

T O T H E S T A R S

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Can a bike ride fix the worst year ever?

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T H R O U G H D I F F I C U L T I E S

“ I ’ M L O S T , ”  
I S A I D T O  
T H E V U L T U R E ,  
A N D T H E N  
L A U G H E D A T  
T H E S O U N D  
O F M Y S M A L L  
V O I C E I N  
T H E E M P T Y  
L A N D S C A P E .

The bird was hunkered over a dead animal like it was a plate of french fries he didn't want to share. It felt like a bad sign. It actually felt like a scene contrived for the sole reason of communicating the message “bad sign.” I hadn't seen anyone ahead of me when I made my last turn, about 60 miles into my race. I hadn't seen anyone behind me in a while either. I sighed, and started to turn my bike around in the chalky gravel. I was definitely headed in the wrong direction.

Back on January 14th, when I signed up for the Dirty Kanza, I was at one of my lowest points. Crammed onto a Greyhound, waiting for the clock to tick over to 9 a.m. so I could enter my credit card information into BikeReg, I was convinced I needed this. My broken left hand sweated inside a cast that refused to wick anything other than a vague foot smell. I wore greasy sweats—the only clothes I could pull on myself. Most people like to at least have the capacity to button their own pants before they sign up to race 200 miles through gnarly mud and gravel, but I was convinced that conquering this notorious event would be the thing to turn this bad-luck year around.

It wasn't just the broken hand, or the inability to dress myself, let alone ride a bike. I was also fresh off celebrating history's most pathetic family Christmas—a holiday observance that makes the plot of *It's a Wonderful*

*Life* seem like a comic romp. My wife's close friend had died. My sister, who for months had hinted that she might waive her conservative Christian beliefs long enough to allow her five kids to see us for the holidays, decided at the last minute to stand us up. It seems the fact that my relationship was now sanctioned by an official marriage license made it too hard to explain away Aunt Cait's “friend.” Before this, spending time with my nieces and nephews had been one of my greatest joys. I felt like I'd been hit by a coal truck. Even the most maudlin of holiday carols has yet to narrate the tale of an entire family sitting out the holidays to evade the gay couple who flew across the country to see them.

Spurred by this family conflict and chronic health problems that kept me off a bike for half a year, at some point depression set in and hung around for the bulk of 2016. But I was determined to bounce back in 2017. What I needed, I decided, was to set a big, lofty goal, to conquer something huge. Riding my bike 200 miles in one of the most storied gravel grinders in the world felt like it could be the comeback I needed.

The clock struck 9:00 and my registration went through—a small moment of triumph for a sad, sweaty woman on a bus.

Oh, shit.

What did I just do?

#### DIRTY KANZA IS AN ICONIC GRAVEL RACE

in Emporia, Kansas, not far from where I grew up and learned that a bike could provide the perfect means of escape. It bears mentioning that the race is not flat, like you're probably thinking—it's a grueling tour of the Flint Hills, over some of the finest, messiest, most remote roads you could imagine. Now in its 12th year, it attracts more than 2,000 riders annually and sells out immediately. Over the years organizers had noticed that the finish rate was roughly equal between men and women, yet women consistently accounted for just 10 percent of the field. So in 2017 they opened 200 spots just to women as part of a “200 women, 200 miles” campaign.

I had no intention of being competitive when I signed up to be one of those women. All I wanted to do was finish within the time cutoff and not die or—worse—run out the clock in a weeping asthmatic ball by the side of a dirt road in my home state, hallucinating the disapproving ghosts of my ancestors. A confirmation email dropped into my inbox, giving me a ping of satisfaction. I settled back into my seat and gazed out the bus window, buzzing with hope.

And then I proceeded to not ride my bike for two months. I couldn't, right? I still had that shattered hand.

Winter wore on. The longer I had to stay off the bike, the more I tried not to think about my race looming ahead. On and off, I'd try to ride. Pedaling was easy enough. But even a tentative squeeze of brakes fired a warning shot of pain up through my fingers.

Not being able to ride made me feel worse. I was bored and sluggish. I started sleeping more and more. And when I really wanted to bask in frustration, I'd scroll Instagram for a masochistic tour of all the superfun rides my friends were doing without me.

In my experience depression hits you a little like bonking on a long ride. It wears you down slowly over time—so slowly that you almost don't notice your own diminishment, until that day you just can't get to your feet and the idea of doing something as simple as eating a Snickers feels like too much effort.

By March my hand still hurt, but I could just manage to grip a handlebar. Relieved to be back in motion, I rode in a way I never had before—often twice a day, racking up towering piles of laundry and consuming incredible quantities of snacks. Most of the time I rode alone, too out

of shape to even sit on anyone's wheel. I sought the big hills. I got on my bike early, wanting to get in a few miles before the stresses of the day set in. I looked for any off-roading I could find, crunching the loose rocks up Scout Road under the tires of my Salsa Warbird, flipping down the bill of my cap when the sun finally rolled out of bed to meet me.

Still, at some point I realized it wasn't going to be enough. There was no way I could train to ride 200 miles in two months, despite my newfound commitment to two-a-day riding, my version of cramming before a big test. The Dirty Kanza offered a 100-mile, “Half-Pint” version too, and in April I cracked and switched my registration. This time, there was no wave of smugness, no wash of satisfaction

that I was pushing myself to conquer the unthinkable. Just a sense that I had to keep moving forward. I tried to keep climbing. My goal was a lot smaller, but having a reason to ride every day released some of the weight I felt. I had hoped I could escape my sadness, out-pedal it, drop it on the first climb, leave it panting at a town-line sprint where it would eventually give in and curl up by the side of the road. And in some ways I was doing it—getting out of bed, putting in the miles, accomplishing things that felt impossible when just living in my own head was hard enough.

And then June rolled around. It was Dirty Kanza weekend, the weekend I'd been anticipating and dreading since January. I had ridden 100 miles before. But 100 miles with this much gravel? This was new—and terrifying.

Even after all my training, I started to doubt I even had the Half-Pint in me. And talking to a DK100 veteran at a bike shop in Kansas City did little to assuage my fears. Based on his rundown of finishing the race the past five years, by the time I crawled down the finish chute I would be down at least three tires and a derailer. Did I mention this is

a completely unsupported race?

The truth is, I'm not that tough. While I've always dreamed of being the kind of person who yells something like, “Call FedEx for a tracking number 'cause I'm about to send it!” before bunny-hopping off a dirt ramp, the closest I've come to “sending” anything on a bike would be the equivalent of 10-week media mail. Slow and steady, that's how I'd get through it. I wondered how my hand would hold up.

The race started and thousands of bikes exploded out of downtown Emporia like a pinball machine ticking into multiball mode. Supportive locals lined the roads, cheering on family members. The sun was just starting to peek out. At the first turn off Commercial Street, a

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AT THE 2017  
RACE, 600  
OF THE  
2,200 TOTAL  
ENTRIES WENT  
TO DK100  
PARTICIPANTS.

sea of Half-Pint riders formed two lines as our knobbies hit doubletrack gravel. We were off!

The pack was tight. There wasn't much room for repositioning until we reached the first rollers and slower climbers fell back. I was grateful for the breathing space but also hoped to keep the crowds in sight. Somehow my GPS computer had ignored my persistent attempts to upload the route, so I was flying mapless and solo by the mud-died seat of my spandex. It was working for a while—until I missed a turn and found myself on that dusty road leading to the opening scene of a western movie, with no one in sight and no trail of energy-gel detritus to suggest I was on the right path. | CONTINUED ON P. 26



## To the Stars, Through Difficulties

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**WRONG TURNS ON HILLY RIDES HAVE** defeated me in the past, but this time I just felt amused that I was too in my head to notice how long I'd been riding alone. I bid farewell to the vulture and started heading back in the direction I'd come from. After nearly a mile, I saw riders in the distance. I've never been so happy to see the gleam of hiviz. I was back in the pack, holding pace, and even passing other riders on sketchy, loose-dirt climbs. I was starting to feel remoralized, like the kind of person with the authority and confidence to invent a new word.

By mile 70 my hand was throbbing, but I

**I ' M N O T  
S U R E W H E N  
S P E N D I N G  
S E V E N  
H O U R S O N  
A B I K E H A D  
S T O P P E D  
S O U N D I N G  
E P I C  
E N O U G H .**

was still hanging in. Suitably covered in mud, I had cruised through every water crossing and ridden through sections I'd seen tougher-looking riders walk. The sun was high over that endless Plains horizon, and my heat-addled thoughts turned, as they often do, to soft pretzels.

There would be no coasting in the last 25 miles of the race. I looked at the riders around me. What had started out as a cheerful gravel parade had begun to look more like a death march, even for us Half-Pinters.

I'm not sure when spending seven straight hours on a bike had stopped sounding epic enough. Was it the pressure of scrolling through so many Instagram photos of big, ambitious bike adventures that had made my own rides—even the five cross-country tours I've done—feel so pitiful? Was I comparing myself to my podium-worthy coworker in the 200-mile race, or spending too much time poring over other people's Strava rides that always seemed longer than my own? I swore to myself if I actually finished I would stop telling people I had “only” done the 100.

With 20 miles to go, the terrain had flattened out, but my dust-coated chain groaned with every pedal stroke like it was ready to give up on the race and start drinking. *Ad Astra per Aspera*, the text inked beneath the sunflower tattoo on my left arm reminded me. “To the stars, through difficulties.” It was my home-state motto and the only phrase that seemed to get at what it was like to be a gay kid from Kansas, always looking for any justification to keep going. I had gotten it two years earlier to reward myself for finishing another hard bike ride. I am drawn to the idea of pushing through something tough—like fighting to be yourself in a place where being different gets you pelted with rocks thrown from the windows of pickup

trucks. Or signing up for an ultra-endurance gravel race when you can't even operate a doorknob.

I crested the final hill into downtown Emporia and squeezed the bar tightly in my bad hand. The entire town had come out to cheer for finishers of the 200-mile race—and even my junior 100-mile version, which didn't feel so junior under the glare of that Kansas sun. This was it, after all those miles and hills and training rides. And when I crossed the finish line, I knew it was enough. **B**