Luna and I

Megan McManama
I have no memory of learning to ride a bike, but if my parents taught me, my dad would have played a dominant role. He would have been the one to secure my knee guards, helmet, elbow pads, then hold the handles and jog on both sides of the back wheel as I pedaled. I would have jerked myself out of his grip and fell. As I cried and ran back to my house, my mom would be the one to fart and then blame it on my brother to get me laughing.

My dad continued to play a protective, dominating role, especially in whom I dated. I remember one of my first dates. A sixteen-year-old boy, was taking me to get ice cream. My dad insisted that I shouldn't go. He followed me around the house as I got ready. He had disapproving creases on his forehead. My mother jokingly yelled from the other room, “Have fun, bring me back a beer!” I laughed and wished my dad could ease up. When my date’s car pulled up, I ran for the door and my dad screamed an elongated “Beee goood!” out the front door.

My dad offered his opinion so much that I began to rebel out of spite, and soon I didn’t know what I wanted. I fell in love with boys, my dad would offer his harsh opinion of them, and I found myself
quickly out of love with them. I didn’t know what to love anymore. I resented the power he had over me, yet I leaned into it to ask for advice often.

... I woke up early and made eggs and toast. I packed energy packets, gummies, and granola bars into a small bag that I crunched under the metal rack above my back tire. I looked at my phone; the GPS bike route was already pulled up. The next four hours and 47 minutes I would be cycling 59.4 miles through eleven towns. It was my first long ride. My ex-boyfriend Josh, the one who got me into cycling, had always talked about riding his road bike from Provo to Salt Lake City in Utah. I laughed at him when he said that—it seemed ridiculous to ride that far; why would anyone want to do that?

Now here I was doing it without him.

My new friend Vaughn was waiting for me by the bike racks of our apartment complex. We had met only a few weeks earlier at a neighborhood gathering. When we discovered our common love for cycling, we planned this trip. He was wearing thin black shades and had a professional red and white cycling helmet. This was his first ride on a road bike, and I was excited to be the more experienced cyclist. The day before we had went shopping and bought cycling shorts, the black spandex kind with a sewn in pillow under the bum. I felt professional, even though I had been cycling only four months. I was surprised to see him with red basketball shorts on. “Where are your new shorts?” I asked.

“I’m wearing them under these one.” he said.
I didn’t understand. “Vaughn you’re going to get really hot. Why not just wear the cycling shorts?”

He laughed and said, “I’m not ready for that yet.” I laughed right back at him and we started to ride.

Fifteen miles in, we finally got off the roads and onto the bike trail that would take up three fourths of our journey. Vaughn and I would shout when we had something entertaining to say, but mostly we were silent. Most of the times we stopped, he tried to twist his foot out of the bike’s pedals, unsuccessfully, and he would fall. I helped him as much I could but eventually found myself laughing.

As I rode on the trail overlooking the Utah valley, I continued to think of my dad. He had disapproved of me buying a bike, and I hadn’t asked his opinion about cycling 60 miles. Occasionally, Vaughn and I would pass a couple longboarding or some morning speed walkers. A fit cyclist passed us going at a ridiculous speed. He had a red light flashing under his seat, telling me that he had started his ride before the sun rose. I envied his speed and form; the competitor inside me called to Vaughn, “Let’s keep up with him.” Vaughn nodded, with his huge smile, and we pedaled harder. I pulled the little metal switch between my handlebars and shifted gears. I moved my hands to the curved lower handlebars, letting my back become almost horizontal, so I could slice into the air. I had only had my bike for four months, but already I felt more freedom with her than I had in most other relationships in my life.

... 

On the day I bought my bike, my ex-boyfriend Josh was trying to find a robin-egg-blue Bianchi road bike. They were adorable. “They’re not adorable, they are classic,” he would say. He would
also say things like, "It's not a seat, it's a saddle" and "that's not a sprocket, this is a sprocket." I then mumbled at him, "You're a sprocket." He laughed so loud, like thunder, so surprising and exciting. Many things I did or said were purely just to hear his thunderous laugh. It wasn't a deep, sexy thunderous voice; it was a high-pitched crack through the air—and I loved it.

That Saturday we were exploring a vintage bike shop. I test-drove a silver road bike. A Bianchi from 1980. It was lightly raining, and there was that delicious smell in the air that rose from the wet cement. I squinted to see; the steel frame wobbled under me. The seat was so high that I had to awkwardly curve my back to reach the low handles. There were brief moments of exhilaration. I felt like I was floating. The bicycle was so light that with the slightest adjustment of my hands, it would smoothly turn. When I clenched the brakes to stop, there was a moment of terrifying teetering, I didn't know which side I would fall toward. After we got back in the building, I told him, "I can't buy it, it's a road bike! I've only ever rode mountain bikes. And I can't ride on the roads."

"Mountain bikes are for tools. And they are like ten pounds heavier." He told me about the amazing rides we would have, he told me of the thrilling feeling of cycling. I had heard this passionate thread many times before. He always had a way of assuring me. By the bold way he talked, I really believed he knew everything. Even when I knew he was wrong, he said things with such confidence, that sometimes I felt better being wrong with him than being right without him.

But I was persistent, because buying this bike was a big commitment. I knew I would have to pay for tune-ups, and ride it on roads.
“I have a weak back though, this might kill me,” I said. “Maybe,... maybe I am just not be a biker. I mean, I’m saving up for a car.”

He was a few inches taller than me. He looked down into my eyes. “It’s not a ‘biker,’ it’s a cyclist, and this will make your back and core so much stronger.” He looked down at the bike at his side. “We can find nice neighborhood roads you can bike on. You don’t have to ride the busy streets.” He stroked his hand down the bike’s frame, petting it slowly. “It is such a nice bike.”

Thirty minutes after we accelerated, the cyclist in front of us became a distant red light in the foggy morning. We were riding past the large homes in Lindon, with their backyards full of horses and corn. I enjoyed the smells that came, some that I would not normally have enjoyed. I smelt fresh cut wet grass lying in piles, and brown meshy earth under old men’s work boots. Smells took me back to the time that I had ridden on this trail before. Josh had brought me there only weeks after we’d bought my bike.

I had watched Josh “dance” as he called it, with his bike, Francesca. I tried to mimic him; standing up and swinging the bike side-to-side under my body as I pedaled fast and hard. I would often swing the bike too much to the side and make wide curves on the bike trail, unbalanced, and fumbling.

I named my bike Luna because she is silver and Italian made. As I gained balance and a love for Luna, I began riding her everywhere. I rode Luna up the hill to work; it took fifteen minutes. I would rest for twenty minutes before I clocked in—that’s how long it took for the burning legs, jumping heart, and occasional
nausea to go away. I learned what a derailleur was, and why a bent tire rim would ruin a ride. I paid even more so that Luna could ride smooth. I was amazed at her obedience. With the slightest movement, she followed.

Each day I could get to work in a little less time; the game was exciting. My heart began to enjoy sprinting. I felt a heavy burn in my thighs about the time when my breathing became audible. That’s when I pushed down the little metal gear that was in between my handlebars. I stood, swinging Luna under me as I pedaled. My breath was deeper now, loud. There was a point when moving the pedals became almost impossible, so I sat and gave my thighs a breather. On the ride home, I would try to make my back as flat as possible, avoiding potholes, letting my hands rest on the curved bars under the brakes. I knew if I needed the brakes, it would take a moment more to reach them from this position. The wind wrapped around me and whipped the zippers on my backpack, and I could hear them tap the fabric.

I began to ride Luna to school. On the days after Josh and I broke up, I found myself crying less. It seemed weird that such a trying event would stop tears and not wield them. On the days that getting out of bed became hard, it was often the anticipation of the ride that got me up. I could feel the eyes of walking students glued to my back as I sped past them, on my other side cars galloped by me, but I didn’t care.

She understood me and I understood her. Don’t shift the front gear up, she’s broken there, it irritates her chain. She followed my hip sway and the turn of my wrist. I learned how to fix her tires when they went low. My fingers became accustomed to her grease.

McManama 129
I learned how to break a nozzle off the tube (she forgave me for that). The tube still hangs on my wall. I even taught Vaughn how to fix a tire. That was the night we learned what it's like to explode a tube by pumping it too much.

Eventually I stopped taking the neighborhood roads and took the main route to campus. At times there was no clear bike lane. Yet I felt that I belonged there. I merged to wait in line with the cars to turn left, as I had seen many cyclist do. When the light turned green, the adrenaline shot through me. I stood and began to dance the silver-moon steel frame under me.

I could sense that Vaughn was watching me dance with Luna. My hands were grasping the fleshy gold-tape crescent moon handlebars. Wind was rippling over my fingers then and sliding down my forearm, and rolling off my bladed shoulders. I rode flat as an arrow. No one had told me that hills and talking are a bad combination unless you like the taste of bugs. Perhaps it should've been common sense; but eventually Vaughn and I had got it and stopped talking. It was in this silent time, that I felt something unique. I was filled with an indescribable power and sense of freedom, that no relationship or sport has ever brought before. We were pedaling near the point of the mountain, where two towns, Lehi and Draper touched. The highway was on my left, cars going 70 miles-an-hour were only 50 yards from me. I briefly glanced at some colors in the sky, paragliders. I wondered how they felt up there, was that how they felt indescribable power and freedom? Bringing my eyes back to the downhill trail, I saw the Salt Lake valley unveiled below me. Canopies of green trees were sporadically placed in the valley that
was guarded by dangerously tall mountains. Past the frozen valley beneath me, I saw my destination, thirty miles ahead—Salt Lake City.

I held my body low so that I was diving into the air. I was invisible. The hill leveled out and I became vertical again, letting myself glide, breathing in the valley, inhaling God. For weeks after I wanted to tell my whole family about this place. I wanted to buy them bikes and take them here.

I left the bike shop that Saturday and sat in the car with Josh. I called my dad and told him about how I wanted to buy the bike, about how it could save me money, how I would always wear a helmet, how it might be a good thing for me, but that I was just a little scared, and asked what he thought. My dad reacted the way that he often reacted.

I could hear his eyes pressing close and his hand rub his worried face. “Oh, honey, I don’t think you should get it. Those things are really dangerous. I just don’t trust it. I heard about a biker just last month that got killed on the road. Bikers just aren’t meant to be on the road.”

Cyclist, I thought.

I looked at my Josh’s face, it told me, just get the bike.

My dad said, “Just save your money. I really don’t want you getting hurt, honey.”

I thought of going home without the bike. The air was gray and rain was breaking on the windshield. I decided to get it that second that my dad was waiting for me to respond. “Dad. I appreciate your
opinion. I’m going to buy the bike.” I heard a sigh on the other end.

... 

Our muscles were begging for rest, so we stopped a ways down the hill once we reached the neighborhoods. I leaned Luna on a church fence and ate a granola bar. Vaughn stretched reached his hands up his red shorts to readjust his cycling shorts, jumping and laughing. There were birds screeching, awful, loud noises above us. I looked up: two eagles flew in ovals in the sky. I looked in the distance and saw two more circling the valley. I said, “Vaughn are those eagles?”

He looked at them for a moment and continuing to stare at them, he said, “Yeah. That’s crazy.”

“I’ve only ever seen eagles in a zoo.” We watched a while longer, sensing this moment was special. Squinting over the valley, my eyes lowered and noticed a field in front of me. Wood-like antlers were hovering above tall grass. “A deer!” I screamed without thinking. As I said “deer,” the buck raised his head to look at me. I gazed into his black eyes.

“He is so close!” Vaughn said quietly. Vaughn’s words seemed distant. The deer and I were glued to each other. I felt that this moment was sacred, yet I didn’t understand why. Moments later the buck broke the gaze and turned. His body was broader and taller than I had anticipated. I admired him even more. “Well, let’s keep riding?” Vaughn said. I agreed and mounted my bike but kept looking at the buck. He’d turned once to look at me, then continued.
We found that sitting was too painful when we reached South Salt Lake, fifteen minutes from the cafe that I had always loved. We rode, standing, past the kids getting out of school. Braids twirled in the wind as girls chased one another.

We arrived at the cafe and found an empty table on the terrace and left Luna and his bike on the fence next to us. I felt the bones popping in my back as I sat down, my muscles were tingling; they felt like cold liquid running through my taut legs. I felt empty; I’d eaten all my gummies. There was a hand reaching from the depths of my stomach and clawing at my skull behind my eyes. Vaughn was tired too, we gave each other a high five. We told the server what we’d just done, but didn’t really have any other words. So we were silent and drank our water from the tall translucent glasses, then poured and repeated this until our meal arrived.

The server brought the order fast and gave us a free dessert. Chicken Panini’s with potato chips and a slice of marzipan. The food was not as delicious as I remembered, yet it was the best thing meal I ever had. We inhaled it. I felt a sensation expanding in my chest, almost overflowing into tears as I ate it.