

## The Cyclist

He had clocked enough miles for the week, but none across rugged terrain. It was time to step up his training routine with a new challenge before the important September race. Jumping the curb, he turned his mountain bike onto the trail he'd noticed during his many rides through that area. He headed into the woods, confident he could handle the rocks and ruts, or whatever he would encounter. Immediately, cool air and forested shade refreshed him of the heat and relieved him of squinting.

Later, he would say he must have lost track of time when he found himself in a small clearing, wondering how far he'd gone, and where the trail would lead. Of course, he could easily return, no problem; he had plenty of time. Up ahead lay deeper forest, beckoning him. He would forge ahead, then decide where to turn around. He pedaled on.

Not ten yards ahead he abruptly stopped. There to his left stood seven hardwoods, in three neat rows as if intentionally planted, not naturally seeded. But more remarkable, six bore letters conveying a warning: BE W ARE. What? Had he invaded private property?

He scanned his surroundings, propped his bike on a boulder, and approached. He studied the *B* and ran his hand over the rough bark. It was not paint. Backing away, he hustled to his bike. Time to get out of there. But first, he grabbed his cell and snapped a picture. No one would believe him, otherwise. He pedaled away like mad, retracing his path.

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"I know this is the right trail. It's up ahead... not far."

"I'm not going... to pedal all... day, trying... to find it."

He heard her rapid breaths as she labored to keep up. He reassured her, "We're almost there." They reached the clearing. Thank goodness; he wasn't sure she would last. "It's just ahead," he called out as he approached the familiar stand of trees.

He stopped, straddled his bike, and waited. Staring at the trees, he gasped. No letters. Nothing.

She pulled up beside him, glanced at the trees, and frowned. "This is it? The amazing place with the message? You brought me here... for what?"

He ignored her remarks, and consulted the photo again. “This *is* it.” He dropped his bike and slowly approached a tree – *take your pick* – and stroked the rough bark, expecting what? The letters to materialize at his touch?

“Let’s get out of here,” he advised, and darted to his bike.

“Fine with me.”

Jerking their bikes around, they beat a hasty retreat through the woods, to the road, and home.

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It had been a week and he hadn’t heard anything. But, he’d thought of little else since the second forest ride. His training had suffered which annoyed him, and she still doubted his story. He doubted it, too, and couldn’t focus on work. Maybe he was losing it, training too hard?

His cell phone rang. It was Bob his techie friend, at last. But his tone conveyed concern.

“Could he come to the lab?” Bob asked.

“Sure thing.”

Thirty minutes later, he stood in Bob’s computer lab, staring at an enlarged version of his photo. He felt Bob’s gaze rest on him.

“It *is* there. Tried a couple of extra techniques, and with better resolution – “

“Yeah, I see.”

“Weird.”

The face, the familiar face, stared at him. From behind a far tree. From twenty years ago.

The room swam. He heard Bob say, “And the letters aren’t consistent with paint, or like anything applied. Looks like they oozed from within. Weird.”

He dropped onto a nearby chair, lowered his head to his knees. Maybe he could avoid hurling all over Bob’s lab. “Yeah, weird.”

“Hey, man, are you okay?”

“No,” he muttered. “No, I’m not.”

“What’s with the face? Someone you know?”

He raised his head and met Bob’s gaze. “Knew.”

Wide-eyed, Bob waited.

“He was a college roommate, a good friend. Some of us were drinking.... there was an accident, a bad accident. He wouldn’t wear his seatbelt... was thrown.”

“Whoa...”

“Wouldn’t wear his seatbelt... and I was driving.”

“Whoa... looks like you’ve got a problem, buddy. A big problem.”

Overwhelmed, he stared at his friend. Who could help? Where could he hide?

Bob added, “I think we’re done here.”

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“That’s how it happened... all true... and here’s the picture.”

Smiling, the doctor said, “I think, Jed, you’ve had enough for one day.”

“You don’t believe me, do you?”

