

A Bike-able Distance
Julia O'Rourke

President Rose, Members of the College, and Guests, I am delighted to be speaking to you on this momentous occasion.

I want to first ask you to cast your minds back to late August 2015, a time when President Rose and the Class of 2019 were about to begin our first year at Bowdoin College. Perhaps my classmates in the audience were busy packing up bags and saying goodbye to friends. Maybe you were wondering what your roommates would be like. And friends and family members might have been checking to be sure their college-bound student had put together all the supplies needed for their orientation trip.

I don't know about all of you, but the evening before move-in day I found myself in the garage of a Brunswick home, about two miles from where I stand now, where a man named Kris lives with his young family. My Dad found Kris while perusing Bowdoin's Student Digest on a hunt for the perfect bike, a mission motivated both by my need to distract myself from my college nerves and my Dad's need to make me feel better. When I was six—before I could ride a bike—I would feel lonely and frustrated when my older brothers rode away on theirs, until finally one day, my Dad took me down the road to a grassy area to teach me how to ride. I'm pretty sure this lesson is one of the reasons I pursued running as a sport; my lack of coordination was extremely apparent as I fell onto the grass over and over again. Still, I kept getting back on the bike because I wanted nothing more than to ride with my brothers around our neighborhood. Biking was freedom to me—far better than sitting in the back of the car without control over where I was headed. And now, so many years later, my Dad seemed to know that what I needed was to feel that sense of freedom again, to be reminded that I was independent enough to embark on a new experience even if the prospect scared me.

On that August evening before move-in day, I arrived at Kris's house with a

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contradictory mix of emotions. In one sense, I felt antsy to start college independently, and get move-in over with, and yet I also felt sad about the prospect of leaving my family and the comforts of home. These feelings combined to generate the foulest of moods, such that my family probably couldn't wait to ship me off on a canoe trip in northern Maine for four days. Nothing they said about how wonderful college would be made me feel any better, and the promise of Bowdoin's Offer of the College that we will come to "be at home in all lands" felt out of reach.

And then, I saw her. Charlotte. I knew her name as soon as I laid my eyes on her. A vintage pale yellow cruiser bike. It was perfect. Without the slightest hesitation, I picked her. Kris tuned it up for me, adjusted the seat, and I rode back to town. At the time I had no idea that the route I took, which was an unfamiliar and long road, was one I would ultimately run on hundreds of times with cross country teammates. I couldn't have known then, but this path would lead Charlotte and me to beautiful ocean views, polar plunges, and home-cooked dinners with Brunswick's welcoming residents. Now, when I think about how long it will be before I run these streets again, I am filled with the same bittersweet anticipation that I felt in those days leading up to orientation.

Charlotte helped me through that first year, taking me all over Bowdoin and Brunswick. She managed to get me from my intro psych class all the way to the field house in time for track practice and then to Thorne in time for dinner. And whenever I felt over-socialized, I slipped away to the Androscoggin for some downtime. On Fridays in late spring, my friends and I would ride to the ocean for an afternoon swim. With Charlotte's help, Bowdoin and Brunswick had quickly become home. I gradually personalized Charlotte as I grew into my place at Bowdoin, adding a basket, a cup holder for my coffee, and even a giraffe-shaped horn that probably

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belongs on a child's bicycle.

Although Charlotte took me on countless adventures, she hit a downfall around the same time that Bowdoin first began to prove challenging for me. There's a phenomenon we all know; a term we've thrown around throughout our college careers: the sophomore slump. Charlotte hit hers as many of us hit ours.

While we panicked about internships, declaring our majors, deciding if we should study abroad, and more, Charlotte faced crises of her own. Her new basket was eaten by Bowdoin's squirrels, her pedal fell off, and her brakes failed. I felt too stressed—and too preoccupied—to find the time to fix her. What's more is I left Charlotte unlocked, failed to register her with security, and let her rust out in the snow. I neglected Charlotte, just as I neglected my need for connection and exploration. This, in turn, led me to a more isolated, solitary place.

You'd think a bike as stunning as Charlotte would get stolen. And yet, she remained outside Stowe Hall, through cold, wind, and snow. And not only did no one steal my bike, but Kris actually passed her one day and offered to fix her many issues at no cost. It was then that I realized how much support existed in this place—both for Charlotte and for me—and with the help of friends, professors, and advisors, I rediscovered a sense of balance.

How lucky are we that this is how Bowdoin and Brunswick operate? In challenging times, people look out for you, offer to help you, and pump up your tires when you are feeling low. This is the beauty of living in a small community like we do. I think it is this quality—of living within a bike-able distance of all the people and things we need—that makes it so hard to leave Brunswick and Bowdoin.

Next year, the people we've lived with for four years will spread out all over the globe. For example, my roommates will all be in different countries, some of you will be in big cities,

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others in rural areas. Some will stay in Maine, and some will return to your home towns. Never again will we all live within a bike-able distance of one another.

Sometimes when I think about this, it terrifies me, more so than move-in day did back on that August night. What will I do in South Korea, without Charlotte, without people to notice when my brakes are wearing and my wheels are falling off? How will we feel without card swipers warmly welcoming us into Thorne each meal, or long impromptu chats with housekeepers in the hallways of our dorms? What will we do when we can't run into Smith Union or the first floor of HL to instantly find a friend we want to talk to?

We all have people, things, and places that helped us navigate Bowdoin. For me, it was Charlotte. Maybe for you, it was your favorite professor, or the coffee mug you filled up at the café each morning before an 8:30 class, or a club or college house in which you found community. Just like on move-in day, many of us are excited about our next steps, but conflicted about having to part with these pieces of our Bowdoin home. I worry that as we feel all the emotions that come with saying goodbye to these comforts, we might dwell too much on the "loss" of it all. So, I urge us all to go a step further and take a moment to consider what these things, people, and places taught us. Then, let's bring those lessons when we can't bring the rest. While bringing Charlotte to South Korea would be too costly of a baggage fee, I *can* bring my newfound spirit of adventure and continue to access my networks of support. We can't always bring our friends and roommates, but we can nurture these relationships and support one another as we settle into new places. And in these new homes, we can all bring the level of warmth and kindness that the Bowdoin and Brunswick communities showed us throughout our time here.

Just like riding a bike in an unfamiliar place, we don't quite know what's around the corner for us. My guess is that the spirit we've developed, the lessons we've learned, and the

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family Bowdoin has given us will help us feel “at home” in each of the lands we’re about to head off to. And then, maybe we won’t feel far more than a bike-able distance apart after all.

Thank you and congratulations, Class of 2019!