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# Biking Wrong

Olivia Accardo

**M**y Aunt Nadine hands me what appears to be a tiny Capri Sun, minus the straw. It's a little aluminum pouch with the word "GU" on the front and seems to be some sort of endurance supplement. She offers me a smile and throws her leg over her thin white road bike, jams her cycling clips noisily into the pedals, and blasts off down the highway, followed by many other muscley-legged, middle-aged athletes.

...

A little under a month before this moment, I had searched the words "green bike" on Craigslist. I figured it was probably time I learned to ride a bike, preferably a green one. A green one because all I knew about bikes—as far as what kinds existed—was that they came in

different colors. It was Bike Day at the daycare center and the secret was out: *Miss Olivia doesn't know how to ride one.* I hadn't felt particularly embarrassed about it. In fact, I appreciated the irony of being responsible for a group of bicycling six- to ten-year-olds as a twenty-year-old cycling novice.

...

Meanwhile, I'm watching Nadine fade into the miles of concrete that lie before me. My heart is pounding so hard—I think it might break my rib cage. My lungs ache with varying levels of anxiety. Maybe I'm having a heart attack. Maybe I should eat some of this GU. I stand next to my delightfully forest-green, hybrid bike with one chipped-nail polish-baring hand gripping the saddle and the other hand

Layout by Maura Buckley. "My New Bike 3" by Flickr user Joshua Rothhaas, CC BY 2.0: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/joshuarothhaas/5794316131/>.



squeezing the remainder of the chocolate mystery GU into my mouth.

"Let's go! You can do this. You're great!" shouts Mark Wilson, the world's most cheerful sixty-year-old seven-time Ironman (also probably the best-looking). He effortlessly hops off his bike and stands next to me.

"Today we're doing about thirty miles, but don't worry," he says.

I'm worried.

Behind me is a picturesque lake-front parking lot, and before me is thirty miles of hills, potholes, blaring car horns, pedestrians, possibly bears, and a herd of middle-aged muscled Ironmen.

Mark clips into his several-thousand-dollar bicycle and gestures that I follow

him as he starts mile one of thirty.

I feel I perform my best when I'm not given the time to be concerned, and so I clumsily toss my left leg over the bike and begin to pedal, swerving and jerking the handlebars quickly left and right. If I avert my eyes from the road, I will surely crash.

"Look ahead of you! Not down at the ground," Mark yells. He turns around and circles me. I'm sure his face offers some sort of reassuring smile. But again, if I avert my eyes from the road, I will surely crash.

...

I find it a lot easier to stare past my handlebars at the asphalt of this parking lot than the highway. It's actually less intimi-

INTERTEXT 2015 | 19

dating to ride this forest-green hybrid in circles around a different kind of parking lot, the kind where my fellow cyclists are tiny children who throw little toys at me and chant, “Miss Olivia’s a wuss, Miss Olivia’s a wuss.”

The first circle I made around that parking lot on my bicycle was freeing, so much so that I handed my iPhone to a nine-year-old and insisted that she snap a photo for Facebook. I felt a sense of ecstasy. As much as I pretended that I had been fine with being unable to ride a bike, it was always something I envied about other people—including children.

After I had done multiple laps around the little parking lot outside of the daycare center on Bike Day, I ran inside to mass-text my friends this important event—just in case they hadn’t seen my new Facebook picture. This was a life-changing day and I needed to share. One person who I knew would certainly appreciate this was my Aunt Nadine.

*“I’m not sure if  
ponytails can hurt, but  
mine definitely does.”*

“I finally rode my bike! I rode a bike today,” I said.

Nadine responded confidently, “Perfect! Join me on Sunday; the triathlon team and I are meeting at the state park and going for a ride. The coach will be there. He can help you.” And

at the time, it truly seemed like a good idea.



So, here I am swiveling around mile one of thirty on my delightfully forest-green bicycle. This is the second time I’ve ridden a bike in my life, but I just keep telling myself, *This is easy, it’s just like riding a bike*, as if riding a bike was a thing I already found easy to do.

It’s still mile one. I love my bike. It’s beautiful. This helmet gives me a headache and my ponytail hurts. I’m not sure if ponytails can hurt, but mine definitely does. I am wearing a pair of cycling gloves and that’s all I can see: my hands, my gloves. My bare fingers poke out the ends of them because the gloves are mostly designed to protect the palms of my hands, so they cut off at the first joint of my fingers. It’s a good thing they’re so padded because I am gripping onto this bicycle for my life. I can’t decide if it would be safer to let go of the bike and get off, or to continue to hold on to it and let the bike keep moving me forward. I’m not a quitter, and I’m moving forward. All I can see for this first mile is the chipped nail polish on my exposed fingertips. I am straining my ears for the sounds of Mark’s bike ahead of me—straining, straining....

I don’t hear anything. Finally, I avert my eyes from the ground and from my hands to discover that I am on the highway with no other bicycles in sight. I must be that far behind. I experience a sense of accomplishment at my ability to look up and ahead while simultaneously maintaining a somewhat reasonable cadence. This sense of accomplishment quickly transforms into fear because it’s been several miles now

and I have no idea where I am or where anyone else is, where Aunt Nadine is, where sexy Coach Mark is. He's not sexy, he's old. I have to keep in mind that I am lost and also on a bicycle, and this is terrifying to me. I look ahead and see an exit off of the highway and decide to take it, while fast cars pass and blow their horns at me. Fear begins swelling up in my chest, like a great big balloon of wussy sadness. I'm not sure I have the ability to operate a bicycle, look ahead of me, and cry all at the same time.



Imagine what a newborn baby deer might look like riding a bike, except less svelte. That's me, crying at a stop sign off of some exit on some highway that I should have paid more attention to. I awkwardly climb off my bike and manage to scrape the cassette of the bike painfully across my right calf. I unclip my helmet, releasing my throbbing ponytail and squeezed temples. I instantly feel a release in my skull, headache fading slowly but tears still rolling down my big baby cheeks. I look down at my leg and see a combination of blackish bike grease and crimson blood. I can't help but think about every single time anyone ever said, "It's easy, just like riding a bike." And how every single time I ever heard it, I couldn't help but laugh to myself because I didn't know how to ride one. The sounds of chirping birds and blaring car horns pull me out of my aching skull.



"Do you need help?" calls a man in a red pickup truck as he rolls down his passenger's seat window.

"Uh, no. I'm fine. My, I...help is coming!" I lie, and feign cheerfulness. He pulls away.

I stare at the big red stop sign and reach my right hand into the pouch on

*"A desperate phone  
call to my mommy to  
match my big baby tears  
and inability to ride a  
bike or be an adult."*

the back of my cycling jersey to pull out my cell phone. I don't have Mark's cell phone number. Nadine's phone is in her car. I don't even know the address of where Nadine parked her car. I couldn't ask anyone for directions and, to top it off, I don't have a smartphone.

Last-resort emergency contact: Mommy. A desperate phone call to my mommy to match my big baby tears and inability to ride a bike or be an adult.

"Olivia?" I hate that. I hate when my mother picks up the phone asking if I'm Olivia. Yes, Mother. This is Olivia.

Then I remember I am experiencing a sort of emergency.

"Mom, can you do me a favor? Can you Google 'Mark H. Wilson' for me?" I don't want to concern her with the details—that I am bleeding, greasy, crying, and sweaty on the side of a mysterious highway somewhere in upstate New York.

"Okay, sure. Why?" I can hear the clattering of my mother's long fingernails at her computer keyboard.

"Oh, I just need his phone number."



The glaring sun has successfully dried the tears to my face, so they mess well with the now dried sweat.

After some back-and-forth, she recites a phone number to me.

"Thanks so much!" I hang up the phone quickly, repeating the digits in my head. As I dial, more cars stop and pass, with people craning their necks in curiosity at the less-than-svelte bloodied "cyclist" on the side of the road.

The phone is ringing in my ear and a delicate older woman's voice picks up. Crap.

"Oh, hi. Sorry, I...thought I was calling Mark Wilson."

"You are. Well, this is the home phone. He's out right now, do you want me to leave him a message?"

"I'm sorry, who am I speaking to?" If my suspicions are correct—

"I'm Rose. I'm Mark's wife." He's married? I should probably focus on the present issue.

"Hi, Rose. Do you have his cell phone number? I apologize. I'm Olivia. I...am, or was, riding my bike with him and the team...and now I'm lost."

Rose, the wife of the world's most cheerful sixty-year-old seven-time Ironman, recites her old-but-still-hot husband's cell phone number to me.

"Thanks so much!" I hang up the phone quickly, repeating the digits in my head, hoping my fingers will dial the right number for the actual right person this time—and they do.

I finally get hold of Mark, who doesn't feign cheerfulness on the phone because he's actually cheerful. His honest optimism rubs off on me. By the time I hang up, I find myself genuinely appreciating how beauti-

ful the day is and how weirdly happy I am.

I had to get lost to learn how to ride a bike. I ridden to this no-name intersection, and Mark is coming to my rescue (from my vague description of the location, he seems to have an idea of precisely where I am).

...

Another truck rolls up to this big, red stop sign. It's Mark. He opens his door and hops down, offering a big genuine smile. He picks up my bike with ease and gently places it in the bed of his truck.

"How did you do?" he asks, genuinely curious. I simply laugh and relax into the passenger seat as he gets behind the wheel, starting the car.

"Everyone else has started the 10K run. Nadine is waiting for you in the parking lot. Are you up for it?" he continues.

I mentally sigh. If I don't run, that will officially make me a baby.

"Of course!"

Only 6.2 more miles to go.

"Stop Sign" by Flickr user Kt Ann, CC BY 2.0: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/54409200@N04/5070012761>.

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