

Lorraine M. Lopez

A Bicycle With A Bell

Janira saw the bicycle with a bell for the first time in a shop in town. She traced its gleaming blue haunches and sparkling chrome trim with eager fingers. The tires were fat, their tread pure and sharply imprinted with a zig-zagging pattern. The shiny handlebars dipped stylishly at the center and red and white ribbons dripped from each black rubber grip. The factory smells of oil and new plastic lingered seductively in Janira's nostrils long after Popi pulled her away to purchase some garden tools.

"Popi," she began, as they left the shop. "What would I have to do to get a bicycle?"

"You don't want a bicycle," the big man muttered, absently, shifting the packages in his arms. "Bicycles are dangerous. Goddamn, I think they overcharged me for this hose."

"Didn't you have a bicycle when you were a boy?" Janira tried again.

"A bicycle?" Popi's broad face softened in a gentle smile. "I had an old black bicycle my mama bought off a soldier. And I had a blue parrot named Hugo that rode on the handlebars. All day long, I rode around town with that parrot on the bike. He liked to go fast and he wasn't afraid of nothing. Everybody used to look at us. 'There goes that boy with the parrot,' they used to say."

"But, Popi," Janira persisted. "How old were you when you had the bicycle?"

"But he was a brave parrot. He never learned one word, but, man, he loved that bike."

"Popi, please, how old were you when you had your bicycle?"

“I was too young to know any better. I broke my arm in two places riding through the cemetery at night. Hugo used to like bouncing over the graves.” Popi’s smile sagged. “My mama wouldn’t let me ride the bike for a long time after that. I guess Hugo got bored because one day he just flew away. My cousin told me later she’d seen him in San Salvador riding on a motorcycle.”

“What happened to the bicycle?” Janira wanted to know.

“Some men took it away from me,” Popi said, simply. “They pushed me off and they took my bike away.”

“Why did they do that?”

“Who knows why they do things like that? C’mon let’s go back. This hose was supposed to be half-price.” When they got back to the shop, Popi argued with the shopkeeper while Janira stealthily crept back to the blue bicycle. On an impulse, she squeezed a rubber grip and, to her astonishment and deep pleasure, it bleated softly. The bicycle had a bell.

Mama scolded the washerwoman vehemently as she bundled the week’s laundry into four blue sheets which she tied with a firm knot. The washerwoman, an old Indian, hung her head, nodding in mild agreement and clucking her tongue in dismay over her shortcomings. But her ancient corrugated cheeks only partially concealed traces of a feral grin and her narrow eyes, deep in their nest of wrinkles, glowed with dark amusement.

“If you weren’t so lazy,” Mama was saying, when Janira skipped out onto the porch, “and careless, I would trust you with the curtains. But that last load you brought looked like you dragged it through the town.”

“Ay!” the washerwoman cried and clucked her tongue several times more.

Janira waited, twisting a soft brown braid with her finger. She watched her mother handling the bulky wash with swift, efficient movements. Her small dark hands darted like clever sparrows against the pale sky colored linen. Mama, practical and sensible, would at once see the necessity of a bicycle.

“I don’t know why I give you work. You never do it properly.” Mama tied the last bundle with a deft tug.

“Mama,” Janira suggested, “wouldn’t it be a good thing if I could go and get things for you from the store whenever you needed?”

“*Por Dios, hija*, it’s too far.” She poured a handful of bright coins into the old woman’s outstretched palm. “Perhaps if you did your work properly, old woman, that jackass husband of yours wouldn’t be sitting in the jail drunk every night.” Though the washerwoman failed to make a connection between her inability to do proper work and her husband’s drunkenness, she nodded more vigorously than before.

“It wouldn’t be so far if I rode a bike,” Janira continued.

“What wouldn’t be so far?” Mama puzzled.

“Well, the store, Mama.”

“What do you want from the store?”

“I don’t want anything from the store!” Janira cried in exasperation.

“Then why do you want to go?” Mama stared at her daughter in wonder.

“For you. For you. I’ll get things for you.”

“I don’t want anything from the store. Why don’t you get the broom and sweep out the front room, if you want to help?” Mama shoved the bundles toward the old woman.

The washerwoman slowly hoisted the bundles into her cart and pulled the cart across the road. When she had trundled the cart far enough away, she hastily unknotted the sheets and rummaged through the soiled clothes for the sack of eggs, the sweet rolls, and the four mangoes that Mama had hidden along with a terra cotta donkey for her grandson.

Popi sat, swinging gently, in his rope hammock. He sipped green tea and fanned himself with a banana leaf. His bare feet dangled over the thick grass so that the long blades could tickle his toes.

“She wants a bicycle,” he heard his wife say in the darkness behind him.

“I know it.” He had a fleeting vision of Janira, thin and small, wobbling on a large black bicycle at the edge of town. She turned to wave once and rode bumpily into the darkest part of the jungle.

“Well.” His wife’s low voice was in his ear now and he felt her breath on his neck. Then she placed her warm hands on his bare shoulders. Sparrows to roost. He pulled her around into his lap. They swayed silently in the knotted sling, listening to the dogs barking sporadically in a neighbor’s yard.

“She’s too young,” he said, at last. “It’s dangerous.”

“It’s more dangerous,” she hesitated, “what you’re doing.”

“One more year, Elva, I promise.”

“That body in the dump. You knew him?”

“She could break an arm or a leg so easily.”

“Those bombs last week, in the church, in the post office. You knew those people, too.”

“She doesn’t even know how to ride a bicycle,” he muttered.

“She could learn. You learned. Why don’t we get her a bicycle before we leave this place. It will be hard for her and this way she’ll have something in the new place.” She stroked her husband’s rough cheeks with her fingertips.

“In two years, maybe, when she’s fifteen.”

Now the dogs snarled fiercely and flung themselves at the chain fence. Soon they heard voices and feet shuffling in the dirt road. Some men called out for Popi. He jumped out of the hammock and leaned against the fence talking with them. Their voices were low and earnest. They spoke for a long time, while Mama lay alone in the hammock pinching her eyes closed.

“Popi, how could I earn some money?” Janira asked in the morning as he drank his thick black coffee from a thimble-sized glass.

“Well, we could get you a cart to collect laundry like the Indian woman,” he said, thoughtfully. “But you’d have to quit school.”

“And marry a drunk,” Mama added, irrelevantly.

“Or, I believe, they’re hiring men at the plantation. How are you with a machete?”

“Popi, really. I want to earn some money.”

“When I was a girl,” Mama recalled. “I made paper flowers to sell at the *fiestas*. I made hundreds of them, pink, yellow, orange and I tied them on green wire stems. The night before the *fiestas*,

I filled my bed with them. I had to sleep on the floor. When the sun came up, I screamed like a little monkey. It looked like my bed was on fire.”

“I could pull up the weeds in the garden,” Janira offered.

“It took the whole day, but I sold every flower. My pockets were full of coins. I was going to buy raffle tickets to win the convertible. I bought twenty tickets.” Mama shook her head in disgust. “But the mayor won the car.”

“I could pull them up every day and you could pay me once a week.”

“And the next year, he won the vacation in Mexico, too,” Mama continued.

“And the next year he was shot,” Popi added.

“Why won’t you listen to me?” Janira blurted. “I need to earn some money to buy a bicycle!”

“What do you want with a bicycle?” Popi asked.

“I could ride it up and down the big hill. I could go to the store whenever you needed anything. And I could visit Isabel and Marta in town whenever I wanted. I would park it in the rack at school and lock it with a chain.” Janira stared into her bowl as if she could see herself, tiny and unfettered, riding across its porcelain base. “I could go anywhere I wanted.”

“No, Janira,” Popi said, softly. “Not here. You couldn’t do that here.”

“Popi, you had a bicycle,” Janira accused.

“And they took it away from me.”

“*Hija*, we want to get you a bicycle,” Mama soothed. “But not now.”

“You’re too young, now.” Popi shook his head.

“When can I have one then?”

“Maybe in a few years.”

“When you are fifteen,” Popi promised. “Then you can have a bicycle.”

Popi pushed away his coffee and slammed out the door to work. Mama cleared away the breakfast dishes. And Janira folded her arms over the table, resting her forehead on the stiff tablecloth, so that no one could see her hot, angry tears.

There were times when Janira felt convinced her parents would buy the bicycle before her fifteenth year. Usually these times were deep into the nights before holidays and birthdays. She'd lie in her small bed beneath a plaster crucifix, squeeze her eyes closed, and concentrate with an unfamiliar ferocity. "If I hold my breath and count to one hundred, if I say the rosary three times and then once backwards, if I cross my fingers all night long," she'd say to herself. "In the morning, when I wake up, it will be there in the front room." She could nearly see it glinting in the morning light slanting through the big window like a new coin winking at the sun.

On her birthday, she raced out of her room to rouse her parents, but they seemed oddly shamefaced and saddened by her exuberance.

"Come on! Get up! Get up!" she cried, pulling Popi's arm. "It's a happy day!"

"Calm down, little goat," her father grumbled, pulling sheets over his head.

Mama got out of bed, briskly. She had chickens to peel, chiles to stuff, and a large white cake to ice for the guests. All day, Janira stumbled after her mother, hovering like a large blowfly, Mama kept batting away. She spilled sugar on the floor, broke a plate in the sink, and caught a braid in the egg batter. Finally, Mama called to Popi in the front room, where he sat reading the papers.

"Take this child out for a walk," Mama urged. "So I can get something done."

"But I want to help you, Mama." Janira felt stung. "It's my birthday. I want to help."

"You can help me by going with Popi to get some red candies to decorate the cake," Mama told her, gently.

Popi folded the newspapers, put his arm in hers, like a gentleman escorting a lady, and led her out the door. They had not walked very far, when a one-legged man in a fatigue jacket called out to Popi. Popi and Janira crossed the road to speak with him.

"When will it be?" Popi's glance swept the dusty road.

"Tonight, I think," the man answered. His pant leg was neatly folded over his stump and fastened with a safety pin. Janira cast her eyes away with a pang.

“I’ll be there,” Popi said.

The strange man smiled suddenly and fingered Janira’s braid. “Is this your little one?”

“No,” Popi told him, abruptly, leading Janira away.

“Popi, who was that man?” Janira asked. “What happened to his leg? Why did you tell him that about me?” But Popi withdrew his arm from hers, jammed his fists into his pockets, and would not answer her.

When they returned to the house, Janira found that Mama had festooned the entry way with blue and yellow balloons in an arc like a rainbow. Janira whooped with pleasure until she stepped into the front room. A wicker chair near the window held a long department store box wrapped in red foil. Popi grabbed the box and thrust it, wordlessly, at Janira. She swallowed hard, pulled apart the white ribbon. A pink dress with flounces and seed pearls tumbled into her arms.

At Christmas, she felt certain the bicycle would be hers, at long last. She noticed Mama and Popi behaving peculiarly. She’d caught them whispering late at night and growing hushed when she entered a room. They were no longer open and joking with her. They were secretive as if plotting, Janira thought, a great surprise. Early Christmas morning, she dressed quickly in the milky blue dawn. She plaited her hair haphazardly as she raced to the front room, banging her knee on the door.

She searched the front room, tossing aside cushions from the window seat and lifting a throw rug with her toe, as if to uncover the bicycle in some flattened, pre-assembled state. She examined the white-washed entry way, peering into a vase. She poked through the kitchen cabinets, yanked open the oven and checked behind the flour sacks in the pantry. When she found nothing, she ran out of the house to investigate the garden. Of course, they would hide it in the garden, or perhaps in the tool shed. As she slid open the door of the aluminum shed, she felt a strange prickly silence at her back. At once, the lawn trembled and quaked beneath her bare feet. Immediately, she heard a thunderous blast and a flash of light pulled her uncomprehending eyes back to the house. Flames thrust

through the windows of her parents' bedroom with a popping sound. Next billows of black smoke rolled out through the hollowed frames.

"One of the worst explosions," Mr. Sandoval, a quiet, gentle neighbor with bubble-shaped glasses, told her. "Worse than the bomb in the post office."

"But, why?" Janira wanted to know, after the screaming, the sobbing, the hiccoughing gasps had finally left her feeling weak and hollow and she found she could make human sounds again.

"Who knows why they do such things," he answered, blinking through the thick lenses.

Janira stayed with the Sandovals for a few weeks. Like a numb, dumb little ghost, she slept cramped on their small sofa, nibbled at their meals, and spoke to no one. Phone calls were made and telegrams sent. Finally, an uncle was located in the north and he sent money for Janira to come to him. The Sandovals drove her to the airport in a borrowed army jeep.

The scene at the airport disturbed and frightened Janira. Grown men wept openly, women charged the ticket lines with children on their backs, in their arms and entwined around their legs. Everywhere, soldiers slunk about with automatic rifles and long belts with bullets.

Janira boarded a large jet clutching a small pink duffle bag Mrs. Sandoval had given her for the few clothes they'd bought her. A friendly woman in a blue overall snapped a belt across Janira's hips and spoke to her in a strange-sounding Spanish. From the small round window, Janira waved once to her friends and did not glance at them again as the jet taxied through the runway. For their part, the Sandovals shrugged and drove home.

In the weeks following the explosion, the Sandovals supervised the removal of charred debris next door by assorted trash collectors and rag pickers. They claimed several nearly new garden tools from the aluminum shed for themselves. Jaime Sandoval puzzled over a crate filled with bumpy green hand grenades daintily

packed like chocolates in pleated paper sockets. Finally he threw a tarp over the box and left it on the shelf. In the back of the shed, behind a nest of newborn mice mewling and shivering in the unaccustomed light, Sandoval's beam struck an orange reflective disc. The flashlight probed the shadows to wash over a blue bicycle leaning in the corner. He brushed it free of cobwebs and wiped away the dust with an old towel. On the weekend he would take it to the flea market in town and sell it, he hoped, for a good price.

In the United States, Janira lived with her uncle and his wife and their four children in a small apartment deep in the barrio. Her uncle, a large man like her father, but with a humble and embarrassed air about him, took her to the junior high school near their home. In the new school, it seemed everyone spoke a loud, harsh English that grated on Janira's ears like a constant rain of factory noise. The girls wore short skirts, make up and teased hair. Janira felt awkward in her long starched dress and plain braid. Gradually, she was herded with some other children who spoke no English into a room.

The teacher was an ancient Asian woman who spoke very rapidly. Janira could not understand a word. Hot tears clouded her eyes. Then the door flung open and a chubby dark boy burst dramatically into the room. "Don't cry," he exclaimed. "Don't cry, I'm here!" The Asian teacher spoke hard and fast, but the chubby boy translated her words just as quickly. Janira gripped her pencil. She breathed with easy relief. She knew what to do.

After the class, Janira followed the chubby boy to the play yard. He walked rapidly and she did not want to lose him. He was tall with a curly cap of blue black hair. Round glasses perched on his snub nose and when he smiled wide a row of metallic braces glittered between his lips. Janira kept at his heels, afraid he would vanish in the swelling crowd of students. She followed him past the students to a grassy field, where he approached a bike rack. He fumbled at one of the bicycles and finally disentangled it from the rack. It was then that he saw Janira, standing at the edges of his shadow. He smiled and pushed the bike toward her. "You want to ride?" he asked, thrusting the handlebars at her. "Come on. I got

time.” The bicycle had been black but the paint had chipped in rusty splotches along the frame. The seat was bent and the cushion had split revealing a gap of straw colored ticking.

Janira grabbed the bicycle and climbed on at once. She wobbled at first and then pedalled surely and smoothly over the pavement near the field. She filled her lungs and she wanted to sing, or laugh, or cry as she sailed over the cement. It was exactly as she had known it would be. She felt as if she were flying in a dream and laughing as the world spun by. Then the old bicycle faltered. The tire hit a stone and bucked Janira from the seat. She tumbled in a heap near the grass. The boy galloped after her. His face contorted with worry. “Don’t cry,” he shouted. “Don’t cry, I’m coming.” Though there were tears glistening in Janira’s wide brown eyes, she was not crying. She smiled as she pulled the boy’s outstretched hand and yanked him to the grass beside her. Both laughed loud and hard as they struggled to pull themselves to their feet.