

## The Blue Bicycle

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

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

My 12-year old daughter 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 fluffing of heavy falling snow. 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 grew around it?

Whose bike was it, and would that person remember the bike?

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

I looked under the tree for the bicycle. I looked around the area, to no avail. The snow was gone, and this year's vegetation was pushing up from the ground -- just high enough to disguise a jutting pedal or tipped wheel 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 saw it. But it was just a curl of vine, pretending to be wheel, or the color of rot pretending to be rust.

I had already seen the outrageous sight, gotten credit for showing it to my family -  
- what more did I want?

My heart always quickened when I came to that space. A bicycle fashioned of iron from the dirt once roamed this city and raced up and down its hills. How many times did its rider trace a thrill from spine to chain? And then it lived in a tree by the river, gazing out at the barges and crows. And now it was returning to the earth.

I felt ... like that archeologist, Schliemann, who found Troy seven cities down, in reverse. What the earth lifted up, the earth was taking back. Everything combined to make it so. Every falling leaf covered it up in the fall. Each fresh clump of snow that blanketed it in winter. Each pelting splash of rain in spring, every summer hiker's footfall -- all buried it deeper in the wood.

And you know, everything buried was living once. Every moment is half of a miracle. And the blue two-wheeler coasts into the living world.