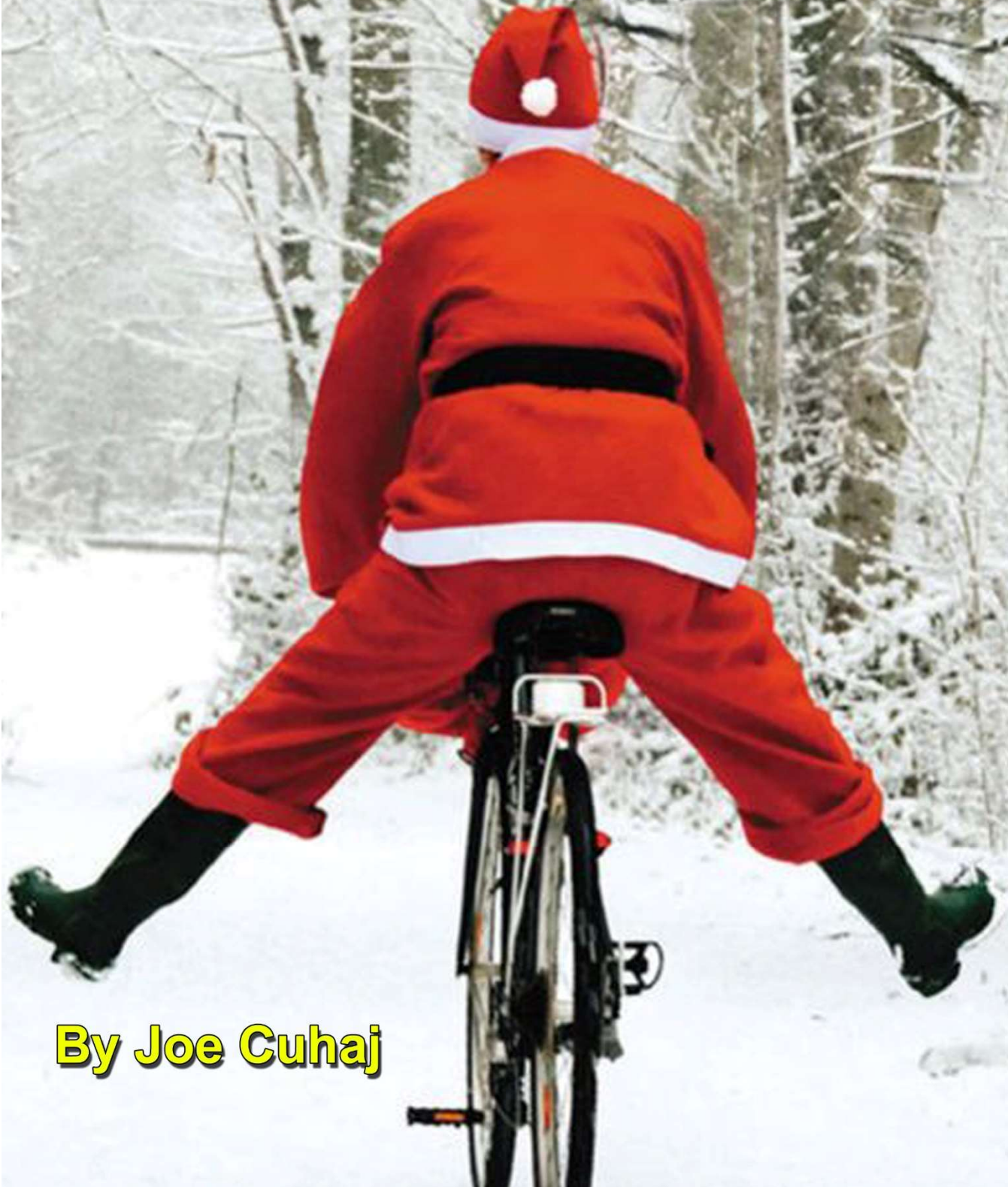


# **A Different Christmas Story**



**By Joe Cuhaj**

BOYS' LIFE for DECEMBER, 1940

**10-SPEEDS... 8-SPEEDS... 3-SPEEDS... NEW AUTOMATIC SHIFT 2-SPEEDS!**

**THERE'S MORE GO! GO! GO!**

**IN Schwinn BIKES WITH GEARS!**

**NEW! 10-SPEED**

**NEW! AUTOMATIC 2-SPEED**

**NEW! 8-SPEED**

**NEW! 3-SPEED**

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## **A Different Christmas Story**

The Sixties were a crossroad in our history. It was a time when the men and women of the “Greatest Generation” ran headlong into a formidable foe and one it hadn’t counted on - their own kids. While the Vietnam War raged on many of those in the older generation believed we were in it for the long haul and needed to stay to finish the job so we could stop Communism dead in its tracks. Many of their offspring, however, had a different feeling and questioned our reason for being there in the first place.

Not all kids in the Sixties felt that way. There were those that were caught in the middle, a love of country and a respect for what our soldiers were doing but with a caveat - that nagging question burning in the back of their minds, was it really worth it?

And that’s where my sister Joyce and I fell on the spectrum. We were raised to look up to our military with awe and reverence. They were truly making the ultimate sacrifice. Actually, my folks never had to tell me this. I knew it. It was in our genes. We were a Navy family through and through. My dad fought in the Pacific during World War II. We watched the Army / Navy football game religiously on television every fall despite the fact that we all disliked football. And don’t you dare change the channel on the TV when a war movie was on. Your hand would be summarily chopped off by my Dad who watched those old black-and-white flicks constantly eyeing every second of stock footage to see if his ship was in there.

Then there was my sister. After graduating high school she decided that she wanted to join the Navy and become a WAVE. Before I knew it, she was waving us goodbye as she headed off to boot camp. Every now and then she’d write and brag about the exotic ports of call she would be seeing once she graduated basic training.

So it was quite ironic that instead of seeing the world she was afforded the opportunity to visit exotic south Jersey, namely the Lakehurst Naval Air Station. The base was just close enough so she could come home during her time off and complain about the sailors and their attitude toward women and being stuck in New Jersey.

My old man hated it as well but for a different reason. It was close enough where my Mom would talk, nay, badger him into leaving the comfort and safety of our little neighborhood and make the trip down there as much as possible to pay a visit. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to visit my sister he just didn’t want to make the trip.

It was about a two to three hour trip to Lakehurst from our house depending on traffic. Even though it was a short haul my Dad hated the drive. Correction, he loathed it and did everything in his power to get out of it, but to no avail. At least once a month we would saddle up the old powder blue Bel Air station wagon and speed off into an early morning dawn down the New Jersey Turnpike heading to Lakehurst.

The one saving grace of this trip for my old man was that he fancied himself a racecar driver. To him the trip was a challenge – he dreamt of breaking the speed record for the shortest road trip on record to Lakehurst, even if it was just his own record.

Without fail we would leave at 3:30 in the morning on the nose. Don't you dare make him late! With a good wind behind our back we would arrive at our destination at 5:30, stay an hour for casual banter and breakfast while my Dad paced the floor and glanced his watch every 30 seconds, and when the clock struck 6:30, VOOM! We would pile back into the station wagon and spin rubber as we headed for home. His personal best time for a complete round trip was 4.5-hours. That was a tough trip. There wasn't even enough time for breakfast or much of a conversation for that matter.

There were, however, occasions when we would spend a full day in Lakehurst. It was usually when the base hosted one of their magnificent air shows that featured the latest Navy fighter planes scorching the sky, the fabulous Navy Blue Angels flying team, and helicopters performing rescue demonstrations.

The sights and sounds of the aircraft made all the kids, young and old, ooh and aah as they performed death defying aerial maneuvers overhead. In between demonstrations I would have just enough time to roam around a bit on my own and explore. Inevitably I would find myself near the hangars that dotted the airfield.

What an amazing place. The hangars were huge and towered ominously over the sandy Jersey shore skyline of pines and scrub oak. This was history and even at my young age it was palpable. These hangars used to house gigantic passenger carrying air ships - blimps - back in the 1930s. Looking into the cavernous structures you could imagine the arrival of those monstrous dirigibles as they lazily circled the deep blue Jersey sky making their way to giant mooring masts for docking.

And of course, there was that most famous of dirigibles, the one that made Lakehurst an entry in all of our history books when it met its doom right here on these asphalt runways - the Hindenburg. Oh the humanity indeed. Until one stands next to one of these mammoth hangars you will never know the enormity of the doomed lighter-than-air craft.

On several occasions I slipped behind the hangars into some woods on the outskirts of the base and there, to my surprise, I found chunks of black rubber. Examining them closely a thought came to me. Nah, couldn't be. Could it? It must be! Pieces of the Hindenburg!

I brought several pieces of the aging, rotting, smelly rubber home to show the gang. I proudly pointed out the incredible history that sat before us. It wasn't until years later that I realized that they were merely pieces of old airplane tires. The old adage is true: some stories are best left untold.

It was a cool spring morning when we embarked on another one of our trips to south Jersey and a visit with my sister. Mom and Dad slid into their respective pilot and co-pilot seats.

“It’s zero-five-thirty on the nose,” Dad said looking at his watch.

My Mom just sat there quietly staring out the window oblivious to what my Dad had said. He shot her a glance and cleared his voice loudly startling my Mom.

“Oh,” she said a bit flustered. She glanced down at her watch. “It’s 5:35.”

Another ritual for these trips was for the pair to synchronize their watches so that the official time it took to make the trip could be measured to the nano-second.

“No,” Dad said looking again at his watch. “It’s five…”

He paused for a moment and without saying another word started the car and we backed out of the driveway. Mom was right again.

The usual deafening silence of the long trip through the New Jersey Pine Barrens was disrupted by an occasional, “can’t believe we’re late!” from my Dad. As usual I was lying on my back in the flight deck of this behemoth of a vehicle, the morning sun flickering through the trees as it began rising over the horizon making me wince with each brilliant flash even with my eyes closed.

Mom derailed my Dad’s latest tirade about our lateness as she turned around and in her raspy cigarette laden voice asked, “Your birthday is only three weeks away, Jake. What do you want for your birthday?”

To say I hadn’t already given it a great deal of thought would be an outright lie. I had been thinking about this for weeks, nay months. I had a ratty old bicycle and that was putting it mildly. I popped my head up from behind the rear seat and spoke right up.

“I need a new bike!” I shouted.

I saw my old man glare at me through the rearview mirror.

“Da-hell? You got a bike!” he shouted. “What do you need a new bike for?”

I tensed as he paused for a moment knowing full well what I was in for - the obligatory parental “down-play”.

“I suppose you want one of those bikes with the pansy bars?” he asked

“No, Dad,” I said. “Those are called sissy bars.”

“Oh, and a banana split seat?”

“That’s a banana seat!”

“I bet you want one of those Bang Ray bikes.”

“It’s not a Bang Ray,” I said exasperated. “It’s called a Stingray.”

I realized at that moment just how un-hip and un-cool my parents were. They didn’t understand the terminology and were always way behind the times. I also realized where this was going.

“NO!” I shouted cutting off the discussion. “Do not get me a Stingray bike! I DON’T want a Stingray!”

I had to emphasize this point a few times to drive it home. We have all experienced this scenario as kids: Our parents, while they mean well, never really hear what a kid says. They only



get a piece of it then go off on their merry way with only half the data lodged in their brain and then pick out what they *thought* the kid had asked for based on that little crumb of information.

A prime example of this happened only a few months before. There was another fantastic toy of the day brought to you by the fine people at *Whamo*. It was called the *Super Ball*.

The Super Ball was a rock hard piece of compressed rubber. Embedded within the dark covering was a marble size ball of steel. This thing was so hard that if you dropped it, not throw it, mind you, but just dropped it, it would bounce 200-feet into the air. Getting hit in the forehead with one of these was akin to being shot with a musket ball. So help me I've seen Super Balls take out brick walls.

Everybody had to have one and so did I. One day I asked my Mom if she would buy me one when she went to the store not expecting to actually get one. She came home with a *Souper Ball*. Da-hell? A Souper Ball was a round, gelatinous ball that when you slung it against a wall it would splatter a bit, cling to the wall, and then ooze to the ground. It was cool, but it wasn't a Super Ball.

And so it was that I felt the need to stress the point one more time. I knew they would only run with the part of the conversation about a "Bang Ray" bike and go looking for one and even though they didn't exist they'd probably find one.

"I don't want a Stingray," I said firmly. "I want a Schwinn 10-speed Continental Derailleur."

It was the Cadillac of bikes and my folks, surprisingly enough, knew it. After a moment of silence they began to laugh hysterically.

"Yeah, right!" My old man said. "Do you know how much that thing costs?"

"\$99.50," I shot back to which I was bombarded with the inevitable parentalisms.

"Do you think we're made of money? Do you think money grows on trees?"

I laid back down in the back of the wagon, put my hands behind my head, and resigned myself to the fact that there would be no Schwinn 10-speed Continental Derailleur for my birthday. And I was right. My birthday and the ensuing party arrived. After the obligatory mumbling of the song "Happy Birthday" by my Mom and the gang and cake all around I opened the present from my folks – a *Kooky Kamera*, and oh, was it kooky.

It really was a camera that took sepia toned, grainy photos reminiscent of Civil War photos I had seen in my sister's American history book. What made this camera unique was that it came in pieces that you had to assemble yourself. Each piece resembled a piece of trash. The tripod it stood on looked like drain pipes from under the bathroom sink; the Kodak flashcube it used sat in a beat up aluminum saucepan; and the lens looked like an old rusty Campbell Soup can. Again, cool, but not the bike of my dreams.

The party ended and my friends decided to ride their bikes down to the sweet shop on Main Street to check out the new comics.

"See you in about an hour, Jake?" Badger chuckled as he hopped onto the brand new Stingray that his folks gave him for his own birthday a few weeks earlier. The gang saddled up and laughed as Badger triumphantly led the pack down the street.

It was a known fact that I would be walking to the sweet shop. Yes, I had a bike. It was a Schwinn but I called it the Schwartz - the Schwartz Studebaker. What a God-awful bike it was. I'd rather walk than be caught dead riding it and I'm sure the fine town folk of Middale were happy about that decision, too. It was a menace to society. The spokes on this bike would pop out at the most in-opportune moments, usually as I was passing someone walking down the sidewalk. The metal would whack them mercilessly in the legs as I passed. Then there was the bolt that held the seat at just the right height for me to ride. It would never stay tight and would loosen just enough so that whenever I hit a bump the seat would crash down and my knees would wound up around my ears.

To this day the great state of New Jersey's Department of Transportation requires cars and trucks to be inspected annually. Every year you would take you vehicle to a specified location where D.O.T. officials would make sure that your horn worked, your headlights were properly aligned, and your emissions were low. If you passed they would slap a green sticker with the month the car passed inspection emblazoned on it to the inside of your windshield and you were good until the following year. If you failed, you would get the dreaded red sticker which meant you had to have the problems they found corrected then come back within so many days and wait in line to have it re-inspected.

That sounds simple enough until you take into account just how many people drive cars in northern New Jersey. The population is so immense, so huge that having your car inspected is an all-day event. I've heard of people dying of starvation while waiting in line to have their car inspected.

When I was finally old enough to have a car of my own and was able to drive my inspection station was located in the town of Lodi. Even though it had nothing to do with my situation and it was about Lodi, California, and not Lodi, New Jersey, that Creedence Clearwater Revival song would play in an endless loop in my head as I waited for hours in the inspection line: "Oh, Lord, stuck in Lodi again."

The town of Middale had a similar policy for bicycles. To help raise money for whatever reason you could take your bike to the police station and for a quarter they would inspect your bike for you. They would check the tightness of the chain, made sure everything was tight and lubricated, and made sure the tires were inflated properly. If you passed you received a green sticker to put on the bike. I would regularly ride my junker to police headquarters and have it inspected, its spokes whacking people along the way. The police would just laugh at me.

"Here!" they'd chortle. "Here's a sticker! Take it! Keep your quarter!"

Oh, the humiliation.

And to top it off, just to show you how ratty the bike was, at school there was row upon row of bike racks so you could ride your bike to school and park it for the day. You'd position the front wheel between the bars and then lock the wheel tightly to the rack with a padlock so no one could steal it. I would purposely leave mine sans lock in hopes of someone stealing it. They never did.

Before you could say, “Jack Frost nipping at your nose”, it was Christmas Eve. I had begged and pleaded for a new bike for months only to have my pleas blocked out by my parents. I went to the local W.T. Grants department store where I told a not-so-convincing Santa with garlic breath my sad story but he just gave me the cold shoulder, a candy cane, and sent me on my way without even a Merry Christmas.

That year the northeast faced a bitterly cold and miserable winter, even for us kids. The snow was waist deep and the wind was numbing and blew right through you and your 30-inches of winter survival gear. My Mom asked me to run down the street to pick up a last minute loaf of bread before the stores shut down for the holiday. I scurried downtown and on the way back I lost a boot in an enormous snow drift. I wouldn’t find that boot again until the spring thaw. I ran all the way home from the grocery store hobbling along like a horse that had thrown a shoe wearing only socks on my feet.

As the sun began to set the streets came alive painting a very Norman Rockwellesque picture. The snow glistened as the street lights winked on; the smell of baking oatmeal and chocolate chip cookies wafted through the air; the sound of several kids caroling “Silent Night” could be heard in the distance.

Christmas lights of all colors flickered on outside of the homes that lined the street. Across the street from our house Mr. Kaufman flicked on his usual string of solid blue lights that had the most amazing effect on the newly fallen snow. There must have been a million bulbs in his display and when he powered them up the lights in the entire neighborhood dimmed a little.

My sister was just turning on our lights as I raced into the yard. The bulbs were humungous jobbers. They must have been 60-watts or more in size not like these dinky bulbs today. They were bright enough to light the front sidewalk and half the street. Heck, you could almost heat the entire house with the warmth these things put out.

The house we were renting was, well, weird. There were only two ways to gain entry. The first way was through the front door that opened into an enclosed porch which then led into the living room. The second door was on the side of the house and it opened into what should have been a mudroom or utility room but instead it was the downstairs half bathroom. This proved to provide many an awkward moment for the Cryzachek family. It was always a surprise when you’d fly up the stairs and throw the door open never knowing if someone was in the room doing their business and had forgotten to lock the door.

I raced up to this side door and threw it open. Sure enough, the door flung open and hit someone behind it with a thud. It was my old man.

“Da-hell you doin’?” He shouted. “Go around the front!”

I halfheartedly apologized and ran into the front porch instead. An old cast iron radiator creaked and moaned as it struggled to pump out enough warmth to heat the room. I took off my mittens, scarf, and my now saturated socks, and put them on its hot metal vanes to dry.

The lights in the living room were low. The Christmas tree we had painstakingly picked out from dozens of others at Crazy Berkowski’s Tree Emporium towered in a corner next to the stairs that led up to the bedrooms on the second floor. The tree was adorned with several strands



of multi-colored lights and a good ton of silvery, shiny tinsel. A rotating translucent color disc of red, blue, and white sat a few feet before it. The disc turned serenely before a spotlight bulb, showering the tree with a psychedelic pattern onto the already color drenched conifer.

My mother, God love her, had packed a small 3-foot by 4-foot coffee table with every imaginable type of confection. There were sugar cookies, peanut butter cookies, spice cookies, divinity, chocolate and peanut butter fudge, bowls full of white and red peppermints, milk chocolate footballs, ribbon candy. Not an inch of table could be seen and it groaned under the weight. All of this was for Santa and the old boy deserved it.

Me and my sisters had a family tradition. Every Christmas Eve at about this time in the evening we would gather around the television. This was a big night for TV watching at our house because the most popular shows of the holiday season were aired. It all began with the *Andy Williams Christmas Special* and that black bear he interacted with, Cookie Bear. No kidding. That was his name.

Following Andy was the *King Family Christmas Special* with special guest Alvin Ray and his Talking Guitar. I don't know about the rest of the world but I could do without the King Family. Just bring on the younger King member, Tina Cole! She was the stuff dreams were made of for boys of our generation. Tina was enough to even make the guys in the gang watch *My Three Sons* when she was added to the cast, something we'd never do normally.

Then there was the classic Rankin and Bass production of *Rudolph the Red Nose Reindeer*, a masterful piece of television if ever there was one. The songs, the animated figures, and the Norelco commercial that had Santa Claus gliding down a snowy hill on a triple head electric shaver that was so seamlessly blended into the program you believed it was actually a scene from the show. *Rudolph* seemed to last forever. Take out the razor commercial and it was probably only ten minutes long.

Before I could settle in for the holiday festivities, though, I had to complete my mission. I darted into the kitchen and handed my Mom the bread. I peeked around the corner and saw that the bathroom door was ajar and through the crack I could see my old man inside. He sat on the toilet with a pile of screws, springs, nuts, and bolts strewn about the floor. He was reading out loud from a large paper diagram that covered his face. He was building something.

“Screw ‘A’ is threaded through bar ‘B’ then clamped to bar ‘C’,” he mumbled to himself.

I walked in and immediately my eyes lit up. Instantly I knew what he was doing. I had hit the mother lode! He was putting together a Schwinn 10-speed Continental Derailleur! I swore I heard the *Hallelujah Chorus* being sung by angels at that very moment but then I realized that the song was coming from the television in the other room.

“Hey!” Dad shouted pointing a wrench at me. “Get that look off your face!”

“But dad!” I shouted like a schoolgirl. “It’s my bike!”

“It’s not *your* bike,” he said going back to work. “Creep’s dad bought this for him for Christmas. I’m putting it together over here for his Dad so Creep won’t find it.”

My heart sank, no, it crashed right through the floor. In an instant my dreams were squashed. Creep was getting my bike.

I walked back through the kitchen where my mother, not looking up once from the kielbasa and sauerkraut she was boiling on the stove, announced that dinner was almost ready.

“I’m not hungry,” I sobbed.

I shuffled my feet as I made my way to the living room, my head hung low between my shoulders. My sisters just sat there and for the first time in their lives they knew that it was not the right time to make a snide remark. They watched me slowly walk up the stairs to my room.

I couldn’t sleep at all that night. Thoughts of Creep gliding to and from school on his Schwinn haunted me. I thought of ingenious plans to abscond the bike from him. Maybe I could steal it and ride it off to Mexico until the heat was off? Or maybe I could...no. I just had to resign myself to the fact that I was still bike-less.

I hopped into bed and stared out of the bedroom window into the darkness. A lone streetlight across the street shimmered with a yellow glow. I stared at it and began fading in and out of that twilight zone before sleep. Occasionally I caught myself dozing and my eyes popped back open and would refocus on the lamp. Silhouetted in that yellowish light I could see something float by. Then again. Before you knew it, it looked like a giant pillow fight going on outside the window. It was snowing again. The world was silent as it fell, accumulating deeper and deeper. Before long I was fast asleep.

The next morning I awoke to the sound of shouting from downstairs. It was my Dad.

“Don’t you know what day it is?” he shouted up the stairs. “Get a move on!”

“Yeah,” Joyce yelled. “We’re waiting on you dweeb!”

“Shh,” my mother scolded.

For the first time ever I wasn’t the first one up on Christmas morning. There was just no hurry today.

I walked down the stairs with my head hanging low thinking that this would be the worst day of my life. I slowly made the turn on the bottom landing and before I stepped off and into the living room I looked at the tree. Even with the heart crushing disappointment I was about to face I saw the beauty in the tree. I gazed at the star that topped its peak and scanned down the branches until my gaze reached the floor. And that’s when I saw it.

Amidst all of the shiny paper and bows, neatly parked before the spectacularly lit tree, standing stoically, majestically, a glowing aura surrounding it from the lights on the tree and the color light wheel that bathed the scene. Oh my God! It was the Schwinn 10-speed Derailleur!

I ran to it and hopped on. I played with the breaks and put a death grip on the handle bars as I jerked the front wheel from side to side to get a feel for its action.

My parents stood off to the side, a satisfied smile on each of their faces. Just then it hit me. I stopped and looked at the two of them and slowly, ever so slowly, reality set in. It was like a bolt out of the blue. How could I have been so stupid? I had finally discovered the secret of Santa Claus!

Other kids had known the secret for a long time. All of those stories I had heard about Santa were true and they all made sense now. I was only a bit upset with the revelation, but understood completely. I came to realize that Santa couldn’t possibly bring all of those big

presents to every kid in the world let alone getting them down those small chimneys. It was up to the parents to give the big gifts!

That year I wrote a long letter to Santa and thanked him for the bajillion “some-assembly-required” toys that kept my old man grumbling way past New Year’s Day, and then made sure I gave my Mom and Dad a huge hug, probably the first in many years, and whispered a thank you to them as I took the Schwinn out the front door and onto the sidewalk for a test drive.