Come Back, *Mandu*

By Indu Ramesh

He bikes by this spot on the Duke plaza almost every day, and his bike seems too fragile.

The frame is thin, light metal; almost too light to support him. There are no brakes around the handlebars; to stop, he must back-peddle, quickly and deftly. The paint on the body is reddish and peeling and fading. There is a bell in front, a small silver bulb with a pleasant enough dinging sound that he unfortunately utilizes a little too often.

And yet it is startlingly unique, a road bike in the midst of the flurry of mountain bikes frequently rented by Duke students and employees from the Outpost, despite the fact that the closest mountains to Duke’s campus are at least three hours away. The bike’s handlebars are free from complex gear-shifting mechanisms, and he is free to rest his hands firmly on rubber grips and think only of the joys of a speedy ride to his ultimate destination. The overall affect suggests careful, loving craft, a reminder of simpler days and technologies.

Yes, I’ll admit it—I want his bike. I’m jealous; jealous of the beauty and grace and vintage-y feel of the bike, jealous of the surprising speed and acceleration that he develops as he rides, jealous the wind that ruffles his hair as he zips through campus, jealous of the gracefully awkward way he tilts, so-so, as he whooshes by the plaza, jealous that it is not his eccentric mannerisms but his spectacular vehicle that make me notice him every time he whizzes by, every day. And yet, for someone I see so frequently, I don’t particularly care to get to know him. I just want his bike.

It seems as if his bike knows that, too. Every time he rides by, the shiny silver metal never fails to subtly catch the glint of the sunlight as he rides by, as if winking knowingly at my gaze.

There is nostalgia in that gaze. His fragile bike reminds me of my childhood, of my very first bike, of that high of youthful freedom and
exhilaration I could only get from riding it. And weirdly enough, it reminds me
of my dad—of how he coached me patiently, directly and indirectly, until I could
ride a bike, until I could experience that feeling.

I am six years old, and I am terrified.

When I first saw the bike at the store, I thought it was beautiful. Now, it
is a monster waiting to attack. The bright pink paint is peeling; the body seems
too light and thin to support me. There is no way I can stay on. My new bike will
be the cause of my tragic childhood demise.

I sit, squirming, wedged uncomfortably on the seat, in the middle of the
driveway. At six, I am a fearsome Pokémon player, a champion at mad math
tests, and have already read a chapter book. But right now, it is my first time on a
bike, and I am scared out of my wits.

Relax, my dad tells me. The kickstand is up.

Oh.

I want to please my dad. My dad is fearsome. He is large, with a belly that
must have once muscle when he was younger, but has gone to seed. He is a strict
disciplinarian. He yells at me, punishes me, makes me cry when I do the smallest
wrong.

But he is always there.

My mom is overbooked, attending graduate school and working a job at
the same time. My dad is the one who lingers and stays; he drops me off and
picks me up from school; he cooks dinner; he plays with me; he helps me do my
homework; he jokes with me. He is always there. Now, he has taken up teaching
me to ride a bike.

My dad asks me if he can kick up the kickstand now. I am frightened and
skeptical. What if I get hurt?
He tells me it is a rite of passage. I don’t even know what that is.

He tells me this is something I need to do. Something I wanted to do. Yes, I wanted to do it, but I didn’t realize how scary it was, until now. I tremble. I stutter, I stammer, I stake in fear.

But I want to make my dad proud. And so, finally—hesitantly, haltingly, like a sacrificial victim approaching the altar—I agree.

My dad lets me go, and I fly into the roaring wind. And for a moment, it is delicious freedom and maturity, the likes of which I have never experienced before.

But only for a moment. Within a second, I lose my balance. I careen, swerve, teeter, and, fall hard, with a resounding crash, into the unforgiving concrete.

A thousand scrapes and bruises grace my left side. I cry for hours.

My dad picks me up and takes me inside. He bandages my bruises, wipes my tears, listens to my complaints, soothes me. He encourages me; he tells me to try again tomorrow. I tell him I will.

I do try again tomorrow. I try again the day after, the day after, and the day after; I repeat my efforts for two weeks.

More tears; more cuts and bruises.

After that, I tell my dad plainly, with the inflection only an obstinate five-year-old could give, that riding a bike is stupid, his pep talks are stupid, and that I’m never going to even touch my bike ever again.

He laughs at me and calls me a mandu.
“I’m not a dumb-head!”

I probably deserve to be called one right now, but still vehemently deny and retort against my dad’s pesky Tamil nickname for me. And no; I still will never ride a bike, ever again.

Fortunately, I am wrong.

Come back, mandu!

“I’m not a dumb-head!”

I have traveled too far, and my dad calls me back. But I have finally done it; I am riding a bike—not only that, I am zooming around the neighborhood. This the first time I have remained stable for more than a minute.

I’m not sure exactly what inspired me to suddenly figure it out. Maybe it was the month of pep talks my dad gave me, enthusiastic and unyielding. Every day, he would heckle me after school, helmet in hand. By the end of the day I would be able to ride, he would tell me. But I refused; the bike had hurt, scraped, and scarred me, and I was embarrassed and frightened of what it could do.

For a month, I had kept true to my word: I had not even touched the bike. It sat in the darkest corner of my garage, behind the white Nissan Sentra and gray-green Honda Odyssey—hidden, obstructed, gathering dust. A monster, suspended.

But for some reason, after school today, I had a sudden spurt of focus. Motivation. Momentum. I wanted to ride a bike. I would ride a bike.

But mostly, I wanted to make my dad proud; for real, this time.
I ascended my bike, kicked up the kickstand, and rolled gingerly down my driveway. I made it down, started pedaling, and immediately crashed into the road. Time to try again.

And somehow, the third time, I didn’t crash. Instead, I soared, with a glorious trajectory through my cul-de-sac, turning precisely at the end, sailing back to my driveway, grinning from ear to ear.

I fly, uninhibited, forever, barely listening as my dad calls me to come home. He calls me a mandu, but I can tell, in his tone of voice, how proud he is that I have not given up after all; that have I have finally achieved my goal. He is proud not only because he has helped me achieve my goal, but because he has helped me achieve my goal by myself, for myself.

I have done it. I am not a mandu.

I am on top of the world.

More than thirteen years later, my dad is no longer here.

There are so many things he has missed, and will continue to miss: my entire college experience, my college graduation, my future career, meeting my future family. He will not see me grow up and live a warm, happy life. He will not call me a mandu ever again. He is not there and never will be, and whatever I do, he never can be, ever again.

But every time I watch this strange man turn the pedals on the fragile bike, I am reminded of all those times my dad kicked up my kickstand, pushed me off the driveway, and cleaned and bandaged my cuts and bruises every time I fell down. I want that bike, because every time I see him ride it, it is as if I ride, as well.

Flying.

And, for a moment, as I fly into the wind, it is as if my dad is there again, calling me to turn around and ride back home.

Acknowledgments:

I would like to thank my Dad for teaching me not only how to bike, and later how to drive, but also how to be a stronger, more independent person. Thank you for being an amazing Dad, if only for 17 years, and I wish you could be here to read this essay. I would like to thank my writing group—Aaron, Arjun, and Dan—for their thoughtful advice through multiple revisions of this essay, focusing it from multitudes of vignettes into one coherent one, and changing the title, as well as their feedback all semester. Thank you for sharing your writing with me, and letting me share my writing with you. Finally, I would like to thank Professor Harris for his insightful feedback in enhancing this piece’s structure and clarity, as well as his patience and wisdom in working with me all semester.