



Testing Limits

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Age: 13 +

In life, especially in your teenage years, situation after situation forces you to examine yourself in a new light. Was it really me who came up with a game that got out of hand so quickly? Or who preferred taking a late-night midsummer hike with a taciturn total stranger over spending time with friends at a girlfriend's cabin? Did I really have the courage and the nerve to stand up to a classmate's bullying? When will I ever find the words that I lost when I lost my brother?

Kadri Hinrikus's short stories about teenage self-discovery invite young readers to consider what they would do and how they'd behave on life's hazy margins.



Reading sample

[pp. 24–31]

The Bike

Triine is biking to school. The January morning is dark, damp, and chill. For days, the temperature has hovered just above freezing. Slush covers the sidewalks and the roads. Steep mounds of dirty snow are piled on both sides of the street.

She's pulled up the cuffs of her jeans and used reflective bands to keep them from getting stuck in the gears. A fall would be guaranteed if that happened. Winter tires keep her from slipping but can't shield her from the muddy water that sprays from the passing cars and buses. A strong wind blows sleet straight into her face or her ears, depending on what direction she's pedaling.

School is a long way from home, which means taking some streets that are quieter and others that are much busier. The part of her route that runs along a graveyard is dotted with especially massive piles of snow: it takes all of Triine's skills and concentration to zigzag through them safely. What's more, the city government decided to save money on electricity by shutting off every other streetlight.

Triine tries to keep a steady tempo, as she gets cold if she pedals too slowly but sweats if she speeds too fast. She's almost made it to school—one more intersection and it'll be in sight. The traffic light turns green and Triine starts to cross.

At that moment, a red SUV starts moving, too. The driver yawns, which is enough to distract him and allow the wheel to suddenly jerk to the right. Triine is nearly run over! She slams on her brakes. The red SUV lazily drifts back into its lane and speeds off.

Triine locks her bike up in front of school. Hers is the only one in such weather.

"Holy moly, you biked here today?!" two classmates squeal at the entrance. Their hats are pulled down over their foreheads and scarves pulled up over their noses, leaving only their eyes visible. They'd been dropped off in a car.

"The weather's so gross!" they exclaim.

Triine nods, agreeing and unable to think of anything worth adding. She hurries inside, still needing to change into a dry shirt in the bathroom before class starts.

She's new at the school, having

joined the seventh-grade class that autumn. Triine isn't really interested in hanging out with anyone after classes and isn't a big fan of opening up about herself, but gets along more or less fine with everyone. Most of the girls think she isn't entirely normal, though. So far, there hasn't been a single day she didn't bike to school.

Kids call her 'bike-crazy'.

Even Triine's homeroom teacher has scolded her, saying it's dangerous to cycle around the city in very bad weather. She doesn't care.

The weather's even nastier the following morning. When she gets on her bike and looks back at the window of her house, she sees her dad waving, just like he always does. Her mom walks past another window.

The temperature dropped well below freezing overnight and a proper blizzard is underway, meaning the streets are particularly slippery and peppered with icy bumps. Even with her gloves on, Triine's hands are cold. Snow digs into her nostrils and pecks her cheeks.

"It's like crossing a mountain range," Triine murmurs after almost slipping and falling over at one turn. The strap of her backpack is digging painfully into her shoulder. Nevertheless, she makes it to school safe and sound that day, too.

When she looks out the window during the first passing period, Triine sees the blizzard has only grown more intense. It's like the whole world has disappeared in a cloud of white flour. But a couple hours later, the storm suddenly lets up and snow stops falling, leaving behind gigantic drifts and mounds.

Triine's classmates Rain and Gregor run over to the store across the street from school to buy pop during the short break. When they return to the school yard, Rain notices something strange: all the bike racks are empty.

"Hey, check it out!" Rain says to Gregor. He points to one rack with a broken lock dangling from it. Triine's bike is nowhere in sight.

"Oh d-a-a-a-ng!" Gregor exclaims. "Somebody stole Triine's bike!"

"That's crazy! In this weather?!"

You've got to be a total jerk to do that!"

"Triine's going to be devastated," Gregor says worriedly. "She's crazy about her bike. We should call the police."

"We've got to tell Triine first! She probably knows its serial number and all kinds of details that can help them find a stolen bike."

The boys hurry inside, as there's no point playing detective with the world buried deep in snow.

Triine hears the news the moment their biology teacher enters the room. As the whole class is shocked and outraged by the awful crime, it's impossible to start the lesson as usual. They inform their teacher what happened and her face fills with sympathy, too. Everyone's talking all at once. Only Triine is silent. It's as if she doesn't understand what's going on!

Then, she walks over to the window, opens it, and peers outside. They're right—the bike is gone. There's no sign of it anywhere. Now, she's seen it with her own eyes. Triine closes the window.

"Triine, honey, if you report it to the police..."

Her teacher trails off as she tries to sound consoling.

"We've got to believe that they'll find it quickly," she finishes, then is quiet again.

But Triine doesn't need consolation. She doesn't even break down into tears. On the contrary: she grins!

All her classmates are dumbstruck, baffled by the situation.

"I've been waiting for this for so long," she finally says.

"Waiting for what?" Gregor asks.

"For getting rid of that awful bike!"

Not even their teacher knows what to say. After a pause, Triine continues.

"I bet you all think that cycling is my favorite thing in the whole world. But actually, I hate it. I hate it with all my heart. I hate riding down slippery streets, I hate my helmet, I hate the mud that cars spray on my face, I hate my fingers being frozen, I hate cars honking at me, I hate when other cyclists shoot around corners at full speed. I'm afraid of busy traffic. I'm afraid of riding in the dark!"

"Good heavens... Then why do you ride your bike?" their teacher almost shouts in astonishment. Red blotches have appeared on her neck from all the excitement.

"Because my dad wants me to."

"Your dad?" multiple students ask at once.

"I didn't even know you have a dad," Rain says.

"I do. And he wants me to someday be just as big a cyclist as he used to be. Thing is, he was a crazy bike fan. All he ever did was practice cycling, all the time. He biked up mountains, did bike marathons, and cycled for hours and hours every single day, even on Christmas and birthdays. That is until he fell and injured his spine. Now, he's in a wheelchair."

Triine looked up to see the shocked faces of everyone in the classroom.

"We used to bike around together when I was little. I really liked when we went out on country roads and through the woods. Dad would be in front, me behind him. He'd always wait for me if I fell behind. We had a fun time together. But the older I got, the more he demanded of me. The faster he wanted me to go, the more endurance he expected me to have. Until he had that fall. He just totally collapsed. It was as if he'd lost everything."

"And you had to keep cycling?"

"Yeah. He waits for me by the window every morning and afternoon, watching me ride away to school and come home. He thinks I enjoy it. He's as obsessed with my cycling as he used to be with his own training."

"But why... why don't you just tell him that you don't enjoy it? That you don't want to?" someone asks.

"I can't bring myself to make him even sadder than he is. He's already so depressed. And we did used to have fun together."

That day, Triine takes the bus home from school. As she approaches her house, dragging her feet, she sees her dad at the window, fumbling at the latch and trying to open it. He looks puzzled, anxious, angry.

But her mom is looking out the kitchen window. Triine pauses. Her mom waves encouragingly. And smiles. There's a calm, reassuring expression on her face.

Triine suddenly feels lighter. A big dark cloud makes room for a patch of bright blue sky.

[pp. 73–78]

Two Types

Karel is late for school. He simply fell back asleep after turning off his alarm. Still, he doesn't hurry on the way to school. Karel never hurries. He strolls down the sidewalk with his usual long, slow, almost gummy steps.

Next to the school entrance is a trash can with a crumpled, empty carton of plum juice sticking out from under the lid. Karel takes a picture. Instead of arriving at eight, he makes it to school by nine, which means he enters the classroom a little after the bell rings for their second lesson of the day.

"Throughout history, there have been two types of people: some who want to give, and others who only want to get. I hope that you are all the first type," Karl's teacher is saying as the boy cracks open the classroom door.

The teacher lightly gestures for Karel to take his seat on the third bench in the row closest to the door.

"Now, let's talk a little more about Charles the Great," the teacher continues while shuffling through papers the students wrote for homework. "And who'll answer for us today?"

Karel pulls his notebook and textbook out of his backpack and sets them on the desk. He's almost 100% sure that the teacher won't call on him. For the last three years, he hasn't been able to give any speaking presentations. He just can't stand up and speak in front of the class. The words get caught behind his teeth, his thoughts grind to a halt, and not a single squeak comes out. After countless appointments with psychologists and speech therapists, his teachers generally stopped forcing him to try. They know he has trouble with speaking in front of others and allow him to submit his work in writing.

"Sohvi, be our guest! Why was Charles the Great important, and what did he mean for history?"

Karel watches Sohvi stand up by the windows on the other side of the room.

"Charles the Great was a successful general, diplomat and restorer of the Roman Empire in the Middle Ages," she smoothly lists off. "He's also been called the Father of Europe. In addition to all of that, he was a very big promoter of education, science, and culture, and started lots of very exemplary reforms..."

Karel listens attentively. He's interested in both Sohvi and Charles the Great, who is almost his namesake. He's just a few letters short.

And Sohvi is very pretty. And smart. And nice. After class, Karel takes a picture of a shoestring on the ground that looks like a big letter S.

During passing period, just as he's about to go up to Sohvi and talk more about the Middle Ages, Anni beats him to it and the girls start chatting about more modern topics. It's so common for somebody to get ahead of Karel. Talking to two people at once is more than he can handle. Instead, he spends the time staring outside.

After mathematics come English, physics, and finally, music. Karel focuses his thoughts on going home. Or rather the moment when all the kids pour out of the schoolhouse. That's when he'll definitely go up to Sohvi and maybe even walk a couple of blocks with her.

He knows their homes are near each other and that on the way is a little café where you can order plum juice and cardamon pastries. He knows that plum juice is Sohvi's favorite.

"Karel, please stay after class for a minute. I'd like to talk to you," his teacher says after the final bell rings.

He stays standing next to his desk. The teacher tells him that it's very hard to get a good music grade on your report card if you never sing along in class, not even once. She goes on about something else, but it's hard for Karel to feel any interest in the topic.

When he finally makes it to the coat room and leaves the building, all his classmates have already vanished. Sohvi, too. Karel takes one picture of the empty street, a second of a bare birch tree, a third of a puddle, and a fourth of white berries hanging from a bush.

After Karel gets home, he shuts his bedroom door, flops down in bed, and stares at the ceiling for a while. Then, he sits up and grabs his phone.

"What've I got to lose?" he thinks confidently. "I'll just go ahead and call her. I'll ask if she knows that Charles the Great was a big role model to Napoleon and Hitler. Or I'll bring up the café and cardamon pastries. I'll ask if she knows that there are two types of cardamon, green and black, and that it's called the king of spices. Or maybe I'll talk about plums. I'll say that in

China, the plum tree symbolizes winter..."

Karel searches for Sohvi's name in his phone, inhales deeply, exhales deeply, inhales deeply again, and then sets the phone back on his desk. Just like he's done so many times before.

He sits at his desk and starts scrolling through photographs he's taken. Karel has an almost infinite amount of pictures: his desk drawers are filled with memory sticks and hard drives that hold probably tens of thousands of them. He hasn't catalogued any; there's no system or organization.

Karel flicks quickly past some pictures but gazes longer at others.

One photo of a speckled floor reminds him of his latest visit to the psychiatrist. He took it in the waiting room outside her office.

A picture of a bus driving away reminds him of the spring field trip on which he didn't go.

A picture of an empty package of pills lying on the kitchen counter reminds him of when he lost his brother. Three years ago. It's been hard for Karel to find the words for things ever since. They've gone and hidden away.

His psychologist says that even a lack of words can be a message.

"There are two types of people," Karel thinks. "Some who hold on, and others who let go."

Photographs help him to hold on. The snowberries in today's picture remind him of the white pom-pom on Sohvi's hat.

Karel imagines being a teensy-tiny Tom Thumb inside of Sohvi's hat, waiting for her hair that smells like snow.

