

Hard-Won Happiness on Two Wheels

By WENDY LICHTMAN

I AM sitting at a picnic table at a monastery in the Chianti region of Tuscany when I realize that, for about a decade now, I've been getting worse at everything.

Doing yoga, I lose my balance more easily; hiking, I lose my breath more quickly, and in nearly everything else I lose my nerve. Yet, here I am in Italy eating antipasto in my biking shorts.

Although my husband, Jeff, and I are both in our mid-50's and he's in no better shape than I am, he claims that he's not the least bit anxious about the weeklong bike trip we've planned to celebrate our 25th anniversary.

Historically, he's a much stronger athlete, so I suppose certain skills are hardwired into the system. When he hits the wall, for example, he keeps going; I like to stop and talk about it.

Nineteen of us will be riding together on this tour, and while we do the introductory chitchat, I complete my personal inventory: I am one of the oldest, one of the fattest, and besides that, my knee hurts.

"You do not get pecorino cheese like this in Texas," a man at my table says, and as I agree that the entire picnic lunch is wonderful, I slip a hand into my jacket pocket, wriggle open the plastic Baggie I've hidden there, and palm four pills: an anti-inflammatory that the surgeon who repaired my knee suggests I continue taking, a gel capsule of borage oil that my physical therapist highly recommends, and glucosamine and chondroitin tablets, the stuff my hairdresser claims has cured his joint pain. I'm not sure I believe any of these pills can actually help my knee, but I do believe wholeheartedly in the placebo effect.

By the time I pedal down the tree-lined path out of the monastery I have so little confidence that I'm startled to see I can still ride a two-wheeler.

But it's a beautiful day in May, the bike they've given me is much more comfortable than the one I have at home, and after a few minutes I start to think the vacation might be O.K. Yet it is a far cry from fabulous, the word my friend kept using when she described her own bike trip.

I'm not too crazy about the uphill parts of the ride, but the directions attached to my handlebars promise me the first rise is only 2.7 kilometers long. I spend so much time trying to convert that into miles that by the time I figure out it's a mile and a half, I'm nearly there.

And when I reach the top, I'm rewarded. The valley beneath me is a deep green patchwork of old vineyards, and the next instruction says: "Turn right toward Monticiano: Use caution, Downhill begins."

"Downhill begins!" I shout as I pull up beside Jeff, and turn right at the sign for Monticiano. I do not use much caution. I let myself fly.

Past isolated farmhouses, acres of cypress trees, herds of sheep -- maybe the very sheep who gave us that remarkable pecorino cheese! -- and I remember how it feels to gallop on a horse, dive from a high board, leap from a swinging rope into a freezing cold lake. I recall, as I speed down a narrow road in Tuscany, what it feels like to be thrilled.

Our trip leaders have assured us that Italian drivers are just being friendly when they honk, so I try to be cool each time a friendly Italian blasts his horn as he whizzes past me on the curves. The leaders have told us, too, that it's perfectly fine to walk our bikes when we need to. The support van will be there whenever we need help. There's no shame, they repeat, in hitching a ride with the van.

Well, there's a little shame, I think, so even though I'm tired when I see the van at about Mile 10, I let it pass.

As soon as I get to our hillside hotel, I slip the empty Baggie out of my jacket pocket and ask a young man setting tables if he can fill it with ice. He smiles at me and smiles at the Baggie. I point to my knee and then to the Baggie again and mime a shiver. He holds up one finger, goes into the kitchen and, amazingly, comes back out with a small bowl of ice.

"This trip is fabulous," Jeff says when I lie next to him on our bed, a pillow under my knee and the ice on top of it.

"We did pretty well for Day 1," I admit.

"We did great," he says, sliding his hand over to mine.

But the next morning, I'm stiff and aching and scared again. The plan is for 23 miles today, and this amount is, well, just not possible for me. I've trained, if you can call it that, by riding five miles a day for the past few weeks. Five is not close to 23. Also those were flat miles, I think as I snap on my helmet. Tuscany is not flat.

On one long stretch, I fall about half a mile behind the people I started with, and I begin to pay close attention to my directions so I don't get lost. The weather is perfect -- warm and breezy -- and as far ahead as I can see, the route is flat and curvy, my favorite for riding. Cows graze so close to the road that they glance up when I pass, and medieval castles built of dark yellow stone look like homes where princesses once lived. As I swoop around one turn I break into an old Holly Near song. "It could have been me, but instead it was you," I sing, "so I'll keep doing the work you were doing as if I were two," and I realize, as I listen to the words, that I'm praying. I'm filled with gratitude that, unlike too many people I have loved, I'm alive and well and able to ride a bike in Italy on this perfect day.

A few turns later a friendly Italian honks a greeting as he zips past me, and I lift my left hand off the handlebars to wave to him.

"Ciao, bella," I call out even though the driver can't possibly hear me, and even though it is very odd to say "Hello, beautiful" to a stranger in a passing car.

But these are two of the only Italian words I know and the sounds they make are wonderful. "Ciao, bella," I tell a cow.

I meet Jeff, who had ridden ahead of me, in the town of Asciano for lunch, then catch one of the leaders and ask for a ride to the hotel. "I'm done for the day," I say, without shame.

For the next few days, I'm happy riding as much as feels right, walking my bike uphill when I need to, and getting into the van when I'm past my limit. I do about 17 miles a day and I don't feel embarrassed hanging out at dinnertime with the stronger bikers who do twice that amount. Sometimes I forget that I am one of the oldest, one of the fattest, and that my knee hurts.

On the last day of our trip, Jeff and I begin the hard climb uphill toward the town of Radda. We rode the same three miles yesterday before we went east toward Badia Coltibuono; today we'll turn north to the town of Greve. In his dream last night, Jeff is telling me, he played basketball with the guy from the Chianti winery we visited.

"What do you think that means?" he asks, puffing.

I am standing up now, pushing hard, and I don't stop pedaling, not even to interpret my husband's dream, not even to talk about the wall I'm hitting. Instead, I focus on the top of the hill, sit again, and shift to the very lowest gear. My legs hurt, my lungs burn, and, inside my helmet, I hear my heart beat. Not more than 100 yards away, I see the sign for Radda.

I can get to the top of this hill, I think.

And when I do, Jeff, his face red and dripping wet, is looking at me. "We walked this stretch yesterday," he says.

"We rode it today," I say, and as I stand still to let my breathing ease, I think: I got better. For the first time in a decade, I got

better at something.

We bike 12 more miles to Greve, and join other members of our group for lunch. After the waitress brings our drinks, I pull my bag of pills out of my pocket and put them on the table.

"What are those?" the woman next to me asks.

"Placebos," I say.

"And they work?" she asks, smiling, "even if you know they're placebos?"

"They work this week," I say as I take a sip of cold, sour lemonade after each pill.