

# Bicycle Love

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**S**OON AFTER I OUTGREW TRAINING WHEELS, I quit riding my bike. The bulbous white helmet that my parents insisted I wear mortified me, and since they would not let me ride outside of our suburban Boston neighborhood, I retired both the helmet and the bike to the cluttered basement of our house. When my mother drove, she cursed the cyclists on the narrow New England roads. “It would ruin my life if I killed one,” she complained. When I began driving, I felt the same way.

I went to college two hours away from my childhood home, in the rural Pioneer Valley of western Massachusetts. The year before I graduated, I landed a job with a sixty-five-year-old biologist who let nothing get between her and science. Dr. Margulis worked through holidays and national emergencies, and she relied on a bike, even in snowstorms, to get to her lab. One day I passed her as I was driving to work. She was unmistakable, wearing a purple backpack and a long skirt. She arrived, breathless and smiling, as I unlocked the door. This woman stood at the threshold of her lab, holding the door open with her outstretched foot, and began talking about termites that she had smuggled into the country from Latin America. She had the enthusiasm of a ten-year-old talking about her ant farm. She grasped my arm in excitement, compelling me to share her delight before I started work. At that moment, as we stood on the doorway of her lab, Dr. Margulis’s vibrancy and fearlessness

transformed my life. The following weekend, I resurrected my mother's twenty-year-old blue Huffy from the basement of my parents' house.

At first, riding the Huffy felt like riding a horse. I sat upright on the wide, cushy seat as I muscled through its three working gears. Regardless of how often it was tightened, the rear brake was useless; the front brake was hardly better, and I usually had to put a foot down to stop. One day on a bike trail, when I needed to lift the heavy frame over a fallen tree, I couldn't. A cyclist waited patiently as I lifted the front wheel over the trunk, climbed over, got stuck in the branches, and then awkwardly pivoted the back of the bike over the tree.

After a year on the Huffy, I graduated from college without any provision for my future. In the same month, I ended a five-year relationship with my high school sweetheart and canceled a nine-hundred-mile backpacking trip we had been planning together. The initial rush of liberation quickly turned to panic and self-sabotage. I quit my job and gave up my apartment. I was loath to return to the world I had grown up in, but I had suddenly forsaken the one I'd created. I felt utterly uprooted.

It was Dr. Margulis, on my last day of work, who suggested I travel. The same day, I decided to take the Huffy for a three-week vacation to France.

My friend Frank, a bike mechanic, asked, "The *Huffy*? It won't be any fun. It's old. It's ugly. And it's heavy."

At the shop, he showed me a silver, ultralight Cannondale Bad Boy with super-slick tires and a beautiful frame. My heart raced. I rode around the parking lot, fumbling through a few of the twenty-seven gears, and pretended to know what I was doing. After a few minutes on the Bad Boy, the Huffy—weighty and plain—was a memory.

I was visiting my parents for a couple of days when I explained my plan to ride the Bad Boy three hundred kilometers from Paris to Centre by myself. My father discouraged me. "A new bike? You're crazy. It'll get stolen."

My mother, terrified, pleaded, “Why are you doing this? Can’t you please go with one of those touring groups?”

My father added, “Did you hear about the cyclist who got run over by a bus in Boston?”

My mother nodded, “What about the woman who was stabbed to death in a restroom? She was all by herself. And she was little, just like you.”

Three days before leaving, I went for a practice ride with loaded panniers and my tent on the rear rack. I obsessively planned a last-minute itinerary, and Frank gave me a crash course on how to fix a flat and repair a chain. He also showed me how to box the Bad Boy for the flight and reassemble it once in Paris, warning me to be gentle when I inflated the tires.

I panicked. I had never traveled alone; I had no idea what a derailleur was; and I couldn’t speak French very well. To my fears, Frank said, “Strap a bottle of wine to your rack, relax, and remember—this trip won’t make you any less attractive to men.”

The woman who checked my bike at the Air France ticket counter voiced the mantra I would hear over and over, “All by yourself? You’re a brave little girl.”

On the plane, the middle-aged woman I sat next to looked concerned. “Aren’t you afraid?” she asked.

I dismissed the question with a shrug, but I *was* afraid—of my complicated bike, of unfriendly French people, of being run over by a bus—and every time somebody asked if I were afraid, his or her fear amplified my own. I didn’t see this as a vacation so much as a trial. But I didn’t even know what I was trying to prove, or to whom.

The day after my arrival, I reassembled the bike in a puny Chartres hotel room, using notes I had taken during Frank’s lesson. I spent the day riding through town to find the best route south out of the city. I also wanted to be in a familiar place in case the pedals or the handlebars fell off.

With the Bad Boy fully loaded, I rode through the outskirts of Chartres and got lost on streets that weren't on my map. I careened through rotaries under the strange weight of my bike, dodging tiny kamikaze cars. When an afternoon rainstorm rolled through, I stopped riding and started to cry. I walked my bike to the shelter of a nearby bus stop, where an old woman eyed me suspiciously. "What the hell am I doing?" I asked myself, as I covered my panniers with thick black trash bags and tried to find the hostel where I planned to spend the night.

I was starting to think the trip was a mistake. The bike was a limitation and I fantasized about leaving it in Chartres and hopping on a train to England. I would carry only a small backpack. There would be nothing to lock or repair. I wouldn't need to interpret French traffic laws. I missed my Huffy and the safe, eight-mile bike path I used to ride it on. Anywhere would be better than where I was. I was beginning to hate the Bad Boy.

That night, I walked through the city to the famous twelfth-century cathedral inspired by the Virgin Mary. I have never been religious, but that night I sought comfort and refuge, and I felt cast out when I discovered that Chartres Cathedral was closed. I wanted only to be inside.

Discouraged and lonely, I slumped into an empty café. I took out my map and tried to figure out where I had been and where I was going. The owner walked by my table and asked if I were lost. I thought I recognized condescension in his voice and I again fantasized about leaving France. I told him that I was cycling south and asked if he could recommend a route without much traffic. He looked at me strangely and said nothing.

After a moment, he asked, "*Tu fais du vélo? Toute seule et tu n'as pas peur?*"

"*Oui,*" I answered. I'm riding my bike. All alone. In fact, I'm terrified.

He smiled warmly and laughed. He pointed out a route and said that in a day, I could reach Illiers-Combray, the small village where Marcel Proust once lived. He treated me to some biscuits and wished me "*Bon*

*courage!*” when I left. I wandered through the narrow streets and returned to the cathedral for a final look before leaving town. It was still closed, but I sat down in front of it and basked in the pleasure of the café owner’s kind words.

When the sun rose, strong and bright, I was already on the road after a quick breakfast of croissants and juice. By midmorning, I was far from rotaries and cobblestone streets. Rabbits darted in front of me on the long, smooth roads that cut across endless cornfields. Each town I rolled through had only a few houses, a church, a public toilet, and a bar. Old men playing *boules* stopped to stare and women looked up from their gardens as I rode by. I reached Illiers-Combray a little after lunchtime. Proust’s house was, predictably, closed.

I picnicked on fresh cherries and quiche that I bought at the outdoor market. I was studying my map in the town square when an old man approached and asked me if I were lost. He recommended a route and promised that I would see only a handful of cars. He paused and asked why I was riding alone and then answered for me while I was thinking. “*Un pèlerinage*,” he said. You’re on a pilgrimage.

Through the next few days, any time I took out the map—which I did often—people waited only an instant before they approached. They offered directions and phone numbers should I need any help. Several people led me to scenic routes by instructing me to follow their cars. As they zipped along the narrow streets, I pedaled hard, trying to keep up. One night, when I rolled into a small campground and set up my tent, an old couple who had been vacationing in the same spot for thirty years came over and invited me to join them for a dinner of ratatouille, bread, and wine. In the small towns I passed through—Fougerolles, Marchenoir, Morée—I met no rude waiters and saw no tourist attractions. I discovered France’s alter ego: the one that loves cyclists and independence.

Four days and 120 kilometers into my trip, as a storm threatened over the fields to my right, I hit stride. The bike, which I rechristened the Bad

Girl, and I met each other head on, with no wasted energy. The speed and smoothness were intoxicating and I no longer felt as if I were pedaling. The bike and I just moved. I looked down at my legs guiding the pedals and then at my arms braced over the bars. I almost crashed, admiring how good they looked, how strong they felt, and how worthy they were of such a powerful bike.

I got a flat tire and actually enjoyed changing it. I sat on the ground with the bike next to me and spread my legs with the wheel between them, using my feet as leverage to pull the tire off the rim. I liked the feeling of yanking out the tube and scanning the inside of the tire for the offending piece of glass. When I found it, I fingered it with animosity.

That evening, when I arrived at the campground, I spent an hour before dinner tuning up the bike. I attentively tightened the brakes, oiled the chain, and rubbed the bike with a damp rag. I imagined the Bad Girl luxuriating in her attention and feeling relaxed and refreshed for the next day's ride.

Within a week, I reached the Loire Valley. I rested in Montlivault, at a secluded hostel down a dirt road. The owner, Philippe, was a thirty-six-year-old playboy with a snaggletooth that slipped over his bottom lip when he smiled. A week before I arrived, he had seduced a shy young schoolteacher named Marie, who was on vacation from Toulouse.

Since there were no other guests, Marie, Philippe, and I ate together. Philippe cooked for us and talked on and on about what a magnificent lover, skier, and citizen he was. Marie—too polite to interrupt—and I—not quick enough with the language—held our tongues, sneaked surreptitious smiles at each other, and tried not to laugh.

On Bastille Day, Philippe put on a pair of elbow-length rubber gloves, went out to the yard, and picked a bucket full of thorny weeds. Still wearing the gloves, he went into the kitchen and began preparing a special soup that, he claimed, would energize me for the ride. Periodically

during dinner, he stopped talking and vigorously rubbed his chest and stomach to demonstrate how the weed stimulated his organs.

After dinner, while Marie went out to watch fireworks, Philippe and I rode our bikes to Chambord, one of the Loire Valley's many chateaux. He struggled to keep up, but the Bad Girl and I cruised ahead. The bike and I were a team. A couple. Together, we were indomitable.

As Philippe and I walked our bikes back down the dirt road to the hostel, he said that I should stay another day because love is like the Tour de France. You wait and wait and then it passes like lightning before you even know what has happened. He smiled, the rotten tooth hanging over his lip. I decided to leave that night.

I wanted to reach Pouligny St. Martin, a tiny town in Centre where I had friends. On the second day after I left Montlivault, I woke early, felt great, and decided to ride the rest of the way to Pouligny. I wrote directions on my arm so that I wouldn't need to consult the map. I stopped briefly at lunch to devour three chocolate bars and two loaves of bread and then continued to ride until late afternoon, when I noticed that the landscape was changing. It was no longer a flat easy ride. I cranked through every gear on the Bad Girl because each town I passed through had been built on top of a hill.

By six that evening, I knew that I was within fifteen kilometers of Pouligny, but I had no idea how to get there. It was so rural that it took me an hour to find another human to ask for directions. Finally, I came upon a family, repairing a lawn mower in the front yard, and asked for directions to Pouligny St. Martin.

"Pouligny St. Martin?" The father looked puzzled. They talked among themselves and then he turned back to me and said something I couldn't understand. I was silent as I fought back tears. I had been riding for ten hours. My bottom hurt, my arms were tired, and my feet were numb.

"Are you American?" the son asked in English.

“Yes! Yes! Oh my god, you speak English. Can you please help me get to Pouligny?” He spoke with his parents before he turned back to me and pointed through a mountain. “It’s across the highway there. You’ll see signs.”

After two more hours of riding, I realized that he was wrong. There were no signs. The horses grazing on hilly pastures were picturesque, and the magnificent views from empty town squares were breathtaking, but I didn’t care. I wanted to reach my friends in Pouligny. I flagged down the only car I saw and, as she gave me directions, I could tell that the woman pitied me. By the time I rolled into my friends’ driveway, I was so exhausted that my body slumped over the handlebars and I could barely pedal. I stumbled inside to a warm, but bewildered, welcome, ate a pound of pasta, and fell asleep for sixteen hours.

After two days recovering, I took a train to Bordeaux, a wine region in southwest France, not far from the Atlantic coast. The train arrived on the most distant track and I had to negotiate a flight of stairs under the tracks to exit the station. I strapped my tent to the bike rack, leaned the bike against my body, and picked up the panniers in my left arm. I then picked up the bike with my right arm and walked down the stairs. I felt the rush of power that a man must feel as he grabs a girl around the waist and scoops her up onto his horse. I had a hold on the Bad Girl’s frame as if she weighed nothing and were mine to control.

That evening I camped at the foot of a cliff on the banks of the Dordogne River, where I met Michel, a ten-year-old boy on vacation with his family. His eyes widened when he saw the bike. “*C’est le velo de Lance Armstrong,*” he said.

“*Non,*” I said with a laugh. It’s better than Lance’s bike.

Michel tried unsuccessfully to ride the Bad Girl and then stood tiptoe over the handlebars and shifted the gear levers. I watched uneasily. I didn’t want to disturb his curiosity, but I also didn’t want him to mess up my bike. As I struggled over what to do, I thought about my parents and

sympathized with their fear about my trip. I knew that they wanted to support my experience, but that they also wanted to protect me from it. Finally, I showed Michel how the gears worked and moved the pedals with my hands so that he could continue to shift.

That afternoon, I went to the bike shop for spare tubes and a tune-up. I spent a couple of hours in spirited conversation with Bernard, an avuncular mechanic with a daughter my age, as he leisurely adjusted the gears on my bike and inflated the tires. “*Tu n’as pas peur, toute seule?*” he asked. I told him that I just had to watch out for *dragueurs*. (*Dragueurs* are French men on the prowl.) Bernard smiled and I said that at first I was scared but not anymore. As I spoke, I realized the truth of what I was saying. I wasn’t afraid anymore. The terror had burned off, like calories, during the three-week ride. The bike—which at first made me feel vulnerable—now empowered me. Strangers—whom I initially found threatening—had actually gone out of their way to look out for me. Bernard gave me his phone number, directed me to his good friend, a wine merchant, and warned in broken English, “Not in the water bottle.”

I spent another night by the river and stayed up late. In front of me in the moonlit water, I could barely make out a sunken German boat that the town elders insisted not be removed as a reminder of what the town had endured during the war. Around midnight, I pulled the bike inside my tent and cozied up to it. I hooked my arm over the middle of the frame, threw my leg over the seat, and was soon fast asleep.

I spent the night at the airport before I flew home, sitting next to an old woman who was traveling by herself to Russia. She saw my bike and asked about the trip. I started to cry when I told her that I didn’t want to go back to the United States. She patted my knee sympathetically. “*Tu es francophile,*” she said, as if I had a terminal illness. As she dozed, I realized that she was right. I loved France for being my place of pilgrimage. I felt forever changed by it.

When I returned to western Massachusetts, there was not much awaiting my return. I spent four months looking for work and the Bad Girl began to seem like what I am not—sophisticated and sleek, efficient and high-maintenance. So, for a while, I resumed life with my darling—the old blue Huffy with a soft seat, a hopeless rear brake, and three working gears. It's the bike that I don't need to lock when I go to the library or when I leave it on the front porch at night. It is the bike that started me on the route to France.

Now, a year later, there is space in my life for dual bikes and dual loyalties, and there is also space for other things. I left both bikes at home when I accepted a job as a backwoods caretaker in northern Vermont.

One day, a middle-aged woman arrived at my drafty cabin and asked if there were a water source nearby. I could tell that she was hiking all 260 miles of the Long Trail, from Massachusetts to the Canadian border. As she stood in the doorway, something about her struck me. She had the subtle confidence of a woman at the reins of her own life. She reminded me of Dr. Margulis and, like Dr. Margulis, this backpacker was radiant with energy. I offered to walk with her to the closest reliable water source.

“What's your name?” I asked, as we negotiated the slippery trail.

“My trail name is Green Knees,” she said, “because this is my first backpacking trip.” She added, “But my real name is Marilyn.”

“How's it been?” I asked. It was the question I asked every hiker who passed through.

“It's been everything,” she replied with a laugh. Until I met Marilyn, most hikers had responded with some variation of “It's been fabulous,” usually spoken with an enthusiasm that does not correspond with the reality—hunger, exhaustion, downpours—of long-distance hiking.

“So, what made you decide to hike the trail?” I asked.

She hesitated before answering. “Well,” she said, “Two reasons: my marriage fell apart and I turned fifty.”

I paused for a moment, appreciating her honesty, and then said, “You’re on a pilgrimage.”

“Exactly,” she replied. “I’m on a pilgrimage.”

We arrived at the spring. Water bubbled out of the mountain and over mossy rocks. We knelt and cupped our hands to drink before filling our bottles.

Later, as she hoisted her pack onto her back, I felt that her journey was also my own. It put a smile on my face to imagine Green Knees reaching the Canadian border. I wished her Godspeed and watched her walk into the woods.