

Spinning Wheels

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Dad won big at the track last night. I knew it by the bounce in his voice that morning, and how he rocked from one foot to the other, smiling, when I came into the living room. A secret passed in the air between them: an echo bouncing back and forth and back again. Finally Dad reached into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet.

"I heard there's a bike you've been wanting," he glanced at me, "and thanks to Mr. Bow-Wow-Jangles in the 10th by a nose . . ."

"A photo finish!" my mom giggled triumphantly.

"We're going to go and get it," he held the hundred-dollar bill by the fingers of his right hand, blowing on it to create a fluttery wave of green. I stared at the bill not speaking, afraid I'd stumble on this moment and break it beneath my growing feet.

I managed to say the one thing I most desperately wanted, "The yellow Schwinn Varsity 10-speed?" I swallowed hard to prevent the tears I felt coming and managed to croak, "Today?"

And just like that we were getting in the car and sailing down the hill toward Montavilla where the bike store held rows of perfectly-aligned tires and carefully-wrapped handlebars. Most especially there was one I'd eased my way on to several times a week for months. It was before I was even berry-picking with my sister and in the days when babysitting paid in cents per hour, so the \$105 price tag was beyond even what I dreamed I could ever pull together. I knew I would love that lemon-yellow bike forever, but never take it out of the store. But then we were there—walking it, admiring it, taking it, with the matching combination lock.

Dad paid cash. And I did remember how many times we hadn't had enough at the grocery store or the things Mom had sold at the Pawn Shop to get field trip money so we wouldn't have to ask for help from the school. I remembered and I didn't stop him; I urged him on. I wanted that bike more than any other thing: it was a single perfect morning in a childhood that had held so many disappointments and fears. It's no wonder the sun shown brilliantly in the chill of early spring as we wheeled it out onto the sidewalk and I finally knew it was mine.

"We can put it in the trunk," Dad said, and I pictured it scraping against the metal on each side or knocking hard against the tire in the wheel well—or falling out behind the car as we climbed the hill to our house, bouncing and scraping and ruining as I watched out the back window.

“No—I’ll ride it home.”

There were protests from both, of course, the hill was awfully steep, but that’s what all those gears were for. And it’s true it was farther from home than I’d ever ridden before, but my bike made me powerful; I’d find my way.

They drove a little ahead of me—was it the station wagon with the contact-paper-pretend-wood siding or the pink Rambler with Batmobile fins? Maybe it was the red truck with Mom’s custom plaid interior: I have no memory of the car they drove as I pedaled and walked and pedaled some more. I almost couldn’t stop smiling as I rounded the top and coasted down the small hill a block from our house, listening to the hum as my brakes caught the spinning wheels. I ran my fingers across every shiny surface before I parked it that day.

I know I said thank you; I know they saw my joy. I’m not sure they knew how content it made me to get just what I wanted. And even though Dad may have won seven or eight of those hundreds that night at the track, all I saw was one. I felt he had given me everything he had.

You see, alcoholism steals fathers, and when mine replaced alcohol with gambling, I felt more alone than ever. Night after night in a house with large windows and no curtains, I huddled under a blanket on the living room couch waiting for them to come home from the track. I would listen to the television and watch it through the holes in the crocheted pattern of the blanket pulled over my head. I willed myself to remain completely still, imagining every moment that some criminal was watching me. No trembling allowed; my life depended on it. They came home angry or disappointed most nights, and I’d pretend to be sleeping. We didn’t speak. I was not a part of their lives, and was convinced if I could just be a different kind of daughter, I would have been.

Until that morning.

I felt something right in my world when they somehow knew what I most wanted and gave it to me. I see us smiling—all three of us at once—as Dad held up that hundred-dollar bill, the early morning light flooding the living room, and just for an instant, it really was a happy childhood.