

My Favorite Christmas Gift



By Gracie L. Chandler

As soon as I'd mastered roller-skating, I began begging for a bike. My mama's response was, "No! You don't even know how to ride a bike." My eight-year-old mind said, "*I'll learn; I'll show you!*" So I started badgering my older cousin to teach me. Most times she refused, but I was terrified when she did. There were no training wheels in those days—learning was built on trusting someone to walk along side you to hold the bike upright as you tried to balance it and press the pedals. My cousin wasn't the most trustworthy. After months of shaky starts, crashes, cuts, and landing in the dirt, I was able to show Mama my new skill.

"Now can I get a bike?" I asked, certain that my spills and determination would bring an instant "Yes! I'm so proud of you!"

But she kind of looked away, muttering, "We'll see what Santa Claus say about it."

Santa Claus? Christmas was five months away! But then I cheered up; she hadn't said no and Santa wouldn't let me down. But he did. Little did I know that Santa was broke. He was broke the next year, too. I kept hope alive, but it was barely breathing.

Then, when I was ten years old, I guess Santa got paid, because there, parked beside the table that held our little artificial Christmas tree was the most beautiful blue and white bicycle



ever invented. Speechless, I wiped the sleep out of my eyes and touched the seat, praying it wouldn't vanish in a dream puff. It didn't, and that bike became my most favorite thing on all the earth.

When I locked onto the pedals and set the wheels in motion I entered a different world—one of speed and exhilaration. I rode through the seasons—fingers clutching the icy handles in winter, barefoot in the sweltering summer heat. When the March wind whistled in my ears and the tires zipped through fall's dry leaves, crunching them, I knew what it meant to soar freely.

Then, a little over a year later, my bike, my best friend, was gone. I was numb, engulfed in a feeling of disbelief. I remember asking one question: "Did somebody steal my bike?" Mama said no, and that was that. The bike was gone, disappeared without fanfare just as it had appeared, and there was nothing more to be said. The lost joy of losing that bike lingered for many years; until I attended a teachers' writing workshop at my school.

The assignment was to write about something you held dear and lost then share it with the group. I wrote about my bike. One of the workshop attendees was a brash, arrogant teacher with whom I frequently clashed. He didn't give a fig about me either, so we often butted heads. After I'd shared my story I noticed him staring at me but he didn't say anything.

The next morning, running late as usual and frustrated, I entered the library, only to find *him* waiting for me. *Oh, damn*, I thought, *not this morning, not first thing!* But before I could say

anything he said, “Your bike story was good,” and extended a small box. Inside was an item wrapped in white tissue paper. On alert for a prank, I carefully unwrapped it. Nestled in the tissue was a small bicycle-shaped pin. I was speechless.

“That won’t replace the one you lost,” he said. “I just want you to know your story touched me.”

I blinked away tears and muttered “Thank you.”

I can’t say we became best buddies, but I think we recognized our mutual humanity and behaved civilly the rest of the school year. That incident occurred 36 years ago and I can’t tell you what became of that teacher, but I still have that pin. I wear it every Christmas, a reminder that the written word, no matter how painful the loss, can bring healing and harmony. It did for me.

