

## Arboreal Adaptation

Cory Kessler looked out his office window into the late Colorado morning and reveled at what a gorgeous day it was. *Excellent*, he thought, *I can get a bunch of stuff done in just one errand – sun, fresh air, light workout, pick up a few things at Colley's – all while enjoying a leisurely ride; sweet!*

It was lunchtime and Cory could use the break. Earlier that morning his manager had asked if he could do a quick tweak on one of the team's projects. Cory'd been skeptical that it could be done with the time and tools available, but she'd pressed him; "Come on, Cor," she said, "you're good at adapting, I bet you can pull something right out of thin air. Give it a shot."

Cory replayed the remark in his head. He granted, without being immodest, that he'd become adept at solving problems at work; in fact he was starting to acquire a reputation for pulling solutions seemingly out of the blue. And that part was all good. But the "thin air" phrasing was starting to wear a little... well, thin. The joke was that although he'd transferred here from New York his "spirit-home" must have been here all along because he was good at pulling things out of the famously thin, mile high air.

But if work was going well, his social life wasn't exactly. Earlier that morning when he stepped into the elevator and Thalia, that cool new coder with the purple streaks in her hair, hovered her hand over the console and asked "up or down?" Cory'd said "oh, let's try sideways for a change" *aaand...* crickets. *What, nothing?* He'd looked at her with a half-smile as if to say, *come on, that wasn't half bad, you've got to admit*, but still no reaction. Later he'd run into Sandra at the copier. She had on beige slacks and a royal blue blouse, he was wearing tan cargo pants and a navy shirt. He gestured toward himself, then toward her, and said, "I see you got the memo." Sandra didn't seem to have gotten it — either the memo or the joke. *Oh well*, he thought, *I guess some guys have the touch and others don't. I'm obviously a "don't."*

But now it was time for lunch and a break from all that. Cory grabbed his gear and headed for the stairwell. Although he always took the elevator going up (he worked on the ninth floor and although he wouldn't have minded the climb, he really didn't want to get his work clothes sweaty) he always took the stairs going down. Granted it rated zero in terms of muscle-building and aerobic exercise, but it at least got his knees, quads, hip muscles, and achilles' tendons flexing, so he figured there had to be least *some* benefit to it.

Down in the basement he unlocked his bike, strapped on his helmet, and wheeled out into the noonday sun. The day was indeed glorious, and for the next fifteen minutes he pedaled at a leisurely pace the thirty-something blocks to the Colley supermarket out by the highway. Lunchtime bike rides (weather permitting) were something he'd begun as soon as he'd moved to Denver, and by now he had routes programmed into his head to get to Colley's and other of his frequent destinations almost entirely by residential streets, park paths, alleys, and other shortcuts without having to navigate the hazards of thoroughfare traffic. So for the next quarter of an hour he enjoyed the fruits of his planning in the form of a carefree and pleasurable ride. The sun was high, the humidity low, and a lazy breeze stirred the treetops into gently oscillating arcs. He drank in their scent, marveling at how they must have adapted over eons of time to the thin air that was a hallmark of his new home. Natural selection, arboreal adaptation, whatever you wanted to call it, it was pretty awesome as far as Cory was concerned: between the shade, the windbreak, the carbon sink, erosion protection, bird and insect habitat, and of course awe-inspiring vistas, there seemed to be no end to the benefits provided by this beautiful urban forest. *Yep, it's a gorgeous day for sure* he thought as he pedaled blithely under the sun-dappled canopy.

At Colley's he dismounted at the periphery of the parking lot and locked his bike to a tree. There was a rack over by the employee entrance but it was way over on the far end of the building so Cory usually just used a nearby tree or pole instead. He

pulled off his helmet, entered the store, and headed straight for the beverage aisle. He knew right where to find what he was looking for: a 2.5 liter bottle of Avery's Savory All Natural Lemon Flavored Iced Tea. *Let's see*, he thought, *today's Tuesday: I'll put this puppy in the fridge at work and it'll do me for a whole week's worth of breaks and lunches, for just \$2.79, and only one trip to the store – on a day when I would have taken a ride anyway; sweet!*

On the way to the register he picked up one additional item. He'd been good lately, had denied himself mightily, but today he couldn't help it, a guy can only hold out for so long, so he gave in to temptation and grabbed a large chocolate bar (all natural and slave-free of course) from the organic food aisle. And I do mean large: one of those 7.5 ounce babies; “candy bar” was hardly adequate to describe it, it was an ingot. Then he cashed out, telling the pretty attendant he didn't need a bag since he had only the two items, and exited the building, tossing the sales slip into a recycling bin on the way out. He put the chocolate bar into one of his capacious pockets, secured the iced tea to his bike rack with a bungee cord, and set off. The temperature was still perfect, the traffic still light, and the bike still felt great under him. Again, what a great setup.

He'd gotten about two thirds of the way back to his office when suddenly he heard a loud plop and a splash. *What the heck??* Screeching to a halt, he angled his bike and looked behind him: in the middle of the street was a wet mess consisting of half a dozen pieces of what used to be a plastic jug and two and a half liters of sticky, amber-colored liquid trickling into a drain. The sight was almost too sickening to look at. *Oh hell*, Cory thought, *there goes that*. And it had been such a perfect ride too.

He picked up the shards and tossed them into a nearby trash can, then sighed and took stock. *Should I write the whole thing off and just go back to work?* he asked himself. *That'd probably be best*. On the other hand he really craved the stuff, and it would set him up for a whole week. But go all the way back to Colley's? And risk getting back to work late? Did he want it that bad?

Turns out, he did. It was never really much of a contest. So back he went.

He coasted into the parking lot, again; dismounted, again; locked his bike to the tree and started toward the entrance, again. But before going any further he realized he still had the chocolate bar in his pocket but didn't have the receipt. Walking out with merchandise but no receipt was not something he wanted to try to explain. But he couldn't leave it with the bike either; unlike a car, you can't lock something in a bike.

Then he looked up. About an arm's length above his standing position, two small branches in the tree made a vee. It looked just big enough to accommodate the chocolaty confection, so he gave it a try. He nested the bar in the little hollow and stepped back to check: nope, you couldn't see it from the sidewalk or parking lot, even if you'd been looking, and nobody'd be looking. And it wouldn't be there long enough to attract any of nature's critters either. So he left it there, feeling smug about his ingenuity, and entered the store for a second search-and-procure mission.

He hurried to the drinks aisle, grabbed another iced tea, and went through the same checkout line as earlier. "I'm back," he said breezily to the cashier, holding up the bottle. "Can you believe I'm thirsty again already?" A puzzled look came over her face. "I was just here?" No change in expression. *Oh come on, really? "A few minutes ago?"* Still nothing. "I... oh never mind." *Like I said, some of us just don't have the touch.*

He exited the store in a dispirited frame of mind and moped over to his bike. He unlocked it and bungeed the iced tea onto the rack, this time making sure it was secure; no way was he going to lose another one of those puppies. He was just fastening his chin strap when a young woman exited the store walking toward him, holding the hand of a small boy about five years old with bright eyes and jet black hair and about as cute as a kid can be. She unlocked the car closest to where he was standing and loaded her groceries into it, then circled around to lift the lad into his seat. Cory smiled. The little guy smiled back. The woman saw the boy's delight and smiled too.

“Wanna see something cool?” Cory asked. He hadn't planned to, the inspiration just popped into his head. He gave the woman a quick look first to make sure she was okay with it; unsolicited overtures by strangers in parking lots are not something young women generally encourage. Since she didn't lock the boy in the car and start dialing 9-1-1 or anything, Cory figured it was okay and continued on, and woman and child watched now to see what cool thing was going to be revealed to them.

“Did you know this is not just an ordinary tree,” he said, “it’s a candy tree!” The boy's eyes grew large. The woman's expression combined an eye-roll with grudging curiosity. “Watch,” Cory said. With a theatricality he didn't realize he had, he snaked his empty hand into the crook of the tree, and when he withdrew it there was an enormous candy bar, all sealed-up and factory fresh, firmly in its grip.

“Wow!” the boy exclaimed. The woman smiled too, seemingly against her inclination; *cheesy*, she seemed to be thinking, *but, not bad*. Cory tore open the wrapper and broke off a nibble-sized piece for the boy, again checking first for permission. The woman nodded, and Cory handed the piece to the boy. He offered her one too but she shook her head, though with a cheery smile.

Cory wrapped up the rest of the bar and stowed it in his pocket, then checked the bungee one last time to make sure the iced tea was secure. When he looked back the woman had slid into the driver's seat and was buckling herself in. Cory was reluctant to let the little encounter end but couldn't think of a way to prolong it, and anyway she was obviously attached and had a son so the whole thing was moot to begin with. So he mounted his bike and with a heavy sigh waved goodbye to the boy. In return he received a wave and a smile back – from the woman. Again he wanted to linger, but, still not seeing any way to a happy resolution, he applied his weight to the pedal and pushed off... until he heard the boy say in his little five-year-old chipmunk voice, “Aunt Julie, can we go home after this? Mommy said I could go in the pool.”

Cory braked so hard he almost shot over the handlebars. “Aunt” Julie?? He turned the bike around and straddle-walked it back toward the woman's car to find

her looking at him through her open window. “I do a lot of shopping here,” she said as she backed out of the space. “Mostly on Tuesdays and Fridays.” Her smile persisted as she pulled away, leaving Cory still straddling his bike, smiling broadly in return. And no longer dispirited.

*Whoa*, he thought, *maybe I'm not hopeless after all!* 'Cause if that wasn't pulling something – or at least the possibility of a something – out of thin air, he didn't know what was.

-----