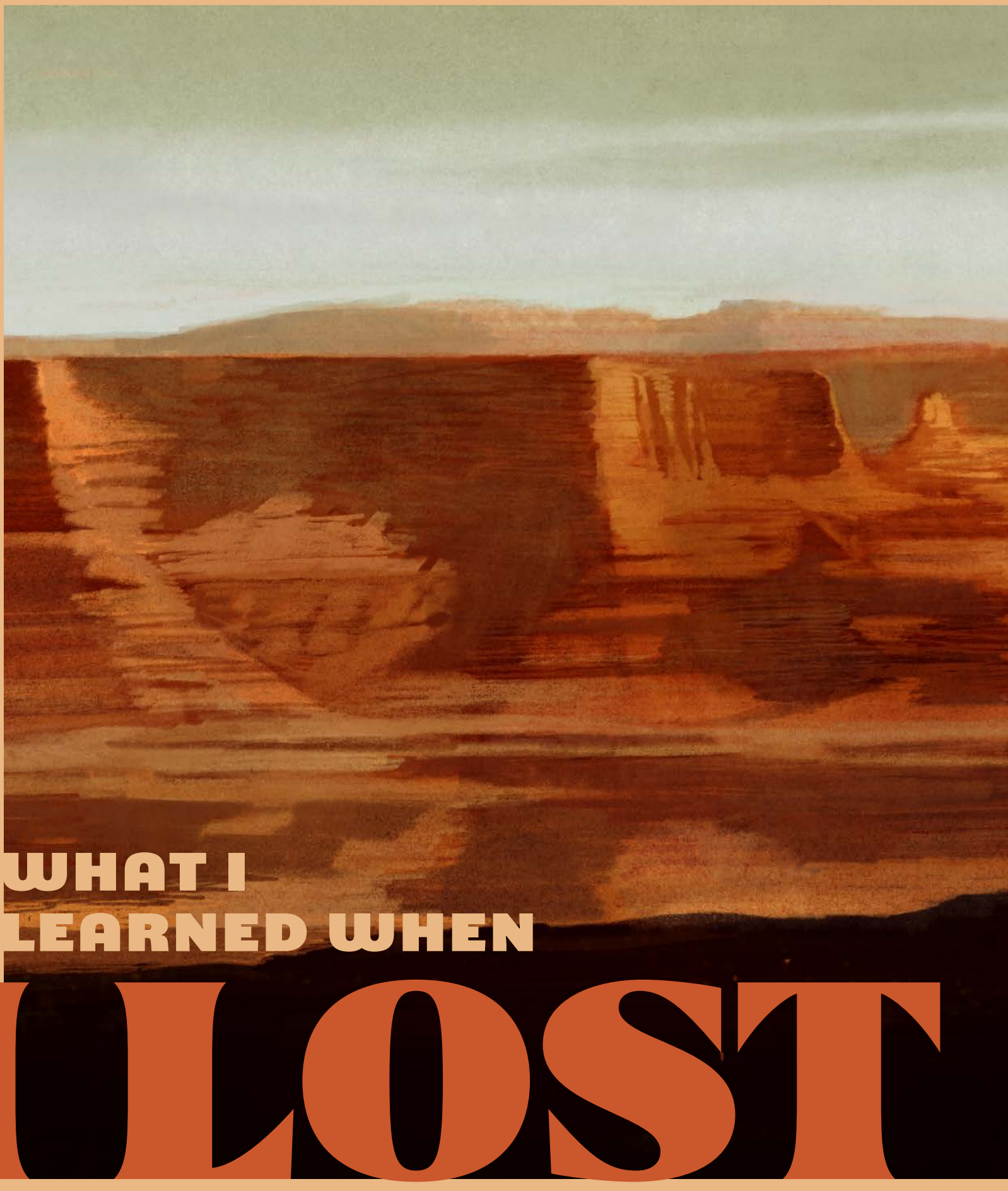
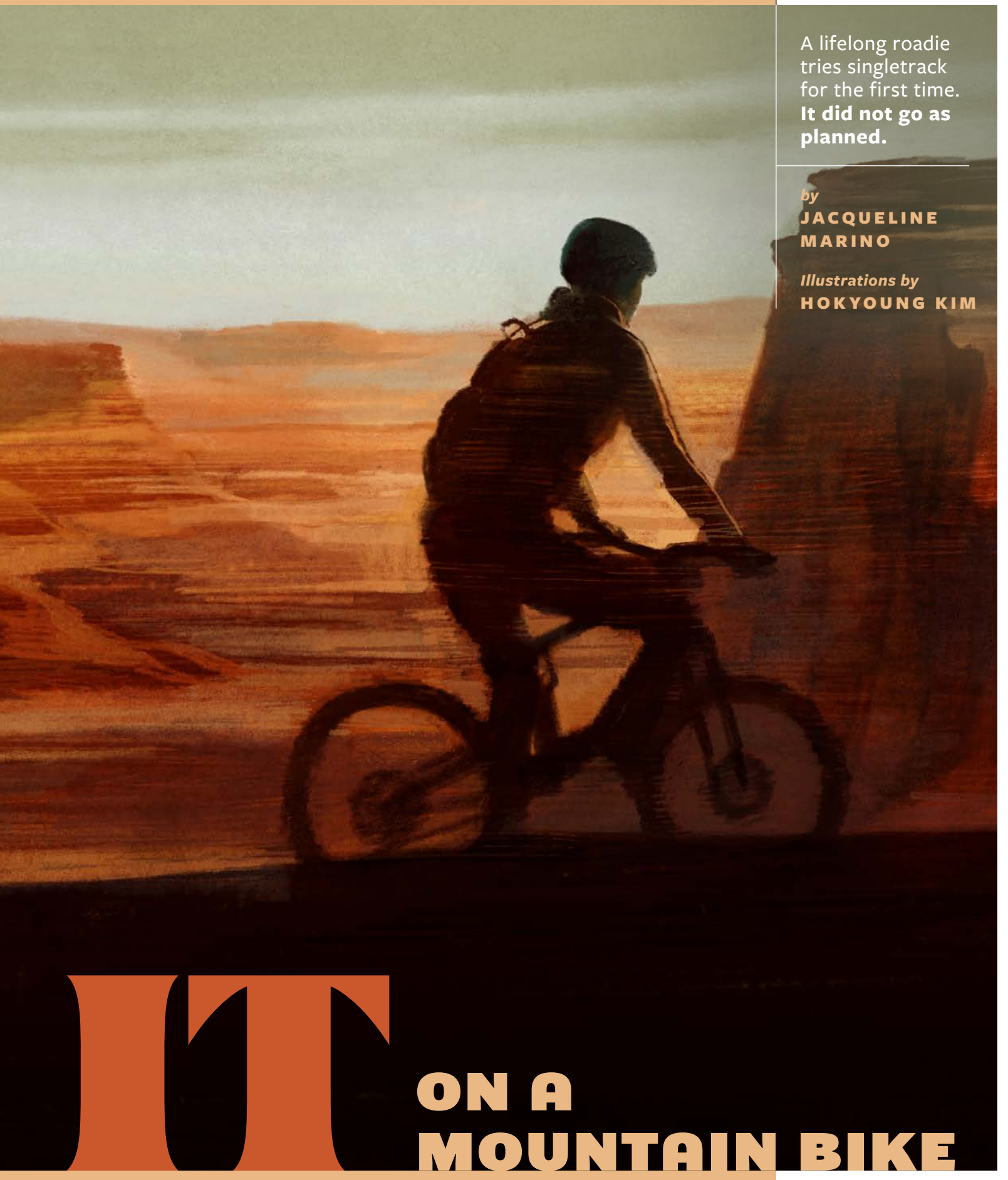


WHAT I LEARNED WHEN I LOST



IT ON A MOUNTAIN BIKE

A lifelong roadie tries singletrack for the first time. **It did not go as planned.**

by
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HOKYOUNG KIM

AT DEAD HORSE POINT STATE PARK, WHERE THE COLORADO RIVER CUTS THROUGH canyons 2,000 feet below, I stood at the Intrepid trailhead, trying to look like a mountain biker. My husband and I were on our first vacation without kids in nearly two decades, and we figured I could make it through the Raven Roll trail. Its "least difficult" ranking was marked by a little green dot on the map. I knew our ride would get more challenging on the Big Chief and Great Pyramid trails with their "more difficult" blue squares, but I figured the beauty of the mesa and the freedom from teenagers could inspire me through anything out there.

Our guide, Brooks Carter, gave us a quick lesson on how to ride the shiny Santa Cruz Hightowers on loan from his bike shop. I couldn't believe how comfortable the Hightower felt compared to my road bike back home. I admired its wide, deep-tread tires and had fun playing with its dropper seatpost. The ultrasensitive hydraulic disc brakes did require some getting used to, so we all practiced braking in the parking lot. After about 15 minutes, I felt ready for the trail.

Another newbie and I were to follow directly behind Brooks. In his 18th season as a guide, he was tanned, lithe, and perpetually smiling. At 76, his knowledge of the area—and mountain biking—was vast. He had helped design and construct trails nearby and modeled the relaxed confidence he advised us to adopt on the bike.

Within the first mile, I went from trying to relax to trying to stay vertical. We started pedaling over sand and quickly graduated to zooming over rocks, some of which felt like jagged boulders under my tires. I constantly fought the urge to brake. I couldn't get used to riding off the saddle like I was guarding someone on a basketball court. And I kept forgetting to keep my pedals level on descents to avoid hitting rocks.

Even when I was doing everything Brooks said to do, I kept thinking I would fall. The narrow singletrack was lined with prickly desert plants and rocks—not comfortable places to take a spill. I also worried about upsetting the cryptobiotic soil crusts that have adapted over hundreds of years to sustain life there.

After about 10 minutes on the trail, I did fall. I was scratched but fine, even relieved. *Now that I've fallen, I can stop worrying about falling,* I thought. I got back on my bike, but the fear intensified. I worried about every big rock, every change in elevation, even if it was just a few inches. *Will my bike make it over that rock? Should I swerve?* Sometimes there was no safe option, so I'd engage in split-second risk assessments. *Would it be less painful to get scraped by a bush or fall sideways at low speed?* I stopped suddenly and frequently, causing the riders behind me to stop too, risking a pile-up. When I started pedaling again, I couldn't keep momentum even though I knew momentum was the only thing that would get me through the trail.

"Pedal, pedal, pedal!" my husband yelled.

I swallowed the words I wanted to yell back at him.

I knew my overwhelming fear was more extreme than the situation demanded, but I couldn't take it down any notches. I wondered if my panic was making it more likely I'd fall. In *Nerve: Adventures in the Science of Fear*, author Eva Holland wondered the same thing while ice climbing with friends in remote northern British Columbia. She made it up the mountain but, on the way down, she imperiled both herself and the friends who helped her descend as the temperature dropped, and the light waned.

As Holland later researched what happened to her on that mountain, one study published in the *Journal of Vestibular Research* felt particularly true to her experience of acrophobia, or fear of heights. It suggested that excessive fear of falling made subjects too reliant on visual cues, including locking their heads in place instead of looking around at their surroundings, and made them more likely to fall than other people. She wrote, "a once rational response to a reasonable concern feeds on itself, growing and spreading to the point where I can hardly stand on a sturdy stepladder."

The confidence I had felt while zipping around the parking lot fell every time my body did. During one descent, I wasn't riding fast enough over a long, thick slab of rock, and my front tire skidded along its edge, causing me to crash onto the poor cryptobiotic soil crust, which may take years or even decades to recover.

I picked up my bike and shambled to the side of the trail, hoping no one could see the tears behind my sunglasses.

"Pass me, please!" I yelled to the group, my voice cracking. "I'm just going to walk my bike from here."

A few encouraged me to keep going. "You're doing great!" they lied as they passed. "You can do this!"

I just stood there, frozen in the desert heat, unable to stop crying.

Brooks made his way over to me from the front of the group.

"Are you injured?" he asked, still smiling, but sympathetically now.

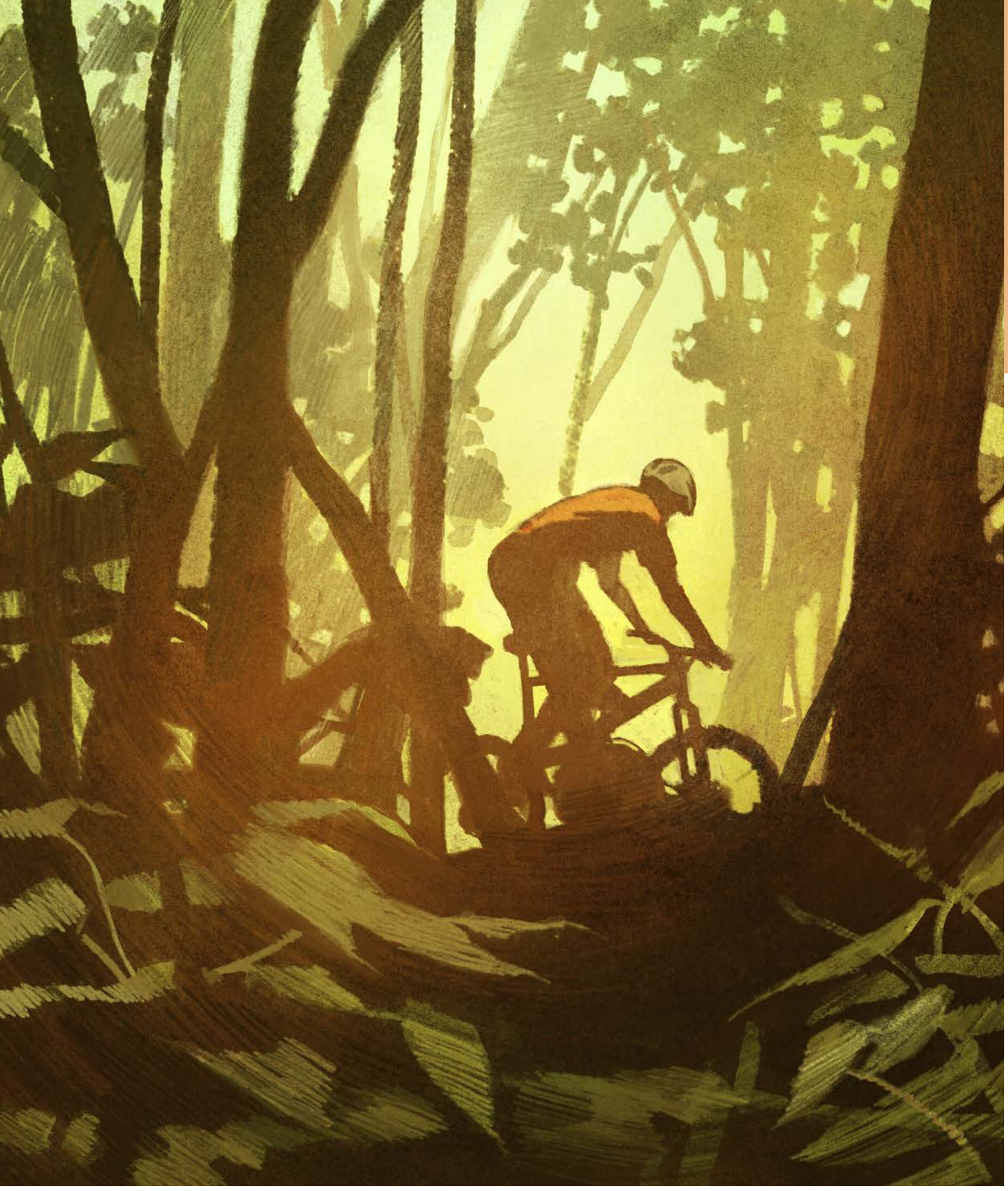
I muttered something about falling on my hip. I told him I was a fast bike walker and would keep up as best I could.

He told me to take my time.

"Sometimes you just need a good cry," he said.

What I needed was to get off that trail.

Brooks said we'd get to a shortcut soon. After another stretch of mostly bike-walking, he pointed my husband and me to the shortcut. We pedaled back to the parking lot where we waited for everyone else to finish their ride. I got off that beautiful bike with its unrealized potential



and leaned against a fence post.

I was baffled and ashamed that I had let fear force me off the trail. I've been riding bikes for nearly four decades, and I'm an outdoor sports enthusiast. Until now, I'd never let scrapes and bruises—or fear of getting injured—keep me from activities I enjoy. Once, I ripped the skin off my knuckles while riding through a too-narrow opening between beams on a bridge. I tipped my kayak in rapids. I tripped over roots on running trails. The natural high that comes with being outdoors, as well as challenging myself, offset any growing pains (and actual pain) these activities wrought.

I felt motivated to redeem myself. I got back on the bike and rode over to the map at the trailhead to scan it for another green-dotted trail. Then I felt something I'd never felt before on a bike: dread. The thought of getting back on any mountain bike trail made my breath quicken and my heart race. Before I could try mountain biking again, I had to figure out what went wrong.

Was my meltdown really about mountain biking? Or was it about not being able to handle my fear?

MOUNTAIN BIKERS LOVE TO TALK ABOUT FEAR. IN THE 2018 DOCUMENTARY, *Reverence: A Journey into Fear*, pro after pro opines on the subject before confronting it on some unbelievable run of rock, air, and speed. Their fears are as distinctive as the lines they take through the mountains. We see what they do on their bikes, and we hear what it takes for them to do it. Even with all their skill and experience, new challenges are a head game. One thinks he's having a panic attack. Another meditates. Freerider Matt MacDuff says, "Fear doesn't actually exist. Fear is a choice that you make."

Few people traverse the extreme edge of an extreme sport like those athletes do, but most of us are wired for fear. Whenever we sense a danger, real or perceived, the amygdala, a small structure deep inside the temporal lobe of the brain, triggers the hypothalamus, which puts into motion the "fight-or-flight" response of the sympathetic nervous system: the heart rate speeds up, the muscles tense, the breath shortens.

Some degree of fear isn't a bad thing on a mountain bike. "It blends a highly technical sport with an adrenaline sport, a very fast sport," says Jody Radtke, a licensed professional counselor who works with outdoor athletes in British Columbia. "There are very real potential impacts."

By the time I'd gone to Moab, I'd seen some of them. My husband has been mountain biking for 20 years and has come home from rides gashed, bruised, and otherwise battered. He has been seriously hurt twice. In 2015, he hit a tabletop jump with too much speed and crashed on the landing, shattering his collarbone. A surgeon put it back together with a steel rod and screws I can feel under his skin. A few years later, he clipped a rock with his pedal and skidded into a tree, separating his shoulder. The same doctor offered to operate "for cosmetic reasons" but assured him surgery wasn't necessary. The shoulder healed on its own, though an egg-sized knob now pokes up when he moves his left arm in certain ways.

Despite the inherent risks, mountain biking has plenty of mental health benefits. Authors of an article in the journal *Frontiers in Psychology* surveyed 1,484 mountain bikers, finding they "reported copious benefits to mental health and well-being" regardless of their age, gender, type of mountain biking, or other factors. Lead author Lisa Roberts, who now works as an occupational therapist for the National Health Service in the UK, said she was surprised to find that one in three respondents "recognized that they proactively already use mountain biking as a coping mechanism" for low-level stress, anxiety, and depression.

I've observed how this plays out with my husband. The harried, stressed-out guy who hits the trail after work is different than the one who comes back. After one or two hours of hard riding, he's relaxed and in a better mood. He says mountain biking gives his brain a rest—you can't think of anything else. There is no zoning out. To stay safe, you must focus on what you're riding and only on what you're riding.

Psychologists call this total immersion in one activity a state of "flow." There are many benefits to flow, including making people feel happier and more creative.

My husband and I pursue different pathways to the flow state. He likes to pedal right to the edge of what he can do, while I enjoy attention-consuming activities mostly devoid of danger. I kayak on mostly flatwater. I bike on paved trails. I run on the same few forest trails because I know where all the tricky roots, rocks, and drops are.

Over the past few years, I've increasingly gone out of my way to not feel afraid. I don't even like to get stressed. In my regular daily life, I'm a planner, a researcher, a worst-case-scenario considerer. I begin to wonder if my efforts to avoid fear all together have made me unable to handle even subtle shades of it. What I experienced in my first 10 minutes on that Moab trail was not life threatening, but I reacted as though it were. I wondered if my extreme fight-or-flight response might be signaling a problem with my mental health.

"You didn't have a mental health crisis out there," says Susan Sotir, PhD, a sports psychologist who coaches endurance athletes. "You had a skill imbalance and coping-choice blip. Your coping skills were not adequate to the situation because your skill set was being challenged to such a degree that it left you trying to be six feet in front of you and not where you were."

Sotir draws a link between stress and fear. It's likely, she says, that the strain of just getting to the trail intensified the fear I felt on the ride. My husband and I were tired from the flight and 5-hour drive through the Rocky Mountains. This was the first time we left our teenagers alone while we went on vacation. In addition to trying out this potentially dangerous, highly technical sport in one of the most challenging locations in the country, I was dealing with mom guilt.

"Stress doesn't have separate buckets," Sotir says. "We've got one bucket. And if that bucket is seven-eighths full of life stress, travel stress...then there's only one-eighth of that bucket left to carry all these other things."

Given this reality, it seems laughable that I thought 15 minutes of braking in the Moab parking lot was enough preparation. I should have practiced riding over some rocks first and asked questions about body positioning and turning. I should have watched some mountain-biking videos, researched the trail, and visualized myself pedaling successfully over the obstacles.

Before I tried mountain biking again, I would prepare better than I did the first time. If I felt afraid anyway, Sotir suggested using a strategy known as problem-focused coping, where you address the problem ("I can't do this!") to manage the fear ("I'm going to get hurt!"). I could examine all the actions I could take, everything from throwing the bike down and running away to riding on the wheel of someone who knows what they're doing. Switching the focus from my emotions and to the problem immediately lowers the temperature of the situation.

To get to the place where I can put one of these solutions in place, however, I would have to deal with my overactive sympathetic nervous system. To slow it down, I would first need to fix my breathing.

Inhale slowly, exhale slowly.

Tell the brain there's no problem in the body.

Broaden my base of support on the ground and rub my hands

together in a soothing self-massage.

Look around. Identify five things I see, three things I hear, one thing I can touch.

Quiet the inner noise. Then act.

I KNEW WHERE I WANTED TO TRY MOUNTAIN BIKING AGAIN: the New River Gorge in West Virginia. My husband and I had taken our girls there to whitewater raft, hike, and zipline before it became the country's newest national park in 2020. The Appalachian Mountains offer a different kind of riding than Moab's geologic wonders. And unlike with Moab, mountain biking is the reason for the trip.

To prepare, I watch how-to videos and visualize myself riding forest-trail obstacles, past overgrown branches, over muddy logs and sudden turns obscured by the trees. Sometimes, while falling asleep, I imagine I am pedaling up a steep bank of rocks, just about to fall, when I startle myself awake.

Another reason I choose the New River Gorge: I have already overcome fear there. In the summer of 2020, while I was ziplining from treetop to treetop, gravity failed to get me all the way across, and I found myself dangling high over the forest floor. I felt a sudden rush of fear, but it didn't paralyze me. I remembered the instruction to pull myself over to the platform where one of the guides waited. I looked up at the line, not down at the stories of empty space between me and the ground, and reeled myself in, one fistful of zipline after the other. I didn't melt down. I got through it, and then I went on another zipline.

The night before my lesson, I walk along a trail in the forest, studying roots and rocks like the ones I'd ride over the following day. At an overlook, I watch the mud-brown New River, one of the oldest in the world, rushing through the gorge. The air is wet. Ghost wisps of fog curl under the largest single-arch bridge in the Western Hemisphere. Listening to the competing sounds of traffic and rushing river, I try to prepare myself for the one thing I can't control: the weather.

It rains—and rains hard—that night. Rain in this part of Appalachia is expected and unpredictable in July. I don't have any mountain-bike nightmares, only because I don't sleep much.

The next morning, I drive to the Arrowhead Bike Farm, where I have a 10 a.m. lesson scheduled with Aspen Handy, the 26-year-old mountain bike program director. Aspen is still in her camper when I arrive, so I walk around the farm, an eclectic place that's part-agritourism outpost, part-hipster paradise. The sign out front reads "Food-Bikes-Beer-Goats!" You can camp, rent a bike, and learn to mountain bike there. You can also have a beer and a brat and pet goats there.

Co-owner and general manager Phil Waidner tells me the bike farm used to be an old, dilapidated house with a horse pasture. Its original owners opened it as a small campground, snack shop, and bike shop with rental bikes in 2015. The first employee, Rickey Scott, was a farmer who put the "farm" in the business's name. In addition to

People love mountain biking because there's always another challenge, another limit to push.

FEAR ISN'T THE ENEMY WITH THIS SPORT; IT'S THE BEACON.

growing vegetables, he kept goats, pigs, and other animals on the property. There's now a memorial to Rickey on one wall. Shortly before he died, they got rid of all the animals but the goats, a "fan favorite." The business has grown over the years. The snack shop became a biergarten. Waidner came aboard in 2017 to run the bike program, which expanded into a full-service shop in March 2020. One day after their grand opening party, they shut down because of Covid. When the bike farm reopened a few weeks later, they were flooded with patrons who wanted to try mountain biking and enjoy the outdoor dining.

Waidner is originally from Indiana. A certified instructor in mountain biking, skiing, and climbing, he's worked in outdoor education across the country, as well as in China and Bolivia, and taught people of all ages, backgrounds, and fear levels. In 2014, he moved to West Virginia to manage the mountain bike, BMX, skateboard, and ATV camps for the Boy Scouts' Summit Bechtel Reserve.

When I tell him about my Moab meltdown, he is unfazed. Even though I've been riding bikes most of my life, he says I need to remember I'm a beginner at mountain biking.

"A lot of us learn how to ride a bike as kids, but we didn't necessarily learn some really basic fundamentals that are just so important for riding a mountain bike," he says. Things like proper body positioning, keeping the pedals level, and looking where you want to go.

Just listen to Aspen, he advises. And if you don't want to do something, ask to do something else. "There's no judgement here," he says. "There should be no judgment anywhere."

Aspen and I begin on the pump track adjacent to the goats, just beyond a colorful fence made of old bicycles. The red-and-yellow Trek Marlin 7 costs several thousand dollars less than the bike I rode in Moab but feels just as comfortable—or maybe I'm just in a better headspace. Aspen wears shorts and a shirt with the farm's logo—a pig riding a bike—on it, several small silver hoops in her ears and nose and a string necklace looped around its makeshift charm, part of a bike chain. Like me, Aspen is from Ohio, where she grew up biking to places and didn't get her driver's license until she was 19. At Ohio University, she double majored in outdoor education and psychology, and she draws from both fields regularly in her job here and at Snowshoe, where she's a ski instructor in the winter. From her work experiences, she is constantly coming up with ideas for TED Talks. She actually enjoys working with new mountain bikers who have a lot of fear.

"Getting people to feel less nervous is just the kind of person I am," she says. "I feel like I see behind people's walls.... I'm always blasting motivational quotes out of my mouth. That can be cringy and annoying to some people, but some people really vibe that way."

On the muddy pump track, puddles have formed on the grass from all the rain. I put the bike into an easy gear just to pedal through it. We start with basic stuff, positioning, which I already learned in Moab. Then she throws half of a PVC pipe on the ground and shows me how to ride over it. *That's easy*, I think, and it is. I don't feel any fear until the next obstacle, a bumpy, three-foot-long rock shaped like the African continent, resting on a slight incline.

Again, she demonstrates. Before pedaling back to where she started, I repeat what I saw her do out loud: get momentum, keep pedals level, ready stance (butt off the saddle, arms bent, chest low). I keep my eyes fixed on the smooth side of the rock and roll over it easily.

"Once more, so I can get it on video," she offers. I am bursting with pride.

Unfortunately, the pride is short-lived. It takes me about an hour to successfully ride through a few more obstacles: a flat area with three rocks that range in dimension from a few inches vertical to more than a foot horizontal, a short drop, a rock garden, and a skinny plank of wood perched on a log like a teeter-totter. I watch Aspen go over each of them effortlessly.

When I feel anxious, I get off the bike. I inhale slowly and exhale slowly. I feel the ground under my feet. I look at the oblivious goats.

"Try yelling something," Aspen suggests. Yelling is a way to get out the nervous energy. An overthinker herself, she yells "no brakes!" when cruising toward a difficult obstacle. I try yelling "level pedals!" but it just seems like one more thing to remember to do.

Aspen makes me go over an obstacle several times, even if I get it once. I don't fall. I only suffer a minor injury, on the teeter-totter when my foot slips off the pedal, and it nails me on the shinbone. The pain isn't too bad, but I feel tired, more emotionally than physically.

We have about 30 minutes left when Aspen declares me ready for a trail in the park. She offers to extend the lesson for however long we need to get through it. And, since the New River Gorge has become a national park, that could be a while. Even on a muggy summer weekday, the beginner trail will be crowded.

No judgement, I think, recalling Waidner's words.

I tell her I don't think I'm up for it. Is there a shorter, less-populated trail nearby?

She says she has just the place, a little trail on the property that's "great for the youth and for more timid people, or people who are from Ohio or Florida."

I follow her past the goats to a short loop that has a sharp turn, a log, a moderate uphill climb, many slippery roots, muddy parts, puddles, and low-hanging tree branches.

It's perfect.

I follow her but still too slowly. What I expect to be the hardest thing—the log—I ride easily all three times we do the trail. The turn is easy the first time, and I miss it the second. I handle a mud-covered rock the second time but not the first or the last. I feel the best on the climb but must get off the bike on the downhill twice. The whole loop takes about five minutes. At the end of our third go, we see a young buck in the woods, its antlers still covered with velvet. Unlike the goats, he watches us.

Aspen says she's proud of me for getting out of my comfort zone. She wants me to work on not overthinking, stressing again that my skills are there.

"Our brains are lying to us most of the time," says the psychology major in the mountain bike coach. "But it just takes experience in doing it more and more and memorizing the trail you're on to feel more comfortable."

As I collect my thoughts in the farm's restaurant, The Handle Bar + Kitchen, I reassess whether comfort should be my goal. I'm already comfortable running, kayaking, and road biking. Mountain biking is different. People love it because there's always another challenge, another limit to push. Fear isn't the enemy with this sport; it's the beacon. Even though I'll never attempt feats like the pros or even moderately dangerous things like my husband does, at the bike farm, I've come closer to finding the fun in fear.

I don't have to look like I know what I'm doing. I can just ride at my own pace, on beginner trails, for as long as it takes. When I overcome my fear there, I know I'll be able to find it again. There's always fear in mountain biking. Now I know that's something to celebrate.

I look for Aspen, excited to share this new idea for a TED Talk, but she's already gone on another ride, this one with friends.

I close my eyes, imagining her on some gnarly course that gets her amygdala firing, and I send her a silent wish.

No brakes! **B**