

THE BICYCLE

by

BRAD REED

It's not something Gerald had asked his wife for on his fortieth birthday. He would have much preferred the massive Snap-On toolbox he had carefully scissored out of his Popular Mechanics magazine and placed on the dinner table. *Who are you kidding?* his wife had said as she crumpled the ad up in her small hand and tossed it into the garbage can. *What would you do with all that fool stuff?* she had asked. Gerald had sat motionless for a moment, then nodded his head and shoveled a spoonful of mashed potatoes into his mouth.

But he couldn't imagine himself using the shiny red bicycle that she had purchased for him, either. It had an absurd red bow placed on top of one of the large faux-leather panniers that hung over each side of the rear wheels. They reminded Gerald of the way his body had started to hang over the side of his belt. He bent to inspect the panniers and found them empty.

"They're to hold all your gear," his wife explained. Gerald had no idea what kind of gear that might be. Sandwiches, he figured. Maybe a pair of binoculars. He squeezed the new rubber tires between his fingers and felt the tight air trapped inside. He looked up at his wife with a question mark on his face.

"You know what the doctor has been saying," his wife explained. "You need to get moving. Do something. For God's sake, Gerald, do *something*." Gerald nodded and wondered

for how many days she would hound him to take the bike out into the neighborhood before she forgot it existed.

The panniers stayed empty as the bike gathered dust in the couple's garage. The unused bike sat next to the other relics of Gerald's wife's attempts to change him into a different person: a treadmill, cross country snow skis, a strange contraption that Gerald never quite figured out whether he was to sit in or stand on but that had wide black straps and lots of chrome and promised to give him "rock hard abs." The collection mocked him each time he ambled into the garage to fetch a frozen dinner from the freezer. Especially the bicycle. Its wide chrome wheels looked at him like large accusing eyes; their reflectors caught the light from the overhead fluorescent lights and blinked at him. He avoided looking at the bike in the same way he avoided looking into his wife's eyes over the dinner table.

The bike had become a permanent and invisible fixture in the garage by the time the night came that Gerald charged into the garage, his forehead wrinkled and his chest huffing. He threw the skis aside, shoved the treadmill farther back into the corner, and grabbed the bike around the headstock. He dropped it hard on its tires and it bounced eagerly in response.

"I'll show you, goddammit," he said through gritted teeth, unsure whether he was talking to the bike or to his wife. His hard breath whistled through his nostrils. He knocked aside boxes with his knees, elbowed the Les Paul out of his way, and muscled the bike to the front of the garage. He stabbed at the door opener with his finger and the door lurched to open.

"Who is she to talk to me like that?" he asked of the crisp fall air that slapped his face as he turned into the wind and began to pedal up the incline of his street. The fight had been coming for a long time, he realized. All those nights of staring into his mashed potatoes, his steaming mound of mixed vegetables, his cool glass of milk, he'd known it. He had become less and less

able to tune her out, less and less able to swallow his words down with his food. He'd been feeling it building for some time. As he sat there that night, taking her berating, he began to form two simple words in his mouth that he hadn't uttered to a soul since he was four years old. He said them first inside his head. He formed them in his mouth and chewed on them until they almost spilled out of his lips. Inside his mind, a movie played of the last time he'd spoken them.

Gerald's mother stood tall over him, a wooden spoon in her hand. Her words were slurred in Gerald's memory, not quite clear enough to recall. But her head shook from side to side and Gerald felt the anger build up inside him. He remembered glancing over at his father, asleep on the couch in front of the television, before he risked saying the words he'd been warned about. It was time. He looked up into his mother's eyes, straightened his body and, firmly, with as much maturity and power as he could muster while still being that early part of his life when everyone called him Little Jerry, said them. "Shut. Up."

His father hadn't been asleep. He jumped from the couch and, at almost inhuman speed, wrenched the wooden spoon from his mother's hand and held it over Gerald's now shaking body. *What did you say to your mother?* he raged. Gerald remembered the way some of his father's spit flew from his mouth and hit Gerald on the cheek. It was all violence and volume after that. Even as Gerald pumped the pedals on the bike, he swore he could still feel the burn of those blows echo inside his thighs, buttocks, and calves.

He huffed out a great rush of air with each hard shove on the pedals and soon found himself forming words to go along with the effort.

Shut—*huff*—up—*huff*—shut—*huff*—up—*huff*—shut—*huff*—up. Over and over again. With each huff the rambling ranch home grew smaller behind him and the brown looming hills grew larger. His chant slowed as he began to climb into them. His breath came heavier. Beads of

sweat exploded from his forehead and began to drip onto his shirt. His knuckles whitened around the handlebars. A burning sensation started in his calves and spread up into his thighs and groin, yet he pushed on. He managed a quick look over his shoulder—the bike nearly pitching to the ground beneath him—too see that his house was now just a small dot behind him. He imagined his wife standing in the yard with a hand brought up over her squinting eyes. Not even a dot—a speck, if anything.

Perhaps if they'd had the kind of marriage where both husband and wife participated in arguments, the words wouldn't have held such power. Perhaps if he'd started using them from those first days of marriage, back when almost anything could be forgiven, they would have been robbed of their power.

He'd come close to saying those cruel words to her before, but it was something about that man on television, talking softly in the background while she berated him that night, that set him off. Perhaps if Gerald had not been watching it at the precise moment that she laid into him; perhaps if the man on the television had not spoken about how free he felt on his bicycle, had not been riding from the Pacific to the Atlantic without—it seemed to Gerald—a care in the world.

“You can travel the world on a bike,” the man had said. His wide, healthy smile seemed to mock Gerald. “There's no gas to buy, no speed limits to break, and your problems just disappear behind you,” the man had added. And he had said it with a head of waterfall hair sweeping across one eye while wearing a hemp shirt and a twine necklace. Freedom, thought Gerald. Problems disappear behind you, he considered. And so he'd said to the words to his wife through gritted teeth and with an anger in his eyes that said much more. It had made her put a hand quickly to her mouth and her eyes grow large and wet.

But the climb. God, the climb! Not even halfway up the hill he was gasping for air, stopping often to step off the bike and knead the back of his thighs, do deep knee bends in an effort to ease the pain in his ass. He remounted the bike and found that his feet and hands were growing numb, that his neck was aching from its awkward angle. He looked up at the twisting road leading up the hill and decided to walk the bike for awhile. It seemed like a shameful thing. He tried to force his mind to imagine the hemp man walking his bicycle up a hill but it refused. The walking made him notice that he was not wearing a hemp shirt. His was still in his stiff white shirt from the office, now drenched in sweat. He unbuttoned it and let it hang dangerously loose off of his arms, his rounded belling pressing out against the white undershirt. His wrists looked oddly naked and he tried to imagine twine bracelets hanging from them. He made a motion of sweeping long hair from his forehead and inadvertently jabbed himself in the eye.

At the top of the hill, he paused only briefly to look back down at his little town. The houses looked flat from that height, like a mural painted on the canvas of the brown earth. The lush green yards looked cartoonish against the vista of desert. The road ahead curled down, around—down, around. Freedom, he thought. Freedom from pedaling. Finally gravity is on my side, he thought. And he kicked at the ground and began coasting down the hill. His town, his cartoon home, his speck of a wife disappeared behind him.

A split second after he saw the snake, he was already over it and beyond. It had thumped under his tires—thump thump—as simple as running over a garden hose. Not an alive thing in that brief moment, just an obstacle. Thump thump. He squealed the bike to a hard stop and wheeled around. The snake wiggled and twitched there in the road. But not like a snake. Like a fire hose on full without a strong fireman to settle it. Twitching. Flailing. Dying.

Gerald watched the snake twist and wiggle for a long time, considering. Should I leave it here to die? Should I smash its tiny skull with a rock? (A quick survey of the ground nearby turned up only dirt, sand, and tumbleweeds.) He considered riding over it again with his bike but—thump thump. The feeling of it was still in his hands, still pulsing up through his feet. The sound of it was still in his heads, like two words spoken out loud. Thump thump. It made him feel nauseous—but also powerful. A snake, he thought. I killed a snake. His shirt collar rubbed at his neck and it felt like it was made of hemp.

The snake's violent twitching slowed, stopped. The snake was dead and Gerald found that his hands were shaking on the handlebars. The bike chain rattled with his shaking. I killed a snake. I killed a snake. He imagined himself telling his wife about the snake. It became a heroic story in his mind during the ride home. Perhaps it had caught and killed neighborhood cats. Perhaps the snake had been threatening neighborhood children.

“I am a man,” he said out loud to himself. He had saved the neighborhood with his head of hurtling steam. He had rocketed over it before he even knew it was there. Gerald wondered if the hemp man knew about the head of steam. About how a snake can seem like nothing more than a garden hose if you hit it going fast enough on a bicycle.

The town grew large as Gerald hurtled back down into it. The smell of the green lawns came up sweet to meet him. I killed a snake. I killed a snake. Thump thump.

He paused at his front door. He usually knocked if he knew she'd be crying. Thump thump. She might still be crying. Might still be screaming. Might still be watching the hemp man on the television. He built up a head of steam and shouldered through the door.

Thump thump.

END