

Vortices

After a lifetime of riding I still kind of suck at mountain biking. I'm good enough to speed down black-diamond trails, but I fall a lot. I fall all the time. I've had multiple head wounds, contusions, slashed shins, and handlebars to the gut. *So. Much Blood.* When I'm on my bike, slowly grinding up an impossibly steep trail, I question my life choices. *Why am I doing this to myself?*

My mountain bike friends are the kind of women who work out every day. No matter how often I ride with them, I can never keep up. They are marathon runners and ex-college-athletes. Just when I start to get a little better – so do they. Bea is a head taller than me and was a nordic skiing state champion in high school. Andrea lifts weights and climbs steep slippery pitches on her bike as if she were on a flat road.

Once, after a particularly grueling climb in 90 degree heat and 80% humidity, Bea exclaimed, without having broken a sweat, “What a great active rest day!” Andrea nodded in agreement.

Active rest day. “Fuck you, Bea,” I muttered. She and Andrea cackled, finding me funny. But I wasn't being funny. That climb destroyed me.

Last October, I looked away from the trail for the slightest moment, and a jagged rock below a carpet of red and gold leaves tossed me. I flew over the handlebars of my mountain bike, end-over-end; that's “endo” in mountain bike speak. My body slapped against the ground, like a mosquito beneath a fly-swatter. A poof of leaves and dust fluttered up around me.

Stunned and flattened against the dirt, I gasped for air and stared up through the tree branches – orange leaves against a bright blue sky. Leaning against my bike for support, I hobbled down the remainder of the trail. I pulled my bike over logs, across stream crossings, and dragged myself out of the woods. Somehow, despite the stabbing pain in my gut, I still marveled at the leaves – so beautiful, but so deadly. When I reached my car, I caught my reflection in the window. My helmet was crooked and leaves were stuck in my hair, falling loose from its braid.

A few weeks later, with three broken ribs, I reluctantly went on a mountain biking trip to Sedona with Andrea and Bea. Sedona is famous for its beautiful and difficult mountain biking, with other-worldly views of brick-red buttes against bluebird skies. Riders can enjoy climbing over rocks along the edges of canyons for miles and miles. *Great.*

Sedona is also famous for its mystical vortices. Visiting a vortex appealed to me – much more than mountain biking with broken ribs. Vortices are places on earth where the energy is entering into the earth or “projecting out of the earth’s plane,” I learned. There are four major vortices in Sedona: Cathedral Rock, Boynton Canyon, Bell Rock, and Airport Vortex.

I envisioned sitting in a vortex with crystals in my hand, the universe unveiling itself, revealing answers to questions I didn’t know I had. I could stand in a vortex, its beauty and wonder washing away the pain and struggle of everyday life. And... bonus... I wouldn’t have to do as much mountain biking.

One more friend, Sara, joined us on the trip. She had recently broken her ankle for the second or third time in as many years, and was on crutches. I knew this wouldn't slow her down much. Her ankle was literally always broken, but, like Bea and Andrea she was a powerhouse athlete.

One year on a trip to Moab, Sara (with a broken ankle, obviously) rode with me along a famously technical trail, full of sharp rocks and tight corners on the precipice of a canyon looking thousands of feet down to the Colorado River. It always sounds badass to say "While I was mountain biking... *in Moab*." But in reality, I walk my bike over half of the scary features. Not Sara.

"You wanna stop and rest?" I asked every twenty feet or so on that trip.

"Absolutely not." We pressed on and on, pounding on the bike pedals, Sara's ankle brace be damned.

But in Sedona, our injuries couldn't be ignored. Instead of riding our bikes on the edge of a high-consequence thousand-foot cliff, Sara and I decided to do easy hike to Cathedral Rock. Maybe we might experience the magic of the vortex. Luckily for us, most of the path turned out to be flat and groomed with gravel—hardly a hike, really just a walk in the desert. We saw old people, pregnant ladies, and people like Sara, on crutches.

We weren't concerned with our injuries—but we were worried about *javelinas*, the small pigs that roam the desert, sometimes in small groups, and sometimes on their own. Javelinas will attack hikers – especially unsuspecting tourists. We talked about them obsessively.

They are relatively large - the size of small boar. They have sharp teeth that protrude from their dark, wide mouths. Fangs, basically. They are covered in coarse hair, and when provoked, they raise their hackles, making them look even more monstrous.

Sara hobbled along on her crutches, and I rubbed my ribs painfully through my grubby tee shirt. There was a sudden jab in my gut – my broken rib caused me to gasp in pain.

“What? What is it?” Sara asked seriously. “Did you see a javelina?”

“No, no. Don't worry. I's just my broken ribs. No javelinas, thank god.” I resisted the urge to complain about my ribs, seeing as how she never complained, ever, about her chronic injuries.

But then I heard a twig snap, and felt steps behind me. *Javelina?* I looked over my shoulder and there was only red sand and cacti, the sun beating down on us against a perfect turquoise sky.

I constantly asked Sara how her ankle felt and she constantly asked me about my rib. We sounded like two old ladies. Were we old ladies? Mid-forties isn't old... or is it?

We stopped at lookout, and I took photos of cacti, and the rocks, and the views of brick-colored mesas and canyon vistas. We simply stood, silently, absorbing the moment. I jumped at the sound of crunching gravel – was it a javelina? No, just an elderly couple coming up behind us on the trail.

As we bumbled along, it became apparent that the vortex was a tourist trap. There was absolutely nothing spiritual about families dressed in matching tee shirts that read “I’m with stupid.”

We reached the top of the trail, which looked out across Sedona, a firey red and burnt orange desert view. *Tatooine in real life*. Only populated by fifth-grade field trips and old-people church outings.

Sitting cross-legged on a rock, basking in the warm sunlight, Sara asked, “Do you feel it working?” She closed her eyes and scrunched red sand between her fingers, trying to feel mystical.

I sat down next to her and closed my eyes too. “Maybe. What if we wake up tomorrow and all our ailments are healed?”

“I’d like that,” Sara said, taking a pull from her inhaler. “And maybe there will be no fear of javelinas.”

“I’d like that too,” I said.

On that trip, I hiked each of Sedona's four major vortices: Cathedral Rock, Boynton Canyon, Bell Rock, and Airport Vortex. I began understand the significance of each, why so many people are drawn to these places, and what it means for a place to have "energy." Each vortex was a little different - a rock bridge at one, an arch to peek through at another. A canyon to look upon. At each vortex, if I tried hard enough, I felt the energy. But still, all of them were crawling with tourists—and probably some javelinas.

At one vortex, a dozen people stood crowded on the precipice of a canyon in order to get a good photo for Instagram. I was sure someone was going to fall into the abyss. There were small children toddling around and even a tiny unleashed long-haired chihuahua, clambering on the sheer edge. The resulting anxiety I felt surpassed any joy I may have gained from this otherworldly setting. I did not want to see a tiny Chihuahau fall to its death, like a miniature Wiley Coyote.

The final vortex, the aptly named Airport Vortex, was the only hike my overly-athletic friends and I did together, all four of us. We carried a soggy paper bag full of beers with us, the crowded trail eroded from all the heavy foot traffic and littered with cigarette butts and bits of snack wrappers. It was decidedly un-spiritual. I doubted I would have any kind of healing experience there.

And then, it happened. A javelina stood right there, in the middle of the trodden trail. If this javelina was looking for the place with the most people to bite, this was it.

Bea shouted at it, and it simply stood there, glaring at us, and then it walked off into the cacti.

Holy shit.

Stunned and grateful to be alive, there was nothing else to do but pick our way through the tourists to the top. The Airport Vortex turned out to be a cell tower surrounded by chain-link fencing, overlooking... you guessed it... the airport. *Of course it was a cell phone tower.* Maybe it was a mystical cell tower, but probably not. It jutted up into the desert sky, among the first evening stars.

We sat down in the dirt on the west side of the chain-link and drank our beers. We stared stared silently as the sun began to set.

As I watched the blue sky change to golden yellow, then orange, then red, I imagined my broken ribs knitting themselves back together, a little bit at a time. As the last glimpse of the sun sank below the horizon, I took deep breaths, letting the air out slowly. I looked at each of my friends, one at a time. Sara sat in the sand with one knee bent and her injured leg out straight, elevated on a rock. Andrea tipped her head back and laughed loudly, as Bea told a story, hands gesturing wildly. I smiled. *I love these people.* Then we headed back down the mesa in the fast-fading sunlight.

By the time I returned home from the trip, the seasons had changed and the weather had turned icy. It was early November in Vermont, heading into what we call “stick season.” Nothing could be more bleak than the grey skies and barren trees at that time of year.

I didn’t bother washing the desert sand off my bike when I wrapped it up for winter storage. Partly I was still mad at my bike for the broken rib, so I didn’t care to take any extra time with it. But secretly, I held on to a seed of an idea that maybe, just maybe, the mystical sand of Sedona would sink into the bike and give me better luck next season.

Maybe next spring, next season, the next time I rode my bike, my time in the vortices would give me some peace, and maybe, if I was really lucky, I would never see another javelina again.