Not Every Part is the Fun Part

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The road to Piedra Blanca was deeply sandy, and we hardly stopped because it’s so hard to restart on sand. My companions were my partner, Q, and our beloved friend Sara — all of us mountain bikers and tenderhearted dirtbags from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. In those long stretches of loose sand, each of us took turns leading to pack down a track for the others to ride in. It’s a very particular kind of moving meditation, pedaling slowly and gently but consistently, never stopping. When it goes well, and you find the rhythm and pace, you can lock into a beautiful blissed-out state. But when you’re overheated or anxious or cranky or agitated, it’s so hard to find peace, which means it’s harder to stay in the track, and any time you waver off the line, your wheel sinks in the sand and you have to start all over again, making you crankier and more agitated. So you learn: find peace; stay on the line; don’t hurry, but don’t stop.

The sand eased up in the morning, but my brain didn’t switch back over to “stopping is okay” mode as the road became deeply washboarded for miles and miles. The washboards wore on my wrists and the vibration made me nauseous. Q and Sara had no trouble riding them and cruised ahead of me. Sand is arduous, washboards are taxing, and the combination is a special kind of grueling, but, “At least it cushions the blow,” said Sara.

I pushed to keep up, getting more queasy and dizzy and headachey by the mile. They stopped and I eventually caught up, looking fairly awful. Q asked if I was doing okay, and this tiny gesture of kindness opened the door for three tears to slide down my cheek.

“No!” I said. “I think I’m going to throw up!”

All I had to do was stop, let some air out of my tires, and ride as slowly as I’ve ever ridden in my entire life. I didn’t throw up.

On a sign in the middle of nowhere that maybe once had listed a town or ranch name but was now completely covered with stickers on both sides, one stood out: the black one that read, “F%!# Cancer.” Carol will love this!, I thought. Just before I left Pittsburgh for this trip, she and I had taken a double middle-finger selfie, because cancer is the worst.

As soon as we got to Mulegé and back into cell service, I texted the photo to her. Ten minutes later, I received an email saying she had died earlier that day.

She’d promised me she would do her best to still be alive when I got back, and I know she did her very best.

I had crazy violent nightmares the night before we left Constitución, and in the morning I was exhausted and emotionally fragile. The first thing to do was ride through the dump, a literal burning trash fire. I was spent and still oblivious to the impact of grief on my body. Some lessons don’t come quickly.

I can ride rocks for days, but I can’t handle a flat road, or a straight road, or washboards. Individually, they are all so hard for me. Together, they are my kryptonite. As we exited the dump, we turned onto a straight, flat, washboard road of misery for miles. I stopped to stretch, and when I folded over, more tears fell out of my face. I rage-sobbed in the middle of the road.

We finally turned onto a different road, a wiggly, chunky, wonderful one, probably only a quarter-mile long, before turning onto another straight road. This time, though, some unknown switch tripped in my brain and my body. I felt myself riding stronger, feeling less pathetic. Not every part is the fun part, but that’s okay — I know how to suffer, I know how to struggle.

Q caught up with me and said, “Remember that time you were feeling all punked out and having a hard time keeping up, and then we turned onto a different road and you screamed, ‘I AM A MOTHERF%!#@R!’ and took off and left us in the dust?”

Is that what happened? I guess it could be.

I knew at some point there would have to be a curve in the road — a bend, a hook, a gentle rise, anything — and I was going to find it. I was going to ride straight on through, no stops until I got there, however far away it was.

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