

PROLOGUE

Nine Brothers in a Box

Thanksgiving 1995, Dallas, Texas

“Now Honey, your dad told me you were doing something involving, let’s see, what did he say? Oh yes, bicycles. Now, what’s that about?” I’m cornered at a packed Thanksgiving party. She’s a friend of my father’s. Her name escapes me, but not that laugh, which sounds like a mischievous hyena.

“Does it have to do with Greenpeace, Honey? Why did y’all have to blow up that boat?” She means well, in a twisted way, warm in her Southern tone that belies the undertext of her question. In this world, the acceptable career boxes are medicine, law or business. In the room are my three blood brothers and four of my stepbrothers (from Dad’s remarriage); all are highly successful with impressive mainstream careers. My other two stepbrothers, an architect and a teacher from Mom’s remarriage, also fit the bill. In case you’ve lost count, that’s nine brothers.

My one stepsister, on Mom’s side, is in pharmaceutical sales. In this day and age, we all understand that one. I get no relief from this side of the family either. My stepfather, Tommy Thompson, a good ol’ boy native of the oil-rig land of East Texas, is hobby-loving, friendly, kind and generous, and loves to get my goat with choice but affectionate words like, “Why Mia, yer jest a young uppity flamethrower. This environmental crap is for y’all hippies. You don’t understand a thing about the real world” (i.e., making money). (I respond that he is a stubborn, close-minded ol’ fart.)

While I take a deep breath and chant inside my head, “Serenity now,” Dad’s friend jumps ahead. “Oh, and you remember my Laura. She’s a wonderful mom.” She pulls out the pictures of her grandkids.

It’s only about the zillionth time I’ve been dismissed by well-meaning friends, not just in my hometown but everywhere I go. Standard one-liners (often accompanied by eye-rolling) include:

“OOOH, how neat! You get paid to ride your bike?”

“Oh, *that’s* a good use of taxpayer dollars.”

“You’re trying to do what? Get people to ride bikes? Ha, ha, that’s a good one. Come check out my new car.”

Truth be told, I’m leading a revolution, savoring every battle scar and getting back up each morning to pick up the charge again. We are engaged in a large-scale social experiment to see if we can transform a large, auto-oriented American city – Portland, Oregon – into one in which bicycling is an integral part of life. The results will determine the quality of life for generations to come. Win or lose, it’s a universe away from here. How does one explain this in cocktail party conversation?

“Do they, um, pay you for that?” She pats me on the arm, as if she’s very sorry I have such a pathetic job. Maybe I should say “no” so she’ll offer me money?

“Didn’t you hear? She’s going biking with the President!” On each side of me, Tweedle-Dee and Tweedle-Dum, aka brothers Bruce and Glenn, are grinning ferociously, delighted at the opportunity to see me agitated.

“She gets paid by the pedal stroke. That’s why she’s always spinning her wheels.” That’s Bruce, the joker.

Glenn, a button-pushing Michael J. Fox look-alike, jabs, “Seriously, Sis. When are you going to get a real job?”

I stammer huffily, “Well, thanks, Brother. Always the nice one, aren’t you? I consider it a pretty important job.”

If I succeed, Portland is going to become a city where people choose bicycling as a normal, everyday means of transportation, maybe not for every trip but for many trips. I am trying to realize this for City Councilman Earl Blumenauer, a bow-tie-wearing intellectual who is leading a livability insurgency and has hired me to be his field general. This is because bicycling is a win-win solution for our growing energy, environmental, livability and health problems. In a not-too-distant future, I hope, many of us will live a car-free or car-light existence. This will mean, as I myself discovered, personal empowerment. We will be fit and healthier, with more money in our pockets. Our kids will arrive at school, by foot or bike, energetic and ready to learn. Our stress levels will drop, and we will be freer.

Glenn wants to let us know, “You know what I think when I see bicycles on the road? 50 points! No, that’s too much, it’s too easy to hit ’em.”

He turns his imaginary steering wheel toward me, grinning. “Boom... Gotcha!”

Oh boy, this is not going to be easy.

For 100 years, we have planned and designed our cities around personal automobile travel. We have cemented our auto addiction through our land-use practices, management of traffic, use of publicly financed space and layout of our



*Me and my biological brothers.
Left to right: Russell, Bruce,
Glenn.*

buildings. We have gotten so used to driving everywhere for every trip that we have forgotten how to use our bodies to fulfill our basic transportation needs. All of us are creatures of habit, and bicycling seems so out of character, so odd, really, that we cannot imagine a lifestyle in which we hop on our bikes to get where we need to go. These habits I am trying to change, through provision of bikeways and bike parking, and through events and activities to encourage people to try it. Because just like me – once a car-addicted chubster – once people try bicycling, they really like it.

I try a last-ditch effort at explanation. “Have you ever been to Copenhagen or Amsterdam? More than a third of daily trips are made by bicycles in these beautiful, cosmopolitan cities.”

Dad’s friend eyes me closely. “Amsterdam... I’ve heard about what they smoke there.” She backs away, tracks down my dad and whispers, “David, we need to talk. I think your daughter’s in serious trouble.”

Maybe I am, or maybe I’m onto something. Only time will tell.