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Applying the Brakes

I recently took my cousin to catch a midnight bus back to Florida. The bus station wasn't in the best part of town. It was secluded, and in a crime-ridden area.

I dropped him off at 11:30 p.m. and headed home. But the road construction, closed ramps and bridges, and my unfamiliarity with the streets caused me to get lost. I wasn't too worried, though. I knew the city skyline well enough to know in what direction I needed to head.

As I drove down the dimly lit streets, making my way toward the only bright area (thanks to the glow of a nearby hospital), someone walked in front of my car. Luckily, she didn't cut it too close and I wasn't going that fast. Her friend who followed, however, stopped. But I didn't stop. I tapped my brakes out of instinct and kept driving. But as I passed the nurse in her pink scrubs, I wondered, how come I didn't stop and let her cross? That would have been the gentlemanly thing to do. But I didn't stop. In fact, I barely paused.

Was I anxious because it was late and I was lost in an unsavory part of the city? Then I noticed something else about the nurse. She was African-American. I am white. In my heart, I know I didn't carry any malice toward the nurse. In fact, I felt sorry for her having to work so late. My cousin's wife is a nurse and I've heard her complaints. But in my head I couldn't help but wonder had she been white, would I have stopped? I don't think it would have made a difference, but did it?

Like the way I instinctively applied my brakes when the first nurse darted across the road – had something programmed inside me caused me not to stop for the second nurse? Was it because I was lost? Or was it because she was African-American? I pondered these things, but had answers for none.

I drove on, feeling bad about not stopping. But as I continued through the city I realized something else. It seemed every person I saw from that time on was of a different race than me, as if the world was saying, "People are people; you should apply the brakes for all."

I saw a group of Middle Eastern young adults dressed nicely, out for a night on the town. When I went into the grocery store, a Latin-American family stood behind me in line, speaking Spanish to each other. As I began to realize what was being shown to me in various ways, I smiled. True, I had not stopped for the African-American nurse when I should have. But, unlike when I was lost, driving down the dark city streets, I was seeing things clearly now. The not-so-chance encounters during the remainder of the night gave me a chance to evaluate my instincts. And I vowed that from then on, that no matter where I was, or the hue of the person's skin, I would apply my brakes for all. ■

— Jake Singleton

Two Refrigerators, Two Continents

By Jennifer K Mahal

Would you like a beer?" my father asked my new husband and me on a warm Indian day. "It's American."

The question took us by surprise. American beer was not something I expected my father to offer us at his farm north of New Delhi.

Then again, I hadn't expected the German chocolate cake with candles that had been waiting for us when we arrived – exhausted from the 24 hours it had taken us to travel from California to India the day after our wedding. A back injury had prevented my father from attending the ceremony.

"No, thanks," I said. "Maybe later; we're not big beer drinkers."

"But we got it just for you," my cousin Chundun exclaimed. "All Americans drink beer. It's Fosters. We bought a case."

And that's when the light bulb came on.

From the time my twin sister and I left our San Diego home for different colleges, my German-American mother had made a point of having Coca-Cola in the fridge, Chunky Monkey ice cream in the freezer and Oreos in the cabinet when we visited.

It didn't matter that my sister and I have never bought these items for ourselves, or that our tastes are much healthier. Our mother believed these to be among our favorite foods. So up until she went into the nursing home last year, if we visited – whether she was in California or, later, Florida – we knew what was in the cupboards.

Though divorced for more than 20 years, my dad had taken a page from my mother's playbook. He had stocked up on treats he thought we would like, filling the sometimes-running farmhouse refrigerator with cans of beer, the aforementioned cake and a vat of rice pudding.

For both of my parents, filling the refrigerator with treats for their kids was an act of love. Although she lived on a fixed income, my mother always found the coins to buy what she thought her babies wanted. And my dad? Well, there are no supermarkets in rural India. In order to get the beer and the cake, he had to have someone travel more than an hour each way to the nearest town.

In the two weeks we were there, my husband and I did not come close to finishing the case of Fosters. My dad offered it to us at teatime every afternoon and at dinner. We drank several cans out of courtesy. I was, however, smart-aleck enough to tell him that Fosters is Australian, not American beer. But I wish I hadn't taken that little pleasure away from him.

Last September, a little more than a year after our wedding trip, I returned to my father's farmhouse for his funeral. Rummaging through the refrigerator one afternoon, I found a can of Fosters, forgotten, in the back. Although it was bitter, I popped the top and drank it. After all, my father bought it just for me. ■