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I conquered my uphill battle, pedal by pedal

By Susan Weiner

When I was 12, nothing thrilled me more than riding my blue-green Huffy bike to the top of my street, then coasting down the hill. I felt free and strong as I sped along. But by the time I left home, I had lost that feeling of freedom. I didn't rediscover it until recently.

Two-wheelers and I didn't get off to a good start. I lagged behind my younger brother Joe in making the transition from tricycle to bicycle. I was a timid child, and I didn't see why I should move from the stability of my trusty red-and-black tricycle to the uncertainty of the shiny-but-shaky Huffy. My trike took me everywhere I wanted to go, generally no further than around the block. But once Joe could bike the length of the driveway, I knew I had to try. It still rankled that he had learned to tie his shoelaces before me. I couldn't let him get ahead again.

My earliest attempts at riding my new bike failed. I fell onto the nubby blacktop driveway, scraping my knee and palms. But I got the hang of riding a bike with practice.

I never took the bike far. My parents were very cautious. They told me to stay on the sidewalk and keep close to home. I obeyed. I feared how they'd respond to defiance. Perhaps if I'd had adventurous friends, I'd have strayed. But I was shy and socially awkward. If I wasn't tagging along with my more outgoing younger brother, I was probably alone.

Generally, the farthest I rode was to the public library at the town hall, just beyond the borders of the 1930s development in which I grew up. The library couldn't have been more than a quarter mile away from my house. I rode there often.

Coasting down the hill on the first block of Southern Parkway was one of my few defiant acts as a child.

"Don't coast down that hill," my mother had said sternly. "Drivers can't see you if they're backing out of the driveway." Most of the houses boasted leafy hedges or trees that disrupted sightlines.

"Yes, Mom," I would say. I might avoid the hill for a day or as long as a week, but then I'd return, knowing that my mother wasn't likely to walk up the hill to catch me.

I pedaled effortlessly up that steep hill, smiling in anticipation of the fun to come.

At the top of the hill, I surveyed my domain. I felt free to imagine a different life when I looked down on my house from a distance. My family wasn't there to disrupt my fantasy life. Southern Parkway stretched ahead.

Despite the grandeur of its appellation as a "parkway," it stretched no more than four blocks. Dutch elm disease had felled the tall trees that had formed a canopy over the street when I'd moved to Rochester in 1960. Their spindly replacements sprouted along the berms that fronted a mix of mostly Colonial and Tudor houses with a couple of ranch

houses of later vintage.

I rested on the balls of my feet, then pushed off. Gravity did the rest. As a concession to my mother, I sometimes rang the silvery bell atop my handlebars just before I crossed a driveway.

The cracks separating the squares of the pavement may have jarred my ride, but they didn't diminish my satisfaction at maneuvering my bike at high speeds.

Unfortunately, the ride ended quickly. I had to slow in order to bear right at the bottom of the block to avoid crossing a street untamed by a stop sign. By the time I had advanced the length of another house lot, I had to pedal again. I was back in my everyday world. But that momentary escape from my cares continued to enchant me all the way through high school.

After high school, I took a long break from biking. Bikes entered my life again when I met Allan, my future husband, and he coaxed me into renting a bike on vacation. Later, he helped me buy a royal blue Mongoose bike.

I tested my bike with Allan on paths along the Charles River in Boston and the old rail bed between Lexington and Bedford, Mass. It was pleasant, but I yearned for something more.

Then Allan said, "You've got to learn to ride on the street." That would be a big move - my first time to ride unconstrained by sidewalk or trail. "We'll go someplace quiet," he said.

For my maiden voyage, Allan chose the "Apple Country Adventure" from a book of bike rides covering eastern Massachusetts. We parked in the lot of a bowling alley, then took off on a side street.

"You go first, I'll block the cars behind you," Allan said.

I felt reassured to know that he would look after me.

"This is fun. I can do this," I thought. How wonderful to have the whole network of roads in eastern Massachusetts open up as riding territory. I'd come a long way since my childhood hops to the town library.

Then I ran into my first hill. It was a struggle to push one pedal and then the other. Even putting my bike into the lowest gear didn't help. Lacking the stamina I had during my forays up Southern Parkway, I quickly faded.

"I can't do this," I said. "Maybe we should turn back."

"No. Don't give up. You can walk your bike up the hill. It's OK," Allan said.

I walked my bike up that first hill. Allan rode ahead and waited patiently at the top. "That wasn't so bad, was it?" he said.

No, but I quickly discovered that my struggles weren't over. Yes, the roads were quiet, so I didn't worry about traffic. But Allan hadn't noticed the guidebook comments on the terrain: "Rolling, with several good hills." A biking author's "good hill" was the kind of hill I loved to hate. There was a reason that I had enforced the "no hills" rules on our earlier vacation jaunts.

With Allan's coaching, I tried to accelerate before reaching a hill. That way I built up some momentum.

The downhills turned out to be emotionally rather than physically challenging. I was scared that I would fly out of control. I pressed firmly on my hand brakes. I had lost the exhilaration I had felt as a child, but perhaps there would be some other reward for sticking out the hills.

The countryside rewarded me with the sight of farms contained by stone walls, white steeped churches, wildflowers, and cows.

With each mile I felt a growing sense of accomplishment.

"I'm riding in the road! I'm riding longer and harder than I've ever ridden before!" I thought.

By the last couple of miles I was surprised to find myself pedaling up slopes that I would have walked up earlier.

I pulled into the bowling alley parking lot with a sense of accomplishment, a sweat-soaked T-shirt, and grease marks on my calves.

Since then, Allan and I have taken 15- to 30-mile rides almost every weekend that the temperature is above 60 degrees F.

When I was a child, I enjoyed the solitary pleasure of swooping downhill. Now as an adult, it's the hard-won uphill that give me the satisfaction of mastering a much broader world, with the support of my husband.

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