

A JOURNAL OF WESTERN OKLAHOMA

W E S T V I E W



Volume 31
Issue 2 *Spring/Summer*

Article 5

5-15-2015

Fish Needs a Bicycle

Deborah L. Cox

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview>

 Part of the [Fiction Commons](#), [Nonfiction Commons](#), [Photography Commons](#), and the [Poetry Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Cox, Deborah L. (2015) "Fish Needs a Bicycle," *Westview*: Vol. 31 : Iss. 2 , Article 5.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol31/iss2/5>

This Fiction is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Westview by an authorized administrator of SWOSU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu.

 SWOSUTM

Fish Needs a Bicycle

by Deborah L. Cox

Brian had good bones. He made the girls laugh, and he listened to Depeche Mode. He brought an edge to our private Church of Christ school. He also had a tiny grooming problem, which I chalked up to his transition from North to South. We discovered Brian's problem one September morning as sunshine flared down on the sidewalks of Waltham Christian College. Brian walked the path that connected his dorm—on the college side of campus—to our academy building on the other side. We watched him approach in the rearview mirror as we waited at the stoplight near the main Waltham gates. He carried a snare drum and two tote bags full of books.

"That looks like your new guy," said David through a mouthful of cinnamon toast. My younger brother made it his business to know everyone in my senior class of 1984.

"It is," I said. Brian wore jeans and an untucked white button-down. "Poor thing—lugging all that across campus." Something broke open inside me.

"Should we see if he wants a ride?" said Mother. My two youngest brothers sat up front, so the only remaining spot was beside me. She pulled our cream-colored Pontiac to the side of the street, beside the men's dorm where last April's suicide compelled the university to remodel a north wing. David cranked down his window, and the squeak of old brakes bounced off the curb. Our sedan featured a chipping paint job on the doors, and cheap cigarette lingered from a previous owner and pinched our sinuses. I cringed and waved him over. Mother popped the trunk and in clunked the drum and the book satchels. As Brian climbed into the backseat beside me, another smell pierced the air. My mother, in the rearview mirror, pressed her top lip down in a deliberate, confirmatory sniff.

Later that afternoon she greeted me. "Your new friend needs some deodorant."

I overlooked his B.O. to focus on other qualities. Brian made eye contact. He spoke in a voice one could use to teach kindergarten children. Just under his skin, he mocked us all. He belonged in Detroit with his diving team. His seething counterculture felt familiar, like visiting an orchestra hall in a faraway city.

We talked after school, the side of my face pasted with makeup and sweat to the receiver of the goldenrod phone that hung in my family's kitchen. I pulled the curly cord around the corner into the living room, where I sat cross-legged under the heirloom baby grand from West Texas. The steam of giggles and sighs filled my lap.

"I'll major in business, so I can work for a big corporation like my dad." I pictured his 42-year-old father, dark-suited in a boardroom, flanked on either side by multicolor pie charts. "I'll keep playing drums," he said, "and I'll try out for the Waltham Wishbones." Brian memorized the glossy Waltham University brochures before he arrived here as a high school senior. The Waltham Wishbones sang Broadway tunes and John Denver for the big recruitment events. I thought they

were cheesy. I had no plans beyond just showing up for college, one block away from high school. I held only one college goal, and he was quite possibly on the other end of the phone line.

"You're different, Lizzie—not like those other girls," Brian said. "People at Waltham Academy have no idea how anemic they are."

Anemic is a good word, I thought. They eschew classical music. They laugh at the ballet. They think it's a sin to go to the Easter Cantata at the big Baptist church downtown because of the instrumental music.

Brian applauded my abstinence from the cheer squad to focus on piano. "That was wise," he said. He didn't care if I mastered my Bach Inventions, but his commiseration comforted me. He sang the Doobies over the phone from atop his bunk in his Levis and white socks.

I ate up his words, and a seduction took place under the threadbare canopy of my parents' marriage. I opened my locker on Monday morning to a bouquet of roses and daisies wrapped with pink ribbon. In front of the arrangement a Hallmark card read, you are the most beautiful and the smartest person I have ever met, signed in black with loops like dragonflies.

"Hey, I keep trying to call you, but your phone is always busy," Mallory gave a quizzical look, and my face grew warm. "We still on for Friday?" Fridays meant off-campus pizza and off-the-record honesty.

"Definitely. We have a lot to talk about."

The week folded in on itself like a blanket—end to end. A blur of classrooms and hymns and little brothers. I lived for Friday. I was falling in love. I hated Leigh Anne Martin—who made the homecoming court, even though she was just a junior, while I sat in the cold, stinging bleachers with everybody else. My father hated my mother. I reasoned, if she would lose thirty pounds and learn to keep her mouth shut, she could maybe save her marriage. I got these sudden blasts of resentment toward my alma mater. This perplexing build-up could only be witnessed by one friend. Mallory shrugged off Waltham while she wore its required skirts and seduced its boys.

"So let me get this straight." She set our pizza in the middle of the table. "Your dad thinks Bob Gearing is a marriage counselor?" Mallory squinted at me. My father. In the principal's office. Seeking help for his troubled marriage. Gearing, playing counselor. Gearing made his daughters wear dresses at all times, even in P.E. class. He loved first and second Timothy, especially the passages about women keeping silent. He wore polyester pants that bulged on one hip where he kept his wallet, and he forbade his wife from having a job.

"I know. It's absurd."

"But of all the non-counselor types I know at Waltham, why Mr. Gearing?"

"He doesn't want to improve the marriage. He wants her to be quiet and leave him alone."

"He thinks Gearing will help with that." She said it as a realization of fact. Truth sometimes gushes out before you fully believe it, like bulk oatmeal shooting from a dispenser onto the floor.

Saturday night I stood on tiptoe, watching for Brian to materialize in the crowd of co-eds outside the big auditorium on the hill for the campus movie. When I spotted him, he was smiling at me as he climbed the pebbly stairs. We clasped hands in the cool darkness of The Grover. *Rocky*, with shit, damn, and hell bleeped out.

On Monday morning, a yellow envelope leaned against a row of textbooks in my locker. I opened it in the dark of the cubby. *I gave up a lot for you, but it was all worth it.* I hid my smile behind the painted metal door and continued reading. *I can't believe there's a person like you in a place like this.* Infusions of warmth, blood, and joy. Boys, I'd known since third grade, passed in the hall with blank faces—no greeting, no nod, and no smile. This new boy treated me like a rare orchid.

It rained every week that fall, soaked and misted the campus, sticking oak leaves to the sidewalks and the seats of the famous white swings that dotted its main lawn—the swings famous for proliferating Church of Christ marriages. Brian and I sat in those damp swings. People walked by and looked at us. So we searched out dark places to plant my family Pontiac, some campus lot or the tall shadows behind the Kroger store. We had only minutes. I felt his lips and his breath inside the giant steel boat. Stale cigarette became an aphrodisiac. After the first gentle kiss, and then the second, visions of domestic bliss spooled: Waltham Married Student Apartments, Brian and I cozied up on our furnished couch, no parents, and no teachers.

Curfew parted us, breathless and panting.

Monday morning in Home Economics, groin-stirring memories of his hands on my neck and his kisses under a full moon dizzied me with total life purpose. It became nearly impossible to focus on convection ovens and turkey basters. Another week passed.

Friday, Missing Persons sang in the floor of the car from a battery-powered jam box as Mallory and I sped to Mazzio's in her brown Maverick.

"Don't you love Mrs. Hoovie's sweaters?" she asked over the lunch-hour clatter and the scent of basil and fresh dough with garlic butter. "Just slap me if I ever wear a flower garden on my rear end."

"I will, and buy me a girdle if my bladder gets as big as Coach Ellis's."



"Did you hear what he said in his Earth Science class?" she said. I shook my head no.

"He was talking about virginity." She licked marinara off her thumb. "He said, 'A girl who's not a virgin is like a car with no wheels'—or something like that."

I nodded. "Bad analogy."

"That doesn't shock you?"

"Is it supposed to?" I said, anesthetized. Discussing it was something new.

"I still can't believe Mr. Gearing stapled my skirt," Mallory said. Last April, we girls flounced out to the track for an afternoon of spectating, all of us in our required dresses. The wind twirled our hair, and we huddled together on the wooden bleachers to keep warm.

"I feel so violated," she said. I loved her vocabulary. Mallory transported my introduction to feminism all the way from a similar Christian school in Alabama, which now seemed cosmopolitan by contrast. "He brought his stapler to the track!" she said, and I viewed myself as if through her eyes, not knowing I should be offended that the principal of Waltham Academy would close a girl's wrap-skirt by hand and fasten it shut.

"So tell me about Brian," she said.

"Mmmm." I obliged. "Well, he's really sweet. He talks about Michigan." I told her about his big high school in the city, his diving team. "He's very, um, spiritual."

"How so?"

"He likes to write little sermons," I said. "He says he would be a preacher someday, but there's not enough money in it."

"What do your parents think of him?" she asked. "I mean, he's a rock drummer."

I shrugged. "He said he'd be happy to play with the college orchestra if my dad needed him."

"And your dad lets you go out with him?" Mallory knew I struggled for every minute away from the house. Cruising down the main avenue on Friday nights, I checked my watch constantly as the sun fell behind the downtown buildings. I had to be home by ten.

"He doesn't know. He's not home much anymore."

"Symphony?"

"Yeah. Which is good. He leaves for Memphis on Friday, and we don't see him again until Sunday night." I barely noticed my own curiosity. Why did Dad stay away all weekend when home was just a thirty-minute drive? Why did he spend so many hours at post offices and bus terminals? What made him loathe my mother? These questions hovered like little ghosts.

I love you Brian penned on notebook paper ripped from metal spirals. Fall misted into winter. I wafted through the academic week, and my focus zeroed in on Friday. I slogged through Christmas break while Brian was in Michigan. *I want to make a*

life together, he wrote. Do you love me more than you love Waltham Academy? he pleaded.

I hid the letters from my parents, who now slept in separate rooms. Brian returned in January and we clung to each other that first Friday evening in the shadows of *The Grover*. *Raiders of the Lost Ark* played on the big screen, punctuated with bleeps. "I want to marry you, Lizzie," he said.

Later, Brian's hands wandered under my tomato-red blouse. We held each other against the side of the Pontiac under a starry March sky. Our breath made little bursts of fog, our bodies warming each other. I went home that night and wrote him back.

Dear Brian,

I feel like God brought you directly to me. I never imagined I'd meet someone as generous and wonderful as you. When we're apart, I think of you constantly. In fact, I think you've given meaning to my life. I want to be with you forever.

I love you.

Lizzie

Somehow, despite an immaculate locker delivery, the letter made its way into the hands of Principal Gearing.

Friday morning in Home Economics, I clutched my wedding portfolio while Claire, our homecoming queen, presented hers. We'd anticipated this assignment since the seventh grade.

"Here's the fabric for my sisters' dresses." She pointed to a swatch the shade of yellow I'd seen on baby dresses and tiny butterflies.

We collected bridal magazines, ribbon samples, and Gorham pamphlets. We designed budgets for honeymoons, cakes, and flowers. Every bridesmaid in my wedding plan wore a different color. My rainbow of friends carried candles in tiny round goldfish bowls. My undisclosed wedding site—obviously not the Waltham University Church—boasted a giant panel of mosaic chunk glass behind a stone altar. Best of all, I hired an organist and a live trumpeter. No one else planned their music—they assumed the *a cappella* balcony singers would appear and sing, "God Give Us Christian Homes."

Claire pointed out the princess neckline of her white dress. Then, a knock at the door. A scrap of yellow paper handed in and passed to me.

Mr. Gearing would like to see you in his office.

I shuddered. The air went hot on my skin. I rushed away from girlfriends and plastic notebooks. My heart thudded as I tiptoed down the hall and into the office. The secretary waved me back to the inner chamber where he sat. His short body poked up from behind an enormous oak desk, shirt sleeves revealing the dark thatch of hair on his arms and his cheap drugstore watch. She closed the door behind me. Someone must be dead.

Gearing waved a piece of paper in front of him. My stomach dropped.

"Do you recognize this?" he asked, smiling. He unfolded it, and I saw my right-tilting cursive running along the top of the paper. He read it aloud, "Dear Brian, I feel like God has brought you directly to me.... When we're apart, I think of you constantly." Gearing licked his overlapping front teeth and grinned at me. "It seems to me, young lady," he said, "that you and this boy are becoming very close."

I said nothing, pressed my lips together.

"I could have you expelled," he smiled, "because it sounds like the two of you are having sexual relations."

"What?" I sucked in air, not believing.

"I plan to call your daddy," Gearing went on, his voice a kazoo.

I shook my head. "It's not what you think." But, I couldn't speak any of the words that mattered: love, marriage, engagement, and silverware.

"I know lots of girls who have sinned," he said.

Heat seared my neck and chest. It was all over.

"You need to know that, er, becoming too close to this boy is, em, probably not a good idea. It can lead to sin."

I took in the contradiction with shallow breaths. One line of Waltham rhetoric said we should find Christian mates, avail ourselves of the plentitude of baptized singles. Girls should prepare for motherhood and Corning Ware. Think reproductive thoughts. Men should prepare for ministry and the heading of households. A competing line said: KEEP YOUR LEGS CROSSED, GIRLS. Stay in the light. Stay in a group. Stay out of cars. Faculty scrutinized couples who held hands in public. Sermons on impure touching cropped up every fall and spring, reminding me of The Fixx, "One Thing Leads To Another." Doing our jobs put us at risk for losing our souls.

I staggered from Gearing's office. How ironic! My father perched his bony bottom in the same chair a few months before. One of us had too much fun—the other, not enough. I darted into the yellow restroom as tears surfaced, scalded, and fell. Though he never touched me, never checked my skirt length, Mr. Gearing had peeped at me as if through a bedroom window. I held onto a sink to steady myself. A fragment sprang to mind as I wiped salt water from under my eyes: "thou sufferest that woman Jezebel...to seduce my servants to commit fornication."

* * *

"It's none of his stinking business!" Mallory screamed into the windshield. She wanted to say damn. Her whole body shook. We sat in her Maverick and stared out at gray sky, leftover glazed doughnuts between us by the gear shift in their white bakery bag. "How can he just call your dad and tell him you're having sex?!"

"He can do whatever he wants." I sat motionless. Maybe I could live in her car for a few weeks—park in a remote, wooded lot, figure out my next move, change my name, take a Greyhound to Dallas, and get a job ringing up groceries at Tom Thumb.

"I'm going to give him a piece of my mind," she said. I looked at her with tiny clicks of rotation making me so different so fast I could not feel it and would not feel it for another seven years.

A red vintage bicycle separated me from my father. I crouched behind it on the tapestry sofa that became his bed at night and focused my eyes on the rusty springs under the seat. He shook, and capillaries in his face rose to the surface. His index finger pointed at me, then returned to his neck, again and again.

"I don't want to see you go down that road, Elizabeth."

My father's bicycle triggered a vacation memory. Posters covered the inside of an urban store window—peace signs in wavy ribbons of color, the Beatles crossing the street in a line, fuzzy black lettering and outlines of slogans in neon. *Keep on Truckin'. Do Your Own Thing.* One with big red lips and a tongue made of the American flag. In the center of it all, a picture of a trout perched on the seat of a bike. It read, *A Woman Needs a Man Like...* Mother shooed us away, but the poster stuck in my mind like an unsolved riddle.

"If you get married too young, you'll throw away all your talent!" my father yelled.

He received the call from Principal Gearing earlier that day. My father practiced in front of his wall of diplomas and glossy conductor photos as the black rotary phone rang. He ignored it for seven trills, a bar and a half of the Mendelssohn concerto. His violin teacher from DePaul smoked a cigarette—all coolness and naughtiness, eavesdropping on the talk with Bob Gearing.

"You're too young to stop practicing and studying!"

So many ironies hit that wall, paint balls exploding in streaks and blobs all over those men in tuxes and turtlenecks.

"Your mother and I have to keep a closer watch. You still live under our roof."

Anytime he said, "your mother and I," I took note. Anytime he appeared poised to hit me, but did not, I took note. Anytime he expressed concern for my welfare, instead of indignation at my rebuffing of family devotionals, I took note.

"We brought you kids here to Waltham so you could get a Christian education."

"I thought you brought us here to find Christian mates."

His hand went up, and he stopped it. "I should slap your face, young lady."

Hate fired my lungs like a ceramic stove. About the time I perceived traces of warmth, he always reminded me how twisted things were between us.

"You—d—don't—ever—t—talk—to—m—me—like—that," he said. "I'm still your daddy."

The next week, Mallory gave Mr. Gearing a piece of her mind. She reported back to me in the safety of her Maverick.

“He said, ‘Young lady, I’ve seen plenty of girls become lost to sin,’” she said. “‘Girls try to seduce me all the time.’ Can you believe that?”

“Gross,” I said. “You’ve got to be kidding.”

“I’m not kidding. He said some girl tried to take her clothes off, begged him not to kick her out of school. He told her to keep them on—he didn’t want to see anything.” We grasped the edges of what was happening. Neither of us said it. We tiptoed around the Bible-based sexual harassment, not giving it a name. It’s easier to blame your mother for her failed marriage than it is to tease apart the subtleties of why her husband can’t have sex with her.

The spring weeks warmed us. Mallory and I addressed our graduation parchments. Another college boy killed himself, hung from a necktie in his dorm room. They called it an accident. One hundred yards from that dorm, four consecutive weddings in teal, peach, mauve, and baby blue took place on the college lawn with the white swings.

