

Spoke

by Chanel Dubofsky

Laurel's new bike is powder blue, with silver tassels on the handle bars. Jenny's mouth actually waters at the sight of it, as though it were a fresh loaf of bread or a perfect, juicy orange.

"You can ride it if you want," Laurel tells Jenny one day on their way home from school. She's been thinking of the test the next day in math, but now she's imagining those tassels between her fingers as she soars through the neighborhood, her boring straight hair stretching behind her like a road.

When they get to Laurel's house, Jenny has to call her mother. This is the year she turns ten, and it seems like her mother worries more with every passing moment. She feels like a baby as she picks up the sleek receiver in Laurel's kitchen and dials her house, but the alternative is worse- finding her mother in the living room curled up in the recliner, red eyed, pale, and shaking.

There's no answer at her house, so Jenny leaves a message and hangs up. They walk out to the garage, where Laurel's older brother's car is parked. He got caught lighting a fire in his locker at school, Laurel reports, so he's not allowed to drive for a month. Normally, Jenny is fascinated by stories of Laurel's brother, but she cannot stop staring at the bike, shiny and graceful, leaning against one wall of the garage.

Laurel wheels the bike to the top of the driveway. Jenny's heart beats crazily, like William, her guinea pig's, the first time she held him. It seemed impossible to her that one small, furry body could contain such fierce joy.

She kicks off carefully, but then she is going faster, her feet pushing

hard. From the corners of her eyes, she can see the blurry colors of houses and lawns and cars. Behind her, someone calls her name, lazily, like a breeze. She doesn't turn around. Laurel has everything, she'll never miss this bike. When it's gone, she'll get another one just like it. The only things that matter are the stretching of her legs, the rush of air across her face, the pure possibility of movement.

But now the voice is getting louder, and its' familiar shrillness curls Jenny's spine. She steers too hard to the right, and there is the quick, horrible feeling of falling, followed by the raw sting of skin against cement.

The bike lays beside her, the ripped tassels glaring in the sun. Her torn palms are glued to the ground with dirt and sweat. Then comes the flutter of arms around her and the wet pressure of her mother's teary face against her dry one. "I was calling you," she whispers, "Didn't you hear me?" Jenny shakes her head, looking at her shredded, bleeding knees, but it doesn't matter. In her head, she's still flying down the road, to somewhere far away from here.

