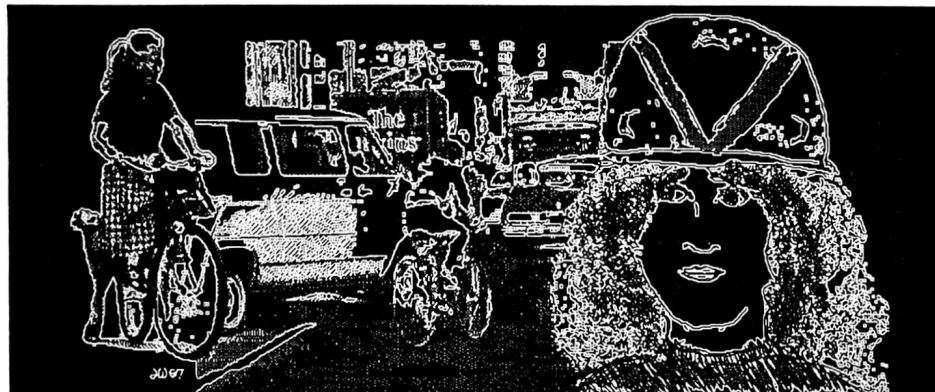


A Matter of Choice

Wearing a bicycle helmet is one way to reduce your chances of harm. There are others... by Mary Frances Dunham



Some time ago I suggested to a leading American bicycle organization that they commend the bicycling of actress Angela Lansbury in the role of Jessica Fletcher. Fletcher is the heroine of the television serial, "Murder She Wrote."

I felt that the way she went about her home town on a bicycle rather than by car deserved an accolade. The answer came back to the effect that Lansbury's Jessica was short of exemplary. She should be wearing a helmet.

In principle, if not by law, all cyclists should wear helmets. This is the ardent plea of American bicycle advocates, doctors, authorities in charge of traffic safety, and relatives and friends of cyclists who have suffered a fatal or crippling head injury.

Given the capacity of bicycles today to reach high speeds and the many motorists who are insensitive to cyclists' needs, helmets do seem to be a necessary precaution for all cyclists. However, I, myself, like Jessica, wear no helmet and I will try to explain why I believe in freedom of choice in this matter.

I find that there is a difference between cycling for utilitarian purposes and cycling

for sport (for recreation, exercise or competition) and that each activity involves different types and degrees of risk. By its nature, sport cycling involves adventure—meeting challenges, be they ever so mild, and taking risks, be they ever so small.

By contrast, utilitarian cycling thrives on the absence of risk for the performance of dependable, effective work. Sport cyclists should wear helmets, as should also those utilitarian cyclists, who may like or be obliged to take risks while riding. But utilitarian cyclists, such as load haulers and short distance commuters, for whom cycling is no more hazardous than walking, should feel free to ride unencumbered by a helmet.

Utilitarian cyclists, who depend on a healthy body and a well-maintained bicycle, can ill afford accidents of any sort. Even small misfortunes can consume precious time and money for repairs or medical help. Wearing a helmet is no protection against a sprained ankle, a bent wheel, or a police summons, not to mention a broken neck or an extensive court case.

Therefore, if a cycling activity is so dangerous that it calls for special head protection, it is probably too risky, even with a

helmet, to be an efficient way to save or earn money. If, however, it is possible to cycle at low risk, so that the cyclist's head is in no more jeopardy than that of a pedestrian, then cycling becomes a viable mode of travel or means of livelihood. In this case, a helmet is as useless to the cyclist as a life-preserver to someone wading in shallow water. Wearing it should be optional.

I have found that low-risk/helmet-free cycling can be successfully safe by implementing the following tactics which I have used for many years while commuting in New York City. I omit here the better known safety tenets: observing all traffic regulations, being visible, anticipating hazards, signalling, etc.

1. Cycling slowly: I cycle only as fast as the speed at which I can stop gently and smoothly. I ride no faster than the slowest cars near me, passing them only when it is absolutely safe to do so. In downtown, for example, my average speed drops from about eight to four miles per hour, and often lower. I can still reach my destination faster than I would by subway or bus.

2. Using conventional handlebars: Since I cycle slowly, I have little need for the aerodynamic advantages of a racing posture. Instead, I use handlebars that allow me to sit upright so that I can look ahead comfortably without bending my head backwards. In the upright position, most of my weight is on the back half of my bike. A sudden stop is unlikely to catapult me over the front of it.

3. Using a low seat: For cycling at moderate speed or less, it is unnecessary to sit at the level that experts generally recommend for efficient pedalling. Instead, I ride an under-sized bicycle with my seat lowered to where I can put both feet flat on the ground.

My center of gravity is desirably low for good balance and I haven't far to fall if this should happen. I can stay comfortably seated after stopping for red lights or in halted traffic while I wait for a safe chance to move on. I can dismount and remount easily for walking my bike on sidewalks to circumvent stalled or double-parked traffic.

In other words, I am less tempted to "run" red lights and to "weave" through traffic since I can save time by safer maneuvers.

4. Cycling defensively: I cycle in the side lanes, not in the middle of streets and avenues. I yield to motorists cutting in front of me and to those passing me too closely.

Many bicycle transportation advocates frown on this "defensive" style of riding, but by riding "offensively," as they recommend, I delay motorists unnecessarily when they have a chance to move ahead faster than I can. I prefer to cycle in spaces where I can do so in peace, reaching my destination with relatively little strain and, so far, unharmed.

Cyclists who find my kind of cycling overly cautious may scoff. But before they discount me entirely, they should consider that most cyclists around the world ride much as I do, sitting upright on sturdy, low-speed bicycles, even on some under-sized ones, as I have observed in Central America. In cities from Amsterdam to Tokyo, including those where livestock roam through traffic, serious harm to cyclists is so rare that the question of helmets does not arise.

Like mandating seat belts for motorists, the campaign to induce all cyclists to wear helmets implies a widespread acceptance of moving at speeds higher than the point at which the vehicles can be properly controlled. Unfortunately, the technology that has made high speeds possible has not yet supplied the means to halt bikes suddenly without causing serious injury. Rather than dealing with this fact by controlling speed, we resort to armor—pythonic belts for car riders and Martian headgear for cyclists—to charm away tragedies. We have become a generation of Don Quixotes, relying more on our imperfect accouterments than on common sense precautions and the mastery of basic skills for effective mobility.

The truth is that Jessica Fletcher without a helmet is as safe, if not more so, than many helmet-clad cyclists risking their necks because their heads are protected. Pedalling her low-speed bicycle with her head held high, Jessica reminds us that cycling can be a pleasant and safe form of transportation, practicable for young and old without special clothing.

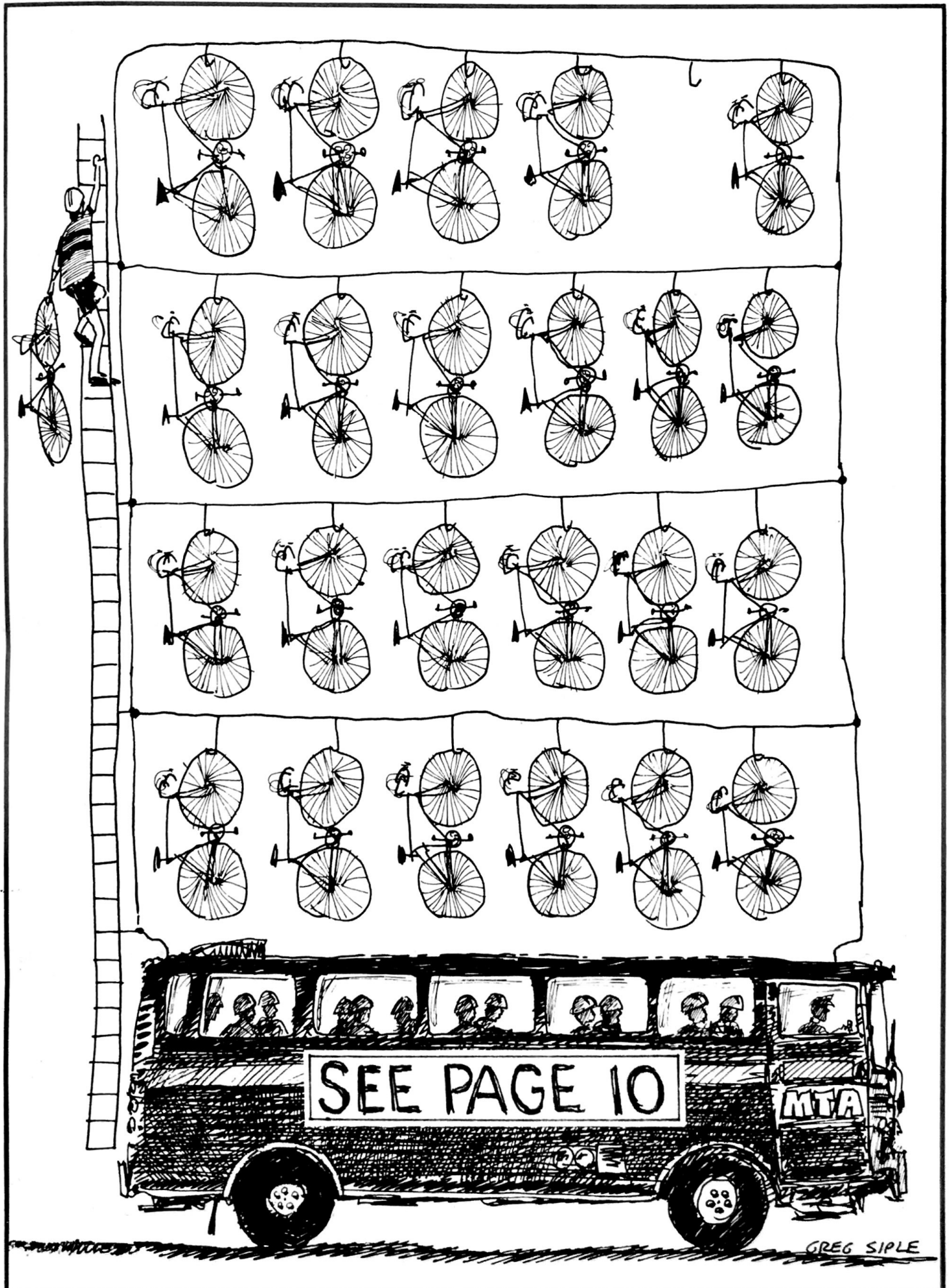
May the freedom to choose Jessica's style of cycling long survive. ✓

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