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Mission: Defeat the Hiawatha

As our group approached the cavernous hole in the mountain, the air temperature dropped. There was a cold breeze blowing from within as we entered, and within moments we were plunged into complete darkness. All turned their head lamps on and proceeded into the inky blackness, not knowing what lay ahead. Over the soft whir of turning wheels, water drops could be heard hitting the ground and puddles with a melodic ping. An occasional yelp could be heard as the icy droplets made someone their target. And so began, "Mission: Defeat the Hiawatha."

Our location was the Hiawatha Bike Trail starting in Montana and ending in Idaho; our mission was to make it through 11 tunnels, cross 8 trestle bridges, and complete the 15 mile long trip along a scenic mountainous ridge with a moderate downhill slope. Our family of 6 had awakened early to rent bikes and head to the trail. At the trail head, it seemed to take forever to gather our water bottles, sunglasses, snacks, etc., but as the sun rose higher in the sky, we finally set off.

At the start, we were confronted with the longest tunnel into the mountain, nearly 1 ¼ miles long. The outside temperature was in the 70s, but dropped to the low 40s in the tunnel. As our fingers and exposed legs began to go numb, we were glad we had brought jackets to put on over our shorts and t-shirts. The tunnel emanated a chilly, creepy feeling as the only noise breaking the glassy stillness was the whirring of wheels and the drip of water. Sickly beams from the headlamps shining on the pitted ground and rocky walls added to the suspense.

A quarter of the way through, trouble started. My dad's light flickered a few times before failing, leaving him in complete darkness. One of my brothers and I rode back to him and the three of us traveled back to the beginning of the tunnel to get a new headlamp. After doing so, we hesitated

slightly before re-entry, and again plunged into the beast's mouth. The three of us, wanting to catch the rest of our party, set out at a brisk pace, racing each other short distances. Midway through the tunnel, we had seen no sign of them and saw no lights at the ends of the tunnel. It was eerie until two people finally passed from the other direction and we were reassured. As we briskly pedaled onward, we could feel the cold air ruffle through our hair until at last a small white dot was seen. At first we thought it was another rider's headlamp, but as we got closer, the happy realization struck us that it was the end of the tunnel! We raced to the end, squinting as we burst into the sunlight. As our eyes adjusted, it seemed like we had entered another world; there was a waterfall gently cascading on the lichen-covered rocks and the air was delightfully warm. Spying us, our group started laughing! In our swift riding, our back tires had splattered mud from the bottom of our shorts in a straight line up our backs! However, we noticed several other people coming out the tunnel with the same ridiculous mud pattern on their backs, so we shrugged it off and figured we would just fit in.

We started out again-- 10 tunnels, 8 bridges, and 11 miles to go. Enjoying the scenery, we observed the wide variety of people biking along. There were families with small kids riding tag along bikes, and some more serious families with special gear. One group of three guys really stood out as they passed in special biking clothes, carrying supply packs on their bikes (which even had rearview mirrors). It was obvious they did this often. We also spotted a bald eagle and several other forms of wildlife. We continued across a few suspension bridges hundreds of feet above the canyon floor and through a couple of short tunnels. The scenery was breathtaking.

All was going great until my youngest brother, Thomas, biked ahead around a turn. Soon after, we heard KAPOW! We rushed around the corner to find him standing next to his bike unharmed, but with a flat front tire. With five miles to go, he was stuck with only his two feet to get him down the mountain, a disheartening proposal no matter how nice a day it was. My mom stopped to try and call the rental

place while the rest of us rode slowly along sympathizing with Thomas. Our once pleasant bike ride now had a kink. Slowly making our way along the ridge, we spotted the three bikers we had seen before. They were taking a break and saw poor Thomas plodding along. Immediately, they stopped us and said they had a pump and patch kit and could try to fix the flat! In no time, they had the tire off and the tube out only to find the reason for the flat was an irreparable three inch gash in the tube. We thanked them and were about to start walking again when one of them realized his bike tires were the same size and he had a spare tube! He offered it up, noting that he likely wouldn't need it since his tires were made of Kevlar. After they replaced the tube and reinstalled the tire, my dad tried to pay them, but they were content with asking us to just pass on the good deed to someone else.

The rest of the trip was uneventful and we made it to the bottom with everything intact. It was a great adventure enjoying the outdoors; kinks in the plan always make a trip more memorable and fun. We were really grateful to the three biker guys and will always remember to pass on the good deed to others. "Mission: Defeat the Hiawatha" was a success!