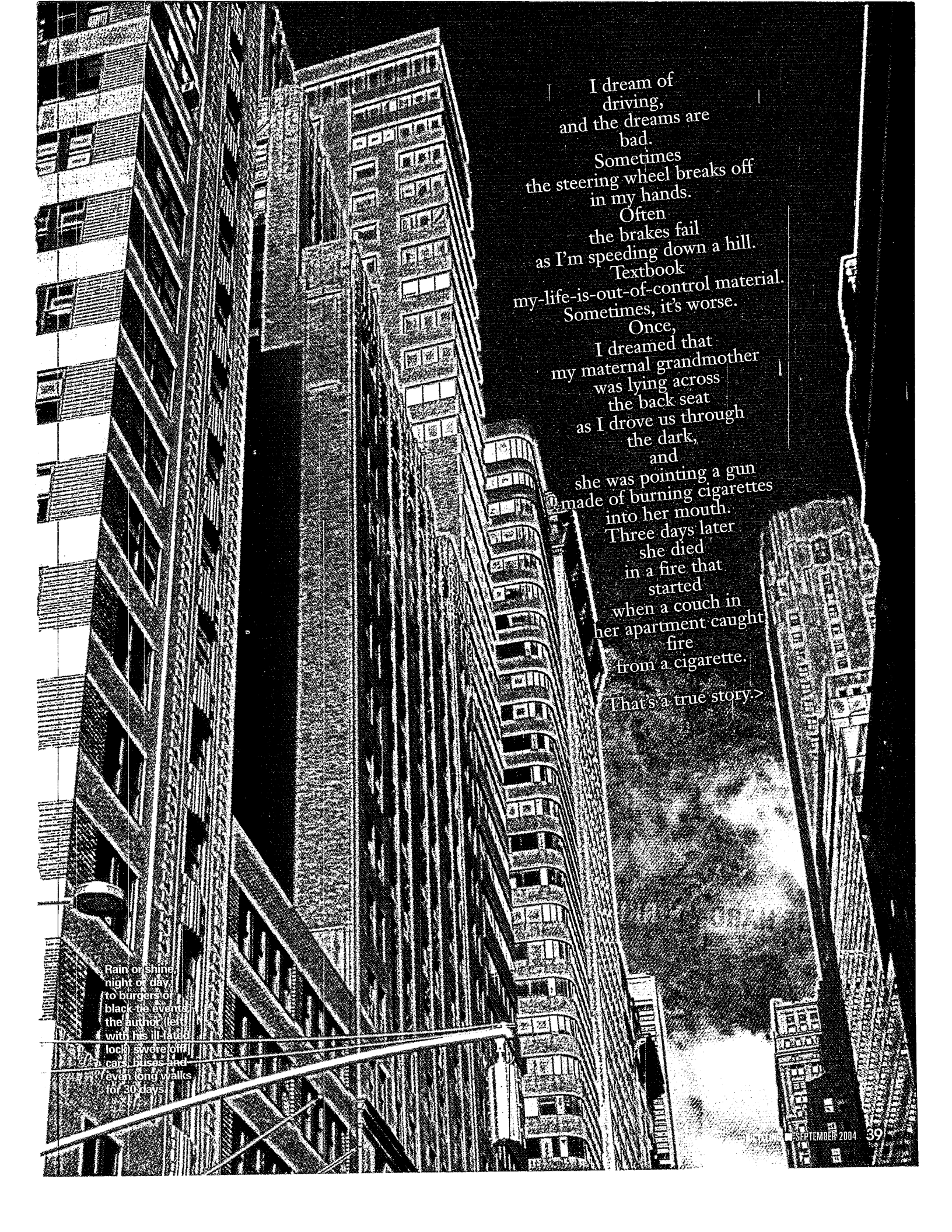




ME AND MY BIKE: A LOVE STORY

By Steve Friedman
Photographed by François Portmann

A VOW TO RIDE
A 20-YEAR-OLD
10-SPEED EVERYWHERE
FOR 1 MONTH
LEADS TO
A LEANER WAIST,
A FATTER WALLET AND
THE REDISCOVERY
OF INNOCENCE,
DERRING-DO, UNLIMITED
POSSIBILITY AND
EUPHORIC PASSION—
AND ONE
VERY, VERY SMELLY
BIKE LOCK.



I dream of
driving,
and the dreams are
bad.

Sometimes
the steering wheel breaks off
in my hands.

Often
the brakes fail
as I'm speeding down a hill.
Textbook
my-life-is-out-of-control material.
Sometimes, it's worse.

Once,
I dreamed that
my maternal grandmother
was lying across
the back seat
as I drove us through
the dark,
and
she was pointing a gun
made of burning cigarettes
into her mouth.
Three days later
she died
in a fire that
started
when a couch in
her apartment caught
fire
from a cigarette.
That's a true story.>

Rain or shine,
night or day,
to burgers or
black-tie events
the author (left)
with his ill-fated
lock, swore off
cars, music and
even long walks
for 30 days.

Here's another one:
 When
 I was a child
 and my father was angry
 at my mother,
 he often took it out
 on the gas pedal.
 We would
 hurtle
 down the tree-lined
 blacktops of suburban St. Louis,
 my parents in the front seat,
 silent
 and
 seething,
 my brother and
 I
 in the back,
 wide-eyed with terror.

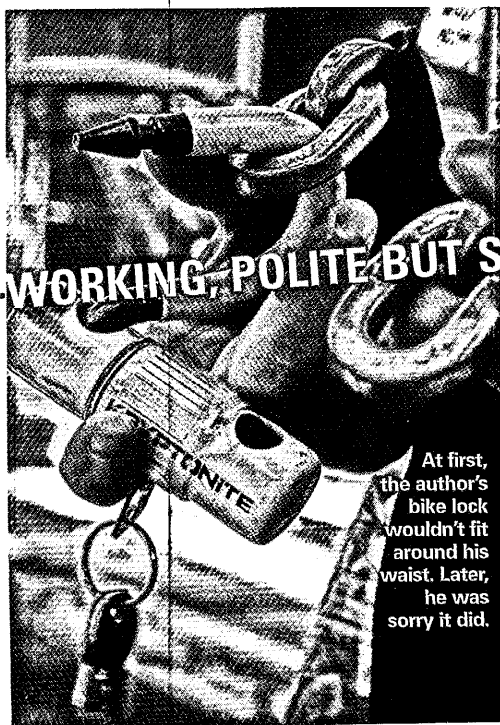
I mention the dreams and apparently prophetic nightmare and childhood fears because I have cooked up an ambitious plan that involves a bicycle. So I want to get the open-road-endless-highways-great-American-love-affair-with-the-car stuff out of the way and point out that I've got some issues with motorized vehicles. More

important, though, as I've tweaked and honed my plan, I've come to believe in the irreducible honesty and primal satisfaction of cycling as a way of life. So if I'm going to do something irreducibly honest, I want to *be* irreducibly honest. (Not that all cyclists are irreducibly honest. There are the Chinese delivery guys who glide the wrong way down one-way streets. There are the sidewalk hogs, the fearsome and remorseless bike messengers, the manicured and bony Spinning harri-dans, the rich bullies with their sneering sense of entitlement on their multi-thousand-dollar machines. There are the thieves. Eight million stories in the

I'LL BE HARD-WORKING, POLITE BUT SWIFT, A CYCLING PRINCE.

naked city, and a large minority of them, I'm convinced, are thugs on spoked wheels.)

But I will be a good cyclist, irreducibly honest, hard-working, rule-following, red-light-stopping, helmet-wearing, right-of-way granting. This is the plan. I will, for an entire month, go everywhere I need or want to go in New York City on my bike. No public transportation, no cabs, no cars, no buses. Rain or shine, night or day, to burgers with my pals or to black-tie events, I will ride. I will ride to the Bronx, where



At first, the author's bike lock wouldn't fit around his waist. Later, he was sorry it did.



Twenty-five years after he was scared away from cycling in the city by a rat roasting on a spit, Friedman hits the mean streets again.

I've never been. I will pedal to Queens, which I think I drove through once but can't remember. To Brooklyn I will whoosh, over the Brooklyn Bridge. Staten Island, I will cruise.

I'm doing this not merely to exorcise my bad dreams. I see someone for that. (But I'll ride to my shrink.) So why? To get more fit and save some cash certainly (subways and taxis cost). But to accomplish those goals, I could cancel a few cable channels and increase my time on the elliptical trainer. I'm after something more elusive and precious. I want to expand

I'LL REPLENISH WITH HOT DOGS AND PAPAYA JUICE.

my universe, to recapture my derring-do, my sureness about the goodness of life, a sense of unlimited possibilities. I want to find the excitement I remember greeting me

every summer morning when I was a child, the thrill that accompanied the first sighting of my brave and sturdy purple Schwinn, and its promise of a softball game at Heman Park, a hot fudge sundae at Velvet Freeze, the new Iron Man comic book and a grape soda at Kranson's drugstore. I want to locate and live in that pre-nightmare sense of serenity, before things such as jobs and debt and death and illness and 30 pounds of lard and—let's be irreducibly honest here—a little too much fun with drugs and alcohol got in the way.

So, the plan: I will learn to love and appreciate the city in ways no pedestrian or driver ever could. I will do loop after 6.2-mile loop around Central Park, just for fun. I'll ride to poetry readings and off-Broadway theater productions and amusing little Peruvian restaurants in the East Village that I've long seen referenced on the covers of hipster magazines I never pick up at the newsstand, but which maybe I will now. I'll find the most bicycle-friendly routes through this asphalt jungle and I'll stick to them. I will spread the spoked gospel, persuade my old friends to embrace the cycling culture, make new, and more adventurous, Peruvian-food-loving friends, and perhaps find a sweetheart with an expansive heart and lustrous hair and smooth and muscled calves.

There are things I won't do, though. I won't turn into an equipment snob or a gearhead, obsessing over titanium nuts and \$500 wheels, debating with other gearheads the relative merits of a custom carbon bike versus a velvety hand-welded ultralightweight steel frame that was once raced by Eddy (The Cannibal) Merckx's second cousin. I possess a perfectly rideable, if rusted, 20-year-old, 10-speed gray Panasonic and that will do me just fine.

I won't ride on sidewalks or the wrong way down one-way streets. I won't dart in and out of traffic and cut off taxis.

I won't wear spandex or biking shorts of any kind. I will be neither arrogant nor a fetishist. I'll be old-school. Polite but swift, I'll carry—in lieu of a water bottle—a few bucks wherever I go, to replenish myself with hot dogs

3 Ways to Go Faster Without Working Harder

- **DRESS FUNNY.** A casual-shorts-and-T-wearing cyclist who switches to a jersey and spandex shorts will go about half a mile per hour faster with the same energy expenditure, according to aerodynamics guru John Cobb of Bicycle Sports in Tyler, Texas.
- **GET SMALL.** If a 180-pound rider who sits upright tucks in his arms and lowers his shoulders, he could ride up to a full mile per hour faster at the same energy cost, Cobb estimates.
- **JOIN THE DRAFT.** Ride 10–12 inches directly behind a buddy's rear wheel and you cut your energy use by about half, says Cobb. When solo, ride closer to the shoulder, where trees, guardrails and buildings deflect wind and give you some benefit. —Sarah Max

THE EASY WAY TO GET FIT

I GOT INTO GREAT CYCLING SHAPE BY ACCIDENT. HERE'S HOW YOU CAN TAKE CHARGE OF YOUR FITNESS.

By Loren Mooney

I used to like cycling. I mean, I just liked it, and nothing more. I dug the speed and the distance I could cover, but oh, the suffering. The day after a ride, I'd fidget in my desk chair, trying to soothe my aching back and butt, and my trashed legs would buckle on stairs. That was nothing compared to the rides themselves. Once a week, or less, I'd do 30–45 miles with Brian, a hammerhead triathlete. I'd draft the whole way, struggling to hang on and sprinting back up when I got gapped. The riding never got any easier, I never got any faster, and I wondered how Brian and others could claim to love riding.

Now I understand. I didn't mean to improve my cycling fitness, but it happened. About a year ago, I started riding with Audra, a running friend who often pokes along on the bike>



LOVE

Friedman's friends sneered when he invited them along—but he never lacked for company on the roll.

and a papaya juice when I get tired. I will be a cycling prince of the city. That's my plan.

The night before I begin, I contemplate the very sensible reasons I should abandon my plan: heavy traffic, wily and rapacious thieves, a slow service elevator (my high-rise doesn't allow cyclists to mix with the regular residents), potholes, pedestrians, dogs, achy back, bad knee, free-floating anxiety, tendency to sweat excessively, dearth of public toilets, general aversion to Peruvian food or new experiences in general, one-way streets, buses, 30 pounds of lard that prevent me from wearing Kryptonite lock around belly. Also a desire to have kids and concerns about a crushed or mangled prostate and resultant unhappy spermatozoa. The roasting rat of 1979.

I must mention the rat. The

I IGNORE RED LIGHTS. I SWERVE. IN JUST 6 DAYS I'VE TURNED

Plan is not the first time

I decided to transform myself into an urban cyclist. No, I made that decision once before, some 25 years ago, when I visited this great metropolis for the first time, when I was a recent college graduate with a copy of *Siddhartha* in his back pocket and a bag of weed in his backpack. I stayed with a friend and we agreed that bikes would be the best and most adventurous way to explore the city. After a few bong hits one bright

and sunny spring morning, we ventured out. A cab sideswiped me in midtown and sent me hurtling onto the sidewalk, inches from a grimy, haunted-looking wraith crouched and carefully tending something on a spit over a sputtering little homemade fire. It was a rat, and he was cooking it. I sprinted back to my friend's apartment, where I stayed for three days, rocking back and forth, nodding, sucking on my bong as if it held mother's milk, until it was time to fly home.

But I am older now, wiser, long bong-less. Even so, cabs and limos still roam the streets, as do rats and—maybe—rat roasters. Would I run back home again? This was going to be an adventure, yes. I hoped it might provide salvation. But it would also be a test.

I am speeding the wrong way down a particularly nasty stretch of Broadway, screaming at a taxi driver who has veered too close to me, turning a baleful eye on a young mother who looks like she's thinking about pushing her infant in its stroller ahead of her and into a crosswalk that any fool can see is rightfully mine. I lock eyes with the mother. My bike. Her baby. Does she really want to make that wager? I pedal faster. She pulls back, I shoot through the intersection.

It is day six. Less than a week, and I've turned into the cyclist I swore I would never become. I ride the wrong way down one-way streets. I ignore red lights, don't wear a helmet, swerve onto sidewalks if I need to, or merely if I feel like it. Why? Maybe it's because I started too fast, logging 15–20 miles each of my first

five days on the plan, after more than a decade of not riding at all.

Maybe because the city planners and their greed-soaked city maps make accommodation after accommodation for fossil-fuel-burning, filth-spewing traffic, and relegate us pure and noble cyclists to choked little chutes where of course we're going to get crabby and break a few rules.

Maybe it's because my legs ache and my butt is sore and all the so-called friends I have invited along on my journey into meaning and health have laughed or sneered, or both. Maybe because my few attempts at picking up women cyclists ("Nice bike," and "You're really fast," and "I'm writing a story about finding peace and optimism on wheels, can I talk to you?") have prompted only frightened sprints—away from me. Maybe it's because of the many lessons I have learned on my bike that I never would have learned on foot or in a car, one of the most important is this:

FUNDAMENTALS

How to Thrive in Traffic

- **RIDE LIKE A CAR.** The most effective way to stay safe: Abide by the rules of the road. Ride with traffic flow, halt at stop signs and lights, signal before you turn—basically ride predictably, says Ed Ravin, a leader of the Five Borough Bicycle Club in New York City, who teaches traffic safety courses.
- **RIDE IN THE ROAD.** Ravin says many cyclists ride too close to the curb, where they're more likely to run into trouble (gravel, pedestrians, car doors). If there's no bike lane, ride a third of the way into the lane or, if you can, take your own lane.
- **IMAGINE YOU'RE INVISIBLE.** Never assume drivers see you, will obey traffic signs or will signal before they turn. You should be ready to react to moving obstacles but calm enough to resist making sudden stops or turns. If a car honks, it's actually a good thing, says Ravin: "It's a sure sign that drivers see you." —S.M.

When I leave my lock wrapped around a "No Parking" pole near my apartment, before venturing out, because it still won't fit around my gut, and because it's heavy, dogs tend to urinate all over it. So add to sore-legged, sore-assed, crabby, law-breaking, slightly sunburnt, a little bloated from hot dogs and papaya juice, this description of this cycling prince—"smells like dog piss."

On the seventh day, I rest. Actually, I nap, and watch *Rocky IV* (the Russian one) on TV, and eat bagels and surf the Internet and drink a lot of coffee. It hurts to walk.

At the beginning of week two, I discover a boil on my butt. The boil happens to erupt the same week that the local tabloids jump on a new flesh-eating bacteria story. Or something like flesh-eating bacteria, anyway. It seems a sometimes-fatal rash has escaped from the hospitals in the city and onto the street. The street, of course, is where I spend a lot of time now. But I will keep riding. The boil won't beat me like the roasting rat did. Did giving up the bong some years ago make me more resilient, less cowardly? Did I hallucinate the rat? Was it just a squirrel? What would I do if, while I was pedaling down a quiet and tree-lined street in, say, Chelsea, a squirrel darted into my path? I remember my high-school driver's-education instructor and his feelings about squirrels and how he always instructed his teenage charges (with a gleam in his eye and a little too

much glee, if memory serves) to grip the steering wheel more tightly and "Go straight—straight over the little guy. Better him than you."

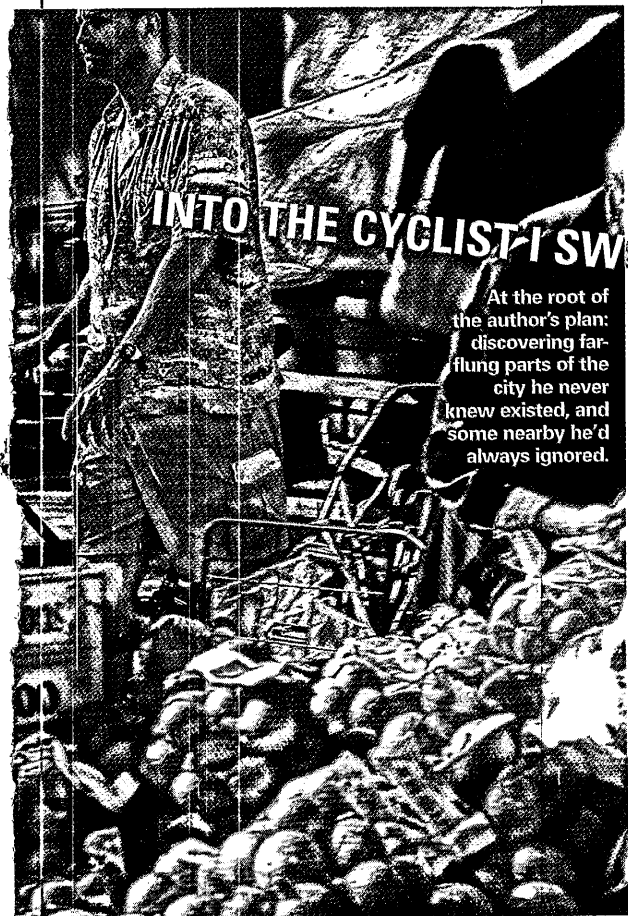
I find myself slipping into these fugue-on-wheels states more often lately. Pre-Plan, on subways and buses, I'd spend most of my time worrying about terrorist attacks and nerve gas, cursing traffic or slow subways in front of us or how the guy next to me was standing too close. Now I daydream about squirrels as I slip in and out of traffic, enjoying the afternoon sun, the way cars get stuck where I don't. If the subways were nerve-gassed, or if there were a dirty bomb that led to mass panic and gridlock, I'd be pedaling over the George Washington Bridge to safety while panicked drivers honked in frustration and terror.

By day nine I have slipped into a routine. Every morning I cross-reference newspaper, television and Internet weather forecasts and scan the crime roundups in the *New York Post* for the outer boroughs, which never used to concern me because I never considered visiting them. While I read and surf and watch TV, I pack sunscreen, a few bucks for hot dogs and papaya juice, my iPod, cell phone, a map, a Magic Marker to trace my routes, antibiotic self-drying hand soap for when I handle my urine-soaked bike chain, an extra shirt if I'm going someplace nice, swimming suit and goggles in case I come upon a pool that looks inviting, two heavy plastic bags for the lock, a notebook and two pens. I wear shorts and a T-shirt and old, beat-up running shoes. I feel prepared and light at the same time. Ready, but not tricked out. It is a fine distinction. Bicycling shorts, I decide, would be tricked out.

Day 10, a miracle. On my way to breakfast, I decide, on the spur of the moment, to sprint a loop around Central Park first.

It's hot, and muggy, and I'm carrying my pack full of stuff but I figure, what the hell. And it's great. For breakfast I choose a place 20 blocks north of my usual neighborhood. To walk there would take me at least 25 minutes, probably longer. On my bike, I'm there in less than four.

Miracle after miracle. I discover the brine-scented world of the Hudson River, a place of kayaks and powerboats and water taxis, where ducks and geese frolic with chunks of rotten wood next to the sanitation department building in the brackish water on 59th Street. I see, a few miles down, the Jersey City skyline rising with shocking majesty across the river, the Statue of Liberty, unbowed, in the harbor. I notice things I never have before: headwinds, cobblestones, potholes, locking



GET FIT cont'd

at 12–13 mph but can go all damn day. We'd ride once or twice a week after work for an hour or so, sometimes longer on weekends. The pace was usually so easy we could have been sitting at a coffee shop conversing. No matter how far we went, the next day my back didn't ache, my legs weren't fried—I felt refreshed.

I also started working at BICYCLING, where my colleagues—of course—ride spiritedly during lunch. I join in about once a week, bringing my weekly total to four rides.

Now I keep up with Brian much more easily. I also go faster on my easy rides without more effort. My legs have grown a little bit bigger and a lot firmer, I'm more stable and comfortable on my bike, and each pedal stroke is easier and more natural. I feel great.

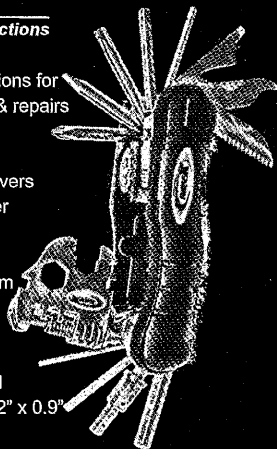
"Makes sense," says cycling coach Joe Friel, author of *The Cyclist's Training Bible* and founder of online coaching company Ultrafit (ultrafit.com). "The biggest beginner mistake is riding too hard. People want to see how fast they can go and how long they can do it. They either progress very slowly or burn out quickly." I >

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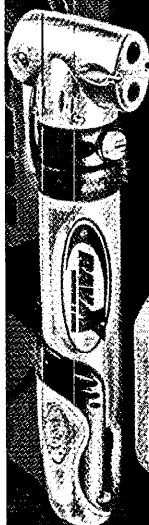
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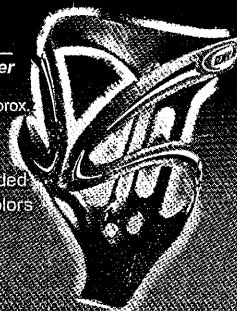
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LOVE

spots, the gentle curve of a bird wing, exhaust patterns, public bathroom locations, the immense value that old ladies possess as blockers of cars.

I also notice—remember, I'm trying to be irreducibly honest here—that my serviceable old Panasonic is kind of a piece of crap. I start lusting after bikes I see on the street. The ones with fat tubes and shiny derailleurs. The skinny racers. The custom jobs with sexy-curves and cruel, sneering silhouettes. Who am I kidding? Those bikes are for guys who draft, who spend their weekends in bike shops and actually know the cost of a titanium nut. Lean, hungry spandex-wearers. I'm a hot-dog gobble who smells like dog piss. "Don't worry," I tell my Panasonic one night, when we're alone in the service elevator. "You'll always have a home." I give her a name. The Beast.

By week three, my shorts are looser and my wallet fatter (no taxi fare or subway tokens). I am not only fitter and wealthier, I am more enamored of the human race. To the doormen and security guards in my building—outer-borough guys—who see me lugging The Beast to and fro, I discuss the wonders of Washington Heights and Brooklyn. To

FUNDAMENTALS

It's Simple—There Are Only 2 Ways to Climb

- **SIT.** You're at least 10 percent more efficient, and you'll use your glutes, quads and hamstrings in a way that emphasizes endurance over power, so you can climb on and on.
- **STAND.** Sometimes you need more power to attack or get through a steep section. Grab the brake hoods, shift one to three gears harder, rise out of the saddle as one pedal begins a downstroke, and gently rock the bike side to side in time with your strokes. Center your weight over the bottom bracket and resist leaning forward. Shift back down as you return to the saddle.—S.M.

Joe, the security guard at the back entrance, I pose questions about routes to the George Washington Bridge. Drivers and city planners I still resent, I admit, but pedestrians and inline skaters, who used to annoy me, I now gaze upon, as I slide past them, with tender and beneficent pity. They are so slow, so earthbound.

I no longer carry the Magic Markers. After a week, my map had become a smeary mess. Besides, the beauty of urban biking is exploration, not slavish obedience to a piece of paper. So, while I started on bike-map-approved bike routes—the path along the Hudson, the

GET FIT cont'd

inadvertently reversed my newbie mistake and got fast by riding more often, more slowly, while not abandoning shorter hard rides. Here's how you can do the same—on purpose.

Get Started

Cycling fitness is a blend of endurance, strength and speed. Your first rides should concentrate on endurance, with long, easy outings in Zone 1. (See "Stay in the Zone," p. 59.)

Once a week, focus on strength with Big Gear Turning drills: Shift up one or two gears, maintain your cadence for two minutes then downshift and recover for two minutes. Repeat the sequence five times, working up to 10.

In the beginning, the best way to improve speed is to boost pedaling cadence. New riders usually spin too slowly, around 50 rpm, says Friel. "It's more efficient to pedal at 90, and with experience it feels natural," he says. Try Lazy Leg drills once or twice a week: Pedal with only one leg for 20 revolutions (leaving the other on the pedal, but slack). Switch legs. Repeat six to eight times. >

LOVE

I'M THINNER, HAPPIER, BUT THE REAL BEAUTY OF URBAN BIKING



"I thought I was alone, and brilliant," says Friedman.
"But I see now that I'm one of many, an army of pedalers."

bike lane on Central Park West, now I venture out. Downtown, I like Broadway, as it slices diagonally across Manhattan. Uptown, I appreciate Sixth and Eighth Avenues, but a bike messenger whispers to me one night, when I ask, a secret: "First Avenue." The car-less path on the Hudson has its charm, but the heart of the city is shielded from the wind off the river. Off the map, I can also get from Lincoln Center to Union Square in less than 15 minutes.

I am richer, thinner, happier. I drink far less coffee. I study things I didn't used to study, know things I didn't used to know.

I know that the Upper West Side, ostensibly flat, actually rises on Central Park West (an excellent avenue for shooting uptown) from about 78th to 92nd, where it crests. I know that the headgear that resembles Nazi helmets might have a certain dangerous street cred, but that tapered ones offer better ventilation. I know that I'm a lit-

IS EXPLORATION. I KNOW THINGS I DIDN'T USED TO.

tle sick of hot dogs

and papaya juice. I know that there is almost nowhere within 30 blocks that I cannot get to faster on my bike than on any subway, taxi or bus. Pre-Plan, when I was invited downtown, or crosstown, or out of town, my standard reply was, "I dunno," often followed by an evening of cable television. My mantra now is "Distance means nothing to me."

I become grandiose. I decide I will ride up and down the boardwalks of Coney Island, eat borscht in Brighton Beach. I will explore Central Park in the dark with the monthly Moonlight Ramble folks. I will get up to 103 rpm, beat the spandex guys up the big hill on the west side of Central Park. Maybe I'll join a cycling club. I will use the phrase "hill work" without giggling.

WEEK four. My legs hurt and my butt hurts and my inner thighs are chafed and even though my boil has shrunk, so has my expanding universe.

It starts with Joe, the back-door security guy. One afternoon I tell him how I've shaved 30 seconds between Grant's Tomb and the Empire State Building.

"Uh-huh," he grunts and continues reading his newspaper.

What's his problem? Doesn't he appreciate my newfound optimism, the way biking has transformed my life? Aren't we both cyclists?

Pedaling a loop, it hits me. I'm riding for fun, for adventure, to change my life, because I want to. Joe rides because he has to. It's the way he gets to work. This insight and the accompanying shame put me into a funk and I try to burn it off by sprinting a loop around the park. (In two weeks, my loop time has gone from 23 minutes to 21.)

Still, I'm irritated. At my arrogance and myself. At drivers, and pedestrians and doormen who won't let me bring my bike inside, and at city planners who don't do more for the cycling communi-

ty and at rapacious owners of Chinese restaurants who no doubt run worldwide stolen-bike rings and at sullen, probably drug-addicted bike-shop employees who are rude to me when they spot The Beast and at dogs who piss on my bike, and at dog owners who don't just move to the country if they so desperately crave animal companionship, who so pathetically need to enslave another species to derive any sense of self-worth. At the chubby guy on the shiny green, overpriced hybrid in front of me on Amsterdam who stops at a red light and forces me to swerve, to nearly smash into him. I really am irritated at him. Red lights are for children and motorists, not me.

"Cops are ticketing people today, mate," he says. "Saw six or seven down Sixth Avenue this morning."

Three and a half weeks, and finally I get it. I had thought I was a two-wheeled prince of the city,

FUNDAMENTALS

4 Trite But True Rules to Live By

- **IF YOU'RE TIRED IN THE LEGS, SHIFT TO AN EASIER GEAR. IF YOU'RE TIRED IN THE LUNGS, SHIFT TO A HARDER GEAR.** When you slowly push hard gears your leg muscles do most of the work. Spinning transfers the workload to your aerobic system. Ideally, you find a sweet spot where no part of your body feels as if it's working too hard—spinning fast enough to keep your legs fresh but not so rapidly that you lose your breath.
- **PEDAL CIRCLES.** Although it's impossible to apply force throughout your entire pedal stroke, you'll be more efficient if you at least try. Imagine tracing a circle with your heel: Concentrate on pulling up, pushing the pedal across the top of the stroke, and pulling backward at the bottom, as if you're trying to scrape mud off the sole of your shoe.
- **IF YOUR KNEE HURTS IN FRONT, RAISE YOUR SEAT. IF IT HURTS IN BACK, LOWER YOUR SEAT.** A low saddle stresses the tendon that connects your kneecap to your shinbone. A high position forces you to reach for your pedals, which can strain the tendons at the back of your knee. At the bottom of the pedal stroke, your knees should be slightly bent but your hips shouldn't sway as you pedal.
- **DRINK BEFORE YOU'RE THIRSTY, EAT BEFORE YOU'RE HUNGRY.** Hunger and thirst are signals that your body is lacking something. You want to prime yourself before you reach that point. Drink at least one bottle of water for every hour you ride, and on rides longer than an hour, eat an energy bar or gel every 45 minutes or so.—S.M.

GET FIT cont'd

The First 6 Months

Once you can ride for 60 minutes at 80-90 rpm, you're ready for Zone training. In a week with four rides, do just one at a moderately high intensity.

DAYS 1-2:

Zone 1-2 (mostly 1), with six to eight Lazy Leg drills, or five to 10 Spin-Ups: In a very easy gear, slowly increase your cadence over the course of a minute until, with 10 seconds to go, you reach max cadence, or just short of the point where you bounce in the saddle.

DAY 3:

Zone 3-4, with five to 10 Big Gear Turning drills.

DAY 4:

Long ride in Zone 1. If you're focusing on an event such as a century, charity ride or race, work your ride time up to the duration of your goal—but no more than four hours.

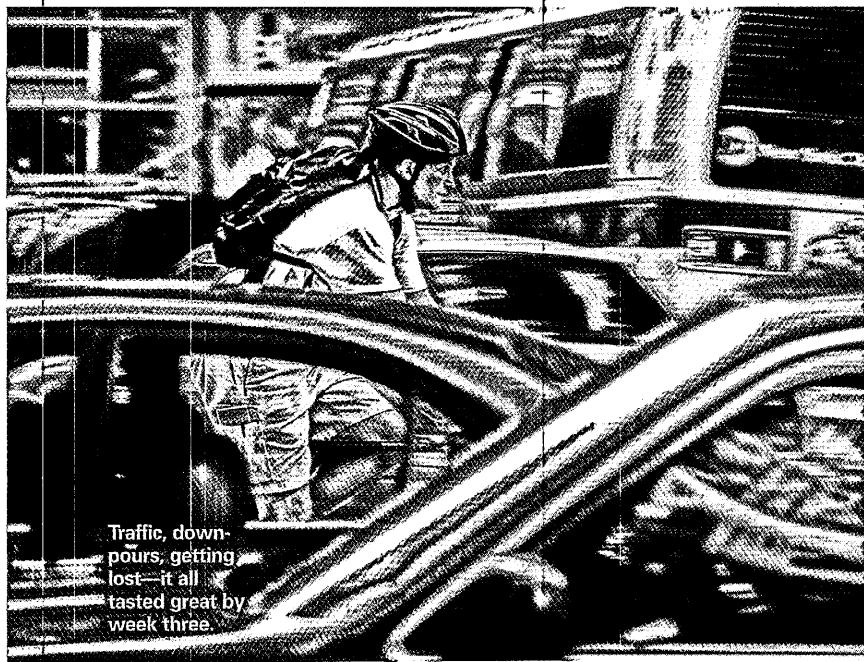
To Nine Months

DAYS 1-2: Zone 1-2

with six to eight Lazy Leg drills and up to 10 Spin-Ups.

DAY 3: Zone 4 with

three to four Big Gear Turning drills at a cadence of about 60 rpm, or three to four six-minute hill repeats with about two minutes of recovery between each one.>



Traffic, downpours, getting lost—it all tasted great by week three.

alone and brilliant in my insights about squirrels and lethal rashes and freedom. But I see now that I'm one of many, just a soldier in an army of pedalers. That rules and laws are good for everyone. That helmets are for my protection. That I'm safer on my bike from flesh-eating bacteria and nerve-gas

I'M BEAT. BUT I GET ON MY BALKY, RUSTY BUT TRUSTWORTHY

than anywhere else in the city, but that in the case of subway nerve gas I'd do my best to help my fellow citizens rather than just hauling ass to Jersey. Even the mighty Lance couldn't do it alone. No one can.

As I pedal uptown, toward the 92nd Street crest, I realize what I haven't done for almost a month—I haven't watched television, or eaten ice cream, or jotted down my most recent car nightmare. I haven't had a car nightmare in almost 30 days.

I can wrap the lock around my shrunk trunk now. I can make it around the park in 20 minutes, 35 seconds. Distances that used to seem vast I welcome. More than a few friends tell me they're really kind of sick of hearing "Distances mean nothing to me," and why don't I go for a long ride by myself and chill out.

I don't make it to Queens or the Bronx. Nor to Coney Island or Brighton Beach. But I ride to the southern tip of Manhattan, take the ferry, and loop Staten Island, see its endless landfill and radioactive weeds and a couple towheads playing stickball and a platoon of purple-robed graduates of Our Lady of Peace High School filling into their assembly hall for graduation on

New Dorp Lane on a soft summer day and an Albanian immigrant who tells me I have "many miles" to go before I make it back to the ferry. I smile and thank her. I ask her how to say "thank you" in Albanian and she scuttles away very quickly, but it doesn't bother me. None of this would have happened without The Plan.

I cross the Brooklyn Bridge in a downpour, amazed at how peaked it is, how old-fashioned the wooden slats underneath. On the other side I buy the thinnest and most delicate pizza I have ever seen, and I huddle underneath a concrete overhang with the three people I've dragged along, and it's the best pie I've ever tasted, and as the rain falls in sheets, we squat and shove slices into our mouths and agree that bicycles rule. I weave in and out of traffic in Chinatown. I ride over the George Washington Bridge with a friend, and up the Palisades. We stop at a park, watch red-tailed hawks, gaze at Manhattan, which for the first time in the dozen years I have lived here really looks like an island.

I ride in the Moonlight Ramble, in a platoon of blinking red lights. I order coffee in shops I never knew existed, roll up downtown streets I'd heard

about but never seen. For the first time I witness steam rising off streets after a summer rain, and models power-walking around Central Park in mid-morning. When did power walking become big? Might cycling be the next big thing for models?

The night before my last day on wheels I attend an engagement party downtown. To be irreducibly honest about it, it's kind of dull. To

FUNDAMENTALS

Steady Does It

- Maintain stability in corners by braking before the turn, not in it. As you turn, position your outside pedal at 6 o'clock, shift most of your body weight onto it and push down on the handlebar with your inside arm. This leans your body and bike into the turn while maximizing traction.
- For non-emergency stops, avoid squirreli-ness while braking by simultaneously feathering the rear and front brakes with one finger. Apply too much force and you could skid or lose control.
- To look backward without swerving, bend your elbows, drop your left shoulder and turn your head to the left without pivoting your shoulders or hips. For quick glances just behind you, do like the pros and sneak a peek under your armpit.
- Avoid wobbling when you're bumped by another rider by keeping your elbows and knees loose so your body absorbs the impact without transmitting it into your bike.—S.M.



The Plan is over. But the adventure's just beginning.

GREAT, GRAY BEAST—AND

be even more irreducibly honest, I'm not looking forward to the 7-mile ride home. I'm beat.

But then I get on my bike, my balky and rusted but trustworthy great gray Beast, and everything changes. I see things I've never seen. There, in the East Village, a gray-haired, broad-shouldered man with his glasses pushed up on his forehead studying a manuscript and sighing as he crosses the street. There, on 14th, two lovers holding hands, staring at the ground, whispering. There, through an open window of a bar in the 20s, a fat bald man with a ponytail, singing. There, ahead of me, almost empty, the great dark speed chute of First Avenue, an invitation to sprint through the night.

I cut west on 71st Street and it's like riding in the Midwest suburbs, so silent is the night. A squirrel darts in front of me. Or is it a rat? The only sound is the whir of the wheels, my breathing, the middle-aged metallic creaking of The Beast.

In the park, a heavy hush, the lonely clomp of horses' hooves on the pavement, the cicada's song, New York sounds I never heard before. I pass an inline skater, lying on his back on cobblestones, cooling off, mist rising from him. I feel sorry for him. He is only exercising. I am going somewhere.

I don't know if I got to 103 rpms. I don't know if I'll ever own titanium, or join a cycling

club, or buy bike shorts or eat Peruvian food. It doesn't seem to matter so much anymore.

The last day of my month on wheels, I ride to breakfast, take a spin down to the Hudson River, visit a friend on the East Side, do two loops and ride to an uptown café I've never been before. Twenty-one miles. That night I dream about pedaling through green mountains. Really, that's the irreducible, honest truth.

I wake on the morning of Day Thirty-One, Plan Accomplished. It's a gray, muggy day, brutally hot. Horns blare outside my window. It will get up to 95 today. There's been a stabbing in Brooklyn. A good day for a walk, or an air-conditioned cab. A better day to stay inside. I call my father at his office in St. Louis, ask if he remembers mashing the family car's gas pedal in rage. A slight pause. "I was young," he says. "Yeah, I probably did do that."

I tell him about my month on the bike, and he suggests I come to the

EVERYTHING CHANGES.

Midwest for Father's Day, that we take a long bike ride together. After we say good-bye, I put on my pack, wheel my faithful beast out the apartment door, to the service elevator. The Plan is over. ■

Writer at large Steve Friedman's profile of Graeme Obree (June 2003) will be reprinted this October in The Best American Sports Writing 2004.

GET FIT cont'd

DAY 4: Boost your long ride time, but keep it squarely in Zone 1—and no longer than four hours.

To One Year

Stay with one hard ride per week, but increase its intensity. Try a Power Turning workout, which is a Spin-Up in a harder gear rather than an easier one. Or do Anaerobic Intervals: three minutes in Zone 5 followed by three minutes in Zone 1 for recovery. Start with three of these, and work up to five of them. When you're ready to think about racing or hanging with the local fast group, boost the number of Zone 3-5 days to two per week.

Stay in the Zone

Of the three main elements of training—frequency, duration and intensity—intensity is most important, says Friel, and also the most frequently abused: "If you ride too hard when you should be going easy, you'll be too tired when it's time to push your limits." To be sure you're not overdoing it, judge your efforts by these zones:

ZONE	FEELS...	OR, FOR HEART-MONITOR GEEKS
1	Easy. You can talk normally.	65–81% of lactate threshold*
2	Comfortable, but you pant slightly as you make your point.	82–88%
3	Pretty hard. You can speak, but not finish a sentence.	89–93%
4	Hard. Talk? You're having trouble thinking.	94–100%
5	All out, as in "I may puke after this."	over 100%

* To estimate lactate threshold, or the intensity at which searing lactic acid begins to accumulate in your legs, measure your average heart rate as you ride 30 minutes at a pace you can barely sustain for the duration.