

Hell on Wheels

I dreamed and dreamed of getting a new bike. Every day, coming home from school, I thought that this would be the day. Dad would pull up in the pickup truck and in the back would be a shiny new CCM three-speed bicycle.

Instead of the bike, something else happened. He gave me an old lawn mower with drive gears, and out of it we built a go-cart. The frame was an old steel bed frame. We used actual car steering pinions which the local mechanic cut out of a wreck, then welded onto our frame. The steering wheel came off the old Studebaker sedan.

The finished go-cart was a rather ingenious piece of work. It could really go and handled like a real car. It did have one annoying feature. You had to wear a raincoat and rain hat to drive it because a stream of oil would shoot forward out of the engine every twenty seconds or so. Another problem was the noise. The neighbours complained of my running up and down Ridge Road. Mr. Carter worked the hospital night shift and needed to sleep in the daytime. He got steaming mad by the third noisy day. Threatened to call the police.

To make a long story short, I finally traded the go-cart for five (count 'em) used bicycles. I had the greatest fun, taking the wheel off of one, the seat off another, fixing the best chain, trading fenders. Even then, there was rust to remove, chains to oil, inner tubes to repair, brakes to adjust, steering columns to pull out and tighten, pedals to replace.

This gradual process produced two working, very acceptable bicycles. One was a balloon tire bike, my favourite, especially after I refurbished it with chrome paint and decked out the handlebar grips with blue plastic streamers. Very sharp! The other was a girl's bike, quite refined compared to mine. My sister Christine and I painted this one with the gold metallic paint and decked it out with red handlebar streamers. We scrounged all the reflectors we could from the other bikes and even bought a few new ones. We were a lively gaudy reflection, any car or truck would see our bikes at night from any and all directions, guaranteed! Then the mirrors, one left, one right. For a while we even

had playing cards attached to the wheel spokes with clothes pins. Once you picked up a little speed it made a machine gun sound. Very annoying, and therefore, FUN! Problem was that it really slowed you down. Also, as dad pointed out, it loosened up the spokes. So, off came the Joker and the Queen of Spades.

We found all kinds of great places to ride our bikes. The school playground on non-school days was a favourite. You could do wheelies and brake slams and no hands on the asphalt or the flat mowed grass. We had a delicious sense of mischief peaking into classroom windows with no one around. A crowd of bike crazy kids would gather.

Eventually, we became the HELL DRIVERS, the world's toughest bicycle gang. Round and round we'd go at the village circle on our flashy cobbled together bicycles. Of course, this club was is all boys, no girls allowed.

Initiation day is the Saturday before summer vacation. The hill is in Ridgeway, near the cemetery. I wait at the top of Long Hill, like a world champion downhill at the top of a ski run. Harry Near gives the signal and down I go, faster and faster. Near the bottom the ground turns up and launches me into the air and over the barbed wire fence. I touch down, back wheel first, now the front wheel. I'm hanging on with all my strength. The bike is wobbling, but the good old balloon tire beauty stays upright. I'm in! I'm in the HELL DRIVERS!

Maybe it's in the name, the reference to satanic forces, but some kind of wild energy was released in me. Perhaps the contrast, a good catholic altar boy, serious student, card carrying paper boy, et cetera. Anyhow, this summer I become hell on wheels. Everywhere I go, I am racing with a vengeance. Up and down the roads, through back yards, gardens, in and out of driveways and alleys, even past the kicking stallion in the public stables.

One particular hot summer's day, Christine and I are bicycling down to the beach. Now you have to understand that this is not some little Sunday Picnic ride. There are thick woods and nasty hills to manoeuvre and poisonous snakes to avoid. Christine is not in the HELL DRIVERS because she is a girl, but she's a better rider than any of us. She's tall and strong and runs like a deer. She's a hellion on wheels.

We decide to race. I have one advantage. I'm sneaky.
'Christine, look out! You're goin' to run over that squirrel.'
'What squirrel?'

By this time, in her compassionate older sister way, she has slowed down just enough so that I surge ahead of her and am streaking into the lead down the path. She won't get past me now, the path is too narrow, too winding. I am laughing and shouting, picking up speed, sure of my victory. Looking back, I let loose in a triumphant voice.

'Na, na, na, na, na . . .! Hey Chrissy, what's taking you so long?
Thought you could beat me. Ha . . . Ha . . .!'

The path is getting narrower and trickier. I look back one more time. BIG MISTAKE. I've forgotten about the sharp bend in the path. Too late to veer left, I miss the turn. I go flying down the hill, and what a hill! This knoll is pitched to the same angle you would set up a ladder against a house to climb it, very steep, close to sixty degrees. I slam on the brakes, but it's a non-stopper. The hill is covered in a beautiful yellow green slick reedy grass. Very slippery. I'm going too fast to roll the bike over or fall off. All I can do is hang on. Where the hill flattens out, the trees begin. My front tire hits a birch tree square on.

In a flash, my life is a series of sound bites:

'Runaway bike hits immovable force. Rider flies up into tree. Bicycle follows. Tree snaps off. Rider slides off tree. He lies smushed up on the ground!'

I feel the warm trickle of blood running from my ear, down my neck, then my back. For a moment I hear nothing, see nothing. Then like a vision from a dream, it's Christine running down the hill, calling out,

'Are you okay? Talk to me!'

Soon she's kneeling beside me, helping me to sit up. It's the scrapes that I feel first. I can barely stand the itching from the scratches. My whole body screams torment. Blood is pouring from my left ear. Feels like it's hanging. There's a gash over my right eye. My shirt's all torn anyway, so

Christine tears off a wide strip and ties it around my head to stave off the bleeding ear. She helps me stand. Only way out is back up the hill. She becomes my crutch, arm over her neck, hobbling up the hill, limping home.

The trusty old balloon tire bike is a write-off. We just leave it there. A testament to folly. An offering to the hill god.

The long walk home. Dad drives me to the clinic. No doctor. We head over to the Ridgeway Hospital. It's packed. There's been a race riot in the Amusement Park. It started on the cruise boat. Sunny day, laughter, girls, booze. First a racist comment or three, then an argument, then a knife, a baseball bat. When the cruise boat landed the fighting spread to the wharf, the arcade, the bowling alley, the roller coaster, even to the Old Mill ride. Spooky.

When I walk into the waiting room I fit right in. I look like I've just had the crap beat out of me. There are no empty chairs so I stand by the pop machine. Dad gives me a dime for a ginger ale. He has to get back to the work site. They're pouring cement and he's doing the finishing float. Christine stays with me. Her comments about some of the people keep me in stitches for three hours, until I get the other twenty-seven stitches I need.

That was the day the balloon tire bicycle died. That was the day a great friendship began.