

A Cautionary Tale of Bike Swapping

by Kimberlee Smith

The bike Gale has been given is a boy's, gleaming midnight blue. The middle bar has an oval metal disc screwed in with the number "6" on it. She unlocks it from the metal stand it is chained to on the side of the house between the grassy lawn and the beach and realizes the seat too high, but she takes it, thinking it best not to protest. She tries to adjust the seat but can't find the lever so she just hoists herself up, swings a leg over the bar, and pedals away. Her first stop is Angel's Market, the first shop on the left. About a half mile up the road.

There is a request for a bottle of Jameson whiskey and two of white wine to replenish the liquor cabinet for tonight, and she offers to take her bike to the center of town to the shops. The street is pocked with potholes, having taken a beating from the winter storms and she has to be vigilant on the road so as not to go "ass over teakettle," as Aunt Penny had warned her about moments before.

Aunt Penny is the hostess this weekend, and Gale would like to please her, this being the first time she has met her boyfriend Harris's extended family. It is all quite formal, for a beach house. She has been designated to stay in a small bedroom originally designed as staff quarters with two single beds, one pressed into each side wall, a window to the sea and a single nightstand between them. She is rooming for the weekend with Aunt Peggy's childhood nanny, Lorena, who smells like fried onions and talcum powder. Harris is staying in another room in the easternmost wing of the home with his cousin Pierce.

The town is full of small, quaint shops and cafes. There are also a used-books store, a dank maritime-themed bar that hadn't been redecorated since Eugene O'Neill summered here, and loads of

art galleries and coffee houses peppering the grid of streets that make up the seaside community.

“Don't forget to lock your bike when you're in town, there's occasionally a bike theft, getting to be that time of year,” Aunt Penny warns her. She and Harris fought the hellish Friday commuter traffic from Boston to the Cape yesterday, arriving in time for the annual clam bake the Marring family hosts to celebrate Memorial Day. After dinner, she sat with the women and watched the boys play touch football.

She is on the main road and it will take her into town, to the market. At Angel's Market there are three men whispering around a chocolate frosted cake that a heavyset woman is holding. They are lamenting that they have no cake box, and the heavyset woman, the shopkeeper, admits she has none, either. One of the three men offers to carry it, and another slides the cake across his outstretched arms. There is beer and wine at the store. But Aunt Penny drinks Jameson's.

“Do you know where the closest *liquor* liquor store is?” she asks the man who just handed over the cake. His voice is barely audible, a whisper, as if prohibition were still in effect

“You go down to Carroll Street, then make a right, then it's on your left,” he says discreetly.

Gale buys a soft cheese with mushrooms and a bag of pretzels because she is taking up so much time in the store, it seems only right. She puts them in her backpack, zips it up, and slid her arms through the straps. She unlocks her bike from a post and rides off in search of the liquor store. She forgets to buy the wine, but she can do that at the next stop.

Her eyes dart from the potholes to the dogs on retractable leashes zigzagging into the road to the bank of cars parked along the right side of the one-way street. It is difficult for her to see when a car turns out of a driveway, so she pedals with hesitation and a wariness that makes her unsteady. There is a rush of people, boyfriends, girlfriends, groups of people, a mishmash of couples, congregating on the sidewalk and crowding up the storefronts.

She rides a mile down the road, looking every few seconds for Carroll Street, but it isn't there. She stops in front of the post office, where two men are sitting on the steps with a Jack Russell terrier. The dog is old and has a cloudy eye. It fusses. The man holding the dog pulls it closely to his chest, and says "Shush, little girl." The dog continues to huff with a long, simmering growl.

"Do you know where the closest liquor store is?" she asks the men.

They both laugh.

"We're not from around here. But I think it's just down the block, on your right. Vinny's Liquor," says the man without the dog.

"Thank you," she says, then pedals off again. It has been nearly an hour since she left the house. The sky is bright blue and clear, the sun is still overhead, but just so. It will start to dip soon. Dinner is promptly at six, and she must get back in time for cocktails at half-past five. She doesn't want to disappoint Aunt Penny.

She rides on. People are pouring out of and into the bars and there is faint music and the smell of musk in the air.

There is no Vinny's Liquor store as far as she can tell. She begins to think there is something odd, that people are jerking her chain, sending her on a fruitless mission. It feels familiar, like sorority hell week. Maybe there is no liquor store at all. She pedals on. Her breath quickens and becomes shallow. She has pedaled to the most western part of the village, where the saltbox cottages are pristine and tulips line the empty sidewalk. There is up ahead a lone shop in the middle of the lovely row of beach cottages with a large wooden sign hanging from a shutter. "OPEN." There are amber bottles stacked like a carnival game in the window.

She dismounts the bicycle, leans it against the cedar shingle wall, and races up the stairs inside. She grabs bottles of whiskey and wine off the shelf. There is a bald man with blue-framed glasses smiling and nodding at the customer he is speaking with, who is gesturing wildly. The customer is going on about an upcoming trip to Europe, he says. It is impossible not to overhear.

Maybe if she interrupts, they'll hurry on up so she can get back to the house in time for Aunt Penny to get her goddamn whiskey.

"I am so excited to take the Eurostar," says the customer. He is heavysset with black hair and a thick moustache.

"Oh, well, if you do...what is the station it gets into in Paris? Ah, Gare du Nord. There is the most charming Alsatian restaurant right next door. Let me write it down for you," says the shopkeeper. He hunts for a pen and peels off a square of orange adhesive notepaper.

"I took it last summer, the Eurostar. From London to Paris, it's a simple trip," Gale says with a clip to her voice.

"Really? I'm going in two weeks. Do you think I need to book a reservation?" he asks.

"Not now. Mid-summer I'd say, probably. This isn't high season. I'm sure you'll be fine," she says.

He looks at the shopkeeper and giggles. "German, aaah, I *like* a little *German*," he says in a heavy, clownish accent, like he is mimicking Arnold Schwarzenegger in "Terminator."

"Alsace is French. Not German. It's a region of France. Well, it has a Germanic influence," Gale says and realizes she should shut her mouth.

Both look at her with blank expressions. Neither responds.

The future European traveler leaves the shop.

She puts her bottles on the counter and sees out of the corner of her eye that the man is touching her bicycle. He takes one hand and brushes his palm along the seat. She puts a credit card down on the counter. Her hands start to shake. She signs the receipt and stuffs the bottles in her backpack, struggling to close it, crushing the mushroom cheese. She walks outside and before she gets down the second stair she sees her bike is gone.

Far up the street, the man who stole her bike pedals furiously and tears around a corner.

"He stole my fucking bike!"

She shouts with her arms flailing in the air. Up where he turned, two men holding hands and wearing white tank tops, jeans, work boots, and are inked with a flurry of tattoos, stop and turn their heads.

“Stop him! He stole my fucking bike!”

One crooks his arm and points up the road.

“He's disappeared,” he says and the couple continues their lazy stroll.

“Did he pay with a credit card? We can call the police! You'll have his name,” she says to the shopkeeper, who has since poked his head outside to see what all the commotion is about.

“Oh, don't worry. This is his bike, right here. He comes in here *all* the time. You'll get your bike back. Give me your phone number, and when he comes back...i'm sure it's just a mistake.” He tilts his head in the direction of a bike propped up against the white iron hand rail.

“Bullshit,” she says.

Gale jumps on the blue woman's beach cruiser. It has a dirty pink rubber pig head mounted where a horn might be. There is a split clean down the center of the vinyl seat and rotting foam is bulging out of it.

She takes the corner and squeezes hard on the brakes to avoid a massive divot in the asphalt. Nothing. There are no brakes. That is, they do not work at all. She braces, thinking the backpack will fall and the bottles will break and her bike was stolen because she didn't lock it up. She takes the bump hard, but continues the chase.

She glares ahead, her eyes darting at every parked bicycle. She's pedaling like mad, cursing and cursing. She sees two blocks ahead the man with the moustache zip around the corner.

“Excuse me! Mister! Hold on,” she hollers.

She catches up with him and on approach she grabs the pig head and squeezes it, thinking it to be a horn. Air hisses out of its forehead instead.

He pulls on the hand breaks and stops with immediacy, smiling at her with glassy cow-pie eyes. Gale points her toes down and drags her sneakers across the mottled pavement to stop the bike, nearly running into him. Their front tired bump together and she does not apologize.

"Give me my bike back. That's my bike," she says, dismounting his ratty old rust pile and letting it fall to the street with a clang.

"That's funny. It is! Mine is a girl's bike and yours is a boy's," he said.

"It is, so give me my bike back. Fuck."

"Okay. Here." He dismounts and she yanks on the handlebars, climbs on her bike, and races back to the house. A block before she arrives she stops to look at her watch. It is quarter past five. She opens her backpack, unscrews the Jameson's bottle, and takes a deep gulp.

She locks her bike with haste to a telephone pole, goes behind a thicket of sea grass, and pulls down her pants. She puts it between her legs and pees a little into the bottle, screws the top back on, unlocks the bike, and walks back to the house to deliver the goods.

