

**THE
RIDE**

**OF MY
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When I Become a Man
by Caleb Roloson

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My dad would always say, “Jews are considered men at thirteen”, implying that I should grow up or act my age. Many cultures across the globe have different ages, often celebrated by ceremonies, to define when a boy becomes a man and is ready to face the world on his own. The ceremonies performed help affirm that fact for the newly declared man. For me, there was no formal ceremony or ritual, but something happened that I had to handle on my own when I was fifteen. The task was difficult and somewhat dangerous, but it helped me to realize that I was more than capable of making intelligent and independent decisions on my own. That sort of realization is important for all young men when they begin the process of putting the boy aside and becoming the man that they are going to be.

My family moved to South Africa to start a camp when I was in the sixth grade. We lived on a farm complex surrounded by a ten-foot high electric fence. Inside the fence, we had three dogs for protection. It was five miles to the nearest neighbor. The crime rate in rural Africa at the time was high due to the racial tension caused by political favoritism. For a young, white, American boy, it had its ups-and-downs; but overall I loved it very much. I was able to have unlimited miles to roam, armed with a mountain bike and adventurous spirit. The fun was inexhaustible. I was content in not having a care in the world, until the night when the grim face of crime unexpectedly appeared and threw me straight in to the middle of it.

I awoke to a knocking on my door and my dad’s voice calling my name. I looked at my clock it was twelve o’ clock in the morning. Groggy, I went to the door and unlocked it. My room was not part of the main house; we had made a bedroom for me in the old garage and I kept my door locked for my mother’s sake. When I opened my door and saw my dad fully dressed, I was puzzled. Then he said in a very stern, urgent tone, “Get your bike and a helmet with a head lamp and meet me at the gate.” Still confused, I did as my father had instructed. I collected my things and went to the gate. As soon as I got there, my dad started to explain what was going on. He told me that someone had stolen some cattle and Curt, the farmer, needed help. The questions started racing through my mind. “Stolen” was the word my father had used. Were we in danger? What were they going to do, and how was I going to help? I was just a kid on a bike.

I composed my thoughts and asked, “What do you want me to do?” My dad explained, “We are going to try to find the men who committed the crime and you need to go with Curt.”

Curt was a gruff and rude sort of man, who talked a million words per second with a thick accent and slurred speech. I loaded my bike into the back of the buckie – what they call a pickup truck-and got into the cab. I was calm on the outside but on the inside I was going nuts, I was nervous. My voice cracked when I asked the question that had been nagging in the back of my mind, “What do you want me to do?” Curt replied in his jumbled speech, “I need you to get out at Belufontane- a small village- and push the cattle back to the farm. I’m going to go to the next farm up the road.”

My thoughts were racing. WHAT? Me? I could not believe that he wanted me to herd cattle that had just been stolen five miles back to the farm, in the dark, in the middle of Africa! No! Everything in me was saying, “Not a chance!” Then, my thoughts turned to how mad I was at my Dad for volunteering me for this job. How was I going to do it?

By this time we had arrived at Belufontane. Curt helped me get my bike out of the truck and pointed up the hill. “They’re up there.” Then he got back in the buckie and was gone. So there I was in Africa. I was in the dark with my bike, a light, and my thoughts. I was very nervous and very mad, which soon became anger. I was so angry that Curt had just left me there in the dark. Nevertheless, there was nothing left to do but get the job done.

I went up the hill and could not see a thing. I went over to a hut and peered inside. A Xhosa woman who could not speak any English emerged from the small structure. I tried to ask her (with made up sign language) where the cows were. It went surprisingly well. By putting my two fingers on either side of my head and mooing like a cow, then putting my hands up as if to say “where?” she got the message, laughed, and pointed behind the hut.

There they were. The six young cows in a stick pen with the letters CR branded on their hides. I got them out of the pen with help from the Xhosa woman and then headed down to the dirt road and headed for home.

After a couple of minutes of riding, I started to relax. Then flying around the corner, came this beat up car with the radio blaring. The car flew by me-- almost hitting me and scattering the cattle in the field next to the road. I was furious. They must have been drunk. I yelled at them in frustration then went to try to get the cows back. After many frustrating minutes, I finally got them back and headed home.

As I was peddling home, I reflected on the fact that I was doing what had seemed impossible. In spite of all of my dread and doubt, I was doing it. I thought about my dad and Curt and how they had just dumped this task on me. At first, I was still a little mad; but then it hit me. The reason they had given it to me was because they thought I could handle it. That was when I realized I was capable of handling it, and I was almost done. That realization was huge to me. They trusted me as a young man to handle the job.

About a mile and a half from home, I heard horses coming from behind me. When they got close to me I could recognize the men’s faces. They were two of Curt’s farm workers. The younger one –who I had played some soccer with- smiled at me on a bike with a light on my head, and said in broken English “Curt ah, we take to farm.” I nodded, and with a loud whistle from the workers, the cattle began to trot away. I was relieved and so tired and as I rode that last mile home. I was calm for the first time since my father had knocked on my door earlier that night.

To this day, I think back on that night and remember how I realized that I was no longer a boy, but an adult who could take responsibility and pressure and deal with it like a man. That realization is vital to a man and that is why I believe that so many different cultures have various rituals or ceremonies to display publically that one is ready to stand on his own. So now, when a task arises and I question whether I can handle it or not, I think back to what I accomplished that night in South Africa and say, "Let's give it a shot!"

