

Summits and Sons

My map, worn and tearing along the creases, gloves, a sturdy and virtuous granola bar, wedges of juicy orange, and a full water bottle. I gathered my supplies uncertainly. As I slid my sunglasses on, I debated leaving my jacket behind; I wouldn't need it for very long, but the morning air was still cool.

My son and I were cycling from Banff to Jasper, and riding to the top of the local mountain was an obvious milestone in our training. For weeks I'd been dreading this day, and I was tempted to delay another week. But this was the test. I had persuaded my son to join me on this Rocky Mountain adventure, and he had already passed this milestone. Did I have the mettle to complete the journey I had started?

As I walked out of the house and strapped on my bike helmet, I reviewed the route in my mind's eye. At the top of the street turn right, then cut across the park and ride past the pool and cemetery. Next, cross under the busy avenue through the tunnel, holding my breath against its urine stink, then ride cautiously downhill with the cars to reach the bike path. There, away from the grit and traffic noise, I can relax as I follow the river, cool beneath the trees. A small reward before I reach the crossroads.

I was surprised at how quickly I arrived at the bottom of the mountain road. Maybe this won't be so bad, I told myself, marvelling at how easy the first part of the ride had been.

The traffic was fairly light. I'd chosen a Sunday for that reason. But the cars still travelled fast up and down the steep road. Standing on the side, the shoulder didn't seem very wide.

I pointed my bike uphill, swung my leg over, and began to pedal. A man dressed in a Lycra onesie drew up swiftly beside me and quickly disappeared around the next corner. A car roared past, sucking me into its vortex of dirt and exhaust.

I couldn't look around and enjoy the scenery. And I avoided looking ahead very often. It hurt to strain my neck. Besides, it's disheartening to see the hills stretching ahead.

Instead, I concentrated on the garbage on the shoulder, or, rather, on avoiding it. Pools of broken glass that could derail this self-imposed torture, the occasional condom—how did these end up on the side of the road?—and more cigarette butts than I could count. Do smokers think they're not littering when they throw their butts out the window? I had lots of time to ponder these questions. It was over four kilometres to the top, and when I looked down at my training watch I was pedalling four kilometres an hour.

To my chagrin, I glimpsed Mr. Lycra again, flying down the hill on the other side of the road. I certainly wasn't the hare in this story.

I looked down at the road passing slowly under my wheels and focused on the sight of my runners pushing on the pedals, one after the other in an unrelenting circle. And slowly, as I mounted the hill, my confidence climbed too.

My first glimpse of triumph came as I rounded the final corner and saw Simon Fraser University ahead. I felt a burst of energy. Even the sight of Lycra dude cycling uphill past me again couldn't dampen my spirits. I kept my head up as I closed the distance and passed under the rotunda. Bursting with pride, I grinned widely at the people standing indifferently around the bus stop.

Wanting to telegraph my triumphant ascent, I got off my bike and dialed home. It rang and rang. No one else I tried answered either. Feeling a little deflated, I settled for a proud text to my son, who had done this practice ride.

“You go!” he texted back. I felt great. And grateful my son got it. I was on top of a hill, but I felt on top of the world.

That August, as I struggled under the hot sun to pedal up the steep, narrow road to Lake Louise, the proud memory of that first ascent drove me upward. It pushed me forward again as I climbed Bow Summit, the highest elevation on the Icefields Parkway and six times that of the road up Burnaby Mountain.

As I noted the speed on my watch and wryly thought I could walk faster, I recalled looking at the same watch that spring morning when, with a sinking heart, I calculated how long it would take to get to the top.

Now, though, I knew the time it took didn't matter. I would reach the top eventually, and my son would be there, waiting. I had persuaded him to come on this adventure because I thought it would be good for him. Turns out, it was good for me. Knowing my son was as proud of me as I of him was the unexpected gift.

At the summit, I gazed at the magnificent valley below me and at the mountain ranges I had passed through. It had taken millions of years to uplift these towering peaks, but less than a week to send my confidence soaring.