

ROMANCING THE BIKE©

By Peggy Badgett

It all started innocently enough, my affair. We were introduced by a friend several years ago, but it took a year's worth of coaxing and promises that I would be happy. I finally gave into the temptation after I justified to myself that after 16 years of marriage, 3 babies, and a full-time stressful job, it was time for a little fun. Our relationship grew from tenuous first outings to flirtatious long summer days, and then to feeling like I was finally where I belonged. I fell in love with my bike.

My story starts when the cycling enthusiast showed one day for spin class. I had recently taken over as instructor for the 5:45am spot (a bit of a stretch for me as my athletic abilities were mediocre at best). But no one else volunteered, and I couldn't let the class die. I loved the happy familiarity of the group; we all saw each other raw and real first thing in the morning. It was the only time of day where there were no children fussing or whining, no customers waiting at the counter for their prescriptions, just time I could be me. Plus it was the best work out I had ever found. But none of us were really into cycling, so the enthusiast was a novelty.

He took the cages off his bike so he could use his clip-in pedals. None of us had ever seen that before – our past instructor had worn his cycling shoes, but we assumed that was because he enjoyed walking like a duck. The new guy sweated so much we swore the water pipe above him was leaking. He was very quiet (probably thinking we were all morons, and in my case rightly so - he should have been the one teaching). But as we got to know him (he really didn't have much choice since most of us were women), he gradually began to talk, and told stories of cycling different places and racing in the area. He introduced us all to world we knew nothing about, the secret world of cycling.

With his encouragement, I went for a ride on my old aluminum bike with his wife and another friend (both tri-athletes whom I was very in awe of). It was a beautiful autumn day and we had fun cycling through the colorful hills of Northwest Illinois. I was amazed at how easily they rode their bikes, making the hills seem like little bumps in the road. They chatted while I huffed and puffed, but they never made me feel like I wasn't good enough to be out with them. We rode over 30 miles that day – pretty good for a girl who had never ridden more than 18 in her whole life. I was worn out but smiling, and had to take a nap before the kids jumped off the bus from school.

Cycling class continued as the leaves fell from the trees. The enthusiast began to talk of a group that rode a hilly circuit during the summer – an informal kind of race. I listened politely, thinking to myself that there was no way I could keep up with those athletes. He said a few girls rode with them, but they wanted to see more. I just rolled my eyes. But he was persistent, and after a while I was intrigued. What was there to be afraid of? Looking like an idiot (I am talented at this off the bike). Falling (that was scary)? And then, to my surprise, my forty-something voice said strange thing. Instead of “no”, it said “why not?”

So I agreed to give it a try if the enthusiast would coach me. He agreed, and we increased the intensity of our cycling class a couple notches. He conned me into wearing bike shirts and clip-in shoes, both of which made a tremendous difference in my comfort and ability. We worked on circular motions of our feet, not pumping them up and down. Once in awhile we would ride longer than the class and he would spin stories of cycling trips, races long ago, and beautiful rides down winding tree-lined roads. I was hungry for spring.

Finally the snow melted, and we began training rides in the park sheltered from the wind early in the mornings. I was extremely nervous for the first one, knowing this would be my first time riding with the boys. I showed up with mismatched gloves (the children lost mine), a borrowed jacket, Victoria Secrets cotton leggings and my trusty little aluminum bike. They took my cages away amidst few choice words while struggling to turn the rusted bolts. I became an official cyclist with clip-in pedals, although I found clipping in and out is a lot easier on a stationary bike. As we stopped for a break during the ride, they all elegantly unclipped one foot and stood while I circled around them like a sick hawk. They waited patiently for me as I rode the brakes down the hills, still petrified at the quickness of the bike. But I didn't crash, and didn't get lost. And the more we rode, the more confidence I gained. And as spring grew into summer, I even grew bold enough to wear those tight bike clothes in public as my body gradually metamorphasized past 6 years of incubating and lactating babies.

I replaced my bike with a faster blue one, and learned how to change tires and lube the chain. I bought gloves and Gatorade. I began learning how to sprint, corner and draft. I was learning the thrill of the chase, and agony of being beaten on the hills. I was caught by the cycling underwear police who gave me a warning for first time offender. I found a company that makes cycling skirts in a style that doesn't slow my legs but lets me still feel like a girl. I became enamored with the breeze in my face and the feeling of power in my legs as they moved the skinny wheels across the pavement.

My bike has given me confidence in myself, and understanding of the need for freedom that the road provides. My children and husband have been wonderfully patient about giving me time to spend with my new love. I have made some great friends in this secret group that rides the asphalt. I am excited to begin a new sport at the age of 43, and for all of this, I am extremely grateful and not one bit guilty about my affair with my bike.

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