

Ride To Euphoria

Whenever my psyche needs an up-lift, or I want to remind myself of the goodness of community, I don't turn to drugs, alcohol or extreme sports. I think about that Sunday in May, 1997 when a simple bike ride turned into a forever memorable event.

I was spending my days being a companion to, and taking care of my mother who could no longer live alone. My being in Portland, Oregon was the result of turning a series of bad events—the death of my husband, disability and my recent early retirement—into the positive act of helping my mother. We had a loving relationship; and I was happy to be there.

It was just before the dinner hour, when Mother settled into her overstuffed chair to watch her television favorites, *Jeopardy* and *Wheel of Fortune*. It was a routine she enjoyed with a passion. All was well with her. All was excited with me. The warming sunshine and fragrant air drew my body to the porch just as a magnet pulls a shard of steel. It was a glorious late spring day and I wanted to be a part of it. I always held the opinion that the caregiver should take care of themselves and so I boldly suggested, “Maybe I could go out while you watch your shows. I've got a letter to post.”

Mother found it difficult to form words since her strokes, so agreed with gestures that translated to, “Go on, I'm fine.” I felt as though I were a child of six again; though, in fact I was a middle-aged woman.

Without a car in Portland, I had to rely on walking, public transit or a three-speed bicycle for my transportation. I rolled the bike out of mother's garage, down the shared driveway and onto adventure.

As I glided into the quiet street I wasn't surprised that most of the neighbors were outside also. I exchanged greetings with many in a sense of genuine conviviality. Parents sat on front porches watching their children play hopscotch or jump rope. Circles of girls giggled while they dressed dolls on blankets spread over freshly manicured lawns. Couples with strollers sauntered along sidewalks occasionally stopping to show off their pride and joy. I could hear friendly murmuring with occasional outbursts of laughter. Men gestured with cooking tongs as they shared barbecue stories over fences. Boys bantered as they played basketball, sometime in driveways, sometime in the street itself with little or no traffic to bother them. Some folks partnered to wash cars or sidewalks, laughing while spraying each other. Others sat and simply relished the company of others. Amateur gardeners toiled to perfect lawns or flowerbeds trying to get that last bit accomplished before the work week began. I discovered my legs moved in synchrony with the soothing rurrh-rurrh-rurrh of reel mowers.

As the low sun warmed first my face, then the back of my neck, I slow-pedaled block by block occasionally watching dog owners exercising their pets. Two of them followed a routine of slow walking their older dog with a cat keeping up beside them. I steered to the curb, set my sandaled foot down and reaching forward deposited my letter in the blue box. I don't remember what the letter was—perhaps a note to my daughter and her husband who were living in, and looking after my house.

I paused to admire a large poodle accompanied by a woman my age. Dak was well behaved, but insisted I pet him. I happily obliged delighting him with ear rubs. I straddled my center bar while the woman and I shared dog tales. I noticed Dak limped slightly. The owner appreciated my interest and gushed, "He's been a great pet for twelve years." My own dog—a Siberian Husky named Buck—once had a limp like Dak's. It progressed so badly that he had to make a final trip to the veterinarian at age twelve. That was four years prior. I still missed him. I admired Dak with one last head pat, said goodbye and pushed off while fighting back tears.

Portland is famous for its individual neighborhoods, parks and gardens. Mother's was old, well maintained and pleasant. Each house was unique. Each garden was well groomed and different. Many gardeners extended their expertise to the park strip which ran between the street and sidewalks utilizing the area to grow vegetables, flowers or ornamental shrubs.

I floated on puffs of perfume with nose and eyes bedazzled by an expanse of flowers. Daphne, alyssum, rhododendrons, and azaleas spread as blankets in multiple shades of red: pink, scarlet, salmon, purple, mauve, and lavender. Tulips of all hues lifted their delicate petals upwards kissing the sunshine. Myriads of crocus, bluebells, daffodils, and hyacinths resonated welcomes with vivid colors and fragrances. Bright yellow forsythia flashed brilliant beside hydrangeas in multiple shades of blue, pink, purple and white. Red, pink and white clematis and honeysuckle climbed pergolas, arbors, trellises, and draped their colors over front porches like banners furling enticing fragrances street ward. Lilacs were ubiquitous—their unmistakable scent bringing me back to my childhood. Mother always loved lilacs and they became my favorite too. Wrapped in this mantle of sensory delight, I felt elevated to some mystical cloud.

Even many of the trees had flowers: tulip trees, dogwood and cherry trees. My eyes were drawn upward and for a moment my mind was transported back home as I recognized European Bird Cherry trees like the magnificent one in my Alaskan yard. Similar to a May Day tree in appearance, it emits a distinctive honey scent.

The Rose City did not disappoint. It was early for the majority of roses, but many already brilliantly displayed their colors and fragrances intoxicating my senses as I passed.

As I pedaled in reverie, the scene was easy on my eyes. No yard was plain. Each was individual and special. Some had trellises, others sported birdbaths, banners, decks, patios, paved walks, hanging baskets or raised beds. Most had cats. Cats were everywhere as in the Mediterranean countries—except Portland's cats all looked well fed and contented.

As I meandered through the quiet streets I could also pick out dinnertime aromas. Barbecue smells were the most prominent, but I could detect spicy stir-fry, roast meats, fried onions, and fresh breads. The one aroma that made my head turn and my heart flutter was that of fried potatoes. I was reminded me of my childhood Sundays when my father—long gone now—stayed home and fried raw potatoes in peanut oil while the rest of the family walked to church services. Father's Sunday cuisine seemed to be his own special religious experience. He even called it his, “Sunday offering.”

What had started out as a simple short bike ride through Mother's neighborhood turned out to be a serendipitous trip in both the physical and emotional sense: fifty minutes of exercise, sensory discovery and memories. Rejuvenated, I returned my bike to mother's garage and galloped up the back steps through her dutch door. Mother returned my greeting with a delighted smile. I sat on the edge of her chair and stretched my arm over her shoulder. Together we

watched Vanna turn the last letter. I don't remember what the secret phrase on the screen said.

The memorable phrase in my mind was “ bike ride to euphoria”.