

The
Adventures
of a
Girl Called
BICYCLE

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Christina Uss



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To Jack and Susannah, who cheer me on

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WA

MT

ND

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ID

WY

SD

NE

NV

UT

CO

KS

Friendship Factory

Ghost Town

The Blessing of the Bicycles

The Bike Thief

Midway Station

CA

AZ

NM

OK

TX

MEXICO

The
Adventures
of a
Girl Called
BICYCLE



THE MOSTLY SILENT MONASTERY

The front door to the Mostly Silent Monastery was missing.

Sister Wanda Magdalena walked up the front steps and started to reach for the doorknob that wasn't there. She stopped, pursed her lips, and put her doorknob-reaching hand on her hip. Examining the wide door frame, she saw three stainless-steel hinges attached to nothing. Luckily, Sister Wanda had chosen to retire years ago from being a Nearly Silent Nun. She could use her voice to say anything she wanted to, and she had something to say right now.

"Big Al!" she yelled. "Where are you? Please hang the front door immediately! This place can't be mostly silent without a door to keep out the noise!"

When Big Al, the construction worker in charge of finishing the brand-new building, didn't answer or appear, Sister Wanda sighed. Move-in day for the Mostly Silent Monks at 65 Monastery Lane in Washington, D.C., had officially

happened yesterday, but the building still had a lot of odds and ends that were not quite right. Some of the light switches didn't switch. The hot-water faucets squeaked. And the pesky front door had needed to be taken down and rehung in order to close properly. Sister Wanda never settled for not-quite-right and had presented Big Al with a list of problems and strict instructions that every item on it would need to be completed and shipshape by six o'clock today—or else. It looked as though one of the workers had gotten as far as taking the door down but not as far as putting it back up.

Sister Wanda went into the front hallway, zigzagging around heaps of empty cardboard boxes. She could see the door leaning against a wall with its shiny new nameplate MOSTLY SILENT MONASTERY—OPEN TO THE PUBLIC. A little girl crouched next to it. Her scruffy black hair stuck up every which way. She was dressed in a faded pink T-shirt decorated with a drawing of a bike and the word BICYCLE printed in block letters. She blinked up at Sister Wanda and clutched the bottom of the shirt, which was two sizes too large.

“Goodness me, leave the front door off its hinges and look what finds its way inside!” Sister Wanda said, wading through the boxes. “Come with me,” she ordered, taking the girl's hand and guiding her toward the office.

Sister Wanda and the little girl sat on opposite sides of Sister Wanda's big desk. “All right, my child,” the nun said, pulling out a yellow pad and a sharp pencil. Sister Wanda

had plenty of yellow pads and sharp pencils. Since all the monks of the monastery had vowed to be Mostly Silent, the monastery had hired Sister Wanda when she retired to do the sorts of things that require a lot more talking than silence, like answering phones, making sure deliveries got where they were supposed to go, scheduling washing-machine repairmen, and supervising the construction of the new monastery building. She was the kind of person who relished getting a job done, and she rarely missed her days of following the Nearly Silent Nuns' vows. But she did continue wearing the Nearly Silent Nuns' black robe because she found it to be nicely intimidating to those who questioned her authority. The plain black garment resembled a traditional nun's habit, although the Nearly Silent order had never bothered with any elaborate head coverings and simply went without them.

"We need to figure out who you are and where you ought to be. What can you tell me about yourself? Name? Address? How you came to be hiding in our hallway?" she said.

The girl didn't say a word.

"Not talking, hmmm? Is that because you haven't learned how, or because you haven't got anything to say?" Sister Wanda peered into the girl's face. "How many years old are you? This many?" Sister Wanda held up three fingers. The little girl just stared back. Sister Wanda leaned forward in her chair, tapping the pencil against her short silver

hair. “Silent as can be. Well, you’ll fit in perfectly around here,” she said.

Big Al jogged into the office. “Excuse me, Sister,” he said. “Something slipped my mind with the long list of items you gave me, but I’ve remembered now, and it’s quite import—” He broke off suddenly when he saw the girl in the pink shirt sitting in Sister Wanda’s office. “Oh, you’ve found her yourself. Okay, then, I’m off to check on the light switches.”

“Big Al,” Sister Wanda said in her no-nonsense tone.

Big Al stopped in his tracks.

“What do you know about this little girl?” Sister Wanda demanded, her frosty blue eyes fixed on the workman.

“I’m sorry, Sister—I spotted her sitting on the front steps at the same time the replacement faucets were delivered. When I asked her why she was there, she wouldn’t answer. Because you were very, very clear that things needed to be ‘shipshape by six o’clock or else’ and I didn’t want to find out what the ‘or else’ meant, I tucked her away safe and told her to stay put until I could drop the faucets off upstairs and get the boys started on replacing them.” Big Al looked sheepish. “I guess I should have dropped *her* off first.”

“Yes,” Sister Wanda agreed. “Now, details. Did you see anyone nearby who may have left her?”

“I didn’t see anyone, Sister. But,” Big Al continued, “there used to be a public lost-and-found office on this very spot before we built the monastery. Maybe someone thought

this was still a place to drop off lost items . . . and maybe lost children.” He shrugged.

“That’s it?”

“Well, the faucets are done.”

“How about the front door?” Sister Wanda said.

Big Al raised his hands. “I’m on it.”

Another worker in the hallway shouted for him, asking how to tell if light switches were installed upside down or right side up.

Big Al rubbed his forehead. “Please excuse me,” he said as he jogged off.

After that, Sister Wanda found she didn’t have much to say, so the girl and the nun eyed each other in silence for some time.

If you don’t live near a Mostly Silent Monastery, you may wonder what they are. The Mostly Silent Monasteries are part of an old and venerated order, founded centuries ago by a monk named Bob. One day, Bob observed that the human body is made with two ears but only one mouth. He felt this meant that we humans are supposed to listen more than we speak, and so he vowed to be Mostly Silent and dedicated his life to listening to others.

Bob decided on being *Mostly* Silent because he knew if he took vows of total silence he wouldn’t be able to call for help in an emergency or politely agree if someone said it was

a nice day or ask for a sandwich, so he cut down his vocabulary to what he called the Sacred Eight Words: “yes,” “no,” “maybe,” “help,” “now,” “later,” “sleep,” and “sandwich.” It turned out with eight words plus a few hand gestures, a person can get across a lot of meaning.

People went to visit Bob if their friends or family didn’t pay enough attention to them. Each person would talk as much as he or she wanted while Bob listened. It seems very simple, but it was brilliant, too—centuries ago, just like today, people really liked to be listened to. Soon more monks joined Bob in taking vows of Mostly Silence and dedicating their lives to listening to others, and the order was begun. Bob’s cousin Euphemia started a branch of Nearly Silent Nunneries, which proved to be equally popular and were staffed entirely by women who also used the Sacred Eight Words. Eventually, there were Mostly Silent Monasteries and Nearly Silent Nunneries in most U.S. states and around the globe. They were open to the public, so anyone could go to one any day of the week and talk about anything they wanted, for as long as they wanted, and a monk or a nun would sit there and listen, guaranteed.

Over the years, the Mostly and Nearly Silent orders had debated adding some new words to the Sacred Eight Words, but the debates hadn’t come to anything. One word the monks and nuns had pondered was “Duck!” (A young monk

had proposed this new word after a painful incident with a flying Frisbee.)

The Mostly Silent Monastery where Sister Wanda and the little girl now sat had replaced a decrepit old building on the other side of the city. In addition to public listening, this new monastery also served as a home for monks-in-training. Construction had taken longer than expected, so the monks were ready to move in before the building was entirely ready for them. That explained the cardboard boxes and the front door in the hallway. It did not, however, explain why the little girl was there, too.

Sister Wanda spent the rest of the day on the phone, calling hospitals, police stations, schools, hotels, and even the zoo, trying to figure out where this quiet child belonged. No one knew who she was. No one appeared to be missing a girl in a pink T-shirt. So Sister Wanda proposed to the Top Monk and the older head monks that it would be best if the girl stayed with them until someone showed up to claim her.

The Top Monk said, “Sandwich,” by which he meant, “Of course, let’s make her feel right at home here.” (The Top Monk was the oldest and most silent of the monks, and had managed to cut down his vocabulary to one word: sandwich. It was amazing what he could communicate by saying “sandwich” with different inflections in his voice.)

The other monks replied, “Yes,” and that was that.

During her first evening at the monastery, the little girl poked her head inside a cavernous room and saw rows upon rows of monks of all sizes, shapes, and nationalities dressed in pale blue robes, kneeling on square pillows, eyes closed. This was an Advanced Listening class. Quiet as a piece of cotton blowing across the floor, she padded into the room, perched on a pillow, and closed her eyes as well. Despite the fact that the monks were listening very intently, no one heard her come in. She sat, still and peaceful, throughout the class. When the monks finally opened their eyes, they goggled at the little girl who had appeared in their midst without a sound. The child broke the room's stillness by giggling at their pop-eyed expressions.

Over the next few days, Sister Wanda brought the little girl with her while running errands around the neighborhood, hoping someone would recognize her and know where she belonged. Because the girl insisted upon always wearing her pink T-shirt with the word BICYCLE on it, neighbors and shopkeepers greeted her by asking, "And who is this youngster wearing a bicycle?"

The girl would either smile or stare, depending on how friendly the asker's voice sounded. On the third day, she opened up her mouth and brightly repeated, "Bicycle!" to every single question asked of her.

Sister Wanda had found that addressing her as "little girl" was becoming tiresome, so right then and there she

began calling her Bicycle. Bicycle beamed so joyfully that the name stuck.

Days became weeks. Bicycle gradually demonstrated a limited vocabulary, but she still had no answers for who she was and where she came from. The monks set up a temporary room for her on the second floor of the monastery.

Weeks became months. Sister Wanda finally called the Top Monk into her office to ask if she could sew Bicycle some new clothes, hang pictures on her walls, and consider the girl their responsibility.

“Not temporarily,” Sister Wanda insisted. “Permanently. For better or worse, it seems she’s a part of the monastery now.”

The Top Monk, of course, said, “Sandwich.”

“Sandwich!” A small voice seconded the Top Monk from the doorway of Sister Wanda’s office.

The monk turned, startled, but then smiled at Bicycle’s I-gotcha-again face. She really seemed to enjoy sneaking up on the older monks when she could, and her tiptoeing skills were second to none.

“As I have said before, she’ll fit in perfectly around here,” said Sister Wanda.



CLUNK

Now that the Mostly Silent Monastery was her permanent home, Bicycle took the Easy Listening class. She had her own comfy pillow and knelt on it alongside the blue-robed monks, listening without speaking for an hour a day. Sometimes the class members practiced listening to visiting speakers or to recordings of speeches. Sometimes they sat in complete quiet, listening to things left unsaid and things that go without saying.

Sister Wanda broke out the monastery sewing machine and whipped up some simple outfits for Bicycle to wear. Not knowing the girl's age bothered Sister Wanda, and when she was sewing some new shirts for Bicycle, she hit upon the idea of comparing the girl's measurements with pattern sizes. Bicycle was a perfect toddler's size three, so Sister Wanda went with her first instinct and entered Bicycle's age as three in the monastery records. In a fit of whimsy, she picked one newly stitched green T-shirt and mimicked the girl's original

pink top by ironing on the same pattern of a bike with the word BICYCLE underneath. Bicycle's enthusiastic squeals convinced Sister Wanda to sew a new BICYCLE shirt in a new color every year to celebrate her arrival at the monastery.

Two bike-decorated T-shirts later, at the age of five, Bicycle was ready to start kindergarten. Sister Wanda decided to homeschool her. Sister Wanda had developed a great fondness for the girl; plus she suspected she would excel at teaching if given the chance. It also hadn't escaped the retired nun's notice that whenever they walked past the neighborhood public school, Bicycle pulled the neck of her T-shirt up to her eyeballs and hid behind the nun's robe, peeking anxiously at the rowdy crowd of kids running through the playground.

Bicycle was especially bright, and she learned many things under Sister Wanda's tutelage. Once they'd covered the basics of letters, numbers, colors, and shapes, they branched out into reading, arithmetic, and writing. Every day, Sister Wanda wrote the Sacred Eight Words on the blackboard and used "yes," "no," "maybe," "help," "now," "later," "sleep," and "sandwich" as the basis for many lessons. They spent months considering what defines a sandwich and comparing varieties of handheld foods around the world. Discussing "now" versus "later" led them to work on clocks and telling time. Bicycle excelled at playing word games like jumbles and anagrams. She eagerly rearranged the letters in the Sacred Eight Words to discover what other

words could be constructed from them, like SEW, PLEASE, and the girl's proudest discovery so far, MAYONNAISE. Bicycle's least favorite lessons were on manners and etiquette, but Sister Wanda insisted upon them.

One morning after a Scrabble session, Bicycle, now six years old, asked, "When are the monks going to add 'duck' to the Sacred Eight Words list, Sister? Once they do that, I can spell COLESLAW to go along with MAYONNAISE." After years of consideration, the word "duck" had still not been approved.

"Change happens slowly in the Mostly Silent world," Sister Wanda said. "Probably because we have so few words with which to discuss the possibility of change. But slow and careful change is not a bad thing, in my opinion."

Bicycle agreed. Each week was much like another to her, and she had no complaints about that. Sister Wanda took her on errands and museum outings. They were regulars at the library and the park. At home at the monastery, Bicycle chipped in with chores like sweeping and tidying, and she helped the monks-in-training practice their skills by pretending to be a visitor who had come to talk at a Mostly Silent listening session. If she was feeling silly, she might also throw out a question to the monk-in-training, like "If there was a big spider on top of your head, would you want me to tell you or not?" The monk-in-training would almost always say, "Yes!" and then she'd answer, "Yes I *should* tell you, or

yes I *should not* tell you?” and then he’d end up saying, “No! Maybe! Help!” until Bicycle burst out laughing and reassured him she was just goofing around. Some monks bungled their vows more than others—one young man had talked to her for ten minutes straight about his fear of spiders—but since they knew Bicycle would never report their infractions to any of the head monks, they took her teasing in good spirits.

When Bicycle was seven, Sister Wanda designed a lesson showing Bicycle how to translate the Sacred Eight Words into fourteen different languages, including French, Japanese, Urdu, Vietnamese, Swahili, and American Sign Language. Although the nun got lesson plans from a homeschooling website, she rarely consulted them. Sister Wanda, as far as anyone could tell, knew everything.

“What have we learned from this?” she asked after the words had been satisfactorily memorized and repeated. (Sister Wanda loved asking “What have we learned from this?” She believed every experience should be a learning experience.)

“Um, people can be Mostly Silent in a lot of different languages?” guessed Bicycle.

“Correct, but don’t say ‘um.’ That’s enough for today,” said Sister Wanda, laying down the chalk.

Bicycle got up to leave the classroom.

Sister Wanda watched her walk toward the door. “Bicycle, wait a moment,” she said. “Are you looking forward to tonight’s

showing of *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*?" A local movie theater had donated an old projector and a few movie reels to the monastery, and the monks had hung a sheet at one end of the dining hall upon which to project the movies. The monks adored the actor Clint Eastwood, whose tough-guy characters usually spoke very little while communicating a whole lot.

Bicycle shook her head. "I was going to read tonight."

Sister Wanda sighed inside. Bicycle was an excellent student, very advanced for her age in learning and listening. However, growing up in such a hushed place, she didn't play or run or shout, and didn't have any friends her age to talk to or laugh with. While Sister Wanda knew the monks were very kind and took the time to listen to anything Bicycle had to say, it was hard to become someone's friend when you could exchange no more than eight words with them. The nun often wondered if she'd made a mistake by not sending Bicycle to public school, but when she had suggested to Bicycle last month that they could enroll her in school next year, Bicycle had begged Sister Wanda to continue tutoring her. She'd pulled out her perfect spelling tests and above-grade math work, plus the awesome brand-new Sacred Eight Words anagram CHAINSAWED, and then gazed at the nun with a long, pitiful, silent look. Bicycle had advanced to an Intermediate Listening class, which included Facial Expression Control, and Sister Wanda had to admit that the girl had some skills in this area.

Sister Wanda said, “Well, I know Brother Otto and a few other monks are going to the market to buy popcorn and candy in addition to groceries for dinner. Wouldn’t you like to go with them?”

Bicycle also sighed inside. She was no dummy. She knew Sister Wanda thought she needed to make some friends. The retired nun had recently begun arranging playdates with kids from the local schools and inviting children from a city orphanage to visit the monastery. However, Bicycle couldn’t stand these other children. None of them wanted to sit in silence, and none of them knew how to listen. In fact, they all talked—a lot. After four years surrounded by Mostly Silence, Bicycle thought that being Mostly Silent was a pretty good way to be. However, she knew Sister Wanda meant well.

“Sure, Sister, I’ll go,” Bicycle said. She always enjoyed spending time with Brother Otto, who did the grocery shopping for the monastery and loved food—choosing it, cooking it, and especially eating it. With his round face, glasses, and ready smile, he looked like the Dalai Lama might if the Dalai Lama always took second helpings of dessert. It was a pleasure to go to the market with him and watch him pick out some marbled sausage or a bushel of fresh, fuzzy kiwi fruit. He often got so excited that he’d forget his vows for a short time and start describing recipes in tasty detail.

“Excellent!” Sister Wanda said. “Make sure Brother Otto gets a Snickers bar for me.”

Bicycle nodded, thinking of her own plans. After the shopping trip and dinner, she'd head straight for the monastery's library. With everyone watching the movie, she could read in undisturbed quiet for the entire evening.

That afternoon, Brother Otto beamed as he pushed his little shopping cart down the sidewalk on the way home. He'd gotten a very good price on pork chops, and nothing made him happier than getting a bargain on tasty food. Bicycle walked beside the plump monk, followed by three young monks-in-training who were toting bags of groceries. Brother Otto hummed a happy little cooking song to himself, looking off into space and imagining what side dishes he'd pair with the chops.

They were passing the post office when Brother Otto's shopping cart halted with a clank, blocked by something metal that had fallen over on the sidewalk. Bicycle and the other monks hurried forward to help and saw what blocked their path. Underneath the spots of rust and clinging cobwebs, the two-wheeled machine was glaringly, screamingly, almost unbearably orange. A hand-lettered sign hung from a piece of string: FOR SALE. SEE POSTMASTER.

"Ooooh!" Bicycle said.

"Well, that's fate!" Brother Otto said. Then his eyes went wide with dismay and he clapped a hand over his mouth. Brother Otto simply wasn't cut out to be Mostly Silent.

“Is that what I think it is?” asked Bicycle.

Brother Otto looked torn for a moment, then seemed to think, *I've already broken my vows today, so a few more words can't hurt.* “Yes, my little cabbage, that is your namesake. It's a bicycle.”

The three monks-in-training shushed him with disapproving looks.

Naturally, it was love at first sight.

“Brother Otto . . . do you think I can buy it?” Bicycle reached into her pocket, pulling out eighty-nine cents.

Brother Otto glanced at the orange bike and then at Bicycle's face. With no further ado, he took her coins and went into the post office. He must have thrown caution to the wind and completely ignored his Mostly Silent training to get such a bargain, because he came back outside with a big smile and said, “It's all yours.”

It was of no surprise to anyone at the monastery when Brother Otto brought Bicycle home with the orange bike. With a name like Bicycle, the girl was bound to start pedaling around sooner or later.

In fact, Sister Wanda was relieved to see the young girl with the two-wheeler. She wrote *child-size bike helmet* on her shopping list and said, “It's high time she found an activity that will get her out of the monastery and engaged with the world. I've said it before, and I'll say it again: the girl needs to make friends. Surely a bicycle will help her do that.”

The Top Monk said, “Sandwich.”

The cobwebby bike required some tender loving care. Bicycle lost no time getting started. She found a thick bicycle repair manual in the library and wheeled the bike into the monastery’s small garage. She spent the rest of the afternoon dismantling the machine piece by piece, barely looking up when Sister Wanda dropped off a plain black helmet with an admonishment to wear it whenever pedaling.

“Crankshaft, bottom bracket, pedal, rear de-rail-leur,” Bicycle read aloud from the book, picking up each rusty, fiddly-shaped bit and turning it over and over in her hands. While the monks were watching the Clint Eastwood movie that evening, she scrubbed every nook and cranny with an old toothbrush, greased the parts that needed greasing, and reassembled the bike. By anyone’s standards, the bike was not a pretty thing. It was a dense, heavy, clunky lump of steel. It was quite old, and had clearly been ridden many miles, but it was fundamentally sound and ready to ride with its new owner. It was a smidge too big for her, but if she stretched, she could reach the pedals. Bicycle hugged her bicycle. She named it Clunk.

For the next five years, Bicycle cycled every moment she could. She rode beside Brother Otto to the market every day. She rode around the block so many times she nearly wore a groove into the road. She slept with Clunk next to her bed,

and occasionally she thunked down the wide staircase to breakfast on the bike. (Sister Wanda threatened to throw Clunk in the trash heap when Bicycle did this, so she rode down the staircase only when she was sure Sister Wanda was busy on the other side of the monastery.)

The theater that had donated the movie projector to the monastery had also donated several black-and-white films about famous bicycle races. Bicycle watched those films over and over, shouting encouragement to the racers on the screen. Most of the races took place in Europe, and Bicycle was fascinated with the wire-thin men on their elegant, nimble bikes, whizzing together through historic towns, struggling up mountains, riding in huge jostling packs usually without crashing into one another.

Bicycle's shouting at the movie screen attracted the attention of the Top Monk. He liked to watch Bicycle while she watched the screen, and to listen to her shouts of encouragement. He seemed to hear something special in her voice, because he was sometimes inspired to shout "Sandwich!" himself. He gave Bicycle a gift subscription to a popular bicycling magazine. She read each issue cover to cover, and in this way learned about the famous bike racers of the world.

The most famous, and Bicycle's favorite, was young Zbigniew Sienkiewicz. He was a tall and lanky nineteen-year-old racer from Poland with a blond mustache. He had won every major race in the world as a rookie, and he always

sprinted across the finish line with a grin on his face, waving with wild enthusiasm to his cheering fans. “*Dziękuję, Dziękuję!*” he would shout, which means “Thank you!” in Polish. Polish, you should know, is not the easiest language in the world to pronounce and understand. For example, although *Dziękuję* looks like a sneeze when you write it down, it actually sounds like “Jen-COO-ya.” Because Polish was so tricky, none of the racing announcers could pronounce Zbigniew Sienkiewicz’s name correctly (it sounded kind of like ZBIG-nyev Shen-KEV-itch), so everyone called him Zbig.

Zbig was Bicycle’s hero. She rearranged the letters in his first name to spell E-Z BIG WIN and found the words NICE and WISE in his last name. She started dreaming about winning the Tour de France and the Giro d’Italia and other famous bike races like Zbig did, riding her bike for hundreds of miles with a grin on her face, waving wildly to her own cheering fans. She thought her dream wasn’t too far-fetched. She knew she was growing up to be tall and lanky just like Zbig—after all, she’d had to raise Clunk’s seat post every time she had a growth spurt, and now that she was twelve years old, it was as high as it could go.

While Bicycle’s dreams of winning international races grew more vivid, Sister Wanda’s dreams of Bicycle making lots of new pals while biking around the neighborhood did

not. In fact, riding Clunk seemed to have separated her even more from other children.

Part of the problem was that Bicycle was a very fast cyclist. If someone tried to start a conversation with her, she started pedaling hard and left them in her dust. Now when Sister Wanda set up playdates with local girls and boys, Bicycle hopped on Clunk and headed outside, passing the children in a flash of flying hair and spinning spokes, pretending she couldn't hear Sister Wanda telling her to come back and meet Betsy or Billy or Jenny or Frankie. Bicycle didn't want to meet them. She just wanted to ride Clunk and be left alone in peace and quiet.



THE FRIENDSHIP FACTORY

One unlucky Saturday morning, Bicycle heard the sound of a gaggle of girls coming in the front door and being ushered toward the main hall. Clearly, Sister Wanda was going to try another one of her friend-making get-togethers.

Bicycle hopped out of bed, threw on some clothes and shoes, and decided that if she was quick, she could ride Clunk down the staircase and out the side door near the kitchen before Sister Wanda could see her. She pedaled into the hallway and started down the staircase, but on the middle stair, she felt Clunk's heavy frame drop out from under her with a terrifying crash. The world went sideways and bits of wood flew everywhere.

"Help!" she screamed.

Every monk in the monastery came running.

Brother Otto pulled Bicycle out of the ruin of the staircase, poking and prodding at her arms and legs, pulling back her

eyelids, and peering into her ears. “Are you hurt? Are you broken?” he asked in agitation. Then he clapped a hand over his mouth as the other monks gave him the Mostly Silent Shush.

“I’m . . . okay . . . I guess.” Bicycle was a little scratched and banged up, but no permanent damage was done to her.

Amazingly, Clunk also came out of the pile of wood and dust with nothing more than a few scratches in the orange paint and a handful of loose screws. But the staircase? The staircase was toast.

Sister Wanda was a dark thundercloud moving toward Bicycle. Holding Bicycle by the chin, she asked in a dangerously soft voice, “What have we learned from *this*?”

“Uh . . . I will not ride my bike down the stairs ever again?”

Sister Wanda repeated after her, “You. Will. Not. Ride. Your. Bike. Down. The. Stairs. *Ever. Again.*”

Bicycle nodded, chagrined.

Sister Wanda’s eyes flashed like blue lightning. “Brother Jianyu!” she called. Brother Jianyu was the carpenter of the house. “You will go to town and buy wood to repair these stairs right now, and when you return, you will have this one”—she gave Bicycle’s chin a shake that rattled the teeth in her head—“help you for as long as it takes to fix this.”

This was the first time Bicycle had ever gotten into serious trouble with Sister Wanda. She meekly went to meet the giggling girls in the main hall. She pretended with all her

might to enjoy their company until Brother Jianyu came and set her to work yanking nails out of broken pieces of wood with a claw hammer.

A few weeks later, Sister Wanda took Bicycle out for her annual haircut at the barbershop. Bicycle rode on Clunk, and Sister Wanda jogged to keep up. They were passing a travel agency when a large poster with curly lettering caught Bicycle's eye. She pedaled over to take a look and almost banged into the side of the building. The poster announced:

*ZBIGNIEW "ZBIG" SIENKIEWICZ TO
VISIT AMERICA!*

*His First-Ever Visit to the United States!!
Zbig Will Host the Blessing of the Bicycles
in San Francisco, California, on July 8*

*All bicycles are welcome to be blessed for safe, fast riding.
Zbig will choose one Lucky Cyclist at the event to tour the
country with him.*

A Once-in-a-Lifetime Ride!
Reserve your plane ticket TODAY!

There was a black-and-white drawing of Zbig at the bottom of the poster. His arms were raised in his signature wave.

“Sister!” Bicycle exclaimed, and made some unintelligible gargling noises. She had so much to say, the words caught together in a jumbled rush in her throat. Sister Wanda jogged up and read the poster for herself.

“Yes, yes, I know you’re a big fan of this Zbig fellow.” Sister Wanda paused. For the first time in Bicycle’s life, the indomitable Sister looked dismayed. “I’d like to say we could afford tickets to California. However, we used up the monastery’s savings to fix the broken staircase.”

Bicycle gulped.

“I’m sorry. I know you didn’t intend to vaporize the staircase, but you will not be attending that event.” Sister Wanda started toward the barbershop.

Bicycle followed behind, slowly pushing Clunk, dumbstruck by the bad luck she’d brought on herself. “You’re sure, Sister? There’s no extra money at all?” Bicycle pleaded.

Sister Wanda pressed her lips together. “Well, there is the emergency fund. And I do have a little reserve of money,” she said.

Bicycle felt hope leap up inside her.

Then Sister Wanda continued. “I was going to tell you this next week, but I’ve been saving up to send you to sleep-away camp at the Friendship Factory.”

Bicycle’s hope crashed back down and went splat.

“Now, I know you’d rather go see this Zbig bicycle racer person, but you have to understand.” Sister Wanda had that

no-nonsense look. “You simply can’t go on this way, refusing the possibility of friendship. Since you don’t seem to be able to find any friends here, it’s time to do something more drastic. The Friendship Factory is a very successful place. They have facilities across the country. There’s one right outside D.C., and they say in their ads ‘Three Guaranteed Friendships or Your Money Back.’ I signed you up for their Spring Break Special, which certifies if the spring session isn’t effective enough, you will automatically be enrolled into their six-week summer intensive.” Sister Wanda’s expression softened slightly. “Please believe me,” she said. “I’m doing this for your own good. Someday you will look back on this and thank me.”

Bicycle was dazed throughout her haircut and the ride home. Not only could she not meet her bike-racing hero on his trip to the United States, but she was going to be condemned to this dreadful-sounding Friendship Factory. She’d probably be trapped in some drafty cabin in the woods, forced to make friends with annoying children, and boring children, and maybe even some children who were both annoying and boring at the same time. And if it didn’t go well, she’d end up back there for practically the whole summer. Three guaranteed friendships or your money back? It sounded like a guaranteed nightmare.

She was in a funk for days. She sent a long, pleading letter to Zbig, asking if he might be able to change his visit from San Francisco, California, to Washington, D.C., preferably

someplace near the monastery. She also talked to the monks about her problem, and they listened with great patience and attentiveness. However, listening was not enough for Bicycle this time. She wanted someone to talk to her and say, “Wow, that’s terribly unfair,” and “I’ll find a way to make Sister Wanda see reason,” and “You don’t need to make friends; you need to go see Zbig Sienkiewicz and maybe win a cross-country bike trip.” Instead, they said, “Yes,” and “Sandwich?” This was very unsatisfying. Bicycle moped.

In mid-April, a week before the Friendship Factory bus was scheduled to arrive, a big envelope with a Poland postmark arrived. The return address was from ZBIG S. ENTERPRISES. A reply to her letter! She held her breath as she slit it open. Inside, there was a photo of Zbig crossing some anonymous finish line on his bike, hands up in the air, smiling at the camera. Scrawled on it in thick black marker were the words *Keep riding!* and it was signed *Your Friend, Zbig Sienkiewicz*. Bicycle stared at it. As she did, an idea began to form. Once the idea formed, it grew wheels and starting spinning through her mind.

A sunny Saturday morning in April was something Bicycle usually savored. But her pale face showed no savoring when the big yellow Friendship Factory bus pulled up to the monastery. She clutched her bulky backpack to her chest while the driver got out and helped Sister Wanda attach Clunk to

the luggage rack on the rear of the bus. Bicycle had insisted that the only way she could stand to go to this loathsome camp was if she could bring her bike with her, and Sister Wanda had finally given in.

Sister Wanda gave her a hug and a going-away present, a book titled *Wheel Wisdom: Great Thoughts from Great Cyclists*. “You probably won’t even get a chance to read this until you return, you’ll be so busy having fun with your new friends.”

Bicycle didn’t trust herself to talk, so she nodded silently. She squatted down to unzip her backpack and slide the paperback book inside.

As Bicycle stood back up, Sister Wanda continued, “I know you aren’t completely sure about this, child, but I’m sure enough for both of us. Think of what you will learn from this experience.”

Brother Otto was also there to see her off and he gave her his most sympathetic smile and a brown bag filled with snacks for the trip. When he leaned in for a hug, he whispered, “Good luck.”

Bicycle nodded again.

The bus was already filled with naughty little boys throwing spit-soaked wads of paper at one another’s heads and nasty little girls making fun of one another’s shoes. These were the children who couldn’t, or wouldn’t, or even

perhaps shouldn't make friends without a camp to force them to do so.

Bicycle sat down in the one available seat, her backpack in her lap with her helmet clipped onto a side strap. The boy next to her was wearing a T-shirt that said BE GLAD I'M NOT YOUR KID. He stuck a moist wad of paper in her hair.

The girl across the aisle looked down at Bicycle's sneakers and squeaked, "Ewwww, those shoes have no sparkle!"

Bicycle tried to ignore them, but it was difficult.

The bus pulled away from the curb. Sister Wanda and Brother Otto waved good-bye until it was out of sight. "She'll thank me someday," Sister Wanda declared. "I hope," she added under her breath.

The bus trundled through the traffic-clogged streets. After a few minutes, Bicycle got up and approached the driver. "Excuse me, sir, but could we stop? I really need to use a bathroom."

"Awww, why dincha go before we left?" the driver asked. "We have to stay on schedule, ya know."

"I'm sorry, but I really need to go," she replied, shifting from one foot to another.

Another girl overheard her and chimed in, "Yeah, I need to go, too." Then a chorus of voices started in the back of the bus. "Stop the bus! We need to go!"

The bus driver grumbled, “Kids!” but he pulled over at the next gas station. “Make it quick!” he yelled.

Bicycle grabbed her backpack and ran off the bus, but she didn’t head for the bathrooms with the rest of the boys and girls. She went to the back of the bus and had Clunk free from the luggage rack in no time. Before anyone noticed what she was doing, she’d attached her backpack to Clunk’s rack with a bungee cord, stuck her helmet on her head, and started pedaling away in the opposite direction of the bus and the Friendship Factory.

Early that evening, one of the monks went in to tidy up Bicycle’s room. He found a note under the pillow when he was making the bed. After he read it, he brought it straight to Sister Wanda in the kitchen, where she and Brother Otto were baking oatmeal cookies.

Sister Wanda read the note once, then twice, and fell back into one of the kitchen chairs. “Silent Saints preserve us all, especially this little girl!”

Dear Sister Wanda,

I figure you will be hearing from the camp pretty soon that I never showed up, so I wanted to tell you not to worry. I know it’s important to you that I make a friend. Maybe you are right. But the Friendship Fac-

tory is not the place I'm going to find one. There is only one friend that I want to make, and that is Zbig Sienkiewicz. Clunk and I are going to California to find him. I'll send you postcards along the way to let you know I'm okay.

Bicycle

Sister Wanda sat staring at Bicycle's note without seeing it, lost in thought. "She doesn't want to make friends with any of the nice children I bring to meet her, but now she wants to take off for California to meet this mustache-faced bike racer!" Then she demanded of the oatmeal box in frustration, "How does that foolish child expect to get across the country by herself?"

The Top Monk walked into the kitchen and read Bicycle's note over her shoulder. He squinted in thought. "Sandwich," he finally said.

Sister Wanda turned around to face him. "If you're saying we need to send the police after her, I think that will push her to do something even more foolish. No, no, she's going to come to her senses." She rubbed her eyes with both hands. "Don't a lot of children try running away from home at one point or another? They eventually cool off and come back, ready to make amends." She exhaled slowly. "She's a smart girl. She'll soon realize that bicycling across the country

isn't something a person just up and does. I bet she'll be home later tonight."

"Sandwich," the Top Monk said again.

This time, Sister Wanda wasn't the least bit sure what he meant.

Bicycle didn't feel foolish. She had thought and thought about ways to get out of spending spring break at the Friendship Factory. But it wasn't until she'd gotten the photo from Zbig signed *Your Friend, Zbig Sienkiewicz* that it hit her: all that really mattered to Sister Wanda was that she make a friend, right? It shouldn't matter if she made a friend at the Friendship Factory or somewhere else—like California. And she had a perfect way to get there: Clunk would take her across the country.

She'd studied U.S. geography last year with Sister Wanda, so she knew how many states lay between her and California. After staring at the picture of Zbig for a while, pondering the best way to get from the East Coast to the West Coast, she'd headed to the public library to make her own cross-country cycling map. She went to the reference section, took a pile of atlases to a table, and spent a long afternoon with a ruler and a calculator and the photocopy machine.

Sister Wanda's rigorous instruction on how to read a map legend paid off. Bicycle knew that the thickest, straightest

lines on the atlas maps were the interstate highways, where cars would roar by at high speeds and no bicyclists were allowed. Instead, she looked for the skinniest lines, the ones that meandered a more indirect way across each state—the local byways marked CR for “country route” or RR for “rural road.” A few states even had trails designed solely for bicycles and pedestrians. She traced those routes in green highlighter across each photocopy and stapled them into a thick packet. Adding up the mileage for each state, Bicycle figured she had to ride almost four thousand miles to get to California. She needed to be there on July 8. That meant she’d need to average about fifty miles a day. *How hard could that be?* she asked herself. *Zbig and those other racers ride over a hundred miles every day for weeks on end. Fifty miles should be a piece of cake.*

When Sister Wanda told her that she needed to pack for camp, Bicycle had instead secretly packed supplies for a long-distance bike trip. She raided the kitchen pantry and put bags of crackers, dried fruits, chocolate, cereal, and beef jerky in a pile. She folded her favorite T-shirts, leggings, and shorts; rolled up an old wool blanket; found a washcloth and soap so she could wash herself and her clothes on the go; and added a toothbrush and toothpaste, a flashlight, a penknife, bungee cords, some postcard stamps, and a tiny yellow spiral notebook with several pens to her pile. From the monastery’s library, she’d taken a pocket waterproof Polish-English

dictionary so she could talk to Zbig in his native language when they met. Her photocopied maps fit nicely inside a gallon-sized Ziplock plastic bag, along with a roll of duct tape to secure the map bag to her handlebars. She put her saved-up allowance money, \$154.20, into an envelope and wrapped it in several layers of underwear. For Clunk, she put in an Allen wrench set, chain lube, a bike pump, and a tire repair kit. She covered the supplies with two extra-large rain ponchos, planning to use the ponchos as a kind of makeshift tent on the road, and crammed the whole wad into her backpack. She leaned two water bottles against it to slide into Clunk's bottle cages. "Ready as I'll ever be," she judged.

The night before leaving, she went to bed and listened to the clock in the hall chime midnight. Too tense to sleep, she kept thinking about whether she ought to go through with her plan.

I showed up at the monastery in a T-shirt labeled BICYCLE, didn't I? Therefore, if I am going to make any friends in life, they are probably going to be bicyclists. So why not start out with the best bicyclist in the world as my first friend? He's even got the word NICE in his last name. When it works out perfectly and Zbig and I become great friends, Sister Wanda won't be angry. She'll see why I did what I did.

Yet no matter how many times she went over this in her mind, Bicycle wasn't convinced that Sister Wanda wouldn't be angry forever after this. This was a big deal.

When she'd climbed on the Friendship Factory bus, though, she knew she had to do it. Right or wrong, she needed to get away from those . . . those . . . those *kids*.

Now she was on the road, moving as fast as she could. It was too late to wonder if she'd done the right thing. She focused instead on pedaling the first mile of the four thousand that lay ahead.