

Bicycle Boys

by Ajay Nair

Some stories are so difficult to believe that they are relegated to scarcely used pockets of the mind so that other more immediate and credible memories can conspire to hide them from our view. You are always aware of them and your dim perception of them is all the more troubling because at some inopportune time, they will break out and shatter the fragile tranquillity that passes for reality. This is one such true story and I must warn you that it does not have a logical ending, wrapped up with a neat bow on top. Like I said, some things happen that are so unfathomable that even the collective will of a city cannot absorb them. They become footnotes in the city's history, ready to rear their heads up as urban legends in the future. This is one such urban legend in the making that I have chronicled — a story that I have joined together from several pieces of fact strewn about carelessly, or perhaps, with intentional, feigned insouciance by the participants involved. Like the milk-sipping stone idols of the early nineties and the three-headed witch that haunted the city of Bombay through the long winter of nineteen ninety eight, this is the story of a tear in the city's fabric that remains hidden but unstitched.

There are cities and there are cities. Bombay is a city that's all muscle and mouth, a meat-packed beast that runs on and on. Not for Bombay the power-stained, whiskey-addled smooth smarminess of Delhi or the muted, spring-sprinkled vibrancy of Bangalore. Bombay is the satisfying thwack of a thick, powerful fist punching through the concrete slabs of subtlety and faux elegance. Its poly-tongued mouth chews and spits out complexity every day and what remains is the mulch of clarifying reason that protects the simple integrity of this greedy city. It has always been more than the sum of its constituent parts, a super-ego superimposed on the smaller, distinct egos of its citizens. It takes a lot to shake Bombay and its often admired and sometimes derided resilience is as much a product of self-perpetuating myth as of the reality of survival. Its gnarled,

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weather-beaten skin is home to several painful carbuncles — the hate-mongering fundamentalism of a few, the bloodying attacks of some zealots, the stultifying apathy of the ceaselessly busy, the nauseating filth of its poor — but it has learned to ignore them or better yet, shrug them off with rapid strides of its tense legs that are forever gathering the city's body for some eternity-grabbing jump. But there are chinks in its armour, and rarely — not often, but sometimes — these gaps are exposed by the inexplicable workings of unexplained forces.

In the year two thousand and eight, a summer descended on the city that was without precedent in its intensity and its ability to transform reality. As the temperature soared inexorably, the city was choked by a hand of heat that was pulpy and powerful, its fat, white fingers gripping the city's neck with unremitting strength. Mirages arose from the sweating potholes on its roads and whole terrifying cities were born from the cracks of the ubiquitous three-storey buildings that dot the length and breadth of this megalopolis. People moved about in crowded trains and buses in heat-induced stupors and conversations stopped before they started, words melting in the sizzling air. It was in such circumstances that the boys — later christened Bicycle Boys by an enterprising cub reporter — first appeared on the landscape.

On the surface of it, there was nothing unusual about boys on bicycles. At any point of time, Bombay's roads are home to thousands of cyclists — some tradesmen plying their business, others messengers, still others young boys and girls commuting to schools. What marked these boys out was an insolent whiff of tortured pain that they seemed to radiate when anyone looked at them carefully. Their attire was a remarkable amalgam of morbidity — dried blood coloured patches on pale, faintly coruscating t-shirts, sickly green denim trousers tucked into muddy brown boots. Their faces were scrubbed clean — not the gruff texture of skin that's shaved, but the shiny smoothness of hairless skin — coloured an even, deep dark tint of brown. They all wore wraparound sunglasses that seemed welded to their faces, so that an observer felt watched

and scrutinized but in turn could only guess at the intent of the watcher. The hair was cut short, a sharp fizzy growth that covered a curiously rounded scalp. Mostly, the hair was jet black but sometimes, from certain angles when the sunlight glanced off it, they acquired a ripe golden colour, a jazzy, metallic burnish that hurt the eyes. However, the strangest thing about them was their bicycles. Unlike regular bicycles which are a set of parts joined and welded together in several places, these boys were riding contraptions that were one organic whole. Cylinders and tubes and handlebars and wheels and chains and pedals were all part of one fluid extension, all a bright silver grey, and the effect was such that you felt that these were more animals than just mere bicycles, with their own cunning and keen intelligence. When you watched one these boys riding the bicycles, you felt as if it was just one creature that was flowing smoothly, sinuously through the surface of the road.

At first, the boys were seen at night in ones and twos all over the city. Bombay is a softer city at night along its roads, perhaps to contrast with the harder edginess that pervades its houses and clubs and dark alleys at that time. The lights bathe the streets in a serene yellow shade and with the traffic easing up, the cars and buses ease through the gears effortlessly, especially on the twin highways that connect the places north of Bandra and Dadar. It was on these highways that motorists spotted the boys. They would be silver streaks of speed riding along the outer lanes and they gave off an eerie luminescence as vehicles passed them by. When a driver slowed down to observe them, they'd feel that the wheels of the bicycles were not so much turning as sliding and the languid pedaling hinted at a lot of power left in reserve. The boys themselves would turn to look at the passers-by and sometimes smile and their ghostly smiles would confuse the tired minds of people who felt as if some otherworldly presence was invading their thoughts. But they never did anything harmful and once the initial surprise at seeing these unusual riders wore thin, people assumed

that this was some elaborate enterprise concocted by someone wanting to sell something.

As the year slid into May and the summer got more oppressive, the boys started appearing at daytime in bigger groups. More people noticed them. All the unusual traits I described earlier were noted by numerous witnesses and a composite though unexplained picture emerged. The strange thing was that nothing really happened — the boys who were now called the mysterious Bicycle Boys by a prominent daily tabloid merely were riding for their own pleasure. People all over the city were reporting sightings now and a faint panic slipped into the collective consciousness of the city. Bombs were easy to understand, everyday violence was comfortable to deal with but these weird boys without any agenda and with their gleaming bicycles, spread an ominous blanket over the city. They would ride with a mechanic synchronicity, like schools of robotic fish, and appear and disappear suddenly, never still, never trapped in traffic snarls, always finding a way through the gridlocks and the side streets. It was not long before some concerned group of citizens sounded a vaguely formal warning about them and asked for intervention. The policemen, who normally did not need much of an excuse to harass the ordinary citizen, had so far watched the boys with trepidation.

Then, there came the first turning point. Bombay's naakabandis are an amusing though irritating exercise. Two metal barricades are wheeled onto the road parallel to each other, leaving a gap for vehicles to slowly weave through them. Two or three overweight policemen would peer at the occupants of slowing vehicles and usher some of them to the side and proceed to browbeat them till they yielded something — money, usually. A group of policemen who so far had avoided any group of these boys decided that it was perhaps worth their while to stop one of them. It was a twosome who were halted with outstretched lathis and guided to the side of the road. The four cops felt uneasy as the boys stopped. They approached them together and immediately felt a shift in the air, as if something heavy was obstructing their way. Perspiration streamed

from their brows and from their palms and even from their eyes as they neared them. The boys were still astride the bicycles and neither foot was resting on the road to prop up the infernal bicycles. A rapid bout of questions followed — all of which were met with perfect silence. Up close, the two boys had a peculiar scent; not unpleasant but sweet, sticky. Then suddenly, without warning, one of the cops felt compelled to strike out and he did. He brought his stout wooden cane down on the head of one of the boys. As soon as he made contact, he felt a buzz, like a mild electric shock, traversing through his arm and the stick rebounded from the skull of the boy and flew out of his hand. There was a sickening crack and a thin streak of blood spurted from the boy's head. It was bright red and it gushed like a weak fountain and it seemed to have glitter dispersed in it. The boy continued to sit still on his bicycle. A frenzy erupted and the cops set about beating up the boys. With canes, with rifle butts, with fists. There was more blood, more snaps and more breaks but the boys continued to remain seated. The bicycles emitted gentle growls. After about two minutes, all four cops just sat down on the road and began to weep. Their hands and clothes were smeared with the glimmering blood and they bawled like children, their piteous screams piercing through the heat, through the honks of passing vehicles.

As people gathered around this surreal tableau, the boys looked at each other — if you could describe the deft movement of their heads that aligned their sunglasses in one line as looking — and they took off, not hurrying, not slow but at the same even pace that they had set all along. As people watched them ride away, they felt a deep sadness. No one came forward to help the policemen. There was another horrible squeal and up ahead, the boys and their bicycles had come under a truck and had been mangled underneath. Onlookers swore that there was not a drop of blood on the bodies of the boys but the bicycles were covered with a thick, silvery liquid which despite its colour and consistency reminded everyone of blood. The spell lifted and the heavy lethargy that had handicapped the witnesses snapped. Someone called for an ambulance. After a

while, the boys were taken somewhere — to the morgue perhaps, while the still crying policemen were escorted away by another group of cops.

This was news now. Cell-phone grabs of the dead boys appeared in prime time news segments, though they were always fuzzy so you could not make out their features. Talking heads postulated hypotheses — conspiracy theories were updated, alien sightings remembered and linked, and the city gorged on the deaths. All the time, the groups seemed to grow larger and sightings, more frequent. Soon, braver, more foolish elements started to corner the boys, often in groups, with crude weapons. There were many fights but the pattern was simple. The boys offered no resistance, and the less resistance they offered, the more urgent and violent the beatings were. As soon as the thrashing subsided, the perpetrators would act in unusual ways. Some cried, many tore their own clothes off and tried to wipe away the blood, others walked around in a daze. After every incident, the boys would ride on and meet a horrible death — under cars and trucks, sometimes jumping off flyovers and bridges. Their bodies would always be intact and the bicycles mangled and bloody.

The city thrashed around helplessly for an explanation. Everyone grew more fearful and the summer grew hotter. Dry tongues of heat licked at the parched skins of people. Children were more listless. Stray dogs that were abundant before these incidents now disappeared. High powered investigating groups were set up but no one could find anything. There were no documents or marks or anything to identify the bodies. Doctors refused to conduct autopsies — or rather, did not know how to do them. The sights of the bodies rendered them helpless and they would drop their instruments and just sit there, staring at the dead boys.

Then, the murders started. Initially, no one linked them to the boys. But soon, every murder was accompanied by a sighting of the boys nearby. Wives cut their husbands up with knives while they were sleeping or set them on fire. Fathers smothered their children. Arguments in local trains that usually escalated to abuse-laden rants

and sometimes to minor fisticuffs now became fights unto death. Colleagues smashed each other's heads with computer monitors and paperweights. People were killed in their homes and offices and in schools and buses. And after every murder, the murderer would sit down next to the victim's body and stare helplessly at what he or she had done. When interrogated, they'd be unable to explain what came over them. All they'd say was that the boys told them to do it. There were seventy four murders reported in one month and who knows how many that were not discovered.

It was as if the heat had cut a hole through a curtain which separated us from a parallel world from which these boys had emerged and along with them a horror that had no rationale had come into being. Bombay has twenty million inhabitants and though the seventy four killings affected the city's psyche disproportionately, it still creaked on. Then the worst of the incidents happened. It was a party held at one of the city's nightclubs — there was a band playing and there were about three hundred young kids — boys and girls. At eleven in the night, the bicycle boys gate-crashed the party. They arrived on their terrible beasts and soon were zipping across the dance floor. A girl screamed and someone clubbed her with a bottle to shut her up. Soon, the kids turned on each other and the orgy of violence continued unabated through the night. Throats were slit, heads were bashed in, limbs were chopped off, necks strangled with wires. And the band continued to play through the mayhem, hypnotized. At dawn, fifty two bodies were discovered. There was no evidence of drugs or excessive alcohol. The survivors — the murderers — all repeated the same thing — the boys had told them that it was time to end the music.

Just when it looked like the killing epidemic would spiral out of proportion, the last act of summer was played out. The day — middle of June — started brightly with the sun burning in the sky but by afternoon, dark clouds had covered the city. There were an unusual number of mirages in the air that day — body-less heads floated about and disembodied screams were heard. It was as if the city was

standing on the edge of an abyss and it just needed a nudge to push it over. And the bicycle boys poured out onto the streets. They were riding furiously, with purpose and all of them congregated in large groups across the city. And then, with practised ease they all rode onto the railway tracks and were run over by onrushing local trains. When it was all over, there was a terrible hush, as if nobody in the city was talking. The bodies of the boys were strewn across the tracks, intact, whole and peaceful. Then it rained — for three days continuously.

The boys have not been seen again. The rain broke the summer's back and normalcy was restored but it was not ever completely normal, not really. In time, explanations were invented and the events were distorted till there was no real mystery left in them. Nobody wanted to really know. In two months, there were just vague memories and no one talked about the summer any more. There were no movie scripts or features about the bicycle boys or the murders. And as winter came, all the accumulated fear had but evaporated. Some of the murder trials were resolved quickly but there was a certain reluctance in handing out harsh sentences. Instead, justifications were discovered and there were more admissions to psychiatric treatment facilities than to prisons. The murderous rampage at the party was blamed on some hallucinogen and the accused were released speedily.

No one ever found out who the bicycle boys were and what really happened. Like I said at the beginning, there is no convenient resolution to this story, no explanation. All I know is that last summer Bombay was squeezed like it had never been squeezed before. It's that time of the year again and every day, it is getting hotter. I can see that people are looking around more fearfully, as if searching for some danger lurking around the corner. There are fewer vehicles about at night. There are no rumors about fresh sightings and somehow, this bothers me more. I think we are about to be visited again.

