

THE CLIMBING LIFE

A Map of the Heart

IN WIND RIVER COUNTRY, geography gives me vertigo. As I ride my loaded bicycle past the point of achy knees and tingling fingers, I keep anticipating a long descent that never comes. Horizons this wide don't make sense to me if I'm not cresting a hill. Instead of the whirring ride down that I keep wishing for, I get roadside antelope that waver on grassy plains; prairie dogs that perch on flat ground, their tiny front paws held as though in prayer. The swoop of a hawk leaves me in so much awe that I nearly cycle into traffic. Julian's tires weave on either side of the white line as he points up at the bird. His bike sags to the left under the weight of its panniers, and a car's horn blares too close. After days on the highway, I've come to know that we are on a plateau, but my heart still flutters as though I were on the brink of a precipice.

I feel weighed down by the enormity of the trip that Julian and I have undertaken: a bicycle-powered linkup of dozens of alpine peaks from Wyoming to northern British Columbia that will span over 4,000 miles. Maps littered my kitchen table until they became sun-bleached under the window. If you'd asked how prepared I felt, I'd laugh and look away. During my first climb of the summer, I glance down on a field of mule's ears, waist-high nearly, dense and yellow. Hours before, their soft leaves had tickled my ankles as I uncoiled the rope with undue hesitation. Now I am 200 feet above the meadow, yet it has taken me more than 300 miles of cycling in the rain, 68 miles of hiking through mostly thigh-deep snow, and 13,000 feet of bicycling uphill to arrive at this dry crack. I still doubt whether I deserve the grip of stone on the back of my hands. Although I'm following Julian on this pitch, I still feel the five-month-old memory of a ledge fall in my still-sore ankle.

As I scan the broken ledge system above, I feel my shoulders clench. After the accident, during the months I trained for this trip, I had panic attacks on every route I scaled. What I used to experience as the pleasure of movement became a pastiche of ragged breath, heart palpitations, held-back tears. With each staccato



beat in my chest, I imagine a new iteration of disaster: this is the edge that will prove coarse enough to sever the rope above me; this is the chockstone that will shatter from my weight; this is the next ledge that I will hit; the pain will be worse this time. I can picture how the quartz dust will sparkle in the breeze, its particles splintered off the cliff by the rockfall that will crush me. When I run out of ideas for how this climb could ruin me, I can move incrementally higher. All the time I spent looking at road maps has convinced me that accomplishing what I set out to complete—even if my trip is arbitrary or absurd—is my only route to courage. I keep going.

My ankle twitches with pain when I twist it into the crack, but I push up anyway. The sun had burned when we reached the base of the route. Now, the sky is ruddied like an old bruise. I feel the first raindrop on my nose as I lurch higher. Moss grows in the puddled divots inside the crack, padding the roots of unfamiliar blue spruce saplings. I am not from here. The needles prick my fingers. Lightning cracks in the periphery of my vision, and I pause to count: "One, two, three, four." The thunder

bangs too close. I wonder if the tingling feeling in the nape of my neck is fear or electricity. Before I climb another ten feet, lightning strikes the opposite rim of the canyon. The rock beneath me glitters for a moment as if a hundred candle lights are flickering in the breeze.

Such overwhelming fear can transform into profound concentration. In a 2017 *Nautilus* article by Samantha Larson, University of Michigan neuroscientist Kent Berridge called this heightened state of awareness "the shimmering back and forth of desire and dread." I remember that I am supposed to like climbing. I try to recall that delicious feeling of levity that I came here for—to will away the feeling of impending doom. Berridge's research shows that whether dopamine (a neurotransmitter associated with motivation) helps cause terror or longing depends on the environment. Under my numb fingers, the older rock bands in the batholith gleam red as they dampen. I grab another spruce too tightly, and it slices my skin. The climb is a mirror.

Do I want to feel fear or love here? I offer up the warm cavern of my body, the self-doubt that makes my heel bounce, and the trembling of my face, dark in the shadow of the storm that booms all around me.

I reach wildly for anything on the invisible other side of the arête. My hand finds a familiar softness: a whitebark pine. Its long, flexible, five-needled fascicles are unmistakable. Years before, when I worked as a naturalist guide in the Eastern Sierra, I taught my students that they would always know the *Pinus albicaulis* by how friendly it felt, pliant in your grasp as if you were grabbing on to the hand of a dear one. I hold on to the branch for the duration of a long exhale. The weight of my panic, the electric feeling in the nape of my neck, the months and miles and tired knees that brought me here: the heaviness vanishes all at once. The soft wood bends in my fingers. Here is a friend. And so, here is OK. I could be here. I could be happy here.

The anchor is within sight now. The climb will end soon. I can keep going. I pull my body over the edge, and I find Julian crouched in the crook of another whitebark, its many limbs sheltering him from the now-falling hail. I blink

fat, accumulated drops out of my eyelashes, and their cool water streams down my cheeks. Julian pulls in the last bit of rope, tugs me close to him. He clasps one of my hands in his, and I grasp a clump of needles with the other.

We run down the first ledge of the descent route, hopping over pine saplings, dodging the spruce. I am strung out and teetering from the drumbeat rain, from the goosebumps on my arms, from the merging of a yearlong dream and a present reality. We are laughing, laughing, not crying. Julian and I howl up the canyon walls when a chunk of hail knocks him in the eye, but it doesn't matter, because we are giddy with the sense of finding our footing. The moss squishes under our feet. I revel in the tenderness of fierce, wild places.

—Astra Lincoln,
Mammoth Lakes, California

The Ahwahnee Brunch Retrospective

Starring Roger & Ed in an eating contest of stupendous proportions

IT COST ALL OF five dollars, the Ahwahnee Sunday morning brunch. That was back in the day of course—thirty-five-plus years ago, when I knew Valley climbers capable of living a whole week on five bucks. Easy. Dumpsters revealed a bounty of cans worth a nickel. Scarfing uneaten food from plates left behind on caf' tables was quick and free.

So why spend such an extravagant amount on a single meal? In contrast to the filth where my Canadian friends and I lived in Camp 4, the Ahwahnee dining hall was a dazzling palace. At the brunch, at least, the hotel staff put up with our weekly invasion. We came in wearing our best dirty rugby shirts and slightly torn-up painter pants. We wore shoes and tried not to smell. But, you know, showering once a week and wearing rock shoes all day creates issues with hygiene. Tourists shot us the hairy eyeball. Management wanted us gone. (A letter to my younger self would now include an admonition not to be too proud of being kind of gross. It's all funny until medieval diseases make a comeback.)

Nonetheless, five bucks got us into our kind of Elysium, even if just for one day. And the brunch fare was dreamy: towers of banana cream and cheese blintzes; acres of sausages and bacon; stacks of French toast delicately powdered with



sugar; mounds of glistening eggs both Benedict and scrambled. There was an art to eating the Brunch: the goal was to help put back on the weight on you'd lost on the last epic. You did not simply Hoover these offerings. You paced yourself, anticipating each plate slowly and carefully. Climbers argued about methods to stretch the stomach in preparation. They agreed that filler food, such as bread rolls, should be avoided in favor of expensive proteins.

Afterward, you could luxuriate in the hallowed anteroom digesting (or sitting doubled and trying not to barf). But by then, the carnivalesque atmosphere of the brunch was over, and try as we (sort of) did to blend in, we couldn't. Management eventually shooed us out. We consoled ourselves with a trip to El Cap meadows to watch the nuclear sunset and howl at the climbers above. Here, we were once more layers of dragons and pirates of gold.