

Balázs Zágoni  
A Tale with a Dog and a Bike

Barni received a beautiful bike for his third birthday. It had two big wheels, two small wheels, a windshield, a petrol tank, a siren, and even a blue telephone. In fact, the whole bike was blue, and the sign on it said POLICE in capital letters. It was a real police bike.

Barni took very good care of it. He wiped it with a cloth every evening, even if it was already clean. When he came home from kindergarten at lunchtime he always took it out and, while Mom was cooking lunch, he would ride it up and down in the courtyard. Then in the afternoon, when Dad came home, he took it out on the street where he could cover much longer distances. If Dad was grumpy, he could only ride to the first lamp post, but if Dad was in a good mood, he could cycle up to the corner shop. There was one thing Dad did not let Barni do, and he was quite strict about it. Barni was not to turn at the corner into the next street and disappear from Dad's sight.

Barni only broke this rule once, but he quickly regretted it. The kindergarten had begun a week earlier, and Barni was testing how fast he could go on his bike. But he was riding so fast, that he could not stop in front of the shop, and swung around the corner into the next street. There, suddenly, he found himself face to face with Aunt Gizi who was walking her Big Black Dog. Barni mumbled a sort of "Hello", and with the same swing he turned back.

But the Big Black Dog took a fancy to the police bike. He especially liked the two big and two small wheels. He started chasing Barni, barking loudly at the wheels. He was actually saying, "This bike is very nice, Barni, but I just can't figure out what makes these wheels go round. These wheels, they keep going round and I just can't get it! Can you explain it to me?"

But Barni could not speak dog language. He could only see from the corner of his eyes that this shaggy Big Black Dog was running behind him and barking loudly. So he rode back even faster and jumped from the bike straight into his Dad's arms, in a way that even a circus acrobat would envy.

Apart from this single incident, Barni liked riding his bike in the street with Dad. The neighbours living in the street always stopped to admire his bike and to praise his skill. Zoli, who was six and lived in a house with a green gate, once wanted to borrow the bike. Barni sped up and did not even look at Zoli, but his Dad chided him, so he got off the bike and gave it to Zoli for a ride. But he whispered to Zoli, "A short one!"

Then, one afternoon, something quite unexpected happened. When Mom brought him home from kindergarten, the bike was there in the hall waiting for him, but what a shock! Its small wheels were gone! Neither of the them were there! Barni's lips curved down, but Mom only ruffled his hair with her hand and said, "When Daddy comes home, he'll teach you how to ride for real!"

Barni could hardly wait until Dad came home. And Dad, just like every afternoon, took him out for a ride. "Today we're going to learn how to ride like the big kids," he said. "Get on!"

But Barni could not even get on by himself, because this incomplete bike kept tipping over. Dad had to hold the handlebars so that Barni could climb onto the seat.

The real riding did not start very well. Dad was holding Barni from behind, stopping him from tipping to the side, and this is how they reached the corner shop and then rode back to their gate. The ladies in the neighbourhood were smiling. Zoli also brought out his bike, which was much bigger and older, and he was riding in front of Barni all the way down, zigzagging because he already knew how to ride like the big kids. Barni wanted to ride like the big kids too, but did not like learning how. The second day was even worse. Dad would sometimes let go of him, but he always got frightened, and the bike would start to swerve here and there. Dad encouraged Barni, saying that he was very clever and shouldn't be afraid, because he could already ride on his own. But Barni was afraid.

Then it got a little better. Barni learned again how to ride fast, so Dad had to run beside him, but he was still terrified of doing it by himself. Whenever he felt that Dad was not holding onto him firmly enough, he would shout, "Hold me, Dad, hold me!"

Hearing this, Zoli grabbed his bike, cut in front of Barni and, imitating him, started to yell, lisping, "Sold me, Dad, sold me!"

Then one afternoon, Barni suddenly got the knack of riding and was laughing out loud at Dad, who had to run very fast beside him. Dad was gasping for breath and said that that was enough for that day. But Barni wanted to complete another circuit, although it was already almost completely dark. Mom was not at home yet because she had gone to the doctor and was probably still sitting in the waiting room. After a lot of begging, Dad finally let Barni ride another final round. Barni started to pedal faster and faster and Dad was running beside him. Just as Barni reached Aunt Gizi's house, the gate opened and the Big Black Dog appeared, pulling Aunt Gizi behind him on his leash. There was another, brown dog in the street, dragging another lady on its leash, and the two dogs started a huge barking fight.

Dad yelled and then there was a crash and the ladies screamed. Barni's heart started to beat very quickly. He heard the loud barking, but did not dare look around. Just then, he noticed Mom, who was turning in at the corner. Barni started to pedal even faster towards Mom, so fast, that he even managed to overtake the bakery's van carrying fresh bread. He could not hear either Dad, or the dogs any more. He only saw Mom, who was approaching him, smiling. He was now riding so fast that, because of the wind created by the speed, he could hardly keep his eyes open, and the only thing he could see through that little slit was Mom. Then Mom suddenly had to jump aside, because Barni could not stop from going so fast. When he managed to brake and turned back, at first he could not see Dad anywhere. Then he noticed that Dad was standing up in front of Aunt Gizi's house and was trying to extricate himself from the leashes. The dogs were still barking and the ladies were lamenting and holding their heads. Mom lifted Barni up into her arms and covered his face with kisses. "My little Barni. Clever boy, you can ride the bike on your own!" she said.

Then they went up to Daddy, who was not very badly hurt. He only bruised his leg. Dad also praised Barni. "See how clever you are! Tomorrow you'll be able to manage without dogs, as well."

That evening Mom cooked something special for Barni and Dad. So, this is how Barni learned to ride the bike on his own.

*Balázs Zágoni's reputation amongst the Hungarian contemporary children's literary scene increased swiftly thanks to The Book of Barni, now in its third edition. The first part of the series was released in Czech in 2012. The book's sequels are Barni in Berlin, Barni and the Girls and Barni's Winter.*