City Biking  
  
As a driver and a pedestrian I have always felt a slight dislike for the bikers of Philadelphia. It’s nothing personal, really. It’s more the less-than-charming agenda that many seem to ride with: To kill or be killed.

I often found myself dodging bikers on sidewalks while walking through the city, and my heart has frequently skipped a few beats when I’ve had to slam on the car brakes just in time to avoid a biker dashing through an intersection in front of me.

So it would seem odd that I, of all people, found myself attempting to join the bicycle culture. I’ll be the first to admit, I am not a biker. But I am a smoker, and a very dedicated one, at that. I quickly found that these two activities did not mesh well together. With hindsight, I realize now that perhaps I should have stuck with public transportation to get around the city, but it certainly was not *my* fault that I ended up with a bicycle. It’s my roommate’s fault.

In late summer last year, Hannah decided that as a Temple student it would be more economical to bike to school during the warm weather than take public transportation. I could not fault her logic, and as I was walking forty minutes from South Philadelphia to University City and back for classes at Drexel each day, it seemed like it would be a quicker way to attain the same result. But this is not what swayed me to join her in searching for a bicycle.

A mutual friend of ours, who owned a bike that she did not use, offered it to Hannah for free. Hannah gladly accepted, to which I was understandably outraged. *Why does Hannah get a free bicycle? We’re friends too, aren’t we?* In a jealous rage, I decided that I too needed a bicycle. But not just any bicycle. A *free* bicycle.

My search continued for a couple weeks in the form of asking friends and acquaintances and skimming Craigslist, but I was soon discouraged. For no discernable reason I could think of, it seemed most people were unwilling to part with working bicycles. As the days began to shorten and September chill came upon us, walking long distances across the city was no longer a desirable option.

I admitted defeat, and continued perusing Craigslist for a bicycle. But not for a free one.

Within a few days I found a bicycle, listed out of University City at a reasonable (but more than I wanted to pay) price. I arranged a date to meet with the seller, and accepted that expecting free things to appear out of thin air was unrealistic. Until it happened.

A friend of a friend was cleaning house and realized he had an extra bike with which he was willing to part. I was amazed with my good fortune as I had planned to meet with the craigslist seller the morning after. Instead I picked up the free bicycle I had been offered and hopped on to try it out.

I was excited to get riding. It had been a long time since I had ridden a bicycle, and certainly not in an environment like the city, but I assumed I’d get the hang of it—that my lungs would get used to the extra strain over time. How wrong was I! Rust had left the frame fixed in a low gear, much to the displeasure of my lungs and thighs. The bike itself, made for a man much taller than I, left my toes hardly skimming the ground when I tried to touch down. Such inconveniences made me a mobile danger, to both others and myself, moving at twenty miles an hour or higher at any given time.

The first obstacle I faced, on my first day of riding, was one I never quite conquered. The old trolley tracks that run through South Philadelphia are notorious for dumping bikers onto the asphalt. If you get stuck in a track, the tire slips on the steel, leading to disaster. As opposed to going down with the bike, I leapt from it as it was still moving, in a swan dive-esque manner, thus proving to anyone curious that it is quite possible to receive road rash on both shoulders, while leaving the face surprisingly intact and undamaged.

My new relationship with gravity left me constantly bruised. Like a bad apple.  One of the fresh gashes on my shin caused a classmate to ask what happened. I had received the injury after losing control and accidentally careening into a crowded farmer’s market in Rittenhouse Square the prior Saturday.

I wanted to tell her I was an amateur kick boxer or abused at home or anything but the truth. But I didn’t.

She rolled her eyes, smiling, and replied, “That’s why I don’t bike when I’ve been drinking.”

I smiled too, but inwardly was too ashamed to admit that I wasn’t drunk, was in no way inebriated, that if anything, the wound resulted despite my cognitive and physical functions working at top form.

Another Drexel classmate tried to warn me away from the growing fad of fixed gear bicycles. I nodded in agreement as I hid a scabbed elbow, and did not mention the fact that my bike did indeed have handbrakes.

“You have a helmet, right?” my mother asked anxiously over the phone a few weeks later. She was so far unaware of my constant accidents.

“Of course I have a helmet.”

I didn’t have a helmet, and of all people I should have. A good friend, who had been hit by a car while biking over a year ago, was still scheduling surgeries to get fake teeth implanted.

After my third close encounter with taxi’s pulling into the bike lane to drop off a client without warning, and after the second near collision, as an absentminded passenger opened a car door directly in front of me, I decided to give up biking.

The heavy panting left me disgraced, the flustered red face and sweat, even more so. And as accepting as I am that death is inevitable, I refuse to get killed due to something as anti-climactic as biking. Shark attack? I’m in. Saving strangers from a burning building? Let’s do it. Lurching like a dolt at full speed into a parked car? I don’t think so.

I’d like to claim I now have a better appreciation for those who bike every day, and why they are as daring or as oblivious as they are in traffic. But I don’t. I have a great appreciation for their lung capacity and their quad muscles, but that’s about it.