



# MY BEAUTIFUL BIKES

by Allan Ishac



I turned 55 this year but people say I don't look my age; that I could be 10 years younger. If it's true, I give the credit to cycling. I was drawn to pedal power the moment that I realized spoked wheels meant freedom, and throughout my life, bikes have been a source of joy and sanity, exercise and escape.

My first two-wheeler was a black, off-brand trainer that my parents bought at our local New Jersey bike shop when I turned five. I was determined to jettison the training wheels the first week I had the bike, and my frequently

rode that Raleigh until he died, and I always imagined he went in the saddle – a pedal “stroke” probably.

When I was in my thirties, my bike became a temple. Struggling with relentless career pressures and high anxiety, I pedaled my heavy Fuji Royale over many months and countless miles. The soothing, circular cadence became a silent mantra, the reassuring rhythms calmed me, the regular exercise stimulated enough darkness-fighting endorphins to keep me from a life bonk. This simplest of machines proved to be the best medicine.

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distracted father stayed with me throughout the wobbly learning curve, despite not knowing how to ride himself. He patiently pushed me into motion, guided me from behind, and speed walked alongside me as I teetered and rocked on the cheap training wheels. I did cast off the stabilizers in that first week and my Dad seemed as proud of me as I felt.

Every bike I owned was a constant companion. Some became family members – like the 1966 blue Schwinn Stingray Fastback with the 5-speed stick on the top tube that I parked by my bed at night for months. I liked to watch the shimmer of the silver metallic seat in the filtered light of the street lamp slanting through my window.

Once I was so excited to get on that bike, I launched myself clear over the banana seat and did a face plant on the driveway. I wore dental braces then and the impact impaled my upper lip on the metal orthodontics. The lip swelled up so grotesquely I had to go to the hospital to have them peel it off.

Since neither of my parents could ride, I took cycling inspiration from a down-the-street neighbor named Mr. Perry. I rarely saw the man except for the times he cycled past our house, something he did regularly at dusk in the spring, summer and fall. His riding outfit never changed – a plaid, short-sleeved shirt, pressed khaki pants, brown penny loafers, and a tweed flat cap, which I suppose conveyed “sportiness” back then.

Rail thin and tall, Mr. Perry looked impressive riding his upright, 3-speed black Raleigh. If I was playing on the front lawn, he would glance over and nod, but never waved. I liked the focus, athleticism and speed of the old man. He

I thank the biking Gods for all my trusted steeds – the red St. Etienne that my father bought wholesale when I was a teenager with the cranky drive train that needed constant attention; a couple of fancy Japanese folding bikes, both of which eventually disappeared from the city streets where I'd locked them; a Cannondale mountain bike with perfect geometries that is still effortless to ride even with its unforgiving hardtail; and a Litespeed Teramo that wants to go a lot faster than I ride it. I had to up-angle the headset a bit on the Litespeed to take the pressure off my neck in the drops – one concession to my advancing age.

This past spring my lifelong ride looped back to my cycling origins. At a garage sale in Long Island, I found a 1964 Schwinn Tiger in beautiful condition with the iconic red, white and blue checkerboard decal on the seat tube nearly intact. There is also a faded yellow Burlington, Iowa license decal on the rear fender that adds a touch of “paperboy” nostalgia to this vintage cruiser. Everything on the Tiger is original, from the chrome fenders and spring-action seat to the Westwind white-wall tires. All that's missing is the classic bullet headlight that no doubt disappeared into the Iowa cornfields long ago.

This peach of a bike always gets longing looks and nods of appreciation on the road. It is a fitting mount upon which to launch my next half-century ride, but I'll be bringing all my other cherished machines along on the journey with me.

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