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I teach at Harvard. Store managers see me as a threat.

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By Reginald Dwayne Betts

In November, two days before my 44th birthday, behind a local bike shop that I frequent, a manager from inside the shop approached me and mentioned something about the police. If I were still on probation, which I was for about three years ending in 2008, running my name might have triggered an arrest.

I'd come to buy a bike, as a birthday gift to myself. During the decade I've lived in New Haven, Conn., I've escorted the elderly home, given lectures at public schools and been a commencement speaker at Quinnipiac University, Yale Law School and a local high school. I coached rec basketball for children for eight consecutive years. By the time an officer arrived and asked me for my license, I was nonetheless shaking with rage and near tears.

In the last 18 months, I've become wildly emotional. I went from being the guy who has a birthday party and receives 15 bottles of bourbon to barely having a drink a week. I had been drowning time in bourbon. Then I stopped and the emotions liquor had let me bury cascaded me into long waves of weeping. The solitude of a bicycle let me grapple with all my sorrow.

Almost two decades after my release from prison, which I entered at 16 after confessing to a carjacking, I'd begun cycling as an effort to be free. I've learned every hill and turn around New Haven this way. I ride down Ridge Road to the old cemetery. I've memorized the sound of my wheels crossing the train tracks leading to State Street. Cycling became the only time since solitary confinement that I'd be alone with myself, and I savored it. I rediscovered curiosity and fear and the stillness that comes with listening to your own heart while going out for rides at 1 a.m. or 2 a.m. or 3 a.m.

When I first began riding, I wore jeans, a T-shirt and sneakers. When it got colder, I wore thicker jeans, a hoodie and some gloves. One Saturday morning I biked 27 miles in a fierce downpour, watching the rain go from sheets to a sprinkle from 3 a.m. until 7 a.m. I was sopping, as if I had fallen off my bike and into a lake.

Eager to learn how people biked in the rain, I visited this Connecticut bike shop months before the incident. A tall brother with a low haircut explained the science of clipping shoes to pedals, layering the thinnest of fabrics and wearing warming gloves named after lobsters. The more I learned about biking, the more enamored I became. In the mid-1890s, there were about four million bikes in the U.S. Cars? Across the country you could barely find 300.

At the turn of the 20th century, when American bike racing was at its peak, Major Taylor was one of the most famous athletes in the world. Born to a poor, Black family in Indiana and known as the Black



Cyclone, he set world records, drew crowds and became the world cycling champion in 1899. During Jim Crow, Taylor became America's first Black sports superstar, but he died penniless and was buried in an unmarked grave.

For my birthday, I wanted a bike befitting Major Taylor. I drove my porcelain white Tesla back to the shop. I was finishing a joint behind the store when a man inside began banging on a window, telling me to move away.

My legal knowledge isn't why I didn't move when I heard the window banging. I knew I was a customer; I knew I was not a thief. In my wallet, I carried proof: a license to practice law in Connecticut, a Yale ID card and a Harvard ID card. And two four-leaf clovers. When I was approached, I figured I'd just explain. But as I remember it, the manager cut me off, saying I could talk to the police.

Maybe I hoped that this man would take a moment to notice my beautiful black jacket and patterned silk scarf, my expertly cuffed raw-denim jeans and my socks that read "Horny for Books." Maybe I hoped that he would suddenly recognize me as a man who'd bought six bikes from the store over the past decade. Maybe I just wanted to be seen as something other than a threat, a nuisance, because I happen to be Black.

I walked back to my car. I almost drove off. Instead, I took a deep breath, turned and walked through the shop's front door. By the time the officer arrived, I'd turned the day around. I walked up to him and explained that I didn't know what just happened but I still wanted to buy a bike. I was even laughing with the manager, and he was convincing me that the 2025 Trek Checkpoint was the bike I needed.

The officer asked for my identification. When I reached into my wallet, I disbelieved the proof there of who I am: a dutiful civilian, an honorable taxpayer. So I passed the officer my license and held my breath, knowing that mostly I am a man trying hard not to weep in public.

Still, because emotion pained my face, he asked if I was OK. But how to explain my surprise that he was there? Explain that I intended to go ahead with the purchase of a bike because I needed to prove to myself that the manager was better than the four minutes that could have led to my arrest?

I went back a week later and bought the bike. They sold it to me at a discount and threw in a free mug and a T-shirt. Riding through my local streets, I still feel fast and free. But no matter how fast I pedal, there are some things I will never be able to leave behind.

Weeks after this all went down, I returned to the shop. I couldn't resist asking the manager what was up with that day. He told me he'd be straight with me: past issues with vagrants defecating behind the store, the hassle of cleaning it all up, my not leaving when he'd banged on the window. He explained. Then he stopped explaining. He looked at me. And he apologized.

This is not an essay about prison. But when people ask me what the interaction cost me, I know it was easy for me to bend, to offer this man grace. My friends and I have committed all manner of violence, including, collectively, carjackings, robberies and murders. I am a lawyer who appeals for their freedom. How do I argue for vengeance — getting the manager fired, for example — and mercy with the same tongue?

What I learned — tragically, for me at least — is that it all goes back to prison. My desire to be forgiven (and to see my friends forgiven and set free) makes the impulse to forgive matter more than any grievance I might hold.

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