

Barbarians At The Gate

- Naeem Mohaiemen

"Sir, excuse me, you can't use this entrance."

"Sorry, I'm just."

"This way."

"Wait, I'm going up to Apartment 10C."

"We have a separate door for messengers."

He gently, firmly, and steadily steered me to the side entrance. Given the plush ambience of the building, the messenger entrance was also grand. I understood within the moment what was happening. I was sweaty from the bike ride. I had a bag slung over my shoulder (graduated from utility to style signage), a helmet in my hand. I became a temporary member of Travis Culley's "immortal class". Why not then, the side entrance? No foul.

Once upon a time, I would get bent out of shape by these encounters. Wait, why did you assume I was a messenger? Couldn't I know someone in this building? Why are you being so rough? Why this, that and the other? There's a phrase everyone in Bangladesh is fond of: *tumi jano ami ke?* (do you know who I am?). Delivered with the right mix of anger and menace, the traffic sergeant or the shop keeper in old Dhaka will instantly assume you're the nephew of a local political MP, goon squad or government official. But these tactics don't work well in New York. It's a city of newcomers, outsiders, travelers, floaters and Peter Pans. Everyone is from here and not from here. The idea that I could be related to anyone who matters in a sprawling, ungovernable city could never click.

At other moments I would take on *lumpen* solidarity and be glad to not belong. The more to hammer home the cause of the working class. Or so I thought. In the end, the doorman dance is all about a delay in your entry to a friend or lover's apartment, not much more really. To the barricades! Not.

A complex formula is calculated in the few seconds that are spent deciding who to allow in. Race and class – refracted through dress, hygiene, demeanor, accent, velocity, accoutrements – get processed through an "are you suitable" abacus. Dress like a bike messenger, and yes, you'll be treated as one. Then, when you explain your purpose, there's a moment of skepticism. You're here for Ms. Ayam? But you could still be delivering a package! The doorman wonders which is the greater risk: getting a ear-chewing from the 10th floor tenant (who coincidentally looks like Audrey Hepburn) for breaking her beauty sleep, or getting a slap-around from a visitor who turns out to "matter".

If the guard is from (maybe?) your part of the world, the interface can get even more muddled. Perhaps he'll be at pains to prove impartiality. You might get an extra third degree. Generally though, when the doorman is from Bangladesh, I get a warm reception after the shock. We'll quickly switch languages, and he will pepper me with questions, possibly about the person I'm visiting. I'm a temporary

secret window into his ward, my casual knowledge surpassing his two years of loyal service.

Doormen are right to be suspicious, you say. Who can say who is who, what is what. There could be a million imposters, swarming the fair citizens of tony New York (defined as the upper east and west sides, as well as the expensive swaths of lower Manhattan). If only the guards of the Dakota had been a bit paranoid, perhaps Mark David Chapman would never have managed to get access on 8th December, 1980. After shooting John Lennon, an unbelievable breach of security outside New York's premium address, he told us: "I'm sure the large part of me is Holden Caulfield, who is the main person in the bookⁱⁱ. The small part of me must be the Devil."ⁱⁱⁱ

New York's rules of engagement place you in a box and calculate your place in the social pecking order (whether in a fancy highrise, swank restaurant, snooty art gallery or high-security government building). Looking at these elaborate rituals, I'm reminded of the great debates over imposters and shadow-shifters through history. Like False Dimitriy I, who claimed to be the son of Ivan the Terrible during the Time of Troubles. Supported by Polish noblemen against Boris Godunov, Dimitriy eventually stormed the royal palace after the Tsar's death. But his wife Marina Mnischev's non-conversion angered the Russian Orthodox Church, and the boyars, who accused him of spreading Roman Catholicism and "other Polish customs". After his enemies stormed the Kremlin, Dimitriy was killed, cremated and allegedly shot (in ash form) from a cannon towards Poland. So much for being recognized for your true worth...

The ominously menacing, hyper-physical, glacially unfriendly doorman guards a world within worlds. Seeing everything and nothing, an invisible ghostly presence with inner lives tucked away for after-work unveiling. The perfect metaphor for the hyper-conscious lives we live in a security-panicked world. In America and Europe (and now Asia), people pay obsessive attention to decoding surfaces. Appearances are scrutinized, racial hue scanned, facial hair counted, accents parsed. This exercise is a little harder to pull off in the melting pot, home to more nationalities than any other world zip code (after the debacle of the 2004 elections, out of step with red-state America, we defensively joked that New York was an "island off the coast of Europe"). But leave the borders of safe liberal city utopias, and appearances can set off tongues or alarms. Like the three bearded brothers who were chased by police after a suspicious waitress "tipped off" the authorities. They were looking at me funny. They weren't smiling. And oh yes, they didn't tip.

Security jobs are often taken up eagerly by the city underclass. In a twist of tradition, it is now African Americans and Latinos going into these minimum-pay positions. The communities that were targets for racial profiling now flip the script and profile others. This too is a tradition. To move up the pecking order, you must

find someone lower on the food chain. Be a model house guard, and you too can advance. Not to the penthouse, but perhaps to \$13.50 an hour.

In a time when particular attention is paid to hyphenated identities, many have perfected the art of "passing." In cities, airports or security zones. How to blend in and be anonymized. Atomized. Mix in and be a good neighbor. Model citizen. First up for promotion. Last to be fired. Smile and keep looking ahead. But the more you speak in this language, the more you alarm certain people. To Michelle Malkin, the blended-in citizen is the ticking time bomb^{iv}. Invisibility is flipped inside out. It's not what you say you are, it's what we say you are. *Are the wogs here to roll an honest burrito, or blow up the World Trade Center?*^v

One night, at that same building, I was visiting until very late. Leaving apartment 10C, taking the elevator down, I walked past the front desk and was surprised to see it vacant. At a high security joint like this, eternal vigilance is expected. Down the hall, a door was open and as I walked by, I caught a glimpse of the missing guard. He was sitting on a small bunk bed, in a relaxed mood. Smoking a cigarette on his break, he was hunched over on the bed – in front of him, the folded pages of a Ukrainian newspaper. Perhaps he was scanning the news, the classifieds, the matrimonials, or searching for a cheap sublet in Corona, Queens. His black, tasseled doorman jacket hanging on the chair. Sitting in his undershirt, reading intently, he was both a sad and glorious figure – reminding me of Parvez in *My Son The Fanatic*^{vi} (alone after hours, drinking scotch, listening to jazz). The guardian of the halls of power, rendered softly human in half light.

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ⁱ The Immortal Class: Bike Messengers and the Cult of Human Power, Travis Culley, Villard Press, 2001

ⁱⁱ The book Chapman refers to is of course J.D. Salinger's *Catcher In The Rye*. Both Chapman and John Hinckley Jr. (Ronald Reagan's attempted assassin) were "inspired" by the book. This is spoofed in the 1997 film *Conspiracy Theory*, where Mel Gibson is pursued by black ops agents, alerted by his purchase of the book.

ⁱⁱⁱ Statement of Mark David Chapman to NYPD investigators at 1 a.m., Dec. 9, 1980, three hours after the killing of John Lennon.

^{iv} *Invasion: How America Still Welcomes Terrorists, Criminals, and Other Foreign Menaces*, Michelle Malkin, Regnery Publishing, 2002

^v Lawrence Chua in a review of Peter Brimelow's *Alien Nation: Common Sense About America's Immigration Disaster* (Random House, 1995), Village Voice Literary Supplement, Apr. 1995, p. 17.

^{vi} Originally published in *Love in a Blue Time*, Hanif Kureishi, Scribner, 1997. The scotch drinking scene is from the film adaptation, directed by Udayan Prasad