I almost feel like apologizing for writing another story about transportation in Parma. Nevertheless, I think that it bears telling, and I certainly expect to be repeating it to my future wife, colleagues, grandchildren, etc. many years hence. I present:

La Bici

It was early March, and the temperature (which had never really been bad) had started to rise occasionally into the high teens. Taking the bus to school every day was starting to be a drag. Was I getting enough exercise? Were all these meals starting to add up? All of these things were on my mind as I asked my host father if I could borrow his bicycle. “Certainly,” he had replied, with no consideration whatsoever. I thanked him for his generosity and set off to pump the tires. A few minutes later, I was on my way to Via Taro, the Pitzer headquarters. I rode back thoroughly satisfied. At last, I thought, I could get the exercise I need, get around town faster, enjoy the nice springtime weather of the coming months, and add another classically Italian aspect to my lifestyle here.

Of course, nothing is as easy as it looks. From the windows of the TEP buses I had seen Parmesans of all ages cycling about the city: old women in fur coats with their ancient single speed affairs, mothers with children seated in front and behind, young men weaving precariously as they chat on cell phones, young women hanging on to their girlfriends’ motor scooters; indeed, it was only their ubiquitousness reassuring me, on the rotary north of the university and that time I accidentally rode west on Via Emilia past the Tangenziale Sud and the sign that said ‘PARMA’ with a red line across it, that I wasn’t necessarily going to get killed. Surely I am more alert and agile than some pensioner, I thought; surely I can manage these streets.

This was the confidence I brought to my fourth journey on my host father’s bike: a trip to a church on the other side of town. I was in a gloomy mood before setting out (it was a gloomy day in general), and after I shattered the bike’s taillight on the concrete fence while trying to close the gate I felt even worse. I had only had this thing for a day, I thought; my host father had trusted me with it, and yet at this rate I would destroy it in a month! Little did I know...

A meeting I had planned at Piazza Garibaldi didn’t pan out. It was time to go to the church. I waved goodbye to my friends who had assembled to take the bus and started off down Via Mazzini. People lined the sidewalks, as always, but now I noticed that the street was unusually empty. One bus rested on the curb to pick up passengers; the rest of the street was empty. I stood on the bike to gain speed and passed the bus on the left.
Via Mazzini, heading west, picks up a bit of an incline before reaching Ponte Mezzo and crossing the Torrente. In fact, I had never really noticed this before I tried to ride there on a bike. To account for this topology, I kept standing and pedaled with forceful strokes. It was after a strong push with my left leg that I noticed I was no longer on a bike any longer. Still facing straight ahead, I began to sense that I was descending, not with the same urgency and shock that comes when one trips and falls, nor with the same stomach-turning surprise one feels on a car ride over unexpected hills, but more with the eyebrow-raising disquiet that comes when your elevator or cable car jolts or stops unexpectedly. What, I wondered, was going on? Indeed, in the five long seconds in which this particular event transpired, I thought a lot of things:

- What is happening?
- Something is very, very wrong with this bicycle.
- My host father will not like this at all.
- Perhaps I should concentrate on the impending landing.

My left shin hit the ground first. I thrust out my left arm and skidded along on my shin and hand. The rest of my body came down soon after as I slowed to a stop; I crunched forward and my forehead tapped the pavement. When all movement ceased, I took stock of the situation.

- Am I hurt? I am not hurt!
- That was certainly a unique experience.
- I am in the middle of Via Mazzini.
- I should endeavor forthwith to remove myself from this busy Italian thoroughfare.

I jumped up and pulled the remnants of the bike off of the street. As I headed to the sidewalk, I noticed at last the six elderly Parmesan women with looks of amazement on their faces. “Are you all right?” they demanded over and over again in Italian. “Did you hit your head?” “Do you need to go to the farmacia?” I replied that I was OK, but my inability to understand everyone at once led them to suspect I really had suffered some sort of brain trauma. At last one of them stood back and remarked, “Ah, straniero,” which I met with a plaintive sì. At last they walked off, muttering to each other and occasionally glancing at me and my poor steed with the same baffled expressions.

I finally got a chance to look at what had happened to the bicycle. It was nothing less than complete structural failure. Instead of the old, brittle brake cables, instead of the fragile deraullers or the unoiled...
chain and sprockets, instead of the corroded spokes or cracked tires, the frame - the skeleton of the bicycle, the most fundamental member of its entire organism - had snapped and bent like a toothpick sculpture. The tube extending from the front wheel yoke to the pedals had fractured just beneath the handlebars, and the rest of the bike had crumpled in on itself under my weight. The frame was bent ninety degrees; if the rear wheel were placed on the ground normally, the front wheel would be suspended in the air like the front legs of a rearing horse. Without doubt, it had been totally exterminated. This was a bicycle no longer.

I showed the bike to my friends, and then, out of concern for municipal littering laws, elected not to lock it up in the Piazza and take the bus. I carried the bike home - down Via Mazzini, down Piazza Garibaldi, down the Strada della Repubblica - on my right shoulder, rear wheel on the ground and front wheel behind my head. As I walked, I took care to note the several different reactions from passersby: the way the teenagers perched on Garibaldi’s statue laughed, the way young thirtysomethings on each others’ arms would slow down and stare, the way old men would approach me, mutter a comment in an incomprehensible language of sh noises, and chuckle to themselves. I was, honestly, a bit disappointed to finally make it to the house.

Now, when I think back on this event, I wonder what things would have been like if it had transpired in America. Would people be so willing to stop and help me; would they have stopped at all? Would I have been told to seek legal counsel? Perhaps the walk home would have been quieter. The only way to find out, I suppose, is to locate a rusty bicycle. Everyone is afraid of making a fool of themselves when they go abroad, but to do so on a grand scale is a unique and valuable experience indeed.

**Word count:** 1,275