

the red dress

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Image: Chris Smith.

Lillie is wearing a red dress. Not any red dress—a red pinafore-style dress that is meant to invoke Heidi of Swiss legend. The costume is the kind you buy for a sexy Halloween party: the skirt is way too short, the bodice is a little tight. Lillie’s hair is fixed into two braids. The braids are tied with red ribbons. Underneath the dress, she is wearing an Assos kit. When she stands to climb, the skirt and petticoat swish side to side rhythmically. When she descends, it flaps behind her angrily.

The Alpenbrevet is serious business—a small and predictably masochistic cycling sportive in the Swiss Alps. Lillie and I are riding the Gold Loop with her friends Chris and Heather. By the end of the day we’ll have ridden over four mountain passes in 172 kilometers, for a total elevation gain of 5,294 meters. I am here on a trip with Brevet Alpine Cycling Adventures, and this ride is the main event. A few of the men from my Brevet group are attempting the Platin loop, which features an extra mountain pass for five total, bringing the distance up to 276 km, with an accumulated elevation of 7,031 meters. In total, 2,444 participants from 32 nations are winding their way slowly up sadistically steep Swiss grades.

At the pointy end of this race (for those that are treating it as a race), there are gristle-muscled fellows who look like they could really stand to eat a sandwich or two, and they are gunning up the mountains trying to hurt each other good. There is some glory involved, though it is mostly the unofficial variety. Guys have been training for this ride for months. This is the target race. The big show. The Swiss are serious about their cycling. Seriously serious. I guarantee you that Lillie Croft is the only entrant wearing a costume.

Lillie looks good, in a hot deranged cat lady kind of way—and she’s riding well. Then we hit Susten Pass.

The Unraveling

Here is what is known about Susten Pass: 17.4 kilometers long, 7.5% average gradient, tops out at 2,264 meters, will take an average climber about 2 hours. It is special but not that special—a pass in the Alps like many others. It winds its way up a green valley that funnels into a point very far in the horizon. Through the clouds you can probably see the top. Don’t get too excited, though, because you might not actually ever get there. That’s how it feels, anyway.

It is the final climb of the Alpenbrevet. Depending on whether you’ve done the Gold or Platin route, you hit the bottom of Susten Pass with about 3,600 to 5,600 meters of climbing already in your legs. Either way, you’re basically cashed—and so is everyone else.

It’s the kind of cycling fatigue that dreams are made of: grown men napping in the fetal position next to their bikes on the side of the road, riders turning the pedals over so slowly their very ability to remain balanced defies the basic laws of physics. Shoulders hunched, backs rounded, elbows locked, legs making chopping motions, mouths agape. Squares where circles should be. The collective question floating above our heads in a cartoonish thought bubble (yes, we are hallucinating): “*Why are we doing this?*”



Images: Swift.

“Behind us, Lillie is shattering.”

Maybe it's because shared suffering relieves us somehow from the suffocating sameness we've chosen for everyday life. Maybe it's because self-imposed suffering is something that controls us a little without requiring us to ever really be out of control. Or maybe it's because we just really like to look at mountains with big, bloody heartbeats thumping inside our skulls.

Whatever it is, there are hundreds of us now spread out along the long road to the summit. Riders watching the cycling computer, staring at the top tube, performing mathematic calculations (that suddenly seem incredibly complex) related to when they might actually find themselves standing in a hot shower, promising never, ever, ever to do this again—a promise they will almost assuredly break within a matter of weeks, if not days. Most of them are silent. Heather, Chris and I are chatting, telling stories about other rides, the way you do.

Behind us, Lillie is shattering. We felt her drop off, but it's that point in a 172-kilometer ride when you just have to keep the pedals spinning at your own rhythm. We've agreed to stop at the halfway point to wait for our pinafore princess. At some point we can no longer see her through the curves. At 8.7 kilometers there is a grass patch and a convenient scattering of chair-like rocks, so we set our bikes down and reach into our pockets to discover what's there.

The Warm Up

The day had started hours ago (nine hours ago, in fact) in a little village named Meiringen where the race departed at 6:45 a.m. in the hushed inky blue pre-dawn. I couldn't find anyone from my group, so I waited in the middle of the throng until there was a noise and then a cheer and then the clicking and murmuring sound of a few thousand nervous cyclist's clipping in.

The road went up. Some people went backward, some went forward. We settled in. We were quiet and anxious. We tried to find a rhythm. The first pass was a beast named Grimsel that featured a relatively tame 5.6% gradient, but went on and on for 26 kilometers.

The warm up, I thought. Good morning, legs.

Switzerland is a small country with landscapes that press in around you insistently. The mountains are imminent, urgent, towering and dramatic. They look as impressive as

they feel. They spare no time gaining altitude. The valleys wind between them with bucolic grace. The beauty borders on obnoxious. The effect of smashing so many mountains into such a small country is that the scenery manages simultaneously vast and compact. Efficient vistas. Very Swiss.

Grimsel is no different. Rough rock faces shoot skyward to our left, moody morning clouds gather near peaks, fading slowly into sun. By the top my legs are finally warm and the previously angry quads have decided they are willing to really, really ride the bicycle. Among the energy drinks and water jugs I find a man standing behind a large, metal container that appears to contain steaming liquid. I take a cup of it and sip: bouillon. Hot and salty. Brilliant.

Down on the other side of the pass I find Raphael in the Brevet van, so I can stash leg warmers, snag sunscreen and eat my fill of chocolate, cheese and Coke. Eat early, eat often as they say. I sit on the bumper doing calculations in my head and realize that there is no way I'll make the first time cut to get onto the Platin route, so I am going to have to settle for Gold. I know that Lillie, Heather and Chris are headed for this loop as well, so I decide to wait in the car for them so I can continue on in good company.

We eventually head off together and I notice Heather has the course profile taped to the top tube of her bike. "It's been there for three years," she said, "That's how long I've wanted to finish this damn ride."

"I hear you don't like climbing." I say.

"Ha! Nope."

"Me neither," I reply.

"So why are we here?" she asks.

"I'm sure we'll find out later."

Nufenen

My Swiss friend Simon warns me about this pass. "Nufenen is an asshole," he says flatly. Simon is a former pro downhill mountain bike racer with the body of a sprinter and a quiet, conservative (Swiss) appreciation for long rides and good cider.

He's right. The pass is only 12.3 kilometers long, but the average gradient is 8.5% with 4 or 5 kilometers above 10%.

Image: Swift.





It's hot when we hit it. I drop my camera and it breaks. Nufenen is an asshole—a beautiful, switchback-ey asshole.

But it leads to a summit where there is bouillon, cheese and bread, followed by a screaming descent into Ariolo where Tom Eeles, the owner of Brevet, is waiting with another feed. The rest of the men on his trip have been coming through fast, stopping only long enough to refill bottles or stuff food into pockets—they're chasing time goals or personal bests. We're not chasing anything except snacks—and some resolution for that pesky course profile that has been taped to Heather's bike for three years.

We stop for a long time and chat. We lean our bikes against the van and sit down. We are setting new records for resting time. It's like the longest, hardest coffee shop ride in the history of cycling. We're party-izing this death march.

Gotthard

Cobbles. Gotthard Pass is sometimes called the Paris-Roubaix of the Alps, though the cobbles are in fact much kinder than that. The road climbs at a steady average of 7.4%, and from the top you can look down and watch the switchback spaghetti spilling down the mountain.

Because climbing cobbled roads is not hard enough, Switzerland throws a headwind at us. I am cobble-powered.

My kill ratio goes up as I pass rider after rider. People are starting to get tired: heads hanging, shoulders pinched. Lillie and Heather are climbing well. Chris is busy taking photos, doing intervals up the length of the climb to set up a shot here or there and then get ahead of the girls again. Did I mention Chris is carrying all of their extra layers, too? We have nicknamed him the Sherpa.

I follow a tiny blond-haired girl with long, tan legs in rolled-up cycling shorts. She carries a fairly large hydration pack and is riding a road bike with flat bars. She is not an official participant so she's packed all of her own supplies. She tells me a story about the time she did this climb and got 2 kilometers from the top but the road was unrideable due to snowfall. She walked the rest of the way. "I had to get to the other side somehow," she says, shrugging. I tell her about the time I tried to ride up the dirt road on the backside of Mt. Lemmon when a storm was blowing in. In this manner, story after story, we get to the top of Gotthard. Then I stop to take a photo with my phone and lose her.

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You know it's a long ride when your friend turns to you and says, "Almost done, just three more hours." That's the feeling when we cross over the timing mat at the bottom of Susten Pass. Just one more climb. One more two-hour climb. No problem.

Images: Swift.



So there we are, halfway up the climb where we'd agreed to stop, sitting on the chair-like rocks emptying the contents of our pockets into our mouths when we finally get worried that something bad has happened to Lillie. We send Chris the Sherpa back down the mountain to have a look and a few minutes later they appear together.

"Found her!" Chris is smiling.

"Can't stop right at this moment," Lillie says. She's glassy-eyed but determined. We hop back on the bikes and take off after her.

During the rest stop I'd managed to fix my flakey headphones, so I cranked A\$AP Rocky as loud as it would go and found a medium-fast cadence. As I went by Lillie I screamed, "VISION QUEST!" And she laughed, god bless 'er.

Susten is not the typical hairpin-fabulous Alpine pass: it's long and straight-ish, with a clear view of where you're headed. There is one curve that Chris referred to as "the turn," when you hook gently to the right and then the entirety of the remaining 4 or 5 kilometers of climbing unravels up the hill in front of you. It's kind of beautiful, but you kind of want to die at the same time. Today there are clouds moving in and the sun

rays to the left are doing battle with them, making fat tubes of light that illuminate the riders ahead of me.

The top arrives in agonizing fashion, and the final payout is a pitch-black tunnel that leads to the rest stop where volunteers and organizers are dashing to their vehicles to extract warm layers and waterproof shells. People are wrapping up in garbage bags and resting against the side of the rock wall where the wind is just a tiny bit less punishing. I take my final bouillon and stand next to the cheese table eating hunk after hunk until I start to feel like I might get sick. Then Chris and I begin what is probably the most enjoyable descent of my life—20 km of impeccable road surface, intermittent hairpin turns, straight open sections for picking up speed and wide, soft, no-brakes turns. The temperature rises with every kilometer and at the bottom we find a slab of concrete that is still sun-warmed and I lay down like a lizard to warm up while we wait for the girls.

We ride across the finish line four abreast and then roll to the red Brevet clubhouse where there are beers and glory stories waiting to be shared. Lillie puts her bike down and lays face down in the road where we have circled the chairs. Her cheek is against the concrete, helmet still on, and I can hear her whispering, "Beer!" so I put one in her hand and take a picture.