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Thursday February 29, 2024

The Bicycle Chain

By Susan Ross

My son burst into the kitchen with a primal wail. I rushed over to him, sure he'd broken a limb or been attacked by a band of suburban marauders.

It was neither. "The stupid chain keeps coming off! I CAN'T RIDE MY BIKE!" The last bit was more explosion than sentence. This was not just simple disappointment. It was the frustration of a boy who desperately craved the wind on his face after a month cooped up in the hospital.

Parenting a teenager is tricky business under the best of circumstances. To complicate matters, we are a household of just two. To further complicate matters, my son has Crohn's. Teenagers crave independence, yet he is often a slave to his disease. But on his bicycle, he gets to choose the speed, the destination, the entire journey. For a kid shackled by a chronic illness, it's *freedom*.

My boy would ride his bike that day, whatever it took. I wheeled it into our kitchen, turned it over, and inspected it as if I knew what I was looking at.

"Mom. You can't fix it. This is a DAD thing!"

Dismissing me as ridiculous, he escaped into the family room to sulk and scroll through his phone. I didn't blame him for doubting me. Hadn't I once sent him back to school two days early? But that day, I would not be deterred. I watched YouTube videos on bicycle repair until I identified the problem. When my son heard me banging on bolts with a socket wrench, he wandered back into the kitchen to investigate.

"The chain keeps coming off because it's too loose, see? To tighten it, we just need to move the seat back a little."

Five seconds later, I realized that it would take the legendary strength mothers have when lifting cars off their babies to budge that seat. I used my entire body weight, heaving and grunting until I managed to tug it back just a tiny bit.

"You DID it!" my son cried. He spun the pedals of the upturned bike, testing the security of the chain and grinning broadly. Together, we walked the bike out onto our driveway, and I watched him ride off until he was just a dot on the horizon.

My son didn't realize we had just shared an Important Moment. I wanted him to recognize this event as a metaphor for conquering his illness, that together, we could overcome anything.

Who knows? Maybe he'll look back in twenty years and see it that way. But today, he was just a kid on a bike, the sun on his face and the wind at his back, taking off for parts unknown.

—Susan Ross

You know that middle-aged rocker chick you saw at the mall? That's Susan, who dresses like a teenager in a frantic attempt to beat back death. Susan Ross is a freelance writer who has been published on *Cosmopolitan*, *Marie Claire*, *Redbook*, *Good Housekeeping*, and *Woman's Day*, among others. Her essay "The Bicycle Chain" received an honorable mention in the 2024 Erma Bombeck Writing Competition in the global human interest category. A native New Yorker, Susan currently resides in New Jersey where her son attends college. She was told she had the right to remain silent — but she declined.

