

a Letter of Apology to my Stolen Specialized Allez Elite

October 2, 2012

Specialized Silver Allez Elite

Probably somewhere in Manhattan
or eBay

Zip Code: The Open Road

Dear Allez E.,

I'm sorry. I know the universe didn't want me to bring you to New York City.

The universe told me not to, but I didn't listen. Perhaps I should have. Perhaps if I hadn't have brushed off all the warning signs, you'd still be mine. I'm so sorry. I really am. I don't know who's riding you right now, but I hope you're providing them with the same happiness you gave me when we rode together.

Perhaps I should have realized that you weren't supposed to accompany me on my research trip to New York City when you got a flat tire while I was attaching my bike rack to your frame the night before we left home. I now believe it was no coincidence that a tiny unassuming needle poked through the inner tube to slowly and quietly deflate your rear tire over the few days leading up to our trip. I had a million other chores to accomplish that evening, and I wasn't supposed to have the time to pull out a patch kit. Your flat was supposed to aggravate and frustrate me to the point that I'd refuse to mend your unridable tire. I really should have interpreted your flat as a sign that you actually wanted to stay home for the

weekend. We had been spending a lot of time together, and I should have realized that a few days of separation would have been good for us. I should have left you safely locked to the bike rack on the back porch. But I didn't want to leave you. Instead, I carefully and lovingly patched your tube and continued packing my panniers. And for that, I'm sorry. I truly am. Please don't blame me for my loyalty.

The following morning's unfortunate weather was no coincidence either. Now I understand why it started raining the very moment we started pedaling down the road at 6:30 AM en route to the Utica Union Station. I was supposed to turn around, drop you off at home, and ask a friend to drive me the 11 miles to the station. But, no. Of course, I didn't do that. I'm stubborn when it comes to cycling, and you know that better than anyone.

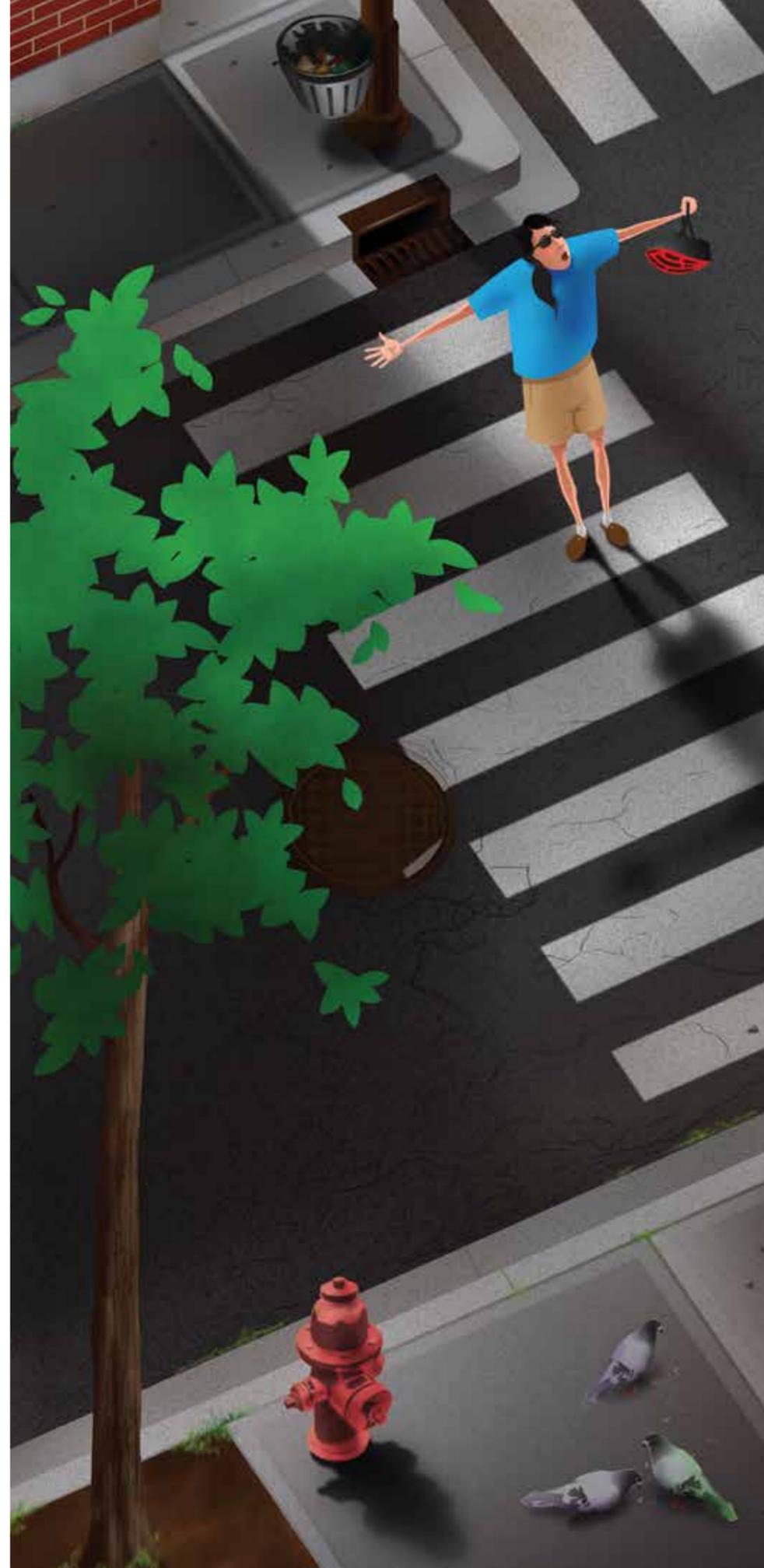
Although I was chilly and wet as we rode out of town, I didn't even stop to put on my rain jacket because your tenacity and speed pressured me to persevere through the rainstorm. (See? It's not all my fault. You've got that same inflexible spirit at times too). I also know a small part of you really did want to hit the big city at least once in your life, especially after everyone kept telling us how we'd surely find riding in New York terrifying. You wanted to prove them wrong, didn't you? Plus you knew we could do it. After all, we survived Paris, Geneva, Barcelona, San

Francisco, and countless collegiate criterium races together. What did the Big Apple have on us?

By the time we reached Utica's opulent, but empty, marble-pillared station, I was soaked and sandy. You know exactly what I'm talking about. How could you forget that film of grit you always plaster all over me when it's raining and your rear wheel spits up on me (especially in that uncovered strip between where the bottom of my shirt and the waist of my pants are supposed to overlap, but rarely do)? You know, that kind of bone-chilling muddy wetness that numbs my toes and sticks with me all day.

Although I was soaked and slightly frazzled, I was relieved we made it to the station. I was relieved we made it 20 minutes ahead of schedule and had plenty of time to work out the finer logistics of bringing you, Allez E., on the Amtrak train to Penn Station. You squeaked and turned heads as I rolled you over to the ticket counter, but I just assumed this was your way of expressing enthusiasm for the exciting journey ahead. Now I realize you were yelping. You were trying to warn me, weren't you? You had a feeling things might not work out so well for us. I should have taken heed of the worried tone in your suddenly squeaky wheels. After all, it closely resembled the sounds you made that one time in Switzerland when you successfully convinced me to turn around as we rode up an

ILLUSTRATION BY HOWARD & MARGIE FULLMER



by McKayla Dunfey

epic mountain pass into an unruly snowstorm.

When we approached the ticket counter, I asked what we should do to prepare you for the 7:57 AM train to Penn Station. The ticket-counter man told us I wasn't allowed to bring you (even though I had checked online and called the station twice to make sure this was possible). He told us that Amtrak just changed their baggage policies and were now much stricter about traveling with bicycles and extra baggage on trains without a baggage cart. He told me that I could still take the 7:57 AM train and simply ship you down and boxed you up. I just didn't think that was right though, shipping you off and sending you to the Big Apple alone like that. Yes, I would be there to pick you up, but I wanted to figure out a way for us to travel together. In retrospect, I should have accepted his response as yet another sign that I wasn't supposed to bring you to the city. I should have either left you locked up in the Amtrak office or asked a friend to come and pick you up. I didn't do that though. Please forgive me.

Instead I started scheming. I developed contingency plans and everything. I thought I had it all figured out. I decided that I would attempt to take you on the 7:57 AM train anyway, and if I couldn't make that happen, then we would both take the

1:00 PM.

I desperately begged the conductor of the 7:57 AM train to let us on. I told him how important it was that you accompany me on this train. I even told him that you could have my seat, and I would sit in the cafeteria cart for the whole ride.

I was desperate. You know I'd do anything for you, right?

And he almost gave in. I was so proud of myself. He told me I could try to squeeze you on if I was able to

THAT'S WHY I'M SORRY. THAT'S WHY I'LL NEVER STOP BEING SORRY FOR LEAVING YOU UNATTENDED OUTSIDE A CAFÉ IN SOHO.

take off both your wheels in the next 30 seconds before the train departed. Unfortunately, as I was unscrewing your quick release and loosening your brake calipers, the conductor conferred with two other Amtrak personnel and changed his mind about letting me on. In a blink of an eye, the train was gone, and we were left behind — alone, wet, and sandy in rainy Utica.

Why were they so intent on separating us?

Feeling disheartened and frustrated by the challenges of traveling with a bicycle on public transportation, I wheeled your fully loaded frame back into the station almost wishing I had left you at home. Renting a bike in the city would have been much easier. Then I felt guilty for having these thoughts and immediately decided to execute my next plan.

I decided that we would both take the 1:00 PM train. I bought a cardboard bicycle box, unloaded my panniers, broke you down, carefully slid all of your components into the box, bade you farewell, and turned you in at the checked baggage window. Let the countdown begin, I thought to myself: T-minus 10 hours until I would see you again. I bought myself a warm pumpkin-flavored coffee, tried to stop shivering, sent texts to friends and family regarding my unfortunate traveling circumstances (perhaps looking for a bit of sympathy), and waited four hours for my train to board.

Fast-forward another five hours and I'm anxiously awaiting your arrival at baggage claim in Penn Station. After yet another 30 minutes of waiting, I pushed you and your box to a less crowded corner of the station and started putting you back together. Luckily, I've done this in busy public spaces before so I'm used to being somewhat of a spectacle. After assembly, I bungeed down my heavy panniers and video equipment, and we maneuvered our way up an escalator onto the hectic streets of

Manhattan, where the real fun began.

Our next goal was ambitious. We had to navigate our way across midtown to my grandmother's apartment on this dark and rainy Friday evening. After I oriented myself, we set off down 34th Street with no reservations. This was not the introduction to New York City riding I'd hoped for, especially after only having ridden in rural upstate New York the past few weeks. We weren't really accustomed to traffic, considering Clinton, New York, has a total of about 10 cars per 100 miles of road.

Riding in the city at night is neither the safest nor easiest way to travel, but it's certainly the most enlivening. To be honest, the adventure was exactly what I needed after being confined to a train for five hours. It was exhilarating, and I loved it. I think we both did, right?

The only other riders on the streets at this time of night were take-out delivery cyclists, and I felt somewhat out of place with my hot-pink Rudy Project helmet, Dansko clogs, and fully loaded touring setup. I tried emulating their brazen confidence as I pedaled you down the noisy, crowded, cab-filled streets. I probably looked silly. No, I definitely looked silly, but I didn't care. I was riding my bike in the most exciting city in the world. And anyone who knows me also knows that riding is what I love to do most.

The smell of peanuts and pretzels made my stomach grumble, the traffic's fluctuation in speed near busy

intersections kept my mind and body alert, the wide-eyed tourists stopping abruptly in crosswalks provided me with a challenge, the sounds of police car and ambulance sirens became my music, and the light rain and wind on my cheeks gave me goose bumps. I was pedaling, I was focused, and most important, I was soaking in life by the moment.

By the time we reached our destination, we had just about figured out how to manage this kind of riding. Know your route, watch out for pedestrians and car doors, use visual and verbal signals, don't hesitate, obey the traffic lights, etc. We were proud of our accomplishment, and we were already excited for our next day of city riding. I was finally realizing why I'd been so adamant about bringing you with me despite the many roadblocks we faced along the way. Although traveling with a bicycle can be incredibly inconvenient, I just wouldn't have felt right betraying you for a rental bicycle for my first adventure riding in the big city.

The next morning, we ventured back into the city to explore parks and greenways as part of my bike transportation research. We passed hundreds upon hundreds of joggers in Central Park and rode alongside the many varieties of New York City weekend cyclists, ranging from the "Honey, let's just go for a leisurely cruise through the park on this glorious morning" folk, to the bright spandex-clad age-group triathletes riding their tri bikes with aero bars and noisy, deep carbon rims. We enjoyed soaking in this scene full of all sorts of bicycles and all sorts of people.

From the park, we headed to the East River and rode on the East Coast Greenway to Battery Park. We stopped once along the way at a farmer's market to gawk at the freshly baked bread, decadent desserts, and ripe produce. I bought homemade granola and a sweet crisp gala apple to save for later, and we proceeded toward Battery Park. The Greenway was smooth enough, and we certainly appreciated the clear painted divisions between the walking and riding lanes. We were a bit overwhelmed by the high volume of

tourists occupying the walkways around Battery Park so we quickly looped the park and rode out through the Financial District. We rode through Chinatown and eventually made our way into SoHo, where we had plans to meet up with my friend Kate at the new Chobani Yogurt Café.

I locked your frame and rear wheel up to a tall street post right beside the café. I noticed several other nice-looking road bikes locked up in the general vicinity so I assumed you'd be safe for a few minutes while Kate and I went inside to order our gourmet yogurt creations. Lots of people were out and about, so I didn't think this would be an easy place for a bike thief to steal you. With that said, we still decided to eat outside so I could easily keep an eye on you.

That's how much I cared about you.

The day was shaping up perfectly. The sun was shining for the first time in a while, my Greek yogurt was delicious, and I enjoyed catching up with my college friend. Little did I know these were the last moments I would probably ever lay eyes on you.

When Kate and I finished eating, we went inside to throw away our spoons and napkins for just a minute, and when we came back outside, you were GONE.

EVERY
single
PIECE
of you.
GONE. GONE. GONE.

I assumed I was looking at the wrong street post, so I frantically scanned the area for signs of your silvery sleekness and red accents. Where were you? How did this happen? How could you have disappeared so quickly? Was someone playing a cruel joke on me? How was I going to survive without you?

I was in utter disbelief.

Allez E., Alze, Monsieur AE, Al-ezzzz, how could I have been so irresponsible as to let this happen to you? To let this happen to me? To let this happen to us? I shouldn't have taken my eyes off you, not even for a minute. You were — and still are — a part of me. I hope you know that.

We've been through it all. Laughs, tears, epiphanies, moments of panic, moments of joy, miles of imagination, song-filled rides, hours of pain, buckets of rain, a bit of snow and hail, epic hill climbs, winding switchback descents, my first half-ironman, crash-filled collegiate racing, a three-month self-supported bike tour in Europe, two self-supported tours down the Pacific Coast, daily bike commutes to summer jobs, casual rides through my hometown of Cape Elizabeth, Maine, and countless team rides in upstate New York.

You've been the center of my life.

That's why I'm sorry. That's why I'll never stop being sorry for leaving you unattended outside a café in SoHo. You didn't deserve that. Now all we have are memories. Beautiful memories. Deep memories embedded in my soul. Memories I'll never be able to re-create. Memories I'll try to share with other people but won't be able to fully express in words. Memories that will help guide me through future endeavors. Memories I'll cherish forever.

Although the universe may have told me not to bring you to New York City,

I don't regret my decision. I'm sorry about what happened, but I don't regret bringing you along one little bit. After all, you taught me to follow my heart. You taught me to push my limits and take risks. You taught me to live without regret. So that's what I did, and that's what I'll continue to do even though you're no longer physically with me.

So, thanks Allez E. It's been real. Keep on spinning, wherever you are!

Adieu,

McKayla, your ex-partner in crime (although I'm hardly a criminal in comparison to your new owner). **AC**

McKayla Dunfey graduated from Hamilton College in Clinton, New York, this past May. She spent her senior year conducting research for her college-sponsored fellowship, titled: The Bicycle's Influence: Changing Perceptions of Place and Space in Urban Environments. McKayla extends her thanks to the Chobani Yogurt Café in New York City for buying her a new bike after they read about the theft of her Allez on her blog. She looks forward to making new memories with this bike, starting with a cross-country trip this summer with a group that she'll be leading.

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Salsa Vaya
Photo Courtesy of Salsa Bicycles

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