

Pedaling from Courage

*Manu Samnotra**

From 2008-2013, my former girlfriend and I were both graduate students at the University of Florida. We lived two miles away from campus, in an area of the city that abutted the parts of town in which no professor ever lived, and undergraduates never visited. We wanted to buy a car, but neither of us had a driver's license. Besides, on our graduate student salaries, the expenses of keeping a car would have been too high.

Instead, we rode bicycles we bought soon after each other. I had to persuade her to buy one. Before that she either walked to campus, or relied on the perpetually late bus service. On the day I bought my bicycle, I asked her if she wanted to give it a spin. I waited in front of the cleverly named bike shop ("Chain Reaction") as she test-rode the bicycle around the parking lot. She zigzagged in between the parked cars, and around the undergraduates who were milling around the university bookstore. I still remember the exhilaration on her face. Her smile was wide, and the nod of her head was a sure 'yes' to my suggestion she purchase one, too. She selected a blue bicycle that was a size smaller than my light gold one. We both bought locks, but she declined to buy a kick stand. At home, she would lean the bicycle against one of the walls at the front of the house. At school, she would hope that the person next to whom she had parked hers would not topple her bicycle in the process of retrieving their own. We rode those bicycles nearly every day on our way to campus. Since the humid Florida air dissipates for only 4 months of the year, these rides mean sweaty backs, aching muscles, and the constant risk of sun strokes and dehydration. But we also took joy in our rides to the campus. One day, while I was outside smoking a cigarette, I saw a small bird alight on the handlebars of her bicycle. I sent her the picture I took of it.

The route to the university was straightforward. Two long stretches of largely low-traffic streets and we would be at the university. On our own, we would have traveled at different speeds, but one way or the other, both of us seemed to take the exact same twenty minutes to get to campus. Riding alone, I would sometimes speed up to feel the air on my face, and the rush of the blood pounding in my temples, until the heaviness in my quads became unbearable. I would then coast for a few blocks, listening to the smooth whir of the wheels, now pressing in the grooves in the road, and now squeaking around the few potholes. I also learnt the hard way that traffic lights did not register my presence. I waited for several minutes on a rainy day for the light to change. With not a car in sight, and getting thoroughly drenched in the process, I was tempted to simply ride across the empty street. I waited. A car appeared behind me. The traffic signal noticed its presence and changed immediately.

* Manu Samnotra teaches political theory at the University of South Florida. He can be reached at msamnotra@usf.edu

I felt relief for not breaking the law.

I received my first student visa in 2000 as an eighteen-year old living in Nairobi, Kenya from an embassy building miles away from the center of town; a large white monolith with red stripes around its awning that stood ominously apart in an open field. Behind it was the open savannah of Nairobi national park. To reach the embassy, one used an access road that veered off from the main highway connecting Nairobi to its airport. Like other parts of the city, the reddish-brown earth stood in the starkest contrast against the surrounding lush grass. The vividness of this difference was especially apparent on cloudy days. The absence of direct sunlight accentuated the greenness of the grass, and the rust colored dirt. I can smell in my innermost memories the scent of this earth on the days when it rained. My father and I drove down that bumpy unpaved road in his 1993 red Toyota Corolla with its distinctive United Nations number plate. Along the way, we could see many others trekking to the embassy gates for their visa appointments. Some, like us, arrived in cars. Most walked the distance from the highway to the embassy on foot.

Simultaneous terrorist attacks at the U.S. embassies in downtown Nairobi and Dar-Es-Salam two years earlier had killed 224 people and injured over 4,000. In response, the U.S. State Department had shifted the Nairobi embassy staff to a safer – because more distant – location until the construction of its large militarized compound. By the time my father and I drove up the winding dirt road to the embassy gates, we had girded ourselves for the extensive security checks, and the intrusive questions that they asked us. We also understood that the excessive security was only partly a response to the tragedies of the years before.

We knew we would be treated this way because of the Indian passports we carried; deep blue with King Ashoka's 2,250-year-old emblem of a three-headed lion on its front. The words 'satyameva jayate' ('Truth alone prevails') emblazoned the bottom portion of the passport. To an eighteen-year old, however, this 'truth' only amounted to one indisputable fact: in the hierarchy of international prestige, this Indian passport was near the bottom. It meant waiting at the end of long lines of other brown and black bodies, smushed together under the suspicious eyes of local security guards who exercised a heavier hand against their fellow countrymen and women.

We were all dressed in our best clothes, but class distinctions inevitably spoke through. In our case, the quality of the clothes we wore probably spared us the physical shoving that the poorer Kenyans around us experienced. But it nearly did not happen that way. My father was livid when I showed up wearing a t-shirt for the appointment with the photographer who was to take my picture for the visa. He had me wear his own jacket so that I would appear more respectable to the interviewing officer. I still have that picture: a close-up of a sullen teenager whose torso – and therefore jacket he was wearing – is barely visible. Even though my clothes failed to have any discernible effect, my father's insight was keen. He insisted that I wear a blazer and a tie to the appointment at the embassy.

My father and I spent the months prior to our appointment at the embassy collecting all the necessary paperwork: Acceptance letters and the correspondence with my admitting college, school transcripts, SAT and TOEFL scores, the Cambridge A-Level results, intended dates of travel, forms laboriously filled out in my father's neat handwriting, and above all, my father's financial records confirming his ability to support my stay in the United States. My father and I carefully placed each of these in a thick blue binder. Fearful that any delay on my part might

irritate the interviewing embassy official, and therefore deny me that visa, my father made me memorize the order in which we had placed these documents. We rehearsed answers to the potential questions: ‘What is the purpose of your visit to the United States?’ ‘What do you want to study there?’ ‘What will you do at the completion of your degree?’ ‘Do you have any family in the United States?’

‘Remember to smile,’ my father had told me. ‘Do not act irritated.’ ‘You have no power there.’

On my ride to the University of Florida campus, I never risked crossing the street without the authorization of the green light. Why risk my tenuous status in the United States by something so trivial as a traffic ticket? Once I learned the pattern of how the lights worked on my bicycle route, I adjusted my speed in order to coast behind an approaching car. When no cars were around – a fairly common phenomena during the time of the day when I rode to campus – I would get off my bicycle, walk to the button for pedestrians, press it, rush back to my position at the stop light, mount the bicycle and wait for the light to turn green. I followed the same routine even when I rode with my former girlfriend. She understood my predicament and experienced its paralyzing fear up to a point. A foreign student herself, she knew well the international hierarchy that marks some passports as more desirable than others; as a white woman, and an EU national, however, this hierarchy did not weigh on her in quite the same way as it did on me. Still, she would wait for me while I would go over and press the button. We would ride off together as soon as the light turned green. Once on our way, she and I would fall into the same soothing rhythm. The whir of the wheels gave us the pause needed to catch our breaths. In those moments we would talk about our classes, our professors and our colleagues, the houses in the wealthy neighborhood we rode through in order to get to the university, and the European cities that she could easily visit...

... but which reminded me of the indignities of seeking entry into an Other’s land.

We were on our bicycles on our way to the university, rolling on a path unmarred by borders and hierarchies. We saw two figures in the distance. *Pedaling*. Perhaps we registered its novelty; in this neighborhood where we rarely saw any children, and where there were no cars parked during the day, it was strange to see pedestrians walking in the middle of the street. *Whirring*. We were discussing what we might cook that night for dinner. *Pedaling*. We hear voices now, distant voices, and there is shouting. The road is much smoother in this part of the ride. *Whirring*. We exchange glances. As we get closer, we notice that the figures in the distance, getting nearer to us every moment, are not white. The color of their skin became apparent before anything else. *Pedaling*. We see now that one of them is gesticulating. Sticking arms out sideways, questioning. *Pedaling*. We notice now that one of them is a man. We hear his words clearly. He is angry. He is insulting her. *Whirring*. He is demanding that she stop what she is doing and acknowledge him. A few feet away, and we realize that the woman is walking ahead of the man. *Whirring*. Her body is stiffened, but not in the way that suggests that they are strangers. *Whirring*. She is trying

to maintain a distance between them. As we are about to cross them, the man stretches forward and punches her. It grazes the back of her head. She stumbles but quickly regains her footing and keeps walking. *Pedaling*. We two cyclists look at each other. *Pedaling*. We are already a block down the path before we realize what we have seen. *Whirring*. No, that is not right. We know what we saw. *Whirring*. It just takes us that long to acknowledge what we have seen. She wants to stop pedaling. Our bikes come to skidding halt. She was always braver than me. I tell her not to stop. *Pedaling*. We cover the rest of the distance until we reach the university where we finally consider what we have seen.

One day my ex and I met up with a freshly minted assistant professor whose work excited us. She had just joined our department from an Ivy-league university, and her cutting-edge work was part of a new wave in political theory. Trained as we were in the tradition of canonical thinkers, the prospect of working with her on W.E.B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, Ralph Ellison, and James Baldwin attracted us. Finally, we thought amongst ourselves, we will be able to speak of our own experiences in a cadence other than that of imperial political theory.

It was another sunny, late fall day in Florida. The leaves in this part of the state turn orange just enough to signal the change in season. Thankfully, after months of humid temperatures and afternoon thunderstorms, the air is cool enough to invite us outdoors. As we three ambled down a main street near the university, lost in conversation about the Harlem Renaissance, and what it meant for identity politics, a white truck drove by at high speed. The passenger, a young white man in a white t-shirt and a blue baseball cap, leaned out of the side and shouted something at us. I saw him too late. His face and blue cap are a blur in my memory. I remember he braced his weight against the side of the car as he leaned out. His voice was caught in the wind, making it impossible for me to decipher his meaning. I only remember the rapid doppler effect, as if it was a soundbite that had been extracted from a longer sentence, and slowed down in a studio to the point of becoming indecipherable. It was a scream.

We stopped. Our bodies stiffened. We could not respond to what we had experienced. The pace of events had been too quick; the moment had passed. Unlike the movies, here there was no heroic effort to jump in front of the professor and absorb the blow. My awareness of what had transpired was slow.

Although I could not be sure, I did not think he had said anything to me. Perhaps it was a disgruntled undergraduate to whom I gave a poor grade? Or maybe, he was just a teenager having fun at the expense of others. I turned around and saw a pained look on the professor's face. Her lips were pursed, but her eyes glowered. 'What did he say?' I asked my ex. She said she didn't know. I did not ask the professor; something in how her body shifted and stiffened told me not to broach it with her. I was not sure I knew who the blue-capped man had targeted, but the effect had been clear. His assault had only grazed our bodies, but it landed squarely on her.

I did not experience the blow because I had not expected it. Having minimized my actions, precisely because I know so much is out of my control, I did not realize that I had created an illusion that I was secure against the caprices of fate. Infantilized by my powerlessness, I had come to believe that my law-abiding actions would, at the very least, allow me to pass unnoticed.

The blue-capped man did not allow us our calm afternoon walk. He noticed us, and in that way destroyed the illusions that I had let slowly guide my behavior. The appropriateness of our conduct was irrelevant to his need in that moment to scream at us. He did not care that the three of us crossed the road when the light told us to cross it; that we had kept to the side-walk; that we dressed appropriately for the weather and the neighborhood.

There were deeper questions that I cannot shake: why did his words – which none of us deciphered – fall hardest on the professor when they might have been directed at any of us? *What was this will to persist and to forget that made me believe that he had not shouted at me?* And what would I have done were the situation only slightly different and the blue-capped man had shouted at us from an unmoving car, where his words would have been clear and their target unmistakable? What would I have said to him? I know the answers to these questions.

I know I would not have said anything. I would have put my head down and asked everyone to keep moving along. Why entangle myself in affairs that could spiral out of my control? A few angry words could easily slide into physical altercations. Someone might call the police, pitting the blue-capped man's whiteness against my brownness, the red earth and green grass full of brown and black bodies against the implacable silence of the embassy walls. And should things go poorly, I would be back again in the studio, awaiting another photograph to affix to my visa application.

But this time my sullenness would be no protection against my father's disappointment. This time, I would stand ashamed before him for having failed to heed his counsel.

Eight years later, I live now in another city in Florida. I have a somewhat stable position in my profession. I am married to a supportive and loving woman who has committed racial suicide to be with me. We are expecting our first child.

We went house hunting a few weeks ago in an attempt to fill in the last missing piece of the aspirational middle-class lifestyle. Going from one open house to another, in gated communities with names such as 'The Sanctuary,' and 'The Enclave,' we found ourselves waiting for the realtor in the driveway of a house that interested us. It was one of the many cookie-cutter types we had seen in these neighborhoods: a large garage at the end of a driveway, and a narrow path on its side that leads to the front door.

We had only a few minutes to wait before the realtor arrived, and so a drive to the nearest coffee shop to while away our time seemed unnecessary. It was late summer in Florida, but these ten minutes would have been too long to keep the car running, and the heat too high to keep sitting in the car. I was tired from all the driving we had done that day, and my back and legs were sore. I stepped out of the driver's seat, and walked around to the passenger side to talk to my wife. We spoke for a few minutes to each other as we took in the neighborhood. Me, leaning against the car, and she, sitting in the passenger seat talking to me through the open door.

A police car drove up to the driveway. The officer, a middle-aged man with red hair approached us rapidly. He saw me first, and as he was walking up to me, he asked me what I was doing there. At this point, he must have seen my wife because his pace towards us slowed down. We told him why we were there, pointing to the 'For Sale' sign on the front lawn. He told us that there had been robberies in the neighborhood; 'young men' were checking to see if cars were

unlocked and stealing them. Someone had seen us driving up to the house, and as a concerned resident, wanted to make sure that everyone's property was safe. He assured us that none of this was meant to scare us. He would be happy to buy a home in that community. We knew he was lying, at least about the reasons for his sudden appearance. 'Young men' – let us just say what he most likely meant – 'brown and black men' – cannot just enter a gated community. And if he really was concerned about young men, then why stop us when, with my bald head and a shock of white beard, I could hardly ever pass for a young man?

He asked for my ID, and I gave it to him. Perhaps in India or in Kenya, or if I were inhabiting a different body, I would have demanded probable cause. Instead, I gave him the ID, and he took it back to his car, probably to run my name through his database. He politely returned it, asked us when we expected the realtor to show up, and drove off. We saw a moment later a second squad car drive off behind his. It had been waiting to provide backup just out of our view.

We looked around the house once the realtor finally showed up, trying all the while to appear genuinely interested in living there. But we knew we would not. On the drive back, when my body finally caught up to my awareness, my hands shook at what might have happened. How much worse would it have been but for my wife's whiteness standing face to face with the officer's own?

When I unthinkingly complied with the officer's request to produce my ID, did I even think about how he might have interpreted my sudden movement to reach for my wallet?

I have lived in the United States for nineteen years. I am still not its citizen. I do not even have a green card. I have moved from one visa to the next. In this time, I have been to the U.S. Embassy on five occasions. Each time, my class background has created enough distance between me and the wretched of the earth – those other black and brown bodies who jostle in the lines leading up the embassy – to allow me passage to these shores. Each passing year I become more of this place and its people than of India or Kenya. But with it the fear of being denied a visa only grows each time I visit the embassy. I have now so much more to lose than I did as an eighteen-year old.

Even as I get closer to those with whom I have shared the better part of my life, a gulf separates us. They anticipate a life of courage. I fear it. I am always eager to avoid conflict, always too slow, always hesitant to take risks. Where others can presume smooth roads, I look for potholes. They have to wait as I carry my inertias: My ex-girlfriend who stopped alongside me for the signal to change; the friends that accommodated my lack of enthusiasm for their plans to travel together, to publish, to say things that would draw unwarranted attention; my wife who accepts – but does not share – my unwillingness to live in predominantly white neighborhoods where a zealous neighbor might call the police on me; and, I suspect, my daughter who, yet to arrive, may already sense in her father a reluctance to accept the full embrace of life.