

## Flights of Fancy

When I was ten, I had a flying bicycle....at least that's what I thought.

It was a purple Huffy with silver pinstriping, and if ever a bike deserved to be magical, it was this one. I had marked the page in the Sears catalog, leaving a hand-written note for Santa. Although I had recently come to suspect Santa was my parents, I was still hedging my bets to be on the safe side.

*“Dear Santa - This is all I want for Christmas. If I get this, I promise to be good forever!”*

As I was harshly reminded the following March, forever is a long, long time.

I remember my grandmother weeping, great sobs that carried through the hallway, as strangers and distant relatives filled the house. I can still smell the wet wool of coats laid out on the bed, mingling with the aroma of casseroles brought by kindly neighbors. The adults spoke in hushed tones, making Gram's sobs seem to echo even louder, as my cousin Mike and I sat on the carpet of my room, keeping an eye on his little sister, Terry.

Mike had obviously been instructed to *not talk about the accident*. He kept up a running monologue about Star Trek episodes as we played with monster action figures on the shag rug. Terry was only seven, though, and she didn't hesitate to interject when Mike paused for breath.

“Daddy says you're an orphan now, 'cause your mom and dad are gone forever.”

Her eyes were wide, an innocent blue, as she spoke the word that seemed so foreign, yet would become my lifelong companion. *Orphan*.

Mike hushed her, glancing worriedly at me.

“Sorry, Jenna. She doesn’t know...” he trailed off because Terry *did* know. There it was, plain and simple. My life would never be the same.

“It’s okay,” I said, averting my gaze.

I had bawled my eyes out for days, of course – I had loved my parents, and now they were gone. It was still so fresh, though. I hadn’t thought about what it would mean to my life. It all seemed unreal, and I was determined to keep it that way.

Reality set in soon enough, and my fate was decided. I guess I was lucky. No orphanage for me, no foster home needed. I didn’t even have to change schools. My Gram decided she would move into our house and become my guardian.

Things were pretty strict. Gram was religious, and we went to church on Sundays and Wednesdays. We knelt by the bed and prayed with the rosary on Good Friday. There was a whole list of things I couldn’t do anymore, like watch Star Trek, or play Atari. Sitting around and daydreaming was frowned upon, too.

“*Idle hands are the devil’s tools*” she’d say, as she sat in my dad’s chair, watching her gameshows and soap operas.

It turned out another adage was true; *out of sight was out of mind*. If I made myself scarce, she didn’t seem to really notice my absence.

The last present my parents had ever bought me was the Huffy bike, and I treasured it from day one. In fact, I’d left the big, red Christmas bow attached to the frame long after the holiday was over. I remember my mom teasing me, as the bow became tattered at the end of January, and my dad joking soon it would be Valentine’s Day and the red bow would be in

season again. I had taken the bow off and stashed it in my closet in late February, in favor of silver streamers attached to the grips of the handlebars.

The spring after the accident, I revived the bow... kind of as a remembrance of them.

So, you can imagine, the purple Huffy *looked* like a magical bike should look. Silver streamers flared out as I rode fast, and that shiny red bow shimmered, but stayed stuck to the frame, courtesy of the Scotch tape wound liberally around it.

The first day I flew on my bicycle was in late July, when the temperature was in the mid-nineties. I had been sitting at the kitchen table with Gram, reading verses aloud from the Bible. The kitchen curtains hung limply in front of the open windows, and I silently added "*please bless us with a cool breeze*" to my recited prayers.

I suddenly heard an enchanting tone ringing in the distance, drifting through the window. That welcome, celebratory, favored song of summer: a plunking, repetitive version of "Pop Goes the Weasel."

*The ice cream man!* I stiffened in my seat but kept my eyes on the verse in front of me.

I may have stumbled over a word or two, but recovered quickly, reading Isaiah 40:31, "...*they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles...*"

I could hear the neighborhood kids through the open window. Pete...Lisa...Jimmy.

Cries of "The ice cream man!" resounded through the neighborhood as everyone took to their bikes to catch him at the intersection, one street over. It was exceedingly rare for him to come down our own sparsely populated road.

I finished the passage, and briefly closed my eyes, trying to appear pious, as I fervently prayed Gram would deem the lesson complete and release me.

It worked. She bowed her head and said, “Amen,” then looked at the clock and commented, “Well. It’s time for my show.”

She stood up to brew a cup of tea to enjoy while she watched Phil Donahue, and I slipped out the slider and ran for my bike.

The neighborhood was silent as I set off and raced down our street. Everyone had a head start on me, and I hoped I didn’t miss my chance. Three shiny quarters burned in the pocket of my cutoff shorts as I approached the top of the hill.

I braked briefly at the top and peered down the half-mile-long slope, shielding my eyes against the bright sunlight. I spied the familiar white truck already stopped at the intersection, a crowd of kids jostling each other for the coveted front row position. There were only six or seven kids, most of them on bikes. I’d better hurry or I’d miss my chance!

I pushed off, pedaling madly, streamers flying out, with the red bow fluttering in the wind. As I narrowed my eyes against the shimmer of heat rising from the hot tar, I could see that a few kids had already moved away from the truck and were standing around, enjoying their treats.

My heart sank at the thought of reaching the bottom of the hill too late, making small talk with my friends as they enjoyed Nutty Buddies and Creamsicles with pity in their eyes.

I doubled my efforts, pumping the pedals as I raced down the hill. I was going faster than I ever had before. The bike was shaking like it would break into a million pieces as I added my own frenetic energy to the steep slope of Turtle Hill Road.

*I wasn’t going to make it.* There were only two kids left in line and I was just halfway there. I remember intensely focusing on the last girl in line, who was wearing a pink top. She had

blond pigtails, and I stared at the back of her head, wishing fervently that I was *right there*, in her spot.

The bike lifted off the ground. At first, I didn't understand what was happening. There was this strange illusion that I was moving backward. I guess my ten-year-old brain couldn't process what I was seeing. The pavement was getting further away, and I thought, "*Why am I pedaling backward?*"

I suddenly realized I was above the road, and I could see the roofs of the houses. The telephone lines seemed within reach, and the ice cream truck and my friends were looking smaller. But then, I panicked.

I remember looking down at the road, maybe fifteen feet below me, and thinking perhaps I was dying. Maybe my soul was going to Heaven. It was that unsettling thought that brought me crashing back down.

*Oomph!* My teeth clacked together as my bike hit the pavement with a bone-jarring thud. I felt the Huffy's tires squash against the asphalt, jouncing all the way down to the rims and bouncing back up again, as I tried to hang onto the wobbling handlebars and keep my balance.

I was still going really fast, and I was less than fifteen feet away from the girl in the pigtails.

I bailed. I jumped off and sent my precious Huffy crashing into the pavement, scratching the purple paint, and causing my friend Jimmy to drop his ice cream as he jumped out of the way. I did a crazy hopping-running move that kept me on my feet, sparing me skinned knees but earning the jeers of the other kids.

At first, I thought they'd seen me fly. They were all looking at me. Some whispered and snickered as my stumbling slowed, and I found my balance. The tires of my wrecked bike slowly

stopped spinning as I stood there, catching my breath, trying to think of what to say. My heart pounded with inexplicable guilt as I waited for their judgement.

“And what can I get you, young lady?” the ice cream man smiled at me kindly.

I gaped at him, then looked around and saw the kids had all gone back to their conversations. No one was even paying me any attention. *No one had seen me fly.*

“A fudgsicle,” I said, my mind whirling, but my priorities firmly in order. “Please.”

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Of course, I had my doubts it had really happened.

As I stood there, licking chocolate drips off my hand, my fudgsicle melting more quickly than I could consume it, I regarded my bike on the pavement, wondering if I had imagined the whole thing. Luckily, the damage to my prized possession was just superficial, and I was able to replicate the experiment. It was several days before I had both the privacy and the courage to try it again.

I was riding home alone after playing at my friend Missy’s house and casting worried glances at the rapidly setting sun. I had been avoiding thinking too much about “the ice cream incident,” knowing anything that labeled me as being different would only make my life harder.

Also, a vague uneasiness lingered, subconsciously equating rising into the sky with death, a notion which kept my mind and my wheels firmly on the ground.

But, that day, another unwelcome fate was far more easily imagined. Being grounded for arriving home after sunset seemed a distinct possibility. *Flying would be faster.*

I pedaled faster to gain speed and then fixated on a spot about fifty feet ahead, a desolate area of the street flanked by empty lots on either side. I focused my will on being *right there... right now...* With a slight wobble, I felt my bicycle lift from the ground.

Determined not to panic, I kept my gaze fixed on the air straight in front of me, resolving not to look down or around. Suddenly, I was sailing smoothly through the air, the wind blowing back my hair and a triumphant grin plastered to my face.

*I was doing it! Flying, right down Cullen Road!*

Aware of the houses clustered at the end of the lane, I focused on gently setting my wheels back down on pavement. It was harder than lifting off, and I landed much less gracefully, almost going over the handlebars on impact. I gained control after a moment of awkward wobbling and zigzagging, and stopped to catch my breath, exhilaration rising in my soul like a bubble.

*I had a magical bike! Probably the only bicycle in the world that could fly!*

I felt like I needed to tell someone...but straight on the heels of that impulse came a very real fear.

I was just a kid, and even worse, an orphan. I was already aware of that label, “orphan”, heavy on my shoulders in this small town. Someone would want my amazing bike and take it away from me. I had to keep this secret to myself.

My silence lasted four entire days.

I flew several more times, just short stretches, getting better at landing with each try. Then one day, I was playing with my friend Missy, and felt an overwhelming impulse to tell her.

Of course, she didn't believe me. I gave a short demonstration, just taking to the sky for about twenty feet, showing off a little by kicking my legs straight out away from the pedals as I glided through the air.

Her mouth dropped open in shock, eyes bugging out. She begged to try it herself, and I reluctantly handed over my magical bike, admonishing her to be careful, especially upon landing. I was painfully aware of the recent scratches that marred the purple paint.

She tried and tried, riding back and forth over the same stretch, as I stood by, calling out suggestions.

“Go faster! You’ve got to get up some speed!”

“Focus!”

“Just imagine yourself over there!”

It obviously wasn’t working. She gave up, eyeing me suspiciously as she handed the bike back to me. I had an uneasy feeling that this hadn’t been a good idea after all, and we parted ways, with Missy reluctantly promising me she wouldn’t tell anyone.

Her promise didn’t even last the ten minutes it took for me to ride home.

I wheeled my bike down the driveway and was met by Gram at the side door. I could tell by the look on her face I was in trouble.

She grabbed my arm and dragged me inside. Her face was beet red as she leaned in close to me.

“What is this nonsense you’re spouting? Mrs. Harris called and said you told Missy you could fly!”

I tried to reason with her, even though I knew it was a bad idea.

“But I can, Gram! It’s my bike! If I concentrate really hard, I can make it fly!”

Gram shook my shoulders, angrier than I’d ever seen her. “You hush right now, Jenna Louise! That’s the devil talking, and I won’t have it!”



I hung my head, tears of frustration unshed in my eyes. I could offer to show her, but I was afraid it would really upset her, maybe even make her believe I was evil. It was best to say nothing. She sent me to bed without supper, and I lay on the mattress, miserable, staring at the ceiling, wondering why I'd ever told Missy Harris anything.

The next day Gram brought me to the church and ordered me into the confessional booth. When the priest asked me how I had sinned, I just whispered, "I don't know..." and sat crying silently.

We came home from church, and I discovered my magical bike, the spectacular purple Huffy with silver spangles and a big red bow... the last thing my parents had given me... was gone. Gram refused to tell me where.

I screamed and cried and had a full-out tantrum. I sulked in my room for weeks. I wouldn't speak to Gram, and I stopped eating for two days. Nothing brought back my precious bike. It took me months to get over her betrayal.

Life moves on, though, and months became years. By the time I was thirteen I had started to doubt if it had ever really happened. It wasn't logical. How could a bicycle fly?

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Corey was new. He didn't have any friends yet and he didn't seem to care. He drew cartoon pictures in class, intently scribbling, and never got embarrassed if he was called on and didn't have the answer. He'd just lift a shoulder and smile.

The best thing about Corey was, he had a crush on me. I was now sixteen, and it was the first time I'd ever felt that thrill, the headiness of knowing a member of the opposite sex found me attractive. It was a delicious feeling, and it boosted my self-esteem.

I caught him watching me in math class. I turned around, feeling his eyes on me, and there he was, just unabashedly gazing at me. In his usual way, he didn't get embarrassed. He just gave me a sweet, sincere smile, and I felt the corners of my mouth tug up, in spite of myself. That afternoon, he asked if he could walk me home.

He carried my books, and we talked about art, music, and poetry. He was sensitive, a kindred spirit. I felt I had more in common with him than any of the kids I'd known all my life. He walked me home every day, and then one day, it happened.

We took a shortcut through the meadow. The late spring day was glorious, blue skies without a cloud in sight, and warm enough to be without a jacket. We walked through the meadow together, talking, and I felt happiness I hadn't known since my parents died.

Corey suddenly set my books down on a stump.

"Hang on a second," he said.

I stood, mystified, as he bent to his task. He picked from the wildflowers surrounding us, forming a bouquet, and turned with a gallant bow.

"Madam," he said, offering me the flowers.

I giggled and accepted them, holding them up to my nose. He cradled his hands around mine, standing close, with an earnest expression.

"When thou art weary, I'll find thee a bed. Of mosses and flowers, to pillow thy head," he whispered, his beautiful hazel eyes, ringed with gold, staring into mine.

He raised a thumb to gently caress my cheek, and my heart hammered in my chest.

"Keats," I whispered back and dropped the bouquet.

We joined our hands and our foreheads leaned together, as our breath mingled. A feeling of absolute joy rose within me. *He was going to kiss me.*

Our lips met, and in that instant, all of who I had been in the past sixteen years didn't matter. The label that had imprinted itself upon me six years ago fell away.

The moment was so powerful, it eclipsed my very being, redefining me.

I *was* the kiss.

I was the sensation of our hands clasped together.

I was the very essence of passion that rose up between us.

I was floating.

I felt Corey's hands trying to drag me down and, confused, I opened my eyes. I was hovering, a foot off the ground, anchored by our joined hands.

His eyes, gazing up at me, were filled with awe, and respect, and admiration. Not a trace of mistrust or suspicion was present on his handsome face.

"Jenna..." Corey breathed, looking at me with love in his gaze. No one had looked at me like that for six, long years. "You are amazing! So beautiful! You are *magical!*"

A serene feeling settled into my spirit, filling the void with light. Corey was right. There was a new word to define me now, a new label. One that I embraced.

I, Jenna Louise O'Neal, was magical.

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