

Special Feature

Beauty and the Beast-a tale of two bicycles

There were once two men living in the same house. Each had a bicycle, but the men were very different and so were their bicycles.

Barry the drudge

Barry's work took him by train to Oxford and then up to the Ashmolean. His job as an archivist had once held him with its fascination – new discoveries, new interpretations and new material, but twenty years of this intellectual diet had taken its toll. Drudgery had taken the place of fascination; the routine now bored him. It all seemed so long since a good second- class history degree at Wadham had inspired his love of the past. Academic success and a challenging career had captured his early years.



No Longer Young

Barry was no longer young, reflected as much in his leisure as in his labour. Youth had left his body not his mind. There was many an evening when he flicked wistfully through his photograph album, all the time hankering after a golden past, which was mainly a figment of an over-fertile imagination. Had he really been that lean? Did his running vest once accentuate a strong chest and active shoulders? And those successes

gained in so many races, were they really completed in times which he could now merely dream about? They were unsatisfactory evenings when nostalgia flowed into pathos.

Ben the boyo

In contrast, Ben was a picture of vitality and so he should have been. Barely into his twenties, he had the world at his feet. Dark haired, good-looking with a body which bespoke fitness and strength; his daily workouts in the gym ensured that. The frequent pumping of iron made him a formidable opponent at the back of the



scrum. His work in insurance brought rewards at considerable cost, but Ben didn't count costs, just benefits; the BMW, snappy clothes and for sheer self-indulgent power, a Harley- Davidson.

Yet it wasn't long before the costs began to mount. His physique, which had always had a narcissistic edge, attracted girls but they quickly tired of his self-centred nature. This was worsened by his habit of working long hours as he sought to impress, making him an unreliable socialite. Even his sporting prowess was, in his eyes at least, second rate – simply never good enough. His life had a lot in common with that treadmill at the gym.

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Ben's Sleek "Beauty"

Even his bike no longer brought him the pleasure that it once had. "Beauty" he had silently named it. Hundreds of pounds worth of flattened titanium tubing, gears which clicked seamlessly across the block, a saddle so minimal it brought tears to the eyes and, of course, those finely treaded tyres. This was the sleek machine that had once burned along the Cotswold roads, tuning his fitness but making him largely blind to the beauties of the landscape. Now it stood in the garage, used infrequently and rarely appreciated.

Ben's life, so glamorous on the surface was filled with a void that satisfied nobody, least of all himself

Separate lives

Neither Ben nor Barry was close to each other. Residents in-passing, their conversations confirmed the stereotypes in their respective lives:

"What time do you call this, young Ben?"

"Too late again, but I had to finish off a set of claim schedules. Still I've had a quick half hour toning up my pecs down at the gym. Missed out on that, did you?" Ben added not a little unkindly.

"So you'll be fit for the seconds on Saturday then?" Barry replied, anticipating the usual excuses.

"Not this week. I'm a bit off the pace still, but not as much as some. How are the new slippers?"

And so it continued, though nothing unduly hurtful was ever said. Ben understood Barry's wistfulness while Barry, in turn, understood Ben's

impotent frustrations. Each led his own life and all they apparently had in common was their bikes.

Barry's Gentle "Beast"

Barry's bike could not have been more different to Beauty. Superficially there were many similarities – drop handlebars, plenty of gears and 531 tubing but there the likeness ended. Age was the Beast's defining difference; made by Hopper at Barton, fifty years old with all that implied - tarnished wheels, brake clamps made of compound and a Benelux change mechanism on the chain wheel. The saddle was comfortable and sprung – *"Something for the mature girth,"* scoffed Ben and not even the shiny new gear block or vivid red mudguards could hide its vintage. It was built for endurance rather than speed. *"Just like its owner,"* Ben muttered. And, of course, The Beast had different purposes to the Beauty. Barry could often be seen riding it gently to Milton, while in summer he toured the undemanding landscapes of East Anglia, staying at Youth Hostels. *"That's another laugh for an old-stager,"* added his young companion.

Satisfaction Guaranteed!

Satisfaction for both men was in short supply. Ben was young in years, but unhappy about his relationships and sports prowess. Barry was declining in years, nostalgic for youthfulness and aware of increasing mortality. Until one day, everything changed. Arriving together beside the garage door, Ben took The Beast, Barry took Beauty, and from that moment, each man found his release.

Bob Forster