

# CYCLETTES

TREE ABRAHAM

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*For Abigail—  
brains, heart, & courage.*

(1)



On a first grade spelling list is the word *bike*. On a second grade (2) spelling list is the word *cycle*. We learn first the thing, second our relationship to it.

**bike** [informal of **bi•cy•cle** /'baɪsɪk(ə)l/]

*noun*

a vehicle with a frame holding two wheels  
front wheel is connected to handle bars that steer, that brake  
back wheel is connected to chains connected to pedals  
connected to a person—torque

**cy•cle** /'saɪk(ə)l/

*noun*

1. a complete series, which might repeat
2. a time period of events/states/interactions that recur in order and duration

*verb*

1. to ride a bicycle (SEE ABOVE)
2. to move in a revolution, often around a central axis

+ *-tte*

SEE p.7-207



My earliest encounter with a bicycle, that I can claim with any certainty, (3)  
 is not a true memory, but a photo record of me found tucked with other  
 outtakes behind posed photos in a clear pocket album. Technically,  
 it is a tricycle. And if you were to judge my childhood based on said  
 photo, it might appear that I grew up in a trailer park—which is ironic  
 since a trailer connotes a home that is mobile, and nothing typifies  
 my childhood less than the suggestion of movement. I am barefoot in  
 an undershirt and sweats on a rusted trike in a backyard filled with  
 plastic child things: a potty, an upturned wading pool, a picnic table.  
 I look determined, though too tiny to pump the pedals. Where would  
 I have hoped to have gone? I couldn't have known then. It is May 11<sup>th</sup>  
 1992 and I am 26.5 months old.

My first bicycle was sparkly magenta with squishy white handlebars (4)  
 and a coaster brake system. The head tube had a 3D silver crest of a  
 mountain motif affixed to it. I rubbed that insignia as if it authenticated  
 membership into a trailblazer's club.

Buried in the 20 hours of 8mm video cassette footage from the begin- (5)  
 ning years of my parents becoming parents is a one minute and two  
 second clip of me riding the magenta bike with training wheels at  
 four years old. Mom is filming from the porch, zooming-in over the  
 fence to capture me, trailed by Dad and my sister sauntering on foot  
 at nearly the same speed that I can manage on wheels. My simpering  
 face is cocked towards Mom the entire labored pedal down the path.  
 I stop when perpendicular to the frame, stumble off the bike in a jog  
 towards the fence to wave at Mom. I want her watching me. Watch  
 me ride a bike. Watch me go on by.



- (6) Sometimes I meet an adult who has never ridden a bicycle. I am left aghast. I cannot comprehend a bicycle-less existence—to not know or want to know a bike ride. There is an ugliness to watching an adult learn to ride a bike, but we all have learning gaps. There are things I missed out on as a child, things my parents didn't model or think to pass along to me. Organizing my adulthood sometimes feels like a series of catch-up sessions to compensate for my parents' oversights (like how to cook, strike a match, apply make-up, pay taxes, camp, dance, celebrate, maintain close friendships, be happy...). But I am catching-up, and those things absent for much of my life are starting to appear as if they have been part of me all along.
- (7) A friend learned to ride a bike in his mid-twenties. Out of embarrassment, he would practice on his childhood block in the middle of the night. He bikes to work every day now.
- (8) I must have begun riding my magenta bicycle with four wheels that became two, but I do not remember that upgrade. I do remember watching my younger sister ride a training wheel-less bike for the first time. We were in the school yard on that kind of field so worn down that its compacted ground with grassy patches looked like a scalp suffering alopecia. As the eldest, I had learned on pavement, but by now Dad had wisened to starting my younger sisters on a softer surface. My sister Daryl<sup>1</sup> was born with a tumor pressing against the left-side of her brain (a fact we didn't discover until adulthood) that causes the right-side of her body to be slightly paralytic. Motor activities sent her into fits of frustration until she could develop her own workarounds. I held my breath as Daryl mounted her sparkly blue retro bike with a banana seat (undoubtedly a garage sale find). She immediately set off in loops around the field with a lionhearted ease. When I stitch together that moment in my mind, I see myself jumping up and down

and cheering her name in elation. She was championing this thing that was supposed to be hard. I watched her becoming free as if it was an extension of my own freedom.

The balding school yard was also the site of bicycle tragedy for my friend Bertie. The story went, she was splayed out at the bottom of the hill when a teenager on a bike came barreling down it and ran right over both her legs. For what seemed like all of first grade, Bertie had two full length leg casts and was wheeled around the school yard by a posse fighting for pushing powers. I wanted injury accoutrement—bandages, crutches, scars. Her casts were crowded with Sharpied doodles consecrating her fandom. The actors on *Barney & Friends* usually had a kid with a broken arm, often in a neon pink or mustard yellow cast, probably caused from falling out of a tree. Kids in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were always falling out of trees and down wells. I was jealous of the special attention injuries garnered. I was jealous of Bertie even when she was wailing in pain and had to leave class or sit out of activities. While brushing my teeth I would bite down hard on my canker sores to try to simulate the degree of pain she must have felt. I wanted to experience the out of the ordinary; to separate from the masses of mundane and do what nobody else got to do.

Once, I strung a skipping rope from the seatpost on my sister's bike to a hula hoop. Rollerblades on, I got inside the hoop and had her ride as fast as she could back and forth on the path behind our house. The limits to our play were either end of that path out back, or the parallel extent in front that spanned where our street intersected a busy road on one end and the curve of the court on the other end (165 yards—which Google Maps estimates is one minute of cycling or two minutes of walking). This might have been one of the most dangerous activities I ever instigated as a girl, alongside swing set acrobatics and

consecutive lunches at McDonald’s. I was never reckless enough to justify injury accoutrement. The closest I came was spraining a thumb, not mid-sport, but sport-adjacent when it was nicked by a classmate’s basketball being thrown back into a bin.

(11) With our limited horizon, sometimes my sisters and I would have slow bike races. While torpor requires poise and micro-movements to keep from tipping over, mostly I won because my resolute adherence to tasks outlasted the spasmodic tendencies of most children. I wasn’t about speed, as much as flux. Not fast, but thorough and moving, even if sometimes microscopically.

VELOCITY	
MODE	AVG. MPH
WALKING	0.15
JOGGING	3-3.5
RUNNING	4-6
SKATEBOARDING	6-15
ROLLERBLADING	8-16
CYCLING - BEGINNER	12
CYCLING - COMMUTER	15-19
CYCLING - ADVANCED	20-24
CYCLING - RACER	25-28

I had longings for a childhood like Vada Sultenfuss’ in *My Girl*. I (12) longed to ride down main street through back alleys under tree-lined sidewalks to the dock beneath the willow, side-by-side with a best friend turned boyfriend. Small town America was always presented as an idyllic playground for latchkey kids to romp around unsupervised. My suburbia lacked the charm and amenities of a quaint historic film locale. The neighborhood was sun-bleached from saplings in lieu of the forests cleared to build it; services were packaged in box-store oases surrounded by parking lot deserts; and whatever utopic delusions once lulled parents into negligence had been obliterated in the wake of missing kids on milk cartons and sensationalist news coverage of guns, drugs, and peanut allergies.

I’ve noticed that time speeds by faster when biking in nature than when (13) biking in the city. Time speeds by faster when walking in the city than when walking in nature.

Self-referential encoding—the mentation that marries our environment (14) with our identity—is made possible through entering *default network mode*, wherein the body is on auto-pilot and the brain is at wakeful rest, lost in daydream and wander. I enter this mode most often when cycling. The bike becomes a telekinetic apparatus, effortlessly channeling creative epiphanies from the world into my mind.

The furthest I ever habitually veered from home as a child was on (15) bike rides with my father. Dad towed my sisters in a bike trailer and I followed on my two-wheeler. I tried to retrace our standard route on a map of Hunt Club—the network of suburban streets and parks in the South end of Ottawa, Ontario, Canada that were encircled by linked pathways. We rode by my elementary school, which was visible from my house, onwards past familiar backyards of school friends towards Greenboro Park. I went to a Catholic School. My best friend, who also