

WHEEL Love



A BICYCLE WAS JUST A MEANS OF TRANSPORT FOR VANESSA MURRAY, UNTIL SHE REALISED THE FEELINGS RAN MUCH DEEPER.



Joni Mitchell had it right; you don't know what you've got till it's gone. I've been experiencing this visceral if somewhat clichéd truth lately, as I deal with the sudden loss of a loved one who was there one moment, and not there the next; who quite literally vanished into thin air.

If I'd known then what I know now? I'd have done things differently. I'd have made sure we spent more time together. I'd have been kinder. I wouldn't have sworn at her in public, or kicked her when things didn't go my way. I wouldn't have left her out in the rain while I dashed into shops, or neglected her basic needs, or failed to take her for her annual check-up.

Hear me out before you go calling social services because it's not a friend, lover or family member, or even a deceased pet that I'm mourning. It's my bicycle. My beautiful bicycle, stolen one rainy evening a few weekends ago as I sat making merry in a bar. I locked her to a fence, went away for a couple of hours, then came back to find her gone.

In between bouts of tequila-fuelled swearing, I checked and double-checked myself and my location. My mind harked back to a dreamy half hour I once spent floating around the city, looking for my mount after an especially good massage, only to find her right where I'd left her: chained to a lamp post outside a gelataria, stoically waiting for me to come to my senses.

"I FIND MYSELF GRIEVING FOR MY BIKE IN WAYS USUALLY RESERVED FOR OUR FELLOW HUMANS. I FEEL A BIT TEARY ... I'VE LOST MY APPETITE."

Could I be making the same mistake again? Was this really where we'd parked? Sadly, yes. The very spot: a buckled piece of vertical steel on the edge of an intersection cut in four by tar seal and traffic lights, now a bike-shaped hole in my universe. I feel it keenly, as one might feel the sudden, unexpected death of a parent or lover.

Forgive me. I know this sounds ridiculously melodramatic. It is, and I'm not really comparing the tragic loss of my bicycle

to the experience of losing an actual living being. Not really. What I am doing is anthropomorphising: attributing human motivation, characteristics or behaviour to inanimate objects, animals or natural phenomena. In my case, an inanimate object made of steel, rubber and a whole lot of style.

We humans have been projecting our own qualities onto the natural and inanimate

world around us for quite some time; maybe forever. The term comes from the Greek *ánthropos* (human) and *morphe* (shape, or form), and was coined in the mid-18th century by Enlightenment thinkers seeking to make sense of our human foibles.

Neptune, the Roman god of the sea, the dude who made the ancient waves crash against the ancient shores? Not real. The iRobot vacuum cleaner I'm thinking about "adopting"? Not real. The vibrator I've

nicknamed Steve and keep down the back of my sock drawer? Him, too. Not. Real.

People (okay, men) are infamous for developing near-unnatural affections for their machines, so why not me and my bike? In World War II, aircrews commonly named their planes after their wives and girlfriends, or after crew traits or qualities they aspired to. In the 452nd Bombardment Group, there was a "Dorothy C" and a "Dixie Jane", a "Dog Breath", and a "Cyanide for Hitler" (it's your guess as to which is which).

So perhaps I shouldn't be surprised to find myself grieving for my bike in ways usually reserved for our fellow humans. I feel a bit teary. My concentration rivals that of a goldfish. I've relived the last ride we took together, along a rain-slicked path in a public park again and again, and – here's the clincher – I've lost my appetite.

When I'm on the move, I observe other cyclists with a mixture of envy and spite. Envy at their carefree careening, and narrow-eyed cruelty, thinking they don't know what they've got coming. I look hard at bikes clustered against lampposts and shop windows, hoping to see mine hidden among them.

Why me, you bastard bike thieves? Why me? I seem to be suspended in a limbo comprising equal doses of denial and anger; the first and second of Swiss-American psychiatrist Dr Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's five stages of grief. God help me, there are still bargaining, depression and acceptance to come.

I can drive, but I choose not to own a car, and public transport brings me out in a rash. My bike is my sole means of transport around Melbourne. A rough calculation indicates that, since welcoming her into my life like a mail-order bride back in 2008, I've spent 270 hours – more than five weeks – astride her sturdy frame. Five weeks; that's more time than I've spent with people I consider close friends, let alone lovers.

Together, we zipped from home to work and back. To yoga. To brunches. To parties. We've whiled away balmy afternoons in the park, poring over the Sunday paper together. We've weathered storms and copped abuse and jumped trains; in short, we had a good thing going on.

Regretfully, I never named my bike. I never took her photograph, and I certainly didn't have enough foresight or common sense to record her serial number (take note, fellow cyclists). All of this means that, even if she is recovered by the police, who assure me they regularly scour the internet and second-hand stores for bikes reported stolen, it'll be hard to make a claim.

But I'd know her anywhere, and if I were to retrospectively name her, I'd stick with a single, telling syllable: *mine*. ●