about two weeks ago. Marcel's father had sent him to his aunt's with bread several times since then. He'd never thought anything of it. He'd been delivering bread for them since he was eight or nine. But in the past, he had only gone once a month or so. Going multiple times in only two weeks was way more than usual.

The trips he had made recently must have been about more than just delivering bread or pastries. Much

more. He must have been carrying notes that were part of an effort to undermine the Germans! Maybe there had been a note in the bread he'd brought to Madame Trottier this morning. And maybe this explained his mother's anxious looks and her sharp voice.

Even though he was sitting down, Marcel's heart was beating very fast and his cheeks felt uncomfortably hot. He tried to put the pieces together in a way that added up to a different answer, but he could not. His father had written this strange note and, without telling him it was inside the loaf of bread, given it to him to deliver to his aunt or his uncle. The delivery had seemed urgent, too. There was only one explanation that made sense: Marcel's father—and no doubt his mother, too—were full-fledged members of the French Resistance.