

MY EARLY CHILDHOOD

The earliest memory I have is of my first spin alone. Before then, I would spin with my mother or father or both of them, or so they said. I remember dressing a bit like, well, a crab, and struggling to climb up the side of the tyre. I needed a lot of strength. It tired me to keep pulling myself up and along, up and along. I had just reached the point where I needed to manoeuvre across to the centre, when half of me slipped and was hanging down into nothingness.

I should explain that we are good bouncers when bunched up into a ball, even when young, but if we are, as I was then, elongated and crinkly, it can hurt to be knocked and bent by a fall. With time and practice we learn to bunch ourselves up quickly, even when falling, but I was very young then.

I could have let go, let myself be hurt and waited to try again on another day, but I was impatient and determined. I remember the feeling of hanging down and slipping off, but I made a special effort and swung a bottom tip to the tyre wall and crawled it back up. I took a breather. I could hear my mother telling me to come down, but my father was saying: 'You can do it, you can do it.' I knew I didn't have much energy left, and if I ran out, I would fall. But I persevered. I remember that glowing feeling of satisfaction when I put one tip of rubber onto the hub and knew I had made it into place. Then, it was only a matter of bunching the rest of me along until I was firmly wrapped around the hub at least one and half times. Mum and Dad were dancing with glee, bouncing around below, happy at my success.

I know now, I didn't then, that this is one of the most nerve-racking moments for a tyre spinner parent. Their children either learn to fend for themselves or they don't. And if they fail on their first journey alone to the hub, this can be a sign they are never going to make it. Sometimes, parents are over-anxious and try to make their offspring undertake the journey when too young, and they get scared and never learn to take risks. And sometimes, parents are so afraid of their young one not making it that they insist on helping them until long past the time when they should be trying it for themselves. This makes them lazy and they never learn how to move properly or to store sufficient energy for anything but the most mundane of tasks. A lot can depend on which vehicle a tyre spinner is born into. I mean, imagine being born in one that hardly ever moves, or, one that is involved in a puncture early on. I was lucky, everything went smoothly for me.

I lay quietly waiting for the moment when the car would shake - the signal that a 'move' was about to begin. Later, I learned that my parents had tried to calculate the best time to send me on my first solo spin. They expected a move of average

length and speed. Unfortunately, nothing in the world of the tyre spinners is ever certain, I was to learn this again and again and again. We are utterly dependent on the whims of you humans - if your actions were more predictable, our lives would be more comfortable.

I stopped thinking about my parents as soon as the signal came. I knew I had to concentrate on gripping the hub. The first movement was backwards, but I was prepared for that. Then it was forwards. I was filled with the thrill. I could feel my insides start to undulate in very gentle waves, and then they got faster, and faster. I could feel myself elongating, and parts of me would swing off the hub but, because the rest was gripped tightly around twice, then three times, then more than three times, I no longer needed to concentrate and hold on, I could just let go as the spinning got faster and faster, and I elongated more and more and . . . And then my memory is gone. Very few spinners ever learn to hold onto their minds when the speed gets up and the energy starts flowing.

The next thing I remember is coming in to land, as it were. I was still spinning but very slowly. My body was wrapped around the hub thirty-two times. I remember counting them and being stunned because I had been expecting ten at most. But I felt so fine, electrified, I didn't worry about it at all. This was marvellous, this was life, I was on my way. I started to retract myself, and found I was able to do this without any effort at all. I didn't even want to wait until the car stopped, but I knew I must. We are taught this from birth: never start wrapping yourself on or off a hub while a vehicle is moving.

When the tyre was still, I retracted fully and peeled myself off with such ease. I was no less clumsy than before, but it didn't matter when I had so much energy. It took a little while to pull into a ball and then I dropped down to join my parents. I thought they would be pleased but when they pressed themselves up against me all I felt was anxiety. They asked if I was all right, and they apologised because the move had been so long, one of the longest they had ever known. I reassured them I was fine, very fine and eventually they cheered up. For some days we were all excited and took a number of unusually good spins all together. Dad was cross, though, when he missed the second long move which must have taken our vehicle back to where it started from.

My next important memory concerns the growing business. We are born when our mother and father decide to press together and, in a special process, shed a part of themselves so as to create a third entity, a new born spinner. This is painful and difficult, but it doesn't stop there. Both parents must continue to give a part of their bodies to the young one until it is large enough and able enough to spin for him or herself. Apart from the pain, giving birth also reduces the size of the parents own bodies; and by then they are too old to undertake the growing business.

Once a tyre spinner reaches a critical size for taking energy on the hub, he can start the growing business. In essence, he lies flat against the tyre wall, the flatter the better, and absorbs rubber from the tyre: he becomes part of the tyre and draws in new molecules. It is very unpleasant and we only ever manage to do it during a limited timeframe when we are young. After a certain age, something happens to our form and we can no longer absorb new molecules. During the first few sessions of the growing business, a tyre spinner needs the support of parents. Believe me I know.

I remember, among the jumble of memories, that after that first very long spin and when we were back in the daily routine of short spins, it was some time before I able to convince my father to let me begin the growing business. I spread myself out in a thin even layer across one curled side of the tyre wall, I pressed and urged myself into all the pores of the rubber and then set to work. I had to use such effort, and it hurt (like a self-imposed headache for humans, perhaps) and, on that first attempt, I let go almost immediately. When my father saw me pulling together, he rolled up and pressed himself firmly against me and told me I had done very well, very well indeed. When I complained that I had scarcely grown one or two per cent, he explained that most young spinners actually lose size on their first try at the growing business. This is because it eases the pain to give molecules instead of taking them.

After that, there was no stopping me, I would be ready to undertake the growing business once every two or three weeks. I learned to cope with the pain, and to absorb three or four per cent on each occasion. Once, early on, I went too far and grew five per cent but then I had no energy left to retract or move and my father had to rescue me at some cost to himself. He banned me from growing for three months. It was then I had my first inkling that he and my mother were scared I might want to leave home one day. The three months ban didn't slow me down at all; I used every available moment and all my energy in perfecting the techniques of movement that are peculiar to spinners: flattening, bunching, rolling, curling, bending, and, of course, elongation and extrusion. If I was ever to go anywhere, see anything, I would have to be skilled at getting through the valves and, for that, I needed to be able dress myself quickly as thin as a thread and to move as fast as wind escaping through a puncture hole.