



The

Blue

Bicycle

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The snowy woods at Hidden Falls echoed with the crunch of boots and the snapping of dry wood. "How much longer?" my 8-year old son Jon asked.

"Not long," I said, huffing frosted steam. "We're almost there."

My 12-year old daughter Daniele was impatient, too. "What did you say we were looking for?"

"Yes," Rachel said, "what is it exactly?"

"Something you'll never see again," I said. I was in heaven, luring my kids out into the cold to see if they could spot the remarkable thing. We finally came to a clearing overlooking a small ravine.

We just stood there for a moment, our breath frosting up before us. "It's right here," I announced.

There wasn't a sound except the subtle poof of huge snowflakes landing. Then Jon said, "I see it!"

He pointed up, into the lower reaches of a young cottonwood tree. There, about ten feet from the ground, was a rusted old

bicycle. It was not sitting in a branch; rather, the branch had somehow grown around the bicycle. The main bar was entirely enclosed in swarming wood.

"Wow," Daniele said.

I had come across it a few days earlier, out walking the dog. I had actually passed that spot a hundred times and not noticed. But who ever looks up to see a tree embracing a bicycle? You need luck to see these things. And now I felt like Merlin, letting young Arthur peer into a peculiar mystery.

Based on the bike style, the amount of corrosion, and the absence of tire rubber, I guessed that the bicycle had been in the tree for over 40 years. It was entirely rusted except for a narrow path of etched blue enamel just below the handlebars, by the little plate that still said Western Automatic.

The four of us were suddenly giddy with the idea of a bicycle growing in a tree. How did it get there? Did someone lean it against the tree years ago, and the tree slowly reached out and lifted it up, an inch a year, up into the sky?

Or did someone just throw it up there, and the tree held onto it and grew around it?

Whose bike was it, and would its owner remember it?

Did the bike think it was flying? Did the tree think it was riding?  
Did the wind once blow the wheels around, whispering stories of locomotion to the stationery tree?

Everyone agreed, on the way back to the car, that it was a wonderful thing, and we should always keep our eyes keen for other anomalies. They must be everywhere, we reasoned. We just have to train ourselves to see them.

But the next time I came to the clearing, in spring, by myself, not only was the bicycle gone -- but the tree itself gone. A big wind blowing up the river has no trouble toppling trees rooted in sand. A cottonwood lay on its side like that, head down in the ravine, its roots reaching up like imploring hands.

I looked around for the bicycle. I scouted the area, to no avail. The spring vegetation was already crowding the ground - thick enough to hide a jutting pedal or rusted rim.

Over the next couple of years I gently obsessed about finding the bicycle, returning to the spot numerous times, to see if I had merely misplaced it.

Occasionally I thought I glimpsed it. But it was just a curl of riverbank vine, pretending to be wheel, or the color of rot pretending to be rust.

My heart always quickened when I stood on that spot. A bicycle fashioned of iron from the dirt once roamed this city and raced up and down its hills. Its rider was thrilled to fly through our town. And then the bicycle took up residence, in some unexplained way, high in a tree overlooking the Mississippi, gazing out at the barges and crows. And now it had returned to the earth.

I felt like that archeologist, Schliemann, who found Troy seven cities down, only in reverse. What the earth lifted up, it then took back. Everything combined to make it so. Every falling leaf hid it. Each clump of snow buried it deeper. Every summer hiker's footfall sank it deeper in the wood.

It all goes. My children are grown. But I saw a bicycle ride through the sky, its wheels still turning in the breeze from the river.

MIKE FINLEY

