Before I had a motorcycle, I had a car, and before I had a car, I had a bicycle. My bicycle, my first vehicle, my first ticket to freedom, was the way out of the boundaries of my childhood neighborhood, which in my younger days was enough, but now felt confining. The bicycle was a freedom machine. With it, I travelled to Pierce Park, Mead pool, Alicia Park, and to Lutz Park, where I wasn’t allowed to go, and to Koehnke’s woods, where I very definitely was not allowed to go, and dozens of other places my parents never found out about.

The premium bike, the holy grail of bikes, was the Schwinn. When we were younger, my friends and I traveled to the Schwinn shop, which we were also not allowed to visit because it was downtown, where we gazed longingly at bikes we couldn’t hope to buy. By the age of twelve, my buddies and I were older, wiser, and taller, and coveted the racing bike. All the cool, older kids rode them. Racing bikes had a full-size frame, thin racing tires, turn-down Rams Horn handlebars with lever brakes, a skinny seat, gear selectors mounted on the frame, and no fenders.

Also, at twelve, my financial options had expanded. I no longer depended solely on my parents' money. I had a paper route and purchasing power, which brought even more independence. I wanted the more grown-up full-sized bike and envisioned myself racing down the streets, almost as fast as a car, traveling even further from home. I decided to buy the bike, and it had to be a Schwinn.

As a preteen with expanded horizons, I was able to ride to the Schwinn shop on my own. There I found an entire display of racing bikes. I quickly realized the ten-speed models were out of my price range, but there were four five-speed models I could afford. I wanted the red one, which had a sixty-dollar price tag.

I didn’t have sixty dollars, but I now understood how much I’d need, and I had a goal. I’d save up my money until I could buy the bike. I went home excited, brochure in my back pocket.

I began saving throughout that summer and into the fall, putting aside a little money after each round of weekly collections. As Christmas approached, I also approached my goal. I thought I’d have enough, with the expected paper route Christmas tips, to buy the bike during the holiday break. My parents, apprised of my progress, knew I was close.

Christmas came, and, as was our custom, we handed out gifts to each other on Christmas Eve. Santa always came during the night, even to twelve-year-old non-believers. Santa didn’t wrap his presents; that’s how we knew they were from him.

On Christmas morning, my sister, then six, who could never sleep in on Christmas, woke me early to go downstairs and see what Santa had delivered. When we entered the living room, there it was. A full-size Schwinn five-speed bicycle. Not red, but brown. Not with Ram handlebars, instead with upright chrome handlebars with brown grips. Not with a skinny racing seat, but a wide, cushioned saddle seat. Not with thin racing tires, but with street tires. Not fenderless, but with full-size chrome fenders.

I stood dumbfounded. There, next to the tree, stood the dream bike of any middle-aged person, not the cool racing bike I wanted.

My parents were excited.

“You can put that bike money in your college savings, David,” said Dad.

“We didn’t think the bike you picked out was practical,” said Mom, “you can’t ride wet streets without fenders, and you wouldn’t like riding bent over.”

I said nothing, but I’m sure my disappointment was evident. At least, I hope it was. It was typical of my parents—“helping” while exercising control. They hadn’t given me a gift; they had taken something away from me. I wanted to make that purchase. I wanted to walk into that bike shop and walk out with the bike I’d picked out, feeling the satisfaction of reaching a goal and seeing tangible results. If buying a fenderless, turn-down handlebar bike was a mistake, it was my mistake to make, not theirs. Now all of that was gone, and, almost as bad, I’d have to ride around on the old person's bike.

I did save the money in my college fund. I’m sure it went toward something important, like several rounds of two-dollar pitchers during happy hour at the downtown bars, or keg deposits for our dorm parties, or other recreational items that came in small baggies passed from a guy who knew a guy. I did buy a racing bike, a ten-speed Schwinn Continental, for $150. It wasn’t a practical purchase. It spent a lot of time in my parents’ garage until I retrieved it several years later. I never rode it much, and I gave it away. I don’t remember what happened to the five-speed.