Night Ride

by Dallas Denny

Bicycles have changed, and yet they are the same. They are still silent running and breezes in your hair and sweaty palms from holding onto handlebars too long. They are leaning into curves and riding without hands, pumping harder when you go uphill, and coasting when you can find a downhill. Modern bikes only remotely resemble those I rode when I was a kid the first time, but the old-time feeling is still there, fresh as ever it was and ever will be.

"Dad?"
"Yes, son?"
"Are there people on the stars?"
"I don't know. There might be."
"Do you think they're any happier than we are here on Earth?"
"I couldn't answer that."
"Dad?"
"Ummm?"
"When you were a little boy, were you happy?"
"I suppose so."
"I mean, were you glad you— glad you were you?"
"I'm not sure what you mean. Yes, I think so."
"Dad, will I grow up to be a man like you?"
"I hope so."
"Boys grow up to be men?"
"Yes."
"And girls grow up to be women?"
"Ummm."
"Dad, do boys ever grow up to be women? Do girls ever grow up to be men?"
"No!"
"Why not?"
"They just don't. Now, no more silly questions."

Ever since I learned to wobble down the road without training wheels, I have ridden in the dark. After everyone in the house had settled into night noises, I would throw back the covers, ease out of bed, pull on a pair of

shorts, slowly, oh so slowly raise the well-oiled window, and use the pine tree near the window as a rough-barked jungle gym, clambering to the ground in sticky-palmed silence. I would find my bicycle where it had fallen over— I had the habit then of stepping off the pedal, letting the bike travel where it would— and glide quietly down the drive, turning onto the sidewalk. If I pedaled furiously, I would have enough momentum to jump the three steps in front of the Rodriguez' house. Then I had to brake for the turn on the long straightway of Coney Drive. And I would scream into the night in frustration and defiance and pedal, pedal, the bike's red paint black in the moonlight.

The bicycle is made entirely of organic-composite materials. It is absurdly light. The frame is photoluminescent, glowing yellow-green. The pedals travel in an elliptical pattern which closely approximates the human gait. In place of the chain, there is a shaft mechanism which stores kinetic energy, accumulating it on the downhills and releasing it on the uphills. Instead of a single gear, there is an infinitely variable gearbox which senses road conditions and the strength with which I am pedaling, and adjusts itself accordingly. There are anti-lock brakes that will stop me on a dime. A voice-operated computer is built into the frame; it tells me how fast I am going, how far I have come, and how long I have been riding. It will amuse me, if I wish, by reading to me, by playing music, or by telling jokes. It will tell me the latitude and longitude and the time, should I want to know. It warms me of approaching traffic. If I fall over and don't get up quickly enough to suit it, it will broadcast an emergency message; no more stepping off the pedal and letting the bike run to ground. It even calls me Susie.

They didn't put street lights in until I was sixteen, and by then it didn't matter, for I was more interested in a prestige ride than in a bicycle— bikes were for kids. I had a car by then. But when I was eight or nine, I would straighten, raising my butt off the seat, lean over the handlebars, and drive the pedals like John Henry drove steel. Three minutes in the dark (I timed it by day, when I could see the hands of my watch), and then I would bear left at the fork onto Martindale, which was winding and hilly. I would have my second wind by then; most of the time I could pull the hills sitting down. Later, when I got my first automobile, those grades on Martindale didn't look like much. On the bike, though, they were formidable, and I took great pride in conquering them. To this day, I'm still not sure which perspective was closest to the objective reality that some people believe exists. My best guest is that reality, like lunch, is a moveable feast, and that my perception was right both times. Those hills were steep when I was on my single-speed Schwinn, and they flattened out when I was in my Chevrolet. And when I moved away, first to the city and then to this far location, the hills and my parents and everything that I had ever known ceased to exist. And now, since I am approximately 10,000,000,000,000 hours (by bicycle) from my place of origin, the slopes and grades of my first youth take shape only when I think of them. They're real tonight, certainly. I can hear the bullfrogs in the pond on the Lee's dairy farm, just as they were when I pumped past in the springtime of the year and of my life.

I can remember the night rains; one caught me on Winger Lane, making me fly low down the only really steep hill on my course. Having little knowledge, at that tender age, of inertia, I did not stop as abruptly as I had anticipated, instead driving straight into the barbed wire along the pasture at the end of the road. Had the single rusty strand not parted, I would have been seriously hurt. Abandoning my bicycle, I left a bloody trail all the way back to my yard, up the pine tree, into my room, and to the bathroom, where I rinsed gravel from a cut, held the flesh together most of the night until the bleeding stopped, then mopped up my mess and crept back to my room and back down the tree and back to Winger Lane to retrieve the wheeled friend of my first youth.

On other nights, though, a right from Winger onto Brookshire, and a straight shot home. I would hop off, letting the Schwinn roll away into the darkness, would already be spidering up that pine tree by the time I heard it fall. Sweaty but exuberant, I would collapse onto the bed, bringing great draughts of oxygen into my lungs, my mind blessedly blank, my arms outthrust. When I caught my breath or felt myself beginning to drowse, I would stand up, kick off the short pants, file them under the mattress for future use, crawl under the covers, and close my eyes. Usually the ride had the desired effect, and I would fall asleep immediately. Things were better during the days, when I could contrive things to keep me busy. But sometimes I did not fall asleep after my ride and I would lie in the darkness, aghast at the immensity of the wrongness of my life, of my body, of my very being. Then the tears would come.

Despite the disadvantages in this light gravity, I choose a traditional seating position rather than a recumbent one or one of the other positions. The seat contours itself to my anatomy. The glowworm frame is hollow, and part of it contains water, gathered from the moisture in the air, which I can drain into a cup which at other times functions as part of the frame. The headlights tap into the kinetic storage device. They are bright and tightly collimated. I can vary their intensity by speaking to the computer.

Sometimes I tell the computer to turn them off so I can ride in the darkness.

I made those rides, winter and summer, until I reached adolescence, which opened vistas of pain that not even bicycling could alleviate. I abandoned night riding, turning my attention to the horrible things that puberty was doing to my body: skin coarsening, hair sprouting on arms and legs and chin, nose lengthening, jaw firming, shoulders broadening, voice deepening. I would look with longing on those more fortunate than I, at their smooth skins and gentle curves, and I would know an envy so immense that it would threaten to consume me. I managed eventually, by dint of hard work and flying against the winds of the established social order (as I had once flown against the night winds on my Schwinn), to change myself so that I replaced that green emotion with a sense of sisterhood. But now the envy is back, stronger than ever, for my body is as it was before, and I am powerless to change it. I could kill myself. Should

kill myself, probably. But I don't. Instead, I ride.

I ride still at night, year round except for the greatest extremes of weather. Then I sit in front of my computer and write in my journal and bemoan my fate.

My rides are longer now. They last most of the night. I am without the guilt of sneaking away from home and hearth, for I am an adult (for the second time), and can do as I please. I cannot *be* as I please, for which I damn all of creation and especially those who sent me here where there is no way to bring my body into consonance with my self-identity. I curse the mistake that ended my existence in the body I had managed to make for myself and took me across centuries and light years and across genders and dumped me here, a balding, two-wheeled miserable creature of the night.

Like a bat, I avoid the sun. I venture out only at night, when there is no one to see me. There are no mirrors in the house, save the small one I use when I tweeze the hairs from my face— a fruitless occupation, for they grow back like weeds in winter wheat.

My name is Susie. Do you like my dress? Do you like my long, long hair? Aren't I a pretty, pretty girl? Would you like to play house with me? I'll be the Mommy and you can be the Daddy. I won't play if I have to be the Daddy. Yes, I know you are a girl, too. Couldn't there be two Mommies? You be a Mommy, and I'll be a Mommy. I don't have a doll. Can I make-believe with one of yours? I'll call mine Susie, and you can call yours Jennifer. Isn't little Susie pretty? Isn't she a cute little baby girl?

Poor dolly Susie. Poor, poor thing. She can't wear her pretty clothes. She has to cut her long, long hair. Susie has been a bad girl. Susie has to throw away her pretty dresses. Susie! You're bad! You know you're not supposed to cry! Boys don't cry. Bad Susie. Bad, bad, dolly!

The first time around, I lived my life for others, and not for myself, at least for the first forty years. I was what everyone expected and needed me to be. I learned to do the things the other boys did. I tinkered with my car. I dated. I went into the service— the Marines, for was I not a man? And if not, wouldn't it show during boot camp? Three years and a decoration for bravery, and then back home, scarred in mind and body. I studied engineering. I met a girl. Eventually we married. We had two children. We had marital problems. Normal things, but not far underneath my bluff exterior hid little Susie, waiting her chance. My chance. She seized it after the divorce. By then, her body had hardened. She did not let that stop her. She sought out others like herself— yes, they existed, and like herself, they were beginning to come forward. She found out what she had to do to manifest her true self, and she straightaway went about doing it. On her male skeletal structure she, with the help of hormones and surgery, imposed woman-flesh; it took years. She unlearned male patterns of behavior, all but the beaten-in inability to cry, and learned to express her long-suppressed femininity. She suffered public ridicule, at first, but with the passage of time her presentation became less anomalous; she began to fit in, to be a more-or-less normal woman. She was no longer an object of curiosity in public, had become just another person. And so she found a job.

I cannot be as I please, for which I damn all of creation and especially those who sent me here where there is no way to bring my body into consonance with my self-identity. I curse the mistake that ended my existence in the body I had managed to make for myself and took me across centuries and light years and across genders and dumped me here, a balding, two-wheeled miserable creature of the night.

Susie went to work for ColdSav, a controversial firm that preserved people cryogenically— in whole or in part, depending on the amount of money the client had to spend— in the hopes that at some future date medical technology would allow their reanimation, and that the society of that age would be willing to do it. She traveled with a picnic basket-sized container and a co-worker, a surgeon. They would arrive on site and await death (if it hadn't already arrived). The surgeon would then cheerfully remove the head and place it in the short-term cryogenic storage unit. Susie was responsible for ferrying the remains to the parent company in California, where there were facilities for long-term storage.

Some people said her work was ghoulish; sometimes she thought so herself. But it paid, and well, and she didn't allow herself to think about the ramifications of what she did or what was in the container she carried. She immersed herself in her job and her emerging social life, and seemed on the verge of true happiness when circumstance struck. It took the form of a failed rotor.

The helicopter scissored in at an angle (or so the newspapers had said), spreading wreckage, both mechanical and human, over five frozen acres. When the rescuers arrived, they found the broken shell of the cryogenic container and scant feet away, Susie's decapitated head. A team from ColdSav appeared just then and, assuming that her remains were those of their client, slapped poor Susie into a supercooled tub. The client had, it turned out, purchased an immortality that was not to be. Her head had rolled under a mesquite bush; it wasn't located for four days. It had taken a coyote only a single day to find it.

When ColdSav realized that it was the itinerant Susie who slept in their vaults, the Board of Directors was faced with an ethical dilemma (as well as the financial dilemma caused by a lawsuit from the erstwhile client's irate descendants). Susie had not paid for preservation, and her small estate would not begin to cover the cost of perpetuating her, even were her next of kin so inclined. Susie was not eligible for a free ride; she had declined the modest deduction for that benefit when she had joined the company. Yet to take her out of the vaults now was, according to the hopeful boasts of ColdSav, to deny her the chance of future life. Fortunately, ColdSav was a young company. Lacking the cynicism of a more mature enterprise, the Board voted to maintain her free of charge.

And as there was no next of kin, her family having forsaken her, Susie was kept, as a kindness, for hundreds of years, and was thawed out and life rekindled, finally, because she was a curiosity, and because she had no say-so about being transported across 10.5 light years, and because in addition to satisfying the curious, she could be put to other work.

"Who is Susie?"

A feeling of coldness, of horror. Of wanting to sink through the floor. "I— I don't know."

"You don't know. And I suppose you don't know what these clothes were doing in your room."

"No. I don't know anything about them, I swear."

"These are yours, aren't they? Aren't they? Look at me when I'm talking to you! Where did you get them? Are they mine? Did you take them from my room? You did, didn't you? Wait until your father hears about this!"

"Mom—"

"Did you put these on? No, don't tell me. I'm not listening. I don't want to hear. Oh, where did I go wrong? Jimmy, what in the world makes you do these things? What is wrong with you? It must be my fault."

"No, Mom—"

"I want you to take these out and burn them. Now! And if I ever catch you with anything like this again, I'll beat you to within a half-inch of your life. Do you understand?"

"Yes ma'am."

"I want you to promise never to do this again."

"..."

"Promise me."

"..."

"Promise!"

"Ok! Ok!"

"Now take them out and burn them. All of them. There had better not be anything left. You make sure of that. I don't want your father to find out anything about this; it would kill him. This is a closed chapter of my life. Promise me."

"..."

"Promise me!"

The old neighborhood is a distant memory. I ride into the desert, flat and straight, as fast as my legs will take me. The wind tosses my hair, still short like it was when I was a kid. I would have worn it long then, but that was not possible for a boy in the 1950's, in the South. It doesn't matter now, for there is very little left. I'm a bald old man. Man, man, man, man.

Few of the cold-sleeps from the XXth century were ever brought to life. Human life has always been cheap, and if possible, it was even cheaper on an Earth with 50 billion people. I was chosen because records showed I had been associated with one of the early cold-sleep companies and because my genotype did not match my phenotype. That is, my karyotype showed me to be a genetic male, while that part of me which still existed seemed to be female, although with microscarring caused by electrolysis and plastic surgery. There were questions they wanted answered, even if they wouldn't have their answers for a long, long time, for my new body was "grown" in transit, and the tapes I am making for those faceless people on the mother planet will have to wait for the next starship, which is not due for decades.

I was selected because few living persons are willing to give up life on Earth for a rigorous existence on a planet circling a distant star. I had no chance to say no. I was awakened just before planetfall, wearing an artificially produced genetic duplicate of the body I had been born with on Earth centuries earlier. A male body.

I was supposed to be grateful for being alive. I'm not. Conditions are primitive, the planet populated by a few hundred others like me. We are widely scattered, and can communicate only because of the geosynchronous communications satellites. There is food enough, and more, and a store of manufactured goods, books, videos. A robot doctor can dispense routine medications and even do simple surgeries— but it has no supply of estrogens and it certainly cannot do the surgery I want. There is no possibility of returning to Earth. The starship left immediately, and another is not expected for 30 years. I have been forced to watch my body harden and become masculinized, feel the testosterone poisoning my tissues. My neighbors (miles distant) wonder why I am not more sociable, why I will not turn on the video when we talk on the phone, why "Susie" has such a deep voice.

My job is to stay here in this house in the middle of the desert. Once a day, I sit at a computer console and monitor instrument readings (the planet is being terraformed), and in the remote chance that something malfunctions, I am to send out an alarm signal, so that maybe a starship will show up twenty years from today, instead of thirty. Once a day, I make a trip outside to collect biological specimens, which I preserve, much as I was myself once preserved. Once a day, I sit at the console and answer canned questions about my first youth. I wonder if it will even matter to the historians a hundred years from now, when the tapes finally arrive. At night, I ride— and for the same reasons that I once rode on Earth.

At one-third Earth normal, hills are not a problem. Pedaling is much easier. Stopping and turning would be impossibly difficult if not for the help provided by the computer and by the incredible road-grip of the tires— which, I understand, temporarily widen when more traction is needed. Even so, I had to learn about inertia all over again. This time, fortunately, I had the advantages of protective clothing and helmet and a self-healing bicycle, and there are no barbed wire fences. After my worst spill, I simply let the bicycle sit in the sun for several days, and the forks and wheels straightened into the remembered positions. Scratches in the bacterial-based paint heal overnight.

But despite all its differences, the bicycle is fundamentally the same as the Schwinn of my first youth. It takes me out, out into the night, uses up my energy, bring me safely home, too weary to think, a man who became a woman and who is now once again a man.

Bicycles have changed, and yet they are the same. They are still silent running and breezes in your hair and sweaty palms from holding onto handlebars too long. They are leaning into curves and riding without hands, pumping harder when you go uphill, and coasting when you can find a downhill. Modern bikes only remotely resemble those I rode when I was a kid the first time, but the old-time feeling is still there, fresh as ever it was and ever will be. ♀♂