

Real Life

Before I ever spoke to my husband, I fell in love with him. Seeing him across the room at a holiday cocktail party, my heart leapt up into my mouth, and the missing piece of life's puzzle seemed to click into place at last. I haven't noticed any other man since.

All of which does not alter the fact that over the years my wonderful husband, Joel—light of my life

though he is—has given me some of the most awful presents in the history of human creation.

I've always thought a gift should bespeak your feelings about the person you give it to. So if the recipient is your spouse, the present should say "I love you." Unfortunately, my husband's gifts to me often say "Get off your tush." An avid runner and fitness fan, he seems unwilling to accept the fact that my own desire to exercise is only slightly greater than my desire to be hit by a runaway crane. Over the years he has deluged me with numerous gifts designed to

help work up a sweat: presenting me, on various occasions, with running shoes, running clothes, a tennis racket and—the pièce de résistance—an exercise bike.

After spending a long time in my closet, the running shoes and clothes somehow made their way—by their own steam, I've always contended—into a bag of clothing for the Salvation Army. The tennis racket I did use several times, but I don't think it ever actually connected with a tennis ball. Try as he might, my husband could never seem to aim one accurately enough so that it hit the ▶



I guess my husband meant well.

Her husband had always given her terrible Christmas presents, but one year he made the perfect choice—even if she didn't know it at the time.

The gift that changed my life

BY BETTE-JANE RAPHAEL



And daughter makes four: the author with husband Joel and their kids, Jake and Rose.

Pooh Makes Bedtime Friendlier.

It's Starlight Lullaby Pooh, actually.

Peeking over the crib, just waiting for a little hand to start the music box twinkling and playing. What a talented bear! Pooh can even separate from the music box so he's free to snuggle under the covers. It's so much friendlier with Pooh.

Pooh

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(continued from p. 50)

strings. I'd stand as still as possible in the middle of the tennis court in order to give him an easy target, but he just wasn't up to the job, and finally he got discouraged. I cheered him up by telling him that the Salvation Army probably didn't get a lot of tennis rackets and would undoubtedly find a quick buyer for mine.

Which brings me to the exercise bike, a piece of equipment that is a) designed to be used alone, without any help from one's partner, and b) hard to hide in a bag of clothing. My husband gave the bike to me for Christmas several years ago, despite my hints that this holiday's spirit of generosity is best expressed by presenting to one's beloved the sort of expensive trinkets not found at sporting-goods stores. He installed the bike in our bedroom, even though I pointed out that its sleek design was incompatible with our antiques and that obviously the proper place for it was in the basement, next to the washer and dryer.

Thereafter, the bike was the first thing I saw upon waking every morning. It stood a few feet from our bed, a solid reproach to my lack of activity. At first, instead of riding it, I used it as a clothes rack, artfully arranging my bathrobe and nightgowns over the handlebars in the hope that my mate might forget its original purpose. He never did. In fact, most evenings his first question upon arriving home was not his standard inquiry into what I'd done during the day but a new and annoying query about whether I'd ridden the bike.

How love conquered all (even fear of exercise)

Initially, I would answer with a snappish reply that was designed to end further discussion. "No," I might retort, "I didn't ride the bike today. But look on the bright side. I didn't throw it out either." However, there was something about my spouse's indefatigable hopefulness, his eager expectancy in the face of absolutely no encouragement, that gradually began to gnaw at my conscience.

After all, I thought, what would be the harm in getting up on the bicycle every once in a while to please him? I loved him, didn't I? And I'd always said I'd do anything for him, didn't I? Well,



Wheels of good fortune: The author shows Rose the miracle bike.

shouldn't "anything" include strenuous exercise, if that really meant so much to him?

One morning after he'd left for the office and our nine-year-old son, Jake, had wandered off to the fourth grade, I got up on the bike and—feeling like a martyr to the late 20th century's mindless mania for physical fitness—started grimly pumping away.

I didn't immediately have some sort of epiphany. I wasn't suddenly hit with a bolt of lightning that made me realize, "Hey, exercise is great!" But neither did I find the experience a total washout. In fact, it was kind of interesting to feel myself drenched with sweat for the first time since I'd given birth and to hear something I couldn't recall ever having heard before: the sound of my own heart pumping. I won't go as far as to say I was exhilarated, but I wasn't turned off either, and to my own amazement and my husband's delight, I gradually started to ride the bike on a more or less regular basis.

My achievement paled a few months later, however, as we confronted an issue that was by then beginning to seem even more intractable than my old inertia. For three years my husband and I had been trying to conceive a second child. We adored our son—who was just beginning his descent into adolescence and had the hidden girlie magazines to prove it—and we wanted more than anything else to nurture a new life. So far, our efforts had been fruitless, and we still didn't know the reason why, although we had had tests and medical opinions galore. ▶

(continued from p. 52)

At this point a doctor friend suggested we seek help from a fertility program attached to the nearby hospital with which he was affiliated. We immediately called the facility but were told I was two years older than their cutoff age for participants. However, after our friend intervened on our behalf, they agreed to allow us to take part in the program, but only if I could first pass a number of physical tests, including a stress test.

Oh, dear. I'd had a stress test eight years before—I could recall puffing away on a treadmill in my doctor's office while he kept track of my heart rate—and after it was over, my doctor said the results were "low normal—by nursing home standards."

With that recollection, our dream of having another child seemed to vanish. If I'd done poorly when I was eight years younger, I reasoned, just how much worse was I going to do now?

Well, I thought resignedly, it's my fault; my years of inactivity have finally come home to roost. Nonetheless, my husband and I decided I should go ahead with the

test. I promised to give it my best shot, and he promised he'd still love me if the results were dismal.

My doctor didn't look any too hopeful when I arrived at his office for the new stress test a couple of weeks later. But as the evaluation

bus—I did. As I got ready for bed that night, I rested my hand for a moment on the exercise bike. It suddenly seemed worth its not inconsiderable weight in gold.

Because the results of my stress test were so good, the hospital decided to accept us into its program. And a little more than a year later, I gave birth to our longed-for daughter, Rose.

Joel and I brought her home from the hospital, appropriately enough, on the day before Thanksgiving. On Christmas Day, he gave me a bracelet he had seen me admire—thereby giving lie to the adage that says leopards can't possibly change their spots. My antique diamond bracelet is very beautiful, and I rarely take it off my wrist. I see it sparkling there whenever I'm pedaling away on my bicycle, that formerly detested other gift, the one that eventually taught me the lesson that one's heart's desire sometimes can arrive disguised in



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progressed and he began to read the results, his face brightened. My score had improved remarkably, it turned out, and if my doctor didn't understand why—having never known me to ride anything more strenuous than a

the most unwelcome package.

My husband finally explained to me why it was that he bought me things like running shoes and an exercise bike. "It's because I want to have you around for a while," he said. I can live with that. ■