The Fall

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On a cool spring morning sometime in the mid-1990s, Kurt Hovelijnck is sitting motionless by the water's edge. He's perched on a black leather box with a removable stand, its four legs sticking into the mud. There isn't much wind. Kurt is sitting on his box as if turned to stone, a teenager in the posture of an ancient fisherman – hunched over, his back rounded like a sail, his elbows planted squarely on his thighs. He's wearing boots and a raincoat with strings hanging down from the hood. With his short hair and slightly angular face, Kurt looks like a painting by Permeke – *Man by the Water*. All that's missing is a rollie dangling from his mouth, workman's overalls fastened over his shoulders and a gold medallion around his neck, the only sparkle in an otherwise swampy existence. Kurt sits there by himself. For hours he keeps his eyes trained on the lure and thinks about fast cars, about his favorite soccer player, Pär Zetterberg, about Anatool, the greedy butler in the Jommeke comics, and about the pointy head of a zander. Kurt sees himself. His reflection is elongated, and whenever a fish comes up for air, the image ripples. The boy likes fishing; he likes rudd, eel, fluorescent lures. He also likes silence and solitude. When you're alone, you don't have to listen to anyone. A country boy from nearby Kaprijke, he sets his own course – he knows how the world turns, he still knows what tadpoles and voles are, and how to catch them with his bare hands. It's cold, and early. Kurt blows into his hands. The cold air becomes visible, like a speech bubble.

It was Kurt's father who introduced him to fishing – who taught him that casting a fishing rod is a delicate matter. You need to be careful that the line doesn't get tangled in the bushes or snag on a tree. And launch your lure in one fluid, streamlined motion from behind your back, over your head, as far as you can. Sit quietly and gently place the fishing rod in the holder. Sometimes people will laugh. They'll say Kurt would rather fish than make out. Kissing has been a little harder ever since that time the hook got snagged in his lip on one vigorously streamlined cast, worm and all.

Now he looks up every once in a while, at the sky, and notices how immense it is. How, wherever you are, you're always exactly in the middle, the still point of a turning world. There's always as much sky on the left as there is on the right and really you're seeing nothing – just an endless blue expanse. Or a lone cloud and the white trail from an airplane. In his mind's eye, Kurt writes his name in the sky like on the fogged-over window of the school bus.

A fish rises to the surface. It looks, hesitates, swims away. Kurt doesn't move. If he does, the leather will creak and the unearthly silence, which surrounds him and the creek like a cocoon, will be broken. And he doesn't want that.

The boy loves this waterway, the Boerekreek. The landscape spans almost a hundred acres and is situated in the Meetjesland region, within sight of the Dutch-Belgian border, right next to Zeelandic Flanders – it almost falls off the map. Everything on the edge of the map is special – it's forgotten territory. It's where there are border markers made of stone, where bus shelters have doorways and where Twix bars are still called 'Raiders.' Not a lot of people live here, and the few who do wave hello and then leave you in peace. The Boerekreek is always deserted, lying there like a bathtub in a pasture, wedged in between Sint-Laureins, Bentille and Sint-Jan-in-Eremo. It meanders into little brooks, branches into smaller streams and is hemmed in by rows of trees, ponds and wooden benches.

Morning turns into day when the sun pierces the fog and Bert De Backer arrives. He always pedals at breakneck pace from Eeklo to the creek to go surfing. Kurt and Bert don't know each other. But when Bert heads out on his surfboard, the other knows that the rudd and zander will take off and descend to the invisible muddy bottom of the creek. When Bert shows up, Kurt reels in his fishing line and puts everything away in the box – the worms with the worms, the line around the spool and the rod in its little case. He straps the fishing gear onto the back of his bike with a bungee cord, climbs on and begins to accelerate, keeping one hand on the box as he rides. He looks back over his shoulder, sees Bert getting smaller and changes up another gear.

Kurt never cycles slowly. Past the open fields of the Meetjesland, past meadows, swampland and farms, his spindly legs reveal their strength. One hand is steering, the other is resting on the tackle box, and his thighs feel firm and strong. He's riding alone, oh yeah, here he comes. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you Roger De Vlaeminck – "the Gypsy." He's first to cross the line! When the wind is in his face, the sweat streams down his back and he returns to the village an exhausted warrior.

On his way to Kaprijke, Kurt sees a group of racing cyclists coming from the opposite direction. Boys heading for the Boerekreek, riding in a mini-peloton. They have bikes with drop handlebars and are wearing close-fitting jerseys that cling to their torsos. Their tongues are hanging out of their mouths, like sled dogs, and at the front of the pack one of those plump, round-faced types is pummeling against the wind. One of those guys who thinks he can beat the wind, who doesn't pedal with his legs but punches with his fists. Dimitri De Fauw, from Sint-Amandsberg. He is followed by a spindly guy, no broader than a coat-hanger. He is perched comfortably in the saddle, a hummingbird astride a bison. Iljo Keisse, from Zwijnaarde.

They whizz past. The air trembles.

Kurt doesn't know those boys, but he does know the pack. Every time he's by the creek staring at the lure and he hears the hum of their tires, he turns around. It looks spectacular when they ride past like that. Those boys always get a lot of attention from the girls at the riding school, with their leather boots and small, pert breasts that bounce when they are showjumping. After the lessons, the girls stand around in little groups, eating popsicles and waving at the cyclists, who blush or wave back frantically. Kurt, in turn, will duck down into the reeds and train his eyes on the lure. For Christ's sake, bite, will you? A few hundred yards behind the peloton he sees a strange fair-headed boy. He's riding a bike with wide tires. He turns towards Boerekreek and plows through the muddy paths around the water like a tractor. No one knows him. He has spiky hair and full lips. Apparently his name is Wouter, Wouter Weylandt, from Sint-Denijs-Westrem.

That's what it must have looked like that day. First the fisherman, then the surfer, then the two racing cyclists and finally a fledgling cyclo-crosser. Boys that look at each other but don't know each other at all. Boys who are all from East Flanders, but from from very different backgrounds, with different personalities and high voices. Kurt reels in the fishing line, Bert heads out onto the water, Dimi is in the lead, Iljo is hidden at the back and Wouter is scraping the mud off his cheeks. No one knows yet how fate will bring them together. How, soon after, the lives of five unknown boys by a creek will all become intertwined. That's fate – happenstance.

The seed of this suddenly-unfolding story is the scrawny fellow from Zwijnaarde, near Ghent. That skinny cyclist. That hummingbird. The boy with the strange name. Iljo Keisse.

Iljo doesn't really know what to do with himself in this life. He may be pedaling past the Boerekreek as part of Dimitri's pack, but in his mind he's somewhere else altogether. The others – Wouter, Kurt, Bert and Dimi – don't know what to do with themselves either. Few teenagers do at that age. They drift to the edge and scratch their initials into the bark of a tree, and when they're bored in class they push the tiny balls out of empty ink cartridges. Iljo's aimlessness, however, goes further than just some messing about. As a child, he looks for signs to tell him which way to turn, to give direction to his sometimes-turbulent existence. Iljo isn't a fisherman like Kurt, nor does he catch voles; he can't find peace and he has a spiky personality. He does everything on his own; he's rather introverted and doesn't talk about difficult things like alimony and custody. When he's on his bike, yes, that's when he's calm; that's when the passing landscape straightens out his thoughts and the world seems clear and benevolent. But when Iljo isn't on his bike, his hackles raise and things sometimes go awry. When this kid loses his temper, all the gauges in the cockpit go haywire and a crash is inevitable. That's when steam comes out of his ears and the strings snap. No one knows what's going on inside him – what Iljo thinks, feels and dreams. He doesn't talk much, but when he does it hurts. At school he can lash out suddenly, like a fencer, and make a fool of you in front of the whole group. And if someone in the playground throws a firework into a trashcan, everyone turns around to look.

Kaboom.

He's mysterious, too – his name isn't Peeters or Vandevelde. The boy has milk-white skin and is called Keisse, a name that sounds like a Norwegian mountain village. Apparently there are only a few of these Keisses in all of Belgium. There's even said to be one in Brazil. No one knows. It was as if the family was suddenly just *there*, like they'd arrived at night in a wooden sloop and then melted into the twilit streets of the city. Iljo is twelve years old; he smashes his squash racket to bits and screams to express his impotence. At home too, the board gets hurled into the air if the game doesn't go the way he wants it to. Monopoly only works if he manages to buy up whole streets, and if his marshal is found out in Stratego, the war is over.

Iljo is a little out of sorts because his parents have divorced and now there's a fault line running through his life. No one saw it coming; the Keisses were a close-knit family. Now Iljo is caught between two poles – Sint-Denijs-Westrem, where his father Ronie has ended up, and Zwijnaarde, where his mother Mariane remained.

Iljo misses structure, routine: father, mother, sister and the Settlers of Catan. Everything was so reliable before. As a little kid he'd sit by the window with his sister Drieka, his legs drawn up, waiting for their parents to come around the corner. On the table there'd be cards with crude drawings, like Memory cards. A drawing of a loaf of bread next to a drawing of a car meant that his father had gone to get groceries. A car and a hospital: father had gone to get mother from the pediatric oncology ward at the university hospital. Like a prison guard, Iljo would sit there and keep watch.

Now he feels abandoned. The outside world is hitting the gas pedal and he is stuck in the sidecar, with no control over the direction his life is going in. He misses that life of postcards, checkers boards and jam tarts, of building forts with pillows and fallen branches, of knee-high wellies and jumping in puddles. Now the teams have been divided and there's one person left sitting on the bench. He keeps waiting, but that life is not coming back.

There are more reasons why he's feeling so rudderless. His father Ronie doesn't want him to take part in any group sports, the youth association is all cliques, and in school Iljo is slumped in the back of the classroom with his head resting on the book. After History class, the Roman Empire is embossed on his cheek. So Marcus Aurelius was an emperor, but also a philosopher. The boy sails under his own flag, partly

out of necessity, and he knows full well that have to set your own course in this life, even if you're caught between two poles. You can't expect any help; you have to fight and survive. What you don't succeed at, no one needs to see, no one needs to know about. His motor skills, for example, aren't quite what they should be, the cogwheels don't mesh well. When Iljo takes a bottle of lemonade and fills a glass, aiming is hard for him and the soda ends up dripping down the tablecloth and the legs of the chair onto the floor. His language, too, needs work: dyslexia. No one knows. No one notices. Sometimes you don't even know if he's there. Iljo can sit completely still without anyone seeing him. A bit like Kurt by the Boerekreek. But even *more* still, even smaller, even more anonymous. A snowy owl in a silver birch. He fades into the background, spends all day up on his loft bed in his room in Zwijnaarde looking at the champions pinned on the wall, at the bald rider Bjarne Riis and his colorless rival Miguel Indurain. Ayrton Senna is up there too. Two cyclists and a Formula 1 driver. A Dane, a Spaniard and a Brazilian. They're all hanging on his wall without much rhyme or reason. You know – photos, posters, window-dressing. Whatever. In the blink of an eye, Iljo can withdraw from the world – because he has to, and because it helps.

On the streets of Zwijnaarde, where his mother chose to remain, he rides around by himself. His motor skills do allow for that. Always the same, unchanging circuit. Past the garage, between the bollards, down the narrow path that runs through their neighborhood and then a right, around the corner towards the finish line, his feet flat on the pedals for the final sprint. Hands in the air. And Keisse is off, Keisse does it all by himself. Keisse wins! A neighbor once won a fishing competition. He digs out the trophy from a cardboard box and gives it to Iljo. Here you go, buddy, congratulations.

At home, his mother Mariane has a hard time coping with the divorce. She buys cigarettes, hastily sucks in the smoke and listens to stand-up comedy. And Iljo listens to no one. He rides into the garage and disappears upstairs, to Riis and Indurain. In his loft bed, he pulls the covers over his head.

In the mornings, when his mother peeks into his room before leaving for the hospital to see if he's gone to school, the bed seems empty: he holds his breath, doesn't move and then has the house to himself. Two hours later he goes to get custard slices from the bakery. In the empty street he kicks rusty cans and loose cobblestones. He rubs the custard off his lips, slips through the school gates – unseen, uninterested – and almost always misses the first few hours of class. Oh well. No one can school *him*. No one can really win him over. No one really succeeds at motivating Iljo.

Iljo's setting his own course requires some creativity. You don't build a raft from scratch to get to the other side; you buy a return ticket for the crossing instead. Before the exam period he convinces the prettiest and smartest girl in his class to give him her notes. He hands over some pocket money and walks out of the copy shop whistling. So that Aurelius, it turns out, was a good guy – who knew?

That pocket money, in fact, is what makes the course-setting possible. On the weekends, he works for his father. In the early '80s, Ronie Keisse is looking for a job, but the construction industry is on its knees and he has two kids to support. So he takes to the world that had already attracted him as a child: the velodrome. Not as a rider, but as a hamburger salesman. Ronie stocks up on meat, gets himself a canopy tent and starts selling snacks at the events where his brother Freddy, Iljo's uncle, races. Ronie had wanted to ride himself when he was just a kid, but his mother was scared to death of bike racing. Much too dangerous, she said. And Iljo knows this. He knows that his father has already won the Tour of Flanders a dozen times in his dreams. Ronie once made a throwaway reference to that family story in an interview: "I wasn't allowed to race." Several days later he got a phone call from his father, who burst into tears. "I was never able to race either. And I wanted to so badly too. To be honest, I've always had to bite my tongue at home."

The dream of racing isn't forced on Iljo. It's the environment he walks around in as a child that slowly creeps into his blood. The grandfather wasn't allowed, the father wasn't allowed, and the son knows the history.

Sometimes, through the burger fumes, Ronie sees how his brother wins his weight in pork chops. Uncle Freddy is not a bad racer; he does well in the regional tournaments and is one of the first in the peloton to wear one of those new-fangled American-style helmets, even if it sits on his skull like an eggshell. Since that moment, Freddy is known as Calimero, after the cartoon baby chick. Later on, Ronie decides to race after all, as an amateur. If there aren't a lot of spectators, the burger grill stays in the trunk and he puts on the racing wheels. Twice he makes the papers: the day he starts and the day he quits. He never wins anything. So Ronie takes his snacks and rides them around the country instead. He studies the Snoecks calendar and circles the biggest events; he calls the butcher and baker and buys several kilos of onions. From De Panne to Ougrée, from Omloop Het Volk to Torhout-Werchter: Ronie is everywhere. Often Iljo will sit in the tent on a stack of cardboard boxes full of frozen sausages. Or he'll walk around the neighborhood by himself. After the canopy tent, Ronie kicks it up a gear and buys a van. A slogan is painted onto the mobile stall: 'Keisse. Quality Has a Name,' in white and blue, the colors of the Buffalos – the Ghent football team – with a gold ribbon underneath. There's a red dot on the 'i' in Keisse – like in the *Calimero* logo.

Iljo earns pocket money cutting rolls and squirting ketchup. That's what enables him to set his course. One day, he stuffs his pockets full of coins and heads over to Plum Vainqueur, a well-known bike store in the center of Ghent. He opens the door and follows in his uncle's footsteps: "I'll have a racing bike, please!"

The desire is untamable. Other boys dream of Rivaldo's red-and-blue jersey or Pete Sampras' tennis racket, but Iljo breaks open his piggy bank and buys himself a racing bike. A second-hand blue Concorde, priced at 10,000 Belgian francs. There, at Plum in Ghent, what he's buying is a companion – because you can't lose out to a bicycle: you're the one who decides the pace, the speed, the direction and the duration. And slowly the frustration ebbs away. He clenches the handlebars and rides out of the store. Now he's biking along the river Scheldt. On the pedestrian towpath it's safe for a little fella like him. He passes low barges carrying piles of gravel, sitting deep in the water, and overtakes them. He passes the *Paloclau*, the *Titan*, *Helena*, *Keiko*, and waves at the captains. Iljo is hiding in the slipstream of old men, just as he'll do later with Dimitri, shielded from the wind, and he sees the Scheldt changing color. The current drags fallen branches along with it, leaves and plastic bottles; a boat is tied up with thick ropes down by the lock. He observes his surroundings carefully; he can't put his finger on what exactly he's feeling. Calm – that must be it. Calm and in control. If you stay on the bike long enough, if you pedal harder than a vintner stomps on his grapes, the world starts to make sense and you forget all the rest – school, squash, the divorce. A bicycle, a river and a headwind.

The passion for racing becomes even stronger when, a few years later, Ronie sets up shop at the velodrome in Blaarmeersen, a sports park on the outskirts of Ghent. The burgers stay in the freezer; Ronie taps beer now, and all of a sudden Iljo has a wooden playground at his disposal, 250 meters of smooth wooden boards. Ronie watches his son riding in the distance; in the evenings he scrubs the cafeteria and then takes Iljo out to the bottom of the track on his Concorde, close to the rail. "Alright, and now up to the top, and dive back down again, come on."

Later on, Ronie will open up the track to amateur cyclists, finding an extra income stream. Accountants and street-sweepers pay to have a go. They put on a helmet and grip the handlebars nervously like the horns of a wild bull. Their noses drip; drops of sweat splash onto the handlebar stem. If someone gets in their way, these novices immediately drop down to the inside of the track. "Hey, watch out!" Steering isn't hard, but without brakes they can't get out of the clipless pedals in time and end up falling and sliding across the wooden floor. Like a hunk of Parmesan cheese being grated, skin peels off their legs, and at night the missus lovingly picks splinters of finest Siberian pine out of hubby's ass. Iljo laughs and glides across the track, as smoothly as a rolling marble: high on the banking in the bends, low on the straights; he leaves everyone in the dust. His technique on the track is flawless, and slowly but surely Iljo loses his hackles. Come and take me on, I'm ready for you.

There's not a lot more to say about that time. Young guy. Grows up. Rides fast. Until, a few years later, the coach of the national team takes his cousin along to the track. This cousin takes the track by storm, riding

Iljo's life upside down in an instant. Iljo sees a guy in faded jeans, a baseball cap and sneakers: "Yo, man!"

This guy is impervious to everything and everyone; he puts on a helmet over his cap and rides to the top of the track in no time at all. Ronie watches it all happen from the cafeteria. Iljo is thrown by the ballsy arrival. And the guy makes him laugh. A cap under his helmet, regular sneakers on the clipless pedals: he's crazy! He gets off his bike and wipes the sweat from his face. He is a jester with the courage of a lion.

He is Dimitri De Fauw.