

The Bicycle

Padma was sure she had everything from the move. The IKEA bed and bureau set, the maple bookcase she picked up on the cheap at the estate sale, the futon with small rinds in the blue fabric that reeked of chemical solvent. All those were obvious. Impossible for even the laxest moving company to leave behind. Her smaller items, her *necessary* items like her laptop and printer she transported herself in her dilapidated car. No chance she'd leave those behind.

But the bicycle. The bicycle she didn't remember until she was unpacking boxes, days after handing in her key to the landlord, and she was one-hundred miles away in a new city, a new apartment. How could she have forgotten to check the basement before leaving? She had kept the bicycle in the basement behind a mound of empty boxes. Out of sight. So out of sight she didn't notice it on her weekly laundry runs, forgot it was even there.

The bicycle was second-hand, perhaps third-hand, a pink cruiser with handlebars that swung up neck-level, which made her feel like a queen on a throne on her good days, or a circus clown on her bad ones. The kind of bicycle found in thrift store basements coated in dust and sequestered in a dark corner, languishing for years until some desperate soul was in sufficient need. Available for fifty bucks. Maybe forty-five. But hers? She didn't pay a dime for it. Her best friend at work, Xin Chang, bequeathed it to her when she moved to California last year.

Padma used the bicycle for one six month stint—early April thru mid-October, the only time to bike in Boston unless you were one of those diehards swaddled in tight fleece who braved Nor'easters and sub-freezing weather almost to prove their hardiness.

The bicycle rode well. Thick tires provided stability and Padma could glide over detritus and road bumps without worrying about a fall. She rode slowly, circumspectly, three miles down

Mt. Auburn Street from Watertown to Harvard Square, cars and city buses whizzing past her, spewing black clouds of exhaust in her face that made her eyes water and her nose run.

Her parents in India were worried. Their daughter was eight-thousand miles away alone in a foreign country, a single woman of thirty-four. If that weren't enough, she was now riding a bicycle down a busy road full of maniac drivers.

"Isn't there a bus you can take, Padma?" Her mother asked, the cheerful lilt in her voice belying her fear. "Or a train?"

Her parents couldn't grasp how an advanced country like the United States didn't have extensive public transportation ushering people from point to point in effortless comfort. India had buses and trains, but they were overcrowded and sweltering.

"I wear a helmet and I'm careful. The drivers are pretty respectful," she exaggerated.

The bicycle ride did save her time – about ten minutes each way when factoring in the long wait for the bus and the multiple bus stops. And saving time was pivotal when she was already working twelve hour days in the lab.

On their unofficial first date at The Punjab Palace, Robert told her to go back to her old apartment building, start ringing random doorbells until someone buzzed her in, and then head to the basement to retrieve her bicycle.

"You want the bike, right?" he said, his eyes light brown and warm. "And the landlord isn't returning your calls. Just go back in there and get it."

Robert appeared confident about everything. He had thick black hair, parted crisply on the left and swept over to the right, held together with mousse, and shaved on the sides. His hair,

along with his perpetual three-day stubble, gave him the look of someone who could host a number of reality shows.

Padma had called her old landlord three times and left messages without receiving even a courtesy reply.

“Once you move out, once you’re no longer a tenant, it’s like you don’t exist,” she said with a shake of her head.

“I like your voice when you get mad,” he said. “It sounds like a song. There’s a magic to it.” Then after a pause. “It sounds like hope.”

“Oh really,” Padma said. She tried to convey nonchalance but inwardly she was beaming.

“This is great,” he said, ripping apart the naan with his slender fingers and stuffing huge wads in his mouth. Robert was from Kansas, the breadbasket of America, and naan was a new bread for his Midwestern palate.

“Slow down, you might choke,” Padma said with a giggle. Robert smiled back.

Robert hadn’t asked her out directly. A group of co-workers were out at happy hour when the subject of Padma’s cooking came up in conversation. The aromatic biryani she brought in for lunch in plastic Tupperware, the sharp smell of ginger and turmeric that overpowered the refrigerator. “It always smells so good, Padma,” someone said.

Robert announced he had never tried Indian food. Padma was in shock, everyone who heard him was in shock.

Later than evening, tipsy on her third Sam Adams, Padma approached him while he stood alone peering at his phone. “How is it that you have never had Indian food, dude?” *Dude*. American surfer slang—this was Padma being flirty. He looked up from his phone, his mouth

half open, and shrugged. Padma stood close to him. She breathed in the sour smell of beer on his breath and liked it.

“I don’t know,” he said and shrugged again. He held her eye contact, his long lashes fluttering, and then he smiled. Unblemished white teeth, perfectly arranged in his mouth. “What can I say? I’m from Kansas. We don’t have a ton of Indian people there.”

“Am I like the first Indian person you’ve met?”

“No way, you’re like the second.”

Padma couldn’t help but notice the fitted dress shirt, tight around the broad shoulders, and his muscular quads that filled out the front of his dress pants.

“How am I going to try Indian food?” he asked with a smile. “You never bring me lunch. You never offer to share.”

“Dude, I just have enough for me,” she said, smiling back.

Then Robert asked whether there was an Indian restaurant in the area. There had to be an Indian restaurant, right? And who better to introduce him to the cuisine than her? Padma said she didn’t know, why would she know, she cooked Indian food at home and had no need for a restaurant. Then they both pulled out their phones to search. Robert was the first to find one on Yelp. “The Punjab Palace,” he said, showing her the screen. “4.5 stars, right in town.”

“Okay,” she said. “So what?”

“So *what?*” he repeated louder. “We have to go. That’s what.”

Nothing physical happened at the Punjab Palace except for a long hug by their cars. Padma hoped he would lean in, take the initiative, plant a kiss, but Robert pulled back and smiled. The first kiss came at the next work happy hour after everyone had left except the two of them. He

suggested another drink at the bar. The drink at the bar turned into a second drink, turned into a scorpion bowl. Two straws became one straw and before she knew what hit her, her head was spinning, and she and Robert were making out under the soft lights of a chandelier to the amorous sounds of a jazz trio in the corner of the bar.

She invited him over for home-cooked meals; he invited her over for take-out pizza, beers, and Netflix. They began to stay over each other's place a few nights a week. There was an easy brazenness to Robert that appealed to Padma. He was cocksure but not obnoxious. When she teased him about silly things like his messy car or his insatiable appetite for frozen dinners, he enjoyed it, reveled in it, unlike her last boyfriend Pratik who responded in a burst of anger whenever she challenged his assertions or poked at him playfully. Pratik was also from India, a resident at a Boston hospital. But Robert was an *American*. Padma had never dated an American. Before Pratik there was Feng who was from China and before Feng there was Oscar from Brazil. She had been in the States for six years.

Yet she had doubts about where things were going. The future. She was an introvert—or an “extroverted introvert” as she announced on her Bumble profile. A profile she disabled the morning after Robert stayed over for the first time. And Robert was an extrovert who flitted in different social circles and wasn't afraid to share his opinions. He enjoyed sports, whiskey, and rock climbing. She preferred reading, cooking, and science.

“Do you even like science?” she asked him one night, her tone borderline accusatory.

“Of course I like it,” he said, smiling through a raised voice. “Why wouldn't I like it? I mean, I *am* working in biotech.”

“I know, but you moved over to business development. You have a PhD in biochemistry but you're not using it anymore.”

“I am using it. I’m just using it in a different way. I’m leveraging my great interpersonal skills,” Robert said and laughed. “No seriously, I just like working with people more. The business side of things. And let’s face it. I’m better at it.”

Padma wasn’t sure why it bothered her that Robert had abdicated, or at least sidetracked, his career as a scientist. Part of her thought he was wasting his education and training. Anyone with a business background could build relationships and analyze mergers and acquisitions, but understanding things at a molecular level, a cellular level, that was where the magic resided. She also realized that Robert had the personality to take him into corporate boardrooms, to wheel and deal, and she didn’t. Was her aversion to his career path a sign of jealousy? She considered it before discarding it. She wasn’t a jealous person.

One night, Padma went to a small dinner party with Robert. His old college friend Kurt was living in Brooklyn with his fiancée Chloe. They were recently engaged. During the forty-five minute drive to Brooklyn, Padma sat quietly in the passenger seat as they zoomed past groves of ash and locust, the trees silhouetted in the waning June sun, emerging and then receding behind her. They drove through carved rock slabs blasted out decades ago by some road crew – an engineering marvel. Padma felt a kinship to this long disbanded crew whoever they were, toiling to create something that humanity now uses without a thought or care for the effort in the undertaking. That was how she considered her scientific endeavors in pursuit of a cancer cure.

“You’re quiet tonight,” Robert said after a while. As she gazed absently out the window, he had been telling her about a road trip he and Kurt took a year after college. They drove from Kansas to Montana and then swung south through the Rockies on the way home. They stopped at national and state parks, camped in random campgrounds and sometimes if they couldn’t find a

campground they pulled over at the side of the road, just rolled a tarp out on a swath of grass and slept under the stars. Robert couldn't even remember eating on the trip. "Strange, huh?" he said. "We must have just lived on gas station food. I don't remember eating in restaurants." The memory stretched back fifteen years. He did, however, recall a couple drunken evenings, one in particular at a cowboy bar in Jackson Hole where Kurt went around asking girls to make out with him and then later at the hostel, Robert couldn't even make it to the toilet and puked all over the bathroom floor. "It was a goddamn mess," he said and laughed, his whole body rocking, as if the memory was still so visceral that if he could have transported himself back into that moment, he would have.

Padma occasionally gave a signal that she was listening, an "uh-huh" or a murmured "oh wow" while she pondered the silliness of it all, the utter extravagance. Her post-collegiate life had no detours, no self-indulgent cross-country romps or periods of indecision. She went straight from university to graduate school and then straight from graduate school to work.

Kurt and Chloe lived in a fancy brownstone. Kurt worked at a hedge fund and Chloe was a project manager at Google. Robert had prefaced their visit by telling Padma that "they were doing very well" and he rubbed his fingers together to indicate money. Over dinner Padma peppered them with questions about their work—she was curious to learn about different jobs and different industries—but neither seemed interested and gave short replies. "Eh, who wants to talk about work," Kurt said. Instead, Kurt provided a thorough recap of their engagement earlier that month. He had booked a charming inn in the Catskills for the weekend. After a hike to the bottom of a waterfall, a famous waterfall, he dropped on one knee and proposed. The engagement ring was loose in the front pocket of his cargo shorts.

Then Kurt and Chloe both pulled out their phones and began flipping through photographs of the waterfall and the surrounding area to show them. Chloe wore the ring and splayed out her fingers out to display it. It was six carats, she announced.

“Weren’t you worried you would drop the ring into the water?” Padma asked Kurt. She was bewildered by the elaborate nature of the proposal. Why risk dropping the ring into a swirling eddy of water and floating downstream? Or losing it on the hike?

Kurt laughed and Robert rubbed his hands up her pant leg and leaned his body in close to hers and nuzzled her. “You think this guy’s *that* clumsy,” Robert said. She could smell the whiskey on his breath. Kurt was an amateur bartender and had made a couple Rusty Nails for Robert and himself.

Padma didn’t understand the emphasis Americans put on trendy behavior and adventure, their need to make everything into a story, like a reenactment of a Hollywood movie. If two people wanted to marry, she thought, why didn’t they just discuss it between the two of them and then make an informed decision in the normal course of life? Like rational adults. The same way people decided where to study, where to live, where to work, how many children to have.

“Padma is very practical,” Robert said at one point. And although he didn’t say it in a mocking way, his tone indicated that she took it too far, that there was something wrong with how practical she was. It irked her but she didn’t say anything.

On the car ride home, she was even quieter than the car ride there.

“Is everything okay?” Robert asked her. “Did you have fun?”

“I’m just tired,” she said. “That glass of wine went right to my head.” Chloe had opened a bottle of chardonnay from a Catskills winery and Padma nursed a glass throughout the dinner. She didn’t tell Robert that she didn’t care for his friends, didn’t care for them at all. They might

have been doing well financially but they weren't serious people. They were frivolous. But even worse than frivolous, they were ostentatious.

Padma didn't deliberately exercise. In India there was physical work to be done around the house, cooking, cleaning and myriad other chores, but she never developed a regular workout schedule or belonged to a gym. She wasn't "fit" nor was fitness a goal. And why should it be? She ate healthy (a vegetarian), rarely drank, always performed well on various blood tests that predict health and well-being.

Her ride to her old job, while a short three miles, was the closest she had come to a workout regimen. As weeks passed into months, she suddenly realized that she was getting in shape, that she was no longer the same woman huffing and puffing drenched in sweat. When she looked in the mirror and flexed her calves, she noticed muscles bulge out. Her lungs were stronger, her heart pumped more efficiently. It wasn't only her physical development that improved. She began to navigate the roads better. She developed a keen sense of how much space to leave between herself and parked cars to avoid crashing into a door suddenly flung open, and how to shoot out into traffic, hold out her arm as a directional, and take the left at the busy intersection. Timidity was not an option.

One morning traffic was bad, cars were flying by, and she couldn't swing into the driver's lane to make the left turn at the busy intersection. She dismounted to the right and faced traffic, waiting for an opening to cross. She was halfway across when she peered to the right and saw a pick-up truck barreling toward her. It showed no sign of slowing. She froze and the driver slammed on the breaks. The screech of tires rang in the air. The driver was a white man around fifty. Country music blared from his open windows.

Padma glared at the truck, shook her head, and continued on foot to the sidewalk.

“You should watch out,” the guy yelled at her.

“Me watch?” Padma’s voice sang out. “You almost killed me.” She mounted her bicycle and was about to pedal off when she heard the roar of the truck’s engine and the man shouted over it, “Why don’t you go back to wherever you came from.”

The brief encounter didn’t deter Padma from riding, not that morning as she continued pedaling to work, or over the next couple months. The opposite happened. She became determined not to let this asshole shake her confidence and the encounter only steeled her, made her realize that she had as much right to the road as anyone.

What stopped Padma finally was simple: the weather. She had grown up in a warm climate and never had taken to the cold Northeast winters. To Padma, winters were three long months to endure until spring. The idea of bicycling during winter was unfathomable.

Now with spring here, Robert wanted to exhume his bicycle from storage and start cycling again and he wanted Padma to join him. He had learned about a rail trail that went fifty-five miles from East Hampton to Northeast Connecticut. Padma wasn’t crazy about the idea of long-distance bicycling. It sounded like torture. Exercise, she believed, should be a byproduct of another practical endeavor not a goal in itself, not a form of recreation.

“I don’t have a bike, Robert, don’t you remember?” she said.

“Let’s just get you a new one,” he said.

“Are you going to contribute for one?” she said, a sarcastic pout on her face. They were on the couch at his house watching an episode of *Ozark*. She sat perpendicular to him, her back up against the arm rest, her feet on his lap.

“I just might have to,” he said, tapping on her shins like bongo-drums.

“I can’t believe I left my bike behind,” she said. She wasn’t lamenting the loss of the bike because she wanted to join him. The loss itself was what stung her. She couldn’t slough it off.

“We should just go back and get it,” he said louder, his tone bordering on incredulity. “I keep saying, let’s just go back and get it. We’ll start buzzing apartments until someone lets us in. I don’t know why this is such an issue. It’s, like, not a problem. Seriously.”

Padma did like her old cruiser. That was undeniable. The bicycle had value. It was an asset buried deep on her balance sheet, one she didn’t want to write off just yet. It was foolish to discard a viable asset. And wasteful.

Her mind turned to practical concerns, namely her ten-year old Hyundai Accent, a beater of a car with over 200,000 miles and a check engine light that came on and off intermittently. She’d have to take it to a shop someday. She’d been pushing of the inevitable. First she’d have to find a new shop. What if it were eight miles away, off the public transportation grid and too far to walk? How would she get back and forth? Ubers? Bug someone for a ride? Robert? All options involved relying on someone else, all options were suboptimal.

The answer was clear: her old bicycle. That’s how she’d shuttle home from the shop after dropping the car, and then go back to pick it up. A bicycle had merit. It was a two-wheeled contingency plan.

When Robert volunteered to drive Padma back to Boston in his new Tesla and she wouldn’t have to add wear and tear to her car, Padma finally acquiesced. His suggestion to ring apartments until someone buzzed her in wasn’t ridiculous. There were twenty apartments in the building. The law of averages would work out eventually even if took ringing all twenty.

On the ride over, Robert dallied, the same way he dallied getting ready in the morning. He turned a quick bathroom break at a rest area into a coffee and doughnut stop.

“I love road trips,” he said to her, the white powder from the doughnut dusting his lips. Back when they first started up two months earlier, Padma would have craved cleaning the powder with her lips. Any excuse to bring their mouths together.

Now she said to him, “Robert, you got crap all over your mouth.” He smirked and tried to flirt, licking his tongue over his lips, but Padma only sighed, saying, “We should go.” She held her phone and looked down at it. “It’s already eleven.”

She was worried that the later they arrived, the fewer the people who would be home, reducing the odds to get buzzed in.

“It’s fine, Padma,” he said. “Somone’s going to be there. Trust me. This isn’t something to get worked up about.”

“I’m not getting worked up,” her voice rose. “I just don’t want us to drive all this way for nothing.”

Robert took another bite of his doughnut. He had made short work of it. All that remained was a small wedge.

“You can finish that in the car,” she said and rose from her seat. Robert shook his head and raised his eyebrows as Padma walked toward the door. He got up and shambled after her, licking the powder off his fingers as he shambled.

“These must be the kinds of places Kurt and I stopped at on our cross-country trip,” he said. “We must have been living on Mickey-Dees and Subway.”

Padma picked up her pace. She had no patience for Robert’s reveries, not anymore. She couldn’t bear another anecdote about Robert and Kurt’s inane cross-country trip. Another one at

Yellowstone, how Kurt positioned himself in front of Old Faithful while Robert stood off in the distance with his camera and how Kurt leaned back and thrust out his pelvis. When the geyser erupted, it appeared as if the steam and water were spouting out of Kurt's penis.

She wasn't sure when the transition happened from finding Robert's stories a source of curiosity and amusement to a source of annoyance and displeasure.

"I want to drive," she said. Robert agreed without any protest. He had stayed up late the night before, hours after Padma went to bed, drinking Scotch and binge-watching *Mad Men*.

He was enamored with the show, couldn't believe he waited this long to watch it. Padma hated everything about it: the debauchery, the casual misogyny, the actual profession on display—salesmen peddling garbage—but most of all the men themselves, Don Draper and his merry gang of reprobates, charlatans, scam-artists and philandering jackasses.

Padma drove fast, hitting eighty.

"Aren't you going kind of fast?" Robert asked, head back against the headrest, eyes half-closed, squinting out the window.

She didn't answer.

"Padma?"

"Why don't you take a nap?" she said.

A few minutes later, Robert's head bobbed down and jerked back up.

Twenty minutes later Padma pulled in front of her old apartment. Everything about the building looked familiar – the faded brick façade, the two pear-shaped hemlocks that stood like sentinels on each side of the staircase, the sundered walkway—and it felt as if she had never left, the past four months a mere blip in time. She felt no emotion in her return. The apartment had been a place to live and nothing more.

“We’re here, Robert,” she shook his arm, jostling him awake.

He woke slowly, groggy still, and looked out the window. “This your old place?” He reached for his coffee in the holder and took a long sip. “Let’s go in.”

Padma looked at him, like he was a pathetic cat left out all night in a rainstorm. “Why don’t you take another nap? I’ll get it.”

She walked to the front door and entered the dingy foyer. The door into the complex was locked as she expected. Beyond the door she could see the dark green and brown checkered carpet and the staircase that led to her second-floor apartment.

She looked to the right at the panel with the twenty buttons. Her former neighbors. She didn’t know any of them personally. The guy across the hall was about sixty with a pot belly that often slipped out from under his t-shirt. He was the only one she had run into with any regularity. She wasn’t going to buzz his place and risk him coming out on the landing. She picked one at random, apartment 107, pressed and heard the loud buzz and then waited. Ten seconds passed before she tried another. No luck. Then she tried another. Still no luck. Finally, she hovered her hand over the row and started pressing frantically. When this failed, she tried her old apartment 208 and held onto the button for a long time, about thirty seconds, as if willing someone to respond. When nobody buzzed her in, she turned around and went outside. Robert had rolled down the window and was looking back at her but she couldn’t bear to look at him. This was *his* plan. His dumb idea to drive all this way, give up a Saturday morning, and start pressing on buttons like a dummy, and then sneak into an apartment like a burglar. That’s what he had suggested to her: breaking and entering. Criminal activity.

She walked around to the driver’s side and flung open the door. “This was so fucking stupid,” she said. “Nobody’s letting me in.”

Robert remained calm. “Did you try all of them?”

“Of course I tried all of them. Like seven times.”

“You weren’t in there very long.” He unbuckled his seatbelt. “I’ll go get it.”

“Yeah, okay,” she said. “You’re going to go get it.”

Robert’s stride was assured but not rushed. He disappeared into the foyer and then she could see him no longer, even as she leaned across the passenger seat to get a better glimpse.

She waited. She waited for him to come out empty-handed, his hands up in the air, an idle shrug, some sign of defeat, of failure.

And then she saw the wheel. Robert had propped open the door with his left arm and was guiding the bicycle and then his body through. The door was heavy and this maneuver had always troubled Padma. It accounted for the multiple scratches on the pink frame, which she could see now from twenty yards away.

Robert carried the bike down the three steps, wearing a smile so wide it could stretch back to Connecticut. And then he hoisted the bicycle over his head and gave it a shake, like a pro wrestler in victory. With his mouth open, he roared out a silent scream. He placed it down and walked by it side. The bike wobbled on flat tires.

When he got closer to the car, he said, “See. What did I tell ya, honey.”

Padma wore a scowl on her face. Then she responded and there was no melody in her voice, no euphonious lilt. “That’s not my bike,” she shouted out. And then more quietly with bite, “*Dude.*”