

## **STRONG / The New Fit**

### HEADS UP - Chapter 1

I squirmed in my chair, becoming increasingly restless. Even as my mother Salwa placed a glazed clay bowl of steaming soup before me, I barely allowed myself to savor the smells of roasted shallots, fresh carrots, noodles, and chicken. Our neighbors from the small house next door, built of concrete and just a tall man's length from our own home, had gathered with my family, the Maloufs, for a late afternoon meal. On nearby couches, the men of the group, including my father Nabil, shared stories of the day as they sipped sweetened Arabic coffee, careful to avoid the finely ground bean sludge that settled at the bottom of each cup.

Salwa's soup, gently seasoned with minced garlic cloves, cayenne pepper, and the bitter but alluring cumin, would be just the first course. I knew that when the empty soup bowls were cleared, my mother would place before our family and friends the "upside down" maglooba, a favorite casserole of Jordanians, featuring chicken, potatoes, basmati rice, eggplant, and seasonings of cinnamon, nutmeg, salt, and black pepper. I found it fun, almost magical in my 7-year-old eyes, to watch my mother place a large platter on top of the pot where the maglooba was cooking, the bottom of the platter facing up.

She would hold tightly onto the pot, and quickly flip the pot and platter over so that the platter would shift to the bottom. Flipping it upside down would bring all the juices and

delicacies to the top. Small dishes of plain yogurt and chopped salata - tomatoes and cucumbers mixed with a little salt and lemon juice - would complete the main course.

But on this June afternoon in 1983, I was distracted. I was far less interested in sitting through a meal than I was trying out a seemingly new British-made bicycle I had received for my birthday a few days earlier. The bike, a Raleigh Grifter, now leaned against the side of our house, gleaming in the bright sun, which baked this neighborhood of Amman, at the edge of the Great Rift Valley, in 96 degrees of searing heat. If it could talk, I was sure the Grifter would be saying, "Fadi, ride me. Come now and let's play."

The gravel lane that fronted my home was perfect for a bike like this – straight for as long as I could see looking north, and southward curving towards my grandmother's house, with occasional mounds of dirt along the shoulders that could make great ramps for jumps. A paved highway, one I understood never to cross, ran parallel to the gravel road, separated by a rutted, loosely packed open field.

The Grifter was beautiful in my eyes: Blaze Blue exterior, with handlebar mounted twist grips and tire mud guards; the rear mudguard several centimeters longer than the front. The elongated saddle dipped in the middle. Handlebar foam, stretching from grip to grip, and a three-speed hub gear made this bicycle almost irresistible.

So irresistible in fact, that I hurried through my meal as fast as I could, careful not to eat so fast that I attracted the disapproval of my parents. The last thing I wanted was to

be forbidden from going outside after the meal.

Although I had not yet ridden my bicycle, or any other bicycle for that matter, I felt confident I could manage. It did not come with training wheels, but that mattered little. As a toddler, I had watched with curiosity as my older brothers, Baseem and Basil, had ridden bicycles, and I felt sure that when my time came – and it most assuredly had arrived now – I would be able to mount and ride.

Since receiving my bicycle, I had patiently waited for the time when my father Nabil would be available to help teach me the proper way to mount and ride a bicycle. My oldest brother Baseem was now gone; sent to California in the United States a few years earlier for an education that Nabil and Salwa hoped would provide him a stable and successful life. My father had told me he would help me ride my bike that week.

“Until you are taught to ride, leave it where it is. We will practice soon.”

As the adults continued to talk, and shared a dessert of locally grown oranges, the neighboring children and I slipped out of the house. I could hear the adults laughing through an open window. My friends began to chase one another, running into their own yard and back and forth to a small building used for storage. I moved straight to my Grifter like a magnet pulled to steel.

Trucks along the paved highway barreled past the houses. Many of the trucks that regularly passed by belonged to the Royal Jordanian Land Force – army vehicles traveling to and from a nearby base. The roar of the diesel engines and the

dust these massive transports stirred up each time they passed were as common to our small enclave of neighbors as the sandstone rocks that littered the dirt lane in front of our homes.

I wiped my hands onto my white t-shirt and checked front and back to make sure my shirt was tucked into my blue shorts. I looked down at my black sneakers, to make sure my laces were tied. I paused to listen, to see if I could still hear my parents talking.

It was quiet, and then I thought I heard my mother say, "Where is Fadi?" I made no audible response. Perhaps I imagined hearing her voice? Still I did not move. More adult conversation ensued, and I could stand it no longer. I reached to my bicycle and with a hand on each twist grip, began to maneuver it from the house to the gravel lane.

I looked toward my playmates. They had gathered in a circle, sitting on the ground dozens of meters away. They were happily engaged in a game of rock, paper, scissors, and shooter.

I was now on the gravel lane, at the edge of the field. I again looked across at my friends. I looked toward my house. It was time to ride my Grifter. Fadi – Conqueror of the Wheels! As I held tightly to the handlebars, I climbed onto the frame, straddling each side, and settled quickly into the saddle. No problem.

I thought about what I had seen others do. I put my left foot onto a pedal, and adjusted it down, so that it was closer to the ground. Then I placed my other foot on my right pedal. I pushed with my right foot and that pedal dropped forward and down, forcing the left pedal back and up again. My bike started to move forward.

Feeling unsure and less than confident. I moved only a couple of feet forward . Then I dropped my left foot to the ground again. I tried again and moved a little more.

Again...and then one more time. I got off my bicycle, and stood beside it, looking again toward my house. Did anyone notice me out in the lane with my bike? I rolled it to the field separating the house from the highway, so as not to draw attention.

My shirt was sticking to my chest, blotched with perspiration in the intense heat.

My hands and arms were beaded with sweat.

“One more time.”

I decided that on this attempt, I would mount quickly, and begin pedaling right away, instead of trying to balance myself on the bike and then attempting to pedal it. I would try to make it move forward in one fluid motion, like a nomad leaping onto a camel, then leaning backward in the saddle and holding on for dear life.

In an awkward motion, I jumped aboard my bicycle and, holding tight to the hand grips, looked down at the pedals and started pushing my legs as hard as I could. The

Grifter began rolling – awkwardly – bumping across the field. I was certainly not in

control, but I was not yet out of control either.

Less than a quarter mile up the road, on the highway, a 10-ton army lorry, with dual wheels on the rear axles, moved steadily at 50 miles per hour, headed toward its base a few miles south. A brown-eyed soldier in the shotgun seat stared out and observed what appeared to be a dark-haired child on a bicycle wobbling across a field toward the highway. He alerts his driver, and points, who glances in that direction, and curses in alarm.

By this time, I spot the large military truck, with an open bed covered by a frame and canvas, headed on the highway in my direction. Although I remained in the field beside the highway, my bicycle had quickly shifted from a slow wobble, as I first tried to manage it, and had now accelerated to an uncontrollable shake - a death wobble. The whole bike felt very light and frail as I gripped the bicycle more tightly.

I wobbled, and shook violently....within 10 meters of the truck, I fell, landed on my right knee and right arm, and ground to a halt, my senses now as aware and alert as a prowling cat. The lorry, without braking, now passed me, belching out smoke as the young soldier in the shotgun seat stared down and then back at me as the truck roared onward.

My T-shirt was stretched and dirty from the grinding fall; my right knee, scraped into the dirt, bled slightly, and the sting in my right shoulder, pink and tender, burned as if on fire.

I sat up, but remained on the ground beside my bike, my back towards my house. Time seemed to move in slow motion. What seemed like several minutes, perhaps was only seconds. I dared not to cry out.

I looked at my knee, a raw abrasion, and prepared to lift myself up.

“Fadi. Stand up. Pick up the bike.”

My blood went cold and I froze in fear. I wanted to leave my bike and run, but I was too stunned. I winced again from the sting on my shoulder.

“Father, I’m sorry....” I now looked up at Nabil, standing over me. My eyes watered.

Dad helped me stand up and collect my bicycle, which didn’t appear to be damaged, save the absence of pristine newness that disappears after something is broken in for the first time.

The two of us walked toward the house. By now my mother was outside the front of the house, a small towel clutched in her right hand.

“FADI! What were YOU doing?!”

My stomach felt like I had been punched. I stood awkwardly now beside my bike, practically leaning on it as I held it with one hand. My father and I had reached the dirt lane near the house.

Nabil examined my injuries. He determined them to be too minor to stop.

“Let’s try again. Get on and ride.”

I looked up at my father, and then remounted the Grifter My father steadied the frame as I began to push down the left pedal.

I tried to ride again, but the gravel rocks dotting the lane appeared as big as sand cats. I looked down to attempt to navigate over the uneven dirt, but bumped a jagged stone, fell left, and pounded the ground. My left elbow ached now. My right foot twisted awkwardly under a pedal.

“Get back on the bicycle.”

I looked at my father. I wanted to protest, but I knew that was not an option.

I stood up and collected my bike. I remounted , adjusted my stance, and maneuvered the handlebars, realizing a slight wobble, then stumbled. Ugh.

“I’ll walk near you, Fadi.” My father waited for me to attempt another ride.

I now awkwardly straddled the bicycle, both feet on the ground, and waited, expecting my father to steady it as I prepared to push off.

“I’ll walk beside you,” said my father, not touching the machine, “you pedal “.

I lurched forward, pedaling as steady as I could, trying to navigate around the rocks I saw in my path. I swayed from side to side and fell over to my left, away from the side where my father was standing.

Dust spiraled upward when my hip hit the ground.

Both my father and I were sweating profusely.



“Too many rocks,” I told my father. “It hurts to fall.”

“Try again, Fadi. I’ll walk beside you.”

A small tear rolled down my right cheek, snaking a path through my dirt stained face. I did not utter another sound as I wiped the tear off with the back of my left hand. My elbow and knee stung, where rocks had pierced the skin earlier. I straddled the bicycle yet again.

“Ride now, Fadi. I’ll be beside you.”

I began to pedal. I focused on the rocks and dips, determined to steer my front wheel around them. I missed one piece of sandstone , but the back tire rolled over another. Both the Grifter and I started shaking.

A sharp tug pulled back my straight black hair. My father yanked my hair, at the back of my head near my lower right ear. My head lifted up, as I felt a slight burning sensation...surprised, but eyes wide open.

“Head up. Don’t focus on the bigger rocks. Concentrate on where you want to be.”

I tried again to ride, this time keeping my eyes up, watching the road ahead as I began to pedal, one revolution at a time. I was moving forward. Time and again I pedaled forward, picking up speed and momentum. The rocks began to seem like pebbles.

They were always there, those rocks. I discovered that each time I thought about them or when I looked down, I would hit them. When I kept my head up, and I

focused on where I was going -- the lane straight ahead – I could ride like the wind.

This was an important lesson to me. I did not fear to try, but I could not succeed without guidance and a painful lesson in focus. Whether I realized it or not, at the impressionable age of seven, on a dusty lane at the outskirts of Amman, I had gained my first understanding of STRONG.



My Loving Father, Brother Basil & Sister Ronda

THANK YOU FOR READING.

WE HOPE YOU ENJOYED THE FIRST CHAPTER OF STRONG / THE NEW FIT BY FADI MALOUF.

WE WILL NOTIFY YOU WHEN THE COMPLETE BOOK IS RELEASED.