

Sidelined

By Ivy Hughes

When Dave, who'd never been a violent man, broke his wrists, he had an uncontrollable urge to hit. Not things but people, particularly his adult children who had taken his freedom and enjoyed the spectacle when he failed to get it back.

Dave was 62 when he braved his first casts, his Herculean luck as a college football player having finally run out. First broken bones at age 62? Not bad, or so Dave thought.

Annoyed, Dave picked up the remote control and pointed his elbow toward the ceiling to accommodate the casts dividing his fingers and forearms. He scanned through the 400s and thought about his children.

In an hour, Jessica, Monica, Justin and Jonah would march through his front door, which, with its Corinthian columns, marble floor and velvet settee, looked more like a hotel entrance than a residence, and join he Nancy for dinner.

Pride often prompted Dave to blame others for his own shortcomings. But he could not blame Nancy for his children's flaws. Their insensitivity to the broken, their distaste for the weak — that came from Dave, not Nancy.

Nancy was one of those rare women worth keeping. Dave knew it when he married her, forgot it when power corrupted and begged for it when his affair threatened their 32-year marriage.

When Dave drove his first business into the ground, Nancy consoled. When he sold the second, third and fourth, she celebrated without placing herself a trophy. When Dave told Nancy about the unicycle, she kept her comments to herself and when he fell off the goddamn thing and shattered his wrists, she didn't say, "I told you so" even though it was well within her right.

The unicycle came to Dave while he was walking through the history museum in Fort Collins, Colorado. As a board member, he was obligated to nod at new exhibits. A nascent 150 years old, history was hard to come by in Fort Collins, which is why the museum director allowed the great granddaughter of legendary unicyclist Bart Bigham a corner of exhibition space.

When Dave passed the sepia photo of the little man atop a giant wheel — dour moustache tickling lips, fingers thumbing suit lapels — adventure quivered his belly. Bart Bigham was a pioneer, a pursuer of risk, a man who ploughed through rutted, unpaved streets on a single wheel while the rest of his countrymen watched the world from atop a horse or cart.

The last real risk Dave had taken was when he'd invested his life savings in his first business 40 years ago. Coincidentally, it was the last thing he'd done entirely on his own.

Unlike Dave, men like Bigham couldn't wait for comfort to take risks. For them, over the hill was a luxury time wouldn't allow.

Inspired by the thought of a little man steering a behemoth of a wheel down cobbles and dirt, aroused by the idea of reclaiming a fleeting particle of youth's freedom, Dave excused himself from the museum tour group, walked to the park and ordered a \$2,000 unicycle from his iPad. Once upon a time, Dave would have found pleasure in the prestige of the purchase. But once Dave could buy what he wanted, attract who he needed, top of the line lost its meaning. In monitoring the trajectory of his success, Dave had done nothing more than prevent the understanding of his own futility.

A week after the order, the unicycle arrived. Nancy signed for the 18 pound, three foot tall box, took a long look at the sporty unicycle graphic on its exterior and put it in the hallway. When Dave returned from his weekly golf game, Nancy followed him down the hallway, her guise an uncommon interest in his score at the Fort Collins Country Club.

When Dave reached the box, she said — casually — “Oh, that came today.”

“About time.”

“Should I get the scissors?”

“Nah.” Dave placed his hands on his butt and bridged his back, a movement that displayed his groin as much as it relieved tension. “I'll get to it later.”

Nancy, whose understanding of the male ego was largely responsible for the survival of her marriage, considered how to save Dave's body without hurting his feelings. “Wear a helmet won't you? Like you do when mountain biking with the boys?”

Dave huffed, but agreed. Nancy excused herself to the garden. As soon as the patio doors closed, Dave hustled into the kitchen, grabbed the scissors and ripped through the box.

The lid removed, Dave marveled at his brand new, shiny piece of freedom, which was much smaller and more technically adept than the one Bart Bigham saddled some 80 years before. Unlike Bart's unicycle, Dave's seat was 27 inches from the ground, its tires the width of a brick, its frame titanium. Dave inhaled the rubber aroma filling the hallway and foyer. It smelled of summertime cops and robbers.

Dave moved to the den and leaned the unicycle against the sofa while he queued an informational video on his iPad. He intently watched the male instructor turn the unicycle with subtle instruction from his feet until the camera panned to the instructor's core, which movement drew like candlelight. Ashamed by his attraction to the young man's abdomen, Dave turned away. The desire wasn't sexual. Dave was simply in the September of his years when he preferred April.



Dave yanked the strap of his helmet caught in the saggy flesh under his neck. Although he was in fantastic shape, fantastic at 25 and fantastic at 62 are several tinctures of different when it comes to collagen. Annoyed, Dave tossed the helmet to the ground where it clumsily rolled around the marble floor. He was indoors. He didn't need the goddamn thing anyway.

The YouTube video suggested two ways to train the core to react to the unicycle. Dave could cycle under a clothesline, moving his hands overhead like a chimp for balance or, he could hold his arms like a "t" down the hallway, pushing against the walls when he lost his balance.

The clothesline was a no go. Even if Dave had one, learning in front of others is a humiliation adults refuse to bear. The hallway would have to do.

Dave checked himself in the floor-length mirror at the end of the hallway. Nancy was at brunch with the ladies, freeing Dave to canvass his padded cycling shorts, fitted breathable lime green North Face shirt and cross trainers.

Satisfied with his appearance, Dave braced his hands against the wall, straddled the unicycle and pushed himself to sitting. After a few awkward rotations that smeared Dave on the wall like a bug on a windshield, Dave wobbled down the hallway. Three laps up and down and Dave deemed himself ready for the road. He left a note for Nancy, strapped on his helmet

and — using his garage door for stability at takeoff — set out to conquer the three-mile loop around the neighborhood lake.

.....

Before Nancy had a chance to read the note, a very irritated Dave called her cell wondering if she could please pick up her husband and his poorly designed, shoddily manufactured piece of shit unicycle. Yes, she most certainly could. Was everything OK?

If Dave could see the forest through the trees which were planted by the top one percent of white males living in the freest country on earth than yes, everything was wonderful but as it was, Dave was shortsighted by humiliation. Things were not OK. As Nancy would later learn, for the first time in his life, Dave had to ask for physical assistance.

While cruising around the lake, Bruce Springsteen’s “Born in the USA” rattling his iPhone ear buds, Dave hit a speed bump at an unfortunate angle. His stomach muscles not what they used to be, Dave had neither the strength nor the speed to counter gravity. As he crashed to the ground, he put his hands out, a feeble attempt to save face that his children later reminded him was the worst way to fall.

After shattering both wrists, Dave rolled into the dry ditch at the side of the road and laid there like a cartoon turtle, wondering how to right himself without using his crumpled wrists. Luckily, the shipping tycoon whose house he’d rolled in front of, saw the whole thing and ran out to help.

The man’s potbelly shaded Dave from the hot sun as he assessed the situation. When the man realized Dave was – in terms of life and death – doing just fine, he didn’t laugh, but mumbled something about getting him on his feet and into the cool house. Also in his 60s, the man was acutely aware of what it meant to appear both foolish and old.

Because Dave couldn’t move either wrist, he had to wrap his arms around the man’s neck while the man, a Mr. CJ Hornmink, lifted him to standing. Dave scoffed at CJ’s offers to take him to the hospital. The last thing he wanted was a strange man who’d witnessed his tuck and roll, holding his hand while he waited for his wife.

Instead, Dave asked CJ to remove his iPhone from the zipped pocket of his shorts and hold it to his ear while he called Nancy. Dave would have preferred to walk home and call Nancy in peace, but the angle of his wrists and the position of the phone made this impossible.

“How about a drink then?” CJ held the phone at arm’s length looking for the “end” button.

“Down and to the right a little.” Dave nodded at the phone. “And a drink sounds great.”

“I hate these goddamn things,” CJ said, jabbing the red button with a force usually reserved for killing insects. “May I?” He nodded to Dave’s pocket. Dave lifted his arms — minimizing flesh-on-flesh contact — and lowered them after CJ released the phone.

Dave followed CJ, who walked with a slight limp, to his front porch. Dave sank into a wicker chair and waited for CJ to go inside for the drinks before letting the pain in his wrists wrinkle his face. The pending admission to his children bothered Dave more than the pain. How would their adult faces react to his beaten one?

“Here ya go.” CJ dropped a Percocet in Dave’s mouth and placed a Modelo with a straw down the middle of its neck, on the table next to him.

“Took a nasty fall on a buddy’s yacht last summer,” CJ said. “Still recovering from my hip surgery. Should’ve started doing exactly this —” he raised his Modelo and slumped into a chair — “about three years ago. Retirement, eh?”

Despite the chainsaw riding the fragments of his wrists, Dave wasn’t ready to admit the implication of his folly. He smiled, waited for the pill to kick in and spent the next 20 minutes enjoying the company of his generation.

.....

When Nancy arrived, Dave and CJ were old drinking buddies.

After hugging Dave and thanking CJ, Nancy asked for an explanation.

“Guy drove by going about 40,” said CJ. “He hit the speed bump just as Dave here was going over it. Scared me, almost hit Dave. That’s how he ended up in that ditch over there.” CJ motioned to the ditch. The unicycle wasn’t visible but for the sun’s reflection off its titanium frame.

“Jesus. Did you get his plate number?” Nancy asked.

“Eyesight’s not what it used to be,” CJ said. “Besides, I hurried over to see if Dave was OK. Good thing he’s in such good shape. Could’ve been a lot worse.”

Despite the pursed lips that followed CJ's explanation, Nancy didn't poke holes in in CJ's story on their way to the emergency room. Nor did she mention the small tread mark on her marble floor or the fingerprints on her hallway mirror. She would let Dave have the broken bones, the trips to the hospital and the irresponsibility of his youth one last time.

Three days later, while feeding Dave a California roll, Nancy mentioned the inevitable. "It's time you called the kids."

"You said you called them."

"Yes, but they want to hear from you."

"Why? What's the point?" Dave's wrists pulsed as the rushing blood moved to his cheeks.

"They're worried about you. They want to hear from you. Here, I'll put you on speaker."

Dave frowned. How could the children — who'd just become his friends — respect a weakness that had been so pleasantly distant not so long ago?

"What's the point?"

"Don't worry, they won't laugh."

"You're telling me they didn't howl with laughter when you told them I broke my wrists unicycling? Unicycling. Is that even a word?"

Nancy raised an eyebrow. "They waited 'til I said you were OK."

"How nice of them." Dave went to cross his arms, but his wrists wouldn't allow it.

"Come on." Nancy held up the phone. "I'm dialing."

And with that, Nancy made the first of four phone calls that would ensure her husband would never, ever again take up a hobby whispered by the smoke of youth.

.....

By the time Sunday rolled around, Dave was restless, his mind an electric chair of potential questions, answers and jabs his kids would make at his

expense. Twice he tried to get Nancy to call off dinner on account that he wasn't feeling well. Twice, Nancy patted his head as she moved past him onto something more important.

When the kids arrived, they kissed Dave and quickly pounced with the questions.

Did it hurt? How long would he need to recover? What was the surgery schedule? Was it weird sitting on a stranger's porch waiting for Nancy? What was he doing with a unicycle anyway?

Even the painkillers couldn't defend against his children's questions, which Dave considered an attack against his competency. By the time the family sat down to eat, Dave was a little drunk, a little medicated and a lot irritated so when the unicycle recycled near dessert, Dave was ready with his defenses.

"What'd you do with that thing anyway?" Jonah asked.

"With what?" Dave asked.

"The unicycle." Jonah stuffed a forkful of lemon tart in his mouth.

Something like embarrassment metastasized to rage before Dave shouted his reply. "Can't you just leave it alone goddamn it?"

"Dave," warned Nancy.

"Jeez, dad." Monica, Dave's youngest and most sensitive, intervened. "It's just a question."

"No." Dave dropped his fork. "That's the problem. It isn't just a question. I may be old. I may be a fool, but I'm not stupid. I know what you think of me."

Dave's family waited – some mouths agape, some pinched shut – for Dave to tell them what, exactly, they thought of him.

"Go on. Tell us." Monica said. But she was met with silence.

"I just want to borrow it," Jonah said. "Jesus. No reason to get so sensitive."

As Dave relaxed into his wine, his children moved on to their careers, their travels and their hobbies. The nettling thing was, they had moved on, so why couldn't he?