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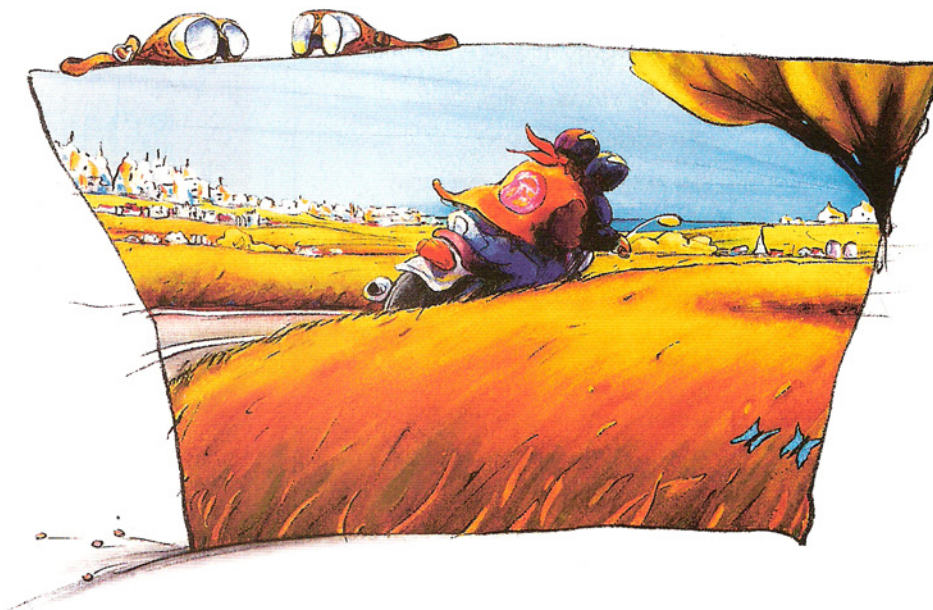


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Proud to Ride Pillion

By Beth M. Howard / Illustration By Philippe Lechien



“AREN’T YOU EVER going to get your own motorcycle?” asks my Harley-riding sister. I come from a family of motorcyclists; my father and two brothers also have bikes. But I don’t want one of my own. I learned to ride on a Yamaha Mini Enduro when I was 8, and I use a motor scooter to run errands in town, but the truth is that when it comes to highways, mountain passes, gravel roads, and rain—all of which require more muscle, more concentration, and more finesse—I prefer the post of pillion. I enjoy the sense of togetherness as I ride behind my husband on his Ducati while touring Europe, and I take my role seriously: riding pillion requires skill and responsibility.

The first time I—impetuously—mounted my husband’s black stallion, I nearly tipped us over; I learned to give ample notice so that he can brace himself and the bike. I have developed techniques to make the ride safer and more comfortable. In a series of hairpin turns I pretend I’m a backpack and become

so closely connected with my driver and his body movements that our sharply angled leans into the curves become like a ballet: graceful, fluid, controlled (anyone who has had a passenger lean in the opposite direction through a curve knows how significant this can be).

Communication is critical. With full-face helmets and deafening wind, we use hand signals—opting against a two-way radio headset because we enjoy the “quiet.” Our invented language contains elements of Morse code: two taps on his hips tell him I’m in position, so let’s go; his hand rubbing my left thigh means he loves me and is happy that I’m on his bike; and hard, rapid slapping on his back means slow down, or else!

I’ve never felt unsafe on the back—I trust my driver, and I wear every piece of protective gear known to man. Yet one time I did fall asleep. I could have sworn this was impossible, but during one ride, after an international flight, I succumbed to jet lag. When my helmet bobbed forward and tapped my

husband’s (an unintentional, but nonetheless successful, communication), he pulled off the freeway to find the nearest espresso bar.

As pillion, the advantages are many. I don’t get bugs on my helmet shield, and I can look around and focus on the scenery. I’m the lucky one who gets to gaze at the Grand Canyon or the Matterhorn instead of endless white lines. I am often the one who spots a rare “vacancy” sign during high season, or discovers a superb French restaurant. And when conditions get hairy at 120 mph on the autobahn, I can meditate.

I have experienced life on the other side, though my scooter is no match for a motorbike. I sometimes drive it when we go out for dinner. As I rev the little 50cc engine, my man—who is secure in himself—obediently climbs onto the seat behind me and taps me twice on the hips. Feeling the wind in my face and my husband’s arms hugging my waist, I beam with happiness and pride at the knowledge that pillion, regardless of who drives, is a very nice place to be. **M**