

It was Christmas of fourth grade, and the number one item on my Christmas list was a full-sized bicycle. I knew some of my closest friends were getting their big bikes that year, and I was doing everything within my power to make sure I would, too. I'd done my research at the Western Auto store and had picked out my favorite. The only item remaining on my "Bicycle for Christmas" project list was to pester my father into taking me to Western Auto. I wanted to show him the exact Western Flyer bicycle I wanted. I didn't dare leave the purchase of such an important item to the discretion of my parents.

The Western Auto store was at the end of the block where the Colony Theater was located. Going to the movies was a popular Saturday afternoon activity among the elementary school crowd. We could see a cartoon and a movie for 50 cents, and if we needed a ride home when the movie let out, we'd call our parents from Colonial Drugs, one block up and one block over from the theater.

This was long before the advent of cell phones, and Colonial Drugs provided a free, public telephone. It had a floor-to-ceiling front window, and the phone was prominently displayed on a table in the window, alongside a sofa. Everyone in town knew that if you needed to make a phone call, the drug store was the place to go.

The route from the Colony Theater to Colonial Drugs involved crossing the street at the Western Auto store, where its snazziest bicycles were displayed outside, along the side of the

building. We could touch them, check out the latest accessories, and even throw a leg over them to try them on for size. It was impossible to ignore the array of shiny, new bicycles, and it didn't take long for me to find the bicycle of my dreams. The manager of the Western Auto store was a marketing genius.

"You won't even have to go inside!" I exclaimed, as I dragged my father toward the object of my obsession. There it was, still on display outside the store. What luck! No one had bought it! It was navy blue and had those thin, stylish tires. We called these bicycles English Racers, in contrast to the American bicycles with the wide, clunky tires. And it was a three-speed with hand brakes! This was, clearly, a grown-up girl's bicycle. It made a statement.

I carefully pointed out all of the superior features to my father, right down to the tasteful navy blue color. I was confident I had presented an air-tight argument. The bicycle was as good as under the tree.

Just before Christmas, having given my father adequate time to purchase and hide the bicycle, I set out to find it and confirm the success of my "Bicycle for Christmas" project. We lived in a two-story house with two attics. There also was a basement that was accessible from what used to be a garage, and there was an old bedroom over the garage that had been in use during the days when people had live-in help. There were LOTS of potential hiding places.

I checked the bedroom over the garage. Nothing. I skipped the basement because no one in his or her right mind

would have put it down there. The access was too awkward. Besides, I didn't like going into the basement; it gave me the creeps. I searched the two attics. Nothing. All the closets. Nothing. The boathouse. Nothing. I snooped around our neighbors' houses. Nothing. I even asked my friends to check the hiding places in their houses. Nothing. No bicycle. No-where.

To say I was upset would have been an understatement. I remember sobbing to my parents that my friends would be getting their big bicycles for Christmas and I wouldn't. I'd be so embarrassed if I had to ride a junior bike while my friends had big bicycles! I was distraught and inconsolable.

But much to my amazement, "my" bicycle was waiting for me under the tree on Christmas morning! I was speechless! I later learned my parents had hidden it in the basement because they knew I wouldn't look there. Parents are smart like that.



I wish the Christmas bicycle story ended here, but it doesn't. Christmas afternoon I wanted to go for a ride. I was told I could, but I was given strict instructions not to cross a particular, busy four-lane street. I agreed, and off I went.

I truly had no plans to cross that street, but when I got to it, there was no traffic in sight. After all, it was Christmas, and the streets were deserted. Calling to me from the opposite side

of the street was an empty strip mall parking lot. Wouldn't it be wonderful to have such a huge area to ride around in? Knowing I could safely cross the street, I ventured forth, despite my parents' instructions. It was a decision I would regret.

To this day, I still don't know what happened. One minute I was happily weaving around the empty parking lot, and the next minute I was crashing into a concrete pad that protected the base of a light pole. I wasn't hurt, but my new bicycle wasn't so lucky. The front wheel was destroyed; it had a twisted rim and broken spokes. I'd also damaged the hand brakes and done something to the 3-speed mechanism. My beautiful, new bicycle was a mess.

I couldn't have walked my bicycle home, but I have no recollection of how I notified my parents of my predicament. My next memory is of my father picking me up in the parking lot and putting my broken bicycle into the back of our Chrysler station wagon. And, of course, I cried all the way home. I'd been caught disobeying my parents and destroyed my new bicycle in the process. I knew I would be old woman before I was off restriction, and I would never see my bicycle again. My parents didn't say or do anything to ease my fears.

A few weeks later, much to my surprise, my repaired bicycle was quietly returned to me without lecture or reprimand. My parents knew I'd already punished myself enough. Parents are wise like that.