



Married to a Fanatic: My Life in the Bike Lane

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I hear the rhythmic tapping of a floor pump – 1, 2, 3, 4 – and then a blast of air and again, the taps and a blast. A minute later, two loud clicks, a pause, then two clicks more. The sound of cinching bike shoes. And then the clip clopping of a pony in plastic horseshoes walking on the basement floor. This can only mean one thing: my husband is about to disappear.

Oh, I'll see him again in four hours, sweaty, dusty, covered in salt and bugs. His first words will be: "If there's anything you don't want me to eat, you better put it in the shed."

This is what it's like to be married to someone who's so in love with bicycling that it almost broke up our marriage. So in love that he rode 10,000 miles last year, that he bought snow chains for his commuter bike. So loyal to his first racing bike that he rode it for 20 years through two broken crank arms, countless rebuilds, and when the frame finally cracked, he mourned for weeks because he couldn't imagine riding anything else.

When I first met him, we were both living in Cambridge, Massachusetts and he was commuting the two miles to work on an old Raleigh three-speed with wire baskets. When he said he loved to bike, I thought how sweet that my new boyfriend has such a quaint hobby. Then, he told me about Harry, a black English road bike with Campy Record components, sew-up tires, and gold-leaf lettering along the frame: Harry Quinn. What I didn't know is that on the weekends he and Harry were off on century rides. I was about to tie the knot with a bicycling fanatic, somebody who is happiest when riding and miserable if he misses even a day of cycling.

The problem was that he didn't know he was a fanatic. He didn't know that in some essential way, biking made his life worth living. This problem was compounded after we got married, when we thought, like many naive couples, that now we had to do everything together. So, we started biking together. But as my muscles and stamina grew on the rides we took together, so did my resentment. I didn't want to ride until I bonked. And my husband wasn't happy either – because he wanted to bike farther and harder.

Then our daughter was born and as a new mother and nursing mom, I didn't want to bike at all. My losing strategy was to convince my husband to stop riding, too. "It takes too much time! It costs too much!" The last thing I wanted was to be left alone with the baby for four hours on the weekends while he took a ride.

As a compromise, my husband continued commuting to work (12 miles round trip) and crammed in short two-hour rides on the weekends. With a new baby, we were both too busy to notice how miserable he looked. Eventually, because of a thousand reasons that had nothing to do with bicycling, we started questioning our future as a couple. One late night, sitting at the kitchen table, we were forced to come clean. I told him the truth: "I don't like biking. I never want to do it ever, ever again." Then, he confessed: "I want to be biking more, not less."

Well, you'd think this would have been the beginning of the end. He bikes more, I bike less until we never see each other, ever again. Well, there was an end. It was the end of me pretending I wanted to be in training for the Tour and the end of my husband living in denial about his love of biking. So, we did an experiment. He started biking as much as he wanted and I started doing other things that I enjoyed, that didn't include handlebars or spokes or spinning legs. And then something happened.

A new employee was hired where my husband worked. A guy who just happened to be an x-racer with mammoth quads who liked to bike as hard as my husband liked to bike. He found a biking buddy.

To celebrate, my husband went clothes shopping. For years, he'd been riding around in old woolen bike clothes. Being a practical guy, he thought, why waste money on new clothes, when the ones I have are still wearable? Well, wearable is a relative term. His "wearable" winter cycling jacket had rips on the shoulder and side seams that he repaired with silver duct tape.

Now, with his new clothes, he was coming home sweaty and muddy, but I had to admit, he looked great. But more important than the clothes, he was happy. He started leaving for work early enough to do a training ride on the way in and he committed to taking long rides on the weekends with his buddy. Sometimes we even booked a babysitter so he could do that. He was sorry I couldn't join him, but he was going to do it anyway. And there is nothing sexier than someone who not only looks

good in lycra but who's happy and unapologetically doing what he loves.

Then, miracle of miracles. One day, home alone, I blew the cobwebs off my bike and did a slow, easy ride. Within a month, I was commuting on my bike a couple times a week, only this time riding on my own terms. This "on my own" was key for me in getting back to biking. I didn't want my husband's expert advice on the latest headlights, rain pants or clipless pedals. I wanted to make my own discoveries.

What we realized that helped save our relationship is that we are different kinds of bikers. I like to bike somewhere when I'm going there anyway. So, although my office is at home, I bike around for errands and meetings and because Portland is full of bike lanes, it's fun and safe to be a commuter.

We learned that we can only take our tandem out when my husband is taking a "day off" and just wants an easy ride. We developed a new language: a day off for him is plenty for me. We now know we can only take a family ride with our six-year-old daughter when my husband has already been on an exhausting ride that day.

I have to admit that my eyes glaze over when my husband tries to enthrall me in the physics of wheel building. Then, one day, I chanced upon him strumming the spokes of a nearly finished wheel, like a harpist, looking positively angelic. I realized that there's a world of his that I don't understand, but is very important to him.

Still, I fantasize about all the house projects he could get done if he spent that much time putting up a new fence, painting the kitchen or cleaning the basement. In my dreams, I married a man who spends his days wandering the house with a tool belt on his hips, a polishing cloth in one hand, and a wrench in the other.

There have been some odd pay-offs to being married to a bicycling fanatic. Now, when I see a biker on the road, I notice his cadence, if he's pulling every stroke. I see if his hips are rocking because his seat is too high. I don't even want to know these things. But, somehow I've soaked them up by living with a biker.

And even though I spent most of our married life clueless about my husband's biking life, there are moments when I'm flying across the Hawthorne Bridge, with the sun glinting off the Willamette River, pink wisps on a blue sky, and I realize it's impossible to be anything but happy on a bicycle. I'm up high, spinning past all the cars, feeling the power of my body to make the wind whip in my face. Free, fast and silent. For a moment, I understand why he loves this so much. I don't need to understand anything more.