

THE COLUMBIA

by Nancy Bourne

Reva Hamm's big toe stuck straight up. No one in Spottswood suspected. They just thought that the heavy brown oxfords she always wore were the style up north, where she'd gone after high school on a piano scholarship. Reva played like an angel, all the classical pieces and hymns. No show tunes though. For some reason she didn't stay in New York after she graduated from Julliard. She just turned up back in Spottswood and practiced her piano pretty much all day. You could hear her out on the street. The hymns mostly. Sounded like she went through the whole Broadman Hymnal, end to end, at least once a week. People who saw her in town, carrying groceries in a faded cloth bag, picking up her father's starched white shirts at the cleaners, waiting for prescriptions at Johnson's Drug Store, said she was surely a treasure to her mother, who rarely left her bed.

But Birdi knew about the toe because she'd seen it. She was visiting her friend Mrs. Hamm in that second floor bedroom with all the windows shut and the blinds drawn. It was hot enough to melt, but the old lady had pulled the cotton blanket with the cornflower pattern up to her waist, and was propped up, as always, against three or four pillows in the four poster mahogany bed. Her gray hair was pinned into a knot on the top of her head and her face was white as flour and quilted-looking. Birdi sat on the stool close to the bed, her eyes fixed on the old lady. And they were both laughing out loud at the antics of the Banks family as Mrs. Hamm read from *Mary Poppins*.

"Time for your medicine, Mama." It was Reva, standing at the bedroom door, clutching a pill bottle in her hand, her voice shrill. She was wearing lime green shorts and a white pique halter; her limp brown hair was pulled back in a ponytail. And she was barefoot. Which is why Birdi stared. She'd only seen Reva in the oxfords. The big toe on her right foot was stuck up straight as a ruler. The other toes were ordinary, just lying there on the hardwood floor flat as you please.

"Just put it here." Mrs. Hamm pointed to a small table beside her bed cluttered with crumpled up tissues and a couple of empty drinking glasses.

But Reva was giving Birdi a hard look. "Mama, you know you're not feeling well enough for visitors," she said.

"I said to put the bottle here." Mrs. Hamm's sharp tone startled Birdi.

"Now, Mama, the doctor said for me to administer your medicine." Reva shook out two small white pills from the bottle and handed them to her mother.

"What does he know? Put the bottle over here; I can count out pills myself."

Reva frowned, then placed the bottle on the table. She turned to Birdi. "Now don't stay long," she warned. "Mama needs her rest."

"Oh, I'm never too tired for my Birdi," the old lady said.

Reva stood beside the bed for a minute, her fingers twitching at her sides like she was playing the piano. Then, "Do you need anything else, Mama?"

But there was no answer.

After Reva left the room, Birdi interrupted Mary Poppins to ask, "What's the matter with her toe?"

"She's a musician, dear."

Birdi gave that some thought. Had she injured it on the piano pedals? It didn't seem right somehow.

But she didn't have time to pursue the subject, because Mrs. Hamm downed several pills with a glass of water and said, "Birdi, dear, I bet you'd like a bicycle."

And that's what Birdi wanted more than anything in the world. She was almost seven, long past time for a girl to have her own bicycle, but her daddy had told her the bicycle factories were too busy making tanks for the soldiers to fight the Germans. Cheap junk. That's all there was out there, cheap junk, and her daddy wasn't one for that. She'd just have to wait until the war was over, he said.

"I sure would, Ma'am, but there's nothing but junk in the stores," Birdi said.

"Maybe there's one that's not for sale," Mrs. Hamm said.

"I wouldn't know about that, Ma'am."

"Maybe there's a bicycle right now in the garage that's not junk," Mrs. Hamm said.

"Whose bicycle?"

"Maybe it's yours." Her voice sort of sang it.

Birdi was confused. "I don't think so," she said.

"Go on out there," Mrs. Hamm said. "If you find a bicycle in that garage, it belongs to you."

And there it stood in the center of the spotless garage, all by itself, clean and fresh, ready to go. It was painted black with cream-colored stripes, not red and shiny like the Schwinn she dreamed about. It was second-hand, she could tell, but the tires and steel handle bars looked new. It was a girl's bike; it was a Columbia; it was the most beautiful thing Birdi had ever seen.

When she went back upstairs to make sure this bicycle was really hers, the old lady was lying on her back, her mouth open, snoring. Birdi took hold of one of her velvety-soft old-lady hands and cradled it against her cheek.

"Thank you," she whispered. "I love it so much."



Mr. Hamm was Harris Reynolds' boss, the Hamm of Hamm Hardware, the Hamm of "If you're handy, go to Hamm." And Harris Reynolds was Birdi's daddy. He had worked for Hamm since high school and knew the business, top to bottom. No other hardware store had ever succeeded in Spottswood, a sleepy town of about forty thousand on the Virginia-North Carolina border, because Harris took care of Hamm's customers. The old man was an enigma to most of Spottswood. Silent and stiff-faced, his balding head bent slightly forward, his light blue eyes fixed on the papers before him, he shut himself up in the inner office most of the day, rarely looking up from the large book he scribbled in. Harris, on the other hand, bounced around the cluttered store, shaking hands, giving advice, demonstrating power tools, laughing, talking. He was a robust young man, a little heavy around the middle, with thick red-brown curls, large brown eyes, and the beginning of a double chin. The kind of young man people trusted.

Once a year, at Christmas, Hamm invited Harris and his family to a dinner of roast chicken, mashed potatoes, carrots and chocolate cake, all of which had been purchased in cardboard cartons from the Sportswood Hotel dining room. On these occasions, Mrs. Hamm left her bed and appeared downstairs in a navy blue silk dress and black and white spectator pumps. Before they sat down to eat, Reva always played the Steinway piano which dominated the living room. She sat with a straight back on the piano bench, her light blue eyes, her father's eyes, fixed on the music stand, while her audience perched uncomfortably on faded Queen Ann chairs and a brown velveteen horsehair sofa. First there would be Christmas carols, then selections from Handel's Messiah, and always at the end a rousing rendition of the Alleluia Chorus. The first time Birdi was invited, she responded by contributing her thin four-year-old voice to the concert. But no one joined her, and no one smiled or looked in her direction except Mrs. Hamm, and so, midway through *Away in a Manger*, she stopped singing and never raised her voice again. Instead, she focused on Reva's heavy shoes pumping the pedals. Reva dressed for these occasions, like her mother, in a blue silk dress, but the fabric seemed softer, and the skirt swept low over her legs, almost hiding the oxfords, but not quite. Her hands, thin and bony with prominent blue veins and long fingers, spread out along the keys, lifting, arching, crashing down.

After the concert, they filed into the dimly lit dining room which was barely large enough for the walnut table. Lucile, the colored maid, had to hold her breath as she squeezed herself between the guests and the dark green walls while serving the dinner with a weary smile. The center piece of plastic plums and bananas in a silver-plated bowl was an annual fixture; time had yellowed the lace cloth.

At the table, Mrs. Hamm sat herself next to Birdi and made sure she got plenty of mashed potatoes and chocolate cake. It was after one of these dinners that Birdi began her visits to Mrs. Hamm's sick room. She was five at the time, and Mrs. Hamm told her she had lots of wonderful books she would like to read to her. And so the weekly visits began, with Mrs. Hamm sitting up in bed, a stack of books beside her, and Birdi on a stool close by.

"What's wrong with you?" she once asked.

"Nerves, dear," Mrs. Hamm said.

"Where do they hurt?"

"My head mostly."

"Do those pills make it feel better?"

"Most of the time."

"Will you read to me even after you get well?"

"I'll read to you forever if you like."

Birdi smiled at the old lady and scooted her stool even closer to the bed.



"Where'd that come from?" her daddy asked the day Birdi first rode the bicycle home.

"Mrs. Hamm gave it to me."

"For goodness sakes," her mother said.

"You sure she gave it to you? She didn't ask you to pay for it?" her daddy said.

"She didn't say anything about paying her. It's old. I think it was Reva's."

Mrs. Reynolds picked up the telephone right then and asked Mrs. Hamm about it.

"She's welcome to it, dear. No one's ridden it for years."

"Are you sure, Maddie? We'd be happy to pay you for it," Birdi's mother said.

"Don't be silly. You know I'd do anything for that child," was her reply.

The next day at the store, Harris asked Hamm what he should pay for the bike.

"I'm sure I don't know," he said. "Talk to the wife."



Birdi was small for her age, with a sharply pointed nose and large black eyes. That's why they called her Birdi. Her real name was Roberta. Now that she had the Columbia, she took flight, racing around town, running errands for her mother, ringing the bell her daddy put on the handlebars, her thin brown hair streaming in wisps behind her, her skinny legs pumping.

She was riding down South Main under green-leafed maples one spring afternoon on the way home from school, when she nearly collided with a yellow rubber raincoat. Reva Hamm was inside the raincoat, crossing the street against a red light, and Birdi had almost hit her.

"Watch where you're going!" Reva's voice was harsh. But then she stopped and stared. "Oh it's you, Birdi," she said in the sort of polite tone adults use when talking to a child, and, smiling, she reached out and grabbed hold of the Columbia's handlebars.

Birdi was relieved. The harsh tone had startled her.

"Where'd you get your bicycle?" Reva asked.

"Your mama gave it to me."

Reva's smile was gone. "When was that?"

"Last fall."

"Well, how 'bout that?" Reva said. She paused a minute, then said, "Are you sure?"

"Yes ma'am." Birdi was feeling uneasy.

Reva suddenly smiled and released her grip on the handlebars. "Well, you run along now and try to be more careful."

Birdi almost said, "Who wasn't being careful?" but instead she hopped on her bike and raced home.



The next morning, when Birdi's father opened the front door for his morning paper, he found Jerry Batson, a local policeman, standing on the front stoop.

"Morning, Harris," the policeman said. "I'm wondering if you got a Columbia bicycle anywhere around here?"

"Sure. It's Birdi's bike."

"Well, I'd like to take a look at it. We got a report of a stolen Columbia."

"Help yourself. But ours isn't stolen."

"Yeah? Hamm's daughter called it in."

"That's mighty peculiar, Jerry. Mrs. Hamm gave Birdi the bike."

The policeman raised his eyebrows. "Peculiar's the word for that girl all right. The mother too. But, I got orders to take possession. You can settle things with Hamm. Sorry 'bout that, Harris."

Harris stood silent for a minute. "Look, Jerry," he finally said, "I myself offered to pay Hamm for that bike. How 'bout you hold off until I talk to him?"

Birdi appeared from behind her daddy, peering up at the policeman with tears in her eyes.

"I guess that's OK," he said, looking down. "But I better not hear about it again."

As soon as the policeman was gone, Birdi raced to the garage and jumped on the bicycle seat, one foot on the cement floor, the other tucked around the black and cream frame. "It's mine," she pleaded, when her father approached. "Mrs. Hamm gave it to me."

"Maybe she meant to just lend it to you for awhile," he said.

Her lower lip began to tremble. "She gave it to me."

"Okay. But I think we need to talk to her."

Birdi's mother came out from the house and put her hand on Birdi's head. "Let me do it," she said. "I know her better."

"You're right," Harris said. Birdi saw him look at her mother in a way she didn't understand.

"You're not taking my bike," Birdi said, winding her arms around the handlebars and pressing her cheek against the bell.

"All right," her mother said. "We'll both take it."

"No!" Birdi screamed.

Her mother pulled her off the bicycle with fingers stronger than they looked and wiped her face with a washcloth. "I'm sure there's a mistake, and we'll bring your bike back home. But the policeman says we have to make sure the bike's yours. I'm sorry, but that's how it is."

They headed together over to the Hamm's house. When they got to the front door, Birdi rested the Columbia on the kickstand, carefully locked it, and dropped the key deep in the pocket of her shorts. Lucile let them in.

"No company, Lucile." It was Mrs. Hamm's feeble voice, coming from upstairs.

"It's just me and Birdi," Ms. Reynolds called back. "We need to see you."

"Lucile, tell her to come back later." Something about Mrs. Hamm's voice struck Birdi as different, and she wanted to leave right then.

But Birdi's mother yelled out, "It won't take a minute, Maddie," and pulled the reluctant Birdi up the stairs behind her.

They found Mrs. Hamm in her bed as usual, her hands nervously twisting the blanket with the cornflower pattern; her gray hair hung loose around her colorless face, her watery blue eyes seemed puzzled. The room smelled funny to Birdi, slightly sweet and not pleasant.

Birdi's mother cleared her throat and announced in a loud voice, "Maddie, look at me."

Mrs. Hamm stared in the direction of the visitors.

"Maddie," Birdi's mother repeated. "Reva claims Birdi stole her bicycle."

Birdi stood very still beside her mother and looked at the floor. She knew something terrible was going to happen.

The old lady's eyelids fluttered.

"Why Birdi," she whispered "I can't believe you'd do such a thing."

Birdi looked up, startled. "Do what?" Her face suddenly felt hot and she was crying, "I didn't steal anything. It's mine. You gave it to me."

"Really?" Mrs. Hamm frowned like she was trying to remember something that had happened a long time ago.

Birdi's mother looked closely at the old lady. "But I thanked you for it, Maddie," she said. "On the telephone. And you said you'd do anything for my girl."

But Mrs. Hamm was no longer watching them. Her eyes had fixed on the door.

"Did you bring it back?" It was Reva, standing in the doorway, her limp brown hair pulled back from her face with bobbie pins, her light blue eyes shining out of dark hollows.

Mrs. Hamm reached out and gripped Birdi's arm with icy fingers but her eyes were still fixed on her daughter.

"Did I give Birdi your bike, dear?" she asked.

"Of course not," Reva spat out.

"We'll return the bicycle," Birdi's mother said. "Now." She was standing very stiff, and Birdi could tell by her voice she was angry.

"No," Birdi wailed. "It's my bike." She pulled her arm away from the old lady. "You gave it to me. It's mine."

But Mrs. Hamm wasn't listening. "Did you bring my medicine?" she said, her voice low, pleading.

"Please go away," Reva said sharply. "You're making her sick."

Without another word, Birdi's mother took hold of her daughter's hand and pulled her out of the room. Birdi fought her all the way down the stairs, but her mother's anger was stronger than her own.

Reva followed them out the front door.

"Where should we leave the bicycle?" Birdi's mother asked in a cold voice.

"No," Birdi screamed. "I won't."

"Just leave it here, by the front door." Reva looked at the bicycle. "It's locked. Where's the key?"

"You can't have it!" Birdi cried.

"You got no choice, honey," her mother said. "Hand it over."

Birdi threw the key at Reva and wrapped her arms around the Columbia's handlebars and kissed each one. Then carefully, lovingly, she leaned her bicycle back up against the kickstand and walked away. She held her mother's hand all the way home because she was crying too hard to see.



Early the next morning Harris Reynolds found the bicycle on his front stoop, its spokes bent and broken, the fender smashed, the tires flat.

"Keep Birdi inside," he whispered to his wife who was standing behind him, her hand over her mouth. But it was too late. Birdi pushed past both of them and threw herself onto the battered bicycle, pressing her hands against the busted wheels and crying out in jerky gasps. When her daddy tried to pick her up, the bicycle came with her. So he

swooped them both up, laid them carefully in the back of his Dodge truck, and headed for the Hamms.

Hamm opened the door before Harris had even rung the bell. He was dressed, as usual, in his blue suit and starched white shirt, but his shoulders sagged and his usually sharp blue eyes were bloodshot.

"It's busted," Harris announced, thrusting the Columbia out in front of him. "How come?"

Hamm stared at the bicycle. He opened his mouth as if he were about to say something, but nothing came out.

They heard someone calling weakly from upstairs. "Who is it?"

"Never mind, dear," Hamm called back to her.

"It's Birdi, isn't it? Tell her to come up." The voice was soft, pleading.

Birdi stared up at Mr. Hamm, defiantly. She was crying and her nose was running, unchecked.

"Birdi?" The voice from upstairs.

The child shook her head from side to side.

"Please, please, Birdi, come up."

Birdi turned back toward her wounded bicycle.

"I've got some new books," the voice promised.

But Birdi was crouched over her Columbia, caressing the fenders, kissing the pedals, her wet cheek resting on the seat.

"Birdi, come back. I miss you..." But the rest of whatever Mrs. Hamm was going to say was drowned out by a sudden crash of chords on the piano. Someone was playing a hymn, except it was too harsh, too loud, like one hand was banging fiercely on the piano while the other was picking out a tune.

Birdi peered around Hamm into the living room. Reva sat at the piano, smiling. Her eyes were focused on the sheet of music before her; her hands pounded the keys, her feet on the pedals were barefoot. And the big toe on her right foot was standing straight up.

WENDY BARKER

THE SURFACE

of the small circular
silver calling card plate

is planished, little ripples
like a pond open for a friend

to drop in—or a great egret
to alight, feathering