

MY TRIBE

It's a Sunday morning, and I grew up Catholic, so of course I'm getting on my bike. Sundays are my holy days of cycling obligation! I'm late to everything, and I live at the northern tip of Manhattan, so it's 35 minutes of fast and sweaty pedaling to make the eight miles from home to the Boathouse in Central Park, our inevitable meeting place. And the guys are waiting for me. We exchange pleasantries, or a hug and a kiss, or all three.

"Honey, have you been snorting meth again, you're skinny as a rail!"

"I started going to Front Runners. Christ, those kids are all 22 years old. They could be my grandchildren!"

Camp is our currency. The Bushmen of the Kalahari Desert communicate with clicks. We communicate with hyperbole.

And who are we? I think of us as a tribe, my brothers and sisters. These are the people I hold close to my heart, my gay family. Family are the people who come to visit you in the hospital, and these guys have had plenty of occasion: forearm fractured when I was hit by a car, leg infection from a severe case of road rash.

And what is this tribe? My tribe is Fast and Fabulous, the queer bike club in New York. A few of us do actually ride our bikes; many more are those who show up for the monthly dinners. When folks ask about us, I tell them that we're an eating club with a cycling disorder.

And who's in the tribe? Paulette, who grew up on the island of Jamaica, is a veteran bike racer with thighs so big they have their own nicknames. She was once kicked out of a women's race because the officials thought she was a guy. Mike, a new guy in the club, sent me flowers when I was recovering from my most recent surgery. John and David, my queens from Queens, are a big help running the bike club. Mark and I used to get up early on weekdays and bike a loop in New Jersey as the rising sun turned the great gray bridge a rosy shade of pink.

Terry is an internist, Neal a dentist, and I'm a physical therapist, so we joke that the three of us could handle any medical emergency. Eric and Gerry are partners and culture vultures, but Eric is the champion punster.

"It got lost in the male? Oh, Bob, that's rich. No, I like the one about the club scene. He got lost in the maelstrom!"

Lots of our banter has to do with manly cyclists cruising by. Geez, did you see the butt on him? Oh, baby, stuff him, but check out the rear end on Miguel Indurain! *¡Dios mio, las nalgas tan amorosas de este hombre!* We repeat sprinter Marty Nothstein's indelible words to *The New York Times*: "My butt is so big that I have to buy pants two sizes too big and wear a belt." Who but gay men and bikers get to talk about how big their asses are? And we, doubly blessed? We get to talk about ass all the time!

Bob Nelson has been a member of Front Runners New York, the city's LGBT running club, for 21 years, and founded the Fast and Fabulous Cycling Club, a subgroup of Front Runners, in 1994.

BIKING IS LIKE CHRISTMAS

As an urban cyclist, I don't let cold weather deter me. I dress in layers and I'm good to go. I also like to dress up my bike. Those are two reasons I love Time's Up!'s annual "Lights in the Heights" ride, a leisurely bike ride to see the over-the-top Christmas decorations in the Dyker Heights section of Brooklyn.

The afternoon of December 14, 2006, was particularly balmy, so a big crowd turned out at the ride's first meeting place at City Hall. I cruised up on my bike, Maid Marian, with my pug dog, Olive, in the front basket. Everyone loves my bike, dolled up with a Christmas tree, wreaths, bells, tinsel, and a NOEL sign on the front basket. And everyone adores Olive too. (She's fantastically cute.)

So a feeling of joy is kicking in, even before the ride starts. To spread it further, I have brought bicycle carols for everyone to sing. In years past, we have made up lyrics to Christmas carols en route. By the end of the ride, we've come up with some good stuff, but because no one writes it down, we have to re-invent the wheel the next time around. Well, this year I'm ahead of the game. I hand out a smattering of copied lyrics.

The sun hasn't set yet, but I'm already wearing my blinking red nose à la Rudolf, Olive has her antlers, and we are READY! Don't you just LOVE the Christmas spirit! Trudy, the ride leader, discusses the ride's route and rules, and we are off over the Brooklyn Bridge.

No matter how many times I bike over the Brooklyn Bridge, I'm always amazed by the splendor and resilience of the bridge, the faces of cyclists and pedestrians sharing a center path above the automobile traffic, and the dramatic views. The struggle on the way up makes the coasting down all the more fun—as long as the tourists remember to stay out of the bike lane.

CYCLISTS ARE MISSING THE REAL, AUTHENTIC NEW YORK EXPERIENCE

So, over the bridge, through Brooklyn Heights, to Prospect Park we go. I always huff and puff a bit coming up Third Street (my bike, after all, is a three-speed Raleigh loaded down with Christmas decorations and a 20-pound pug dog). But I'm happy to remind my fellow cyclists that "they don't call it Park *Slope* for nothing."

We get to Third Street and Prospect Park West, where we meet up with another group of cyclists—double the number as were at City Hall. Fabulous! It gives me a powerful sense of community: Ah, these are my peeps. Candy canes and bicycle carols are distributed, greetings exchanged, and photographs taken. Then off we go, singing "Bicycle bells, bicycle bells, ringing all the way!"

It's dark when we reach Dyker Heights, and the Christmas light displays are spectacular. The owners of these phenomenally decorated homes seem delighted to hear us sing, "We the cyclists from Manhattan are, pedaling our bikes from boroughs afar."

The ride home brings another opportunity to revel in the beauty that is the Brooklyn Bridge. The lights of Manhattan float like the Emerald City in the distance, and the spirit of Christmas sparkles in the chill air. Why do I ride? Because biking is a celebration of love and joy—for me, it's like Christmas all year 'round.

Nadette Stasa is a casting director, actor, writer, and on-camera commercial teacher and coach. She has cycled in Cuba, Vietnam, Quebec, Prague, Paris, and Cordova. In 2008, she plans to cycle in the Middle East. She lives for her pug dog, Olive, and her fiancé, Jon.

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This is addressed to you New York City bike riders. Yeah, okay, so you get around without obstruction, delay, or reliance on anyone or anything else. That's good...but you're missing sights and experiences that make people true, authentic New Yorkers.

For instance...you take a bus. Well, you wait for a bus. And wait. And, uh, wait. Here comes one! No, check that: here come several. All together. A four-pak, traveling as one, nose to tailpipe, like circus elephants. Driver No. 4 pours through a red light to join his buds, blocking a cross street, obstructing cross traffic, making people very cross, and giving new meaning to the term "cross training."

And people say New Yorkers aren't social. You just tell them about bus drivers. They wait for each another so they can play leapfrog up and down the avenues. Give one another a big wave. Yell something to their bro' when one pulls abreast of another. Now you just know that's fun! And, best of all, they can skip stops which makes their routes easier for them which is, after all, their real goal.

Listen to the cell phone conversations on the bus (as though you could help it). Suffer the "likes": "...so I'm like," "...so he's like." See the elderly passenger standing. See the pregnant passenger standing. See the mom with young children standing. See anyone offering them a seat? All these are, like, New York experiences you don't get on your bike.

You wait for a train. And wait. And...plug your ears against the screeching (unintelligible) station announcement! Here comes the train. Plug your ears against its screeching brakes! The car is crowded. The door opens. You get the last space. Oops, no, not quite. As the doors close, someone shoves you to make room for himself. Now you're surrounded by people in more intimate proximity than you ever imagined short of a sexual experience.

The train arrives at a stop. Not at a station. It just stops. Between stations. The brother of that squawking station announcer, whose announcement you couldn't understand, pierces the air: "We'll be moving shortly." And, sure enough, you are...10 minutes later, but not before you've had a chance to fully appreciate the full range of early 21st Century literary wit and graphic imagination known in New York as art, but elsewhere as graffiti. You finally arrive at your station. You'd get off except people are pushing in before you can push out.

You have a car. After circling and circling...and circling the block looking for a parking space, you give up and go into your wallet for 25 bucks to park it. Nah, no you don't. You just park it illegally. Not to worry: likely you won't get a ticket. Now it's morning and you're on your way. Not. See that dog walker, up just ahead? You passed him a few blocks back. Ditto that old man with a walker.

You're in a cab experiencing the thrill of watching the meter move while you don't. The driver doesn't acknowledge your tip any more than he does the red lights...or the cyclists in his way. OK, so you share in *that* experience.

Look, I know you suffer plenty for riding in the city, but how can you call yourself a real New Yorker when you don't regularly suffer these New York experiences?

Richard Rosenthal never rode a bike in his adulthood until he was 40. He has solo ridden the Alps in 14 summers; originated the expression, "One Less Car"; and is responsible for the curb cut onto the GWB.