

THE CLIFF CLIMBING AFFAIR

Dave regretted spending the night atop the hard, ribbed bed of Lance's pickup truck with nothing more than a thin blanket to cover him. Solid shuteye under these conditions was intermittent, so not only did his back ache, but he was exhausted, too. He envied the cozy tent from which Kirk and Darryl had not yet emerged. Lance, who had slept next to Dave on the truck bed, was urinating into the fire pit while smoking his morning cigarette. They'd all peed into the pit at some point during the previous night, stoked by endless talk of dicks and pussy. Their fascination with watching their bodily fluids sizzle never seemed to wane. The four cases of cheap, piss beer deserved some of the blame for the inanity. Dave had tolerated a couple cans before he relegated himself to the shadows, a sober outsider listening to the same salacious story told a dozen different ways. How the other guys sustained this for five hours—ridiculing each other's potency and size and bragging of their own sexual prowess—was beyond Dave's imagination. The only remembrance of the prior evening lay in heap of ash and burnt-out beer cans in the fire pit.

Dave gazed across the river where a young couple clawed their way up a sheer cliff. There was no way his girlfriend would ever do that. Keri might agree to go camping, but only if it didn't require any physical exertion. It had been a month since he'd last gone up to see her, but they had defied the odds and survived four years in a

long distance relationship. In another semester they'd be college graduates, ready to move on to adult things like jobs, marriage, or maybe even kids.

The young couple on the cliff stopped on a ledge about fifteen feet up and carefully turned around. They posed their splayed bodies across the jagged, gray face, and after their friend down below snapped a photo, they scrambled back down, giggling all the way. Conquering nature was what camping was supposed to be, Dave thought, not drinking beer all night by a campfire, tossing every imaginable thing into the flames to see if it would burn, and definitely not having to sleep on the hard bed of a truck because Kirk and Darryl assured everyone they had two tents but actually had brought only one.

“Hey, you think we can climb that?” Dave asked, nodding towards the cliff.

Lance rubbed the sparse patch of blonde stubble on his soft, boyish face. “I think so. You wanna go for it?”

Dave could tell Lance was still a little drunk or a little stoned, or likely both, because the most exercise he'd ever seen Lance willing to do, at least in the days when they dormed together, was walk ten feet from his bed to the mini-fridge/TV stand to get a beer and change the channel.

“No one else has climbed it all the way,” Dave said.

Lance flicked his cigarette butt into the fire. “We could be the first.”

“Let's do it,” Dave said, even though he'd never climbed anything other than the few times he'd hopped some fences when the cops came to bust up a party. He could already imagine it, standing atop the plateau, waving down to all the other campers who'd be cheering his accomplishment.

Shanti would do this, he thought. Shanti was game for anything adventurous, like the time she went over to Dave's apartment and asked if she could borrow a shirt and changed into it right in front of him, and then seeing that she had his attention, let him take it off again. Their extended fling made his senior year of college fun.

Dave and Lance crossed the river carrying their shoes over their heads and stopped at the base of the cliff. Dave mapped several options up the face. Over the weekend, he'd personally witnessed at least ten flirtations with the climb, but no one made it much farther than the couple from the morning had. Everyone else lacked the resolve and planning necessary to make it to the top. He was sure he'd make it, even though he knew his confidence probably derived from being the lone sober one amongst a crowd of drunks for three straight days.

Slicing and jabbing his finger through the air like a dueling swordsman, Dave charted a course up the cliff, carefully plotting out the first fifty vertical feet, then quickly zig-zagging the final thirty-or-so feet. They'd figure that out when they got there.

Dave persuaded Lance to go first since Lance was a little drunk and less likely to let fear cloud his judgment. They planted their feet in tiny footholds and gripped the rock to pull themselves along. It wasn't the easiest place to begin, at least physically, but Dave saw that the other routes with friendly beginnings only took you so far. Even though it was challenging, there was less future risk with this first dance. At this height, even if they slipped, they could manage the fall.

After maneuvering through several tenuous handholds and relying extensively on the rubber grip from the soles of their tennis shoes, they reached a ledge Dave had

spotted from below. He turned his head to see if anyone was watching them, but everyone at the campground was going about their own morning business.

He imagined Shanti down by the river, waiting to take his picture as he embarked on this climb. What did it mean that he no longer wished to impress Keri? He'd thought about breaking up with her even as they were discussing engagement rings. But then Keri cheated on him.

He thought about the banal expression that distance makes the heart grow fonder, but that didn't square. It wasn't the distance that stirred desire. It was the jealousy, the not knowing, the nagging suspicion that maybe she's screwing some other guy, so you do everything possible to make sure she's still on board with you, not that you're necessarily in love with her, but you sure as hell don't want to lose her to some other schmuck. Breaking up with her would have been so much easier if she wouldn't have told him she'd cheated on him. Now, he had to win her back.

Of course, he told Shanti all of this, about all of Keri's indiscretions, but she offered no advice nor the possibility that she might break up with her own boyfriend so she and Dave could now date, at least publicly. He felt bad using her as his backup plan, but then again, maybe Keri was the backup plan, just in case Shanti didn't work out. Or maybe he was *their* backup plan.

The smell of bacon surged across the river and climbed the cliff, spurring Dave to give Lance a nudge to keep going. Lance looked beaten-down, too short of breath to handle a full conversation. He communicated with gasps and grunts and resisted Dave's prodding. It seemed pretty clear to Dave that Lance was no longer enjoying the adventure.

“We can slow down, if you want,” Dave said.

Lance nodded, but after regaining his breath, he didn't budge. “Haven't we gone far enough?” he finally said.

“We have to finish.” Dave wasn't going to let Lance quit. They were more than halfway up the face and caught on a wave of upward momentum. If Lance wanted to backtrack, he'd have to go through Dave, and Dave wasn't going to budge. He'd wait. The sweat dripping down his forehead stung his eyes, but since he had no free hand to wipe them, he found a way to relish the discomfort. Pain was his angel, the only thing that assured him he was alive. He appreciated the stiffness of his muscles, the contorted pose, the friction of stone against his legs, the occasional cramp in his toes. Lance snorted in disgust and continued on.

About sixty feet up they reached a ledge and a dilemma. Brush and cactus sprouting from the rock's surface prevented lateral movement across the face. The only way up was an outcropping directly above, but it was slightly higher than their reach. They'd have to jump. What complicated things was that this outcropping extended beyond the ledge from where they stood, meaning the only way to grab it was to jump up and slightly back.

“You're taller,” Dave said. “You should go first, then pull me up.”

Lance had sobered up and now considered the danger. “I don't think so,” he said. “We can't see what we'd be grabbing onto up there. It might be cactus.”

“If you let go, I'll catch you,” Dave offered.

“I think we should go down.”

“You really want to go down?” The ground seemed so distant now. The nearest relief was finishing the climb. “We’re so close. I know we are. No one has made it this far.” Dave dismissed the idea that if he jumped and reached and didn’t grab on, there’d be nothing but sixty feet of air between him and the rocky riverbank below. What he wondered instead was why he was doing this with no one to impress.

He had given Keri an ultimatum. She’d have to choose. Dave or the former-drug-addict-college-dropout cashier at the bookstore. She said she needed to think about it, which caused him all kinds of anxiety and even compelled him to let a stray cat live in his apartment despite his severe allergy to cats. Keri liked cats. So did Shanti. Finally, Keri called and said she was choosing him, Dave, the love of her life, which didn’t give him the excitement he thought it would. It only brought a sense of relief. He kicked the cat out.

He looked skyward and ran the calculations in his head. Even if he broke up with Keri and things didn’t work out with Shanti, surely Keri would take him back. They’d shared so much in four years, and now she had chosen him over the Barnes & Noble cashier. But what if she didn’t take him back? And what if Shanti didn’t want him as a boyfriend? Could he risk everything for nothing?

He steadied himself and jumped—upward and slightly out—and gripped the stony surface above. It was free of cactus but gritty enough to keep his raw, moist fingers from slipping. The muscles in his arms burned as he did a pull-up. When his chin cleared the ledge, he saw the platform was deep. *Perfect*. He swung his leg over, and he was safe.

He turned and looked down, catching a glimpse of Lance’s outstretched arms measuring the distance between fingertip and ledge.

“Am I good?” Lance asked.

Dave wasn't sure how to answer. He didn't feel comfortable with his friend's position. The jump looked much more precarious from above. He crouched, offering a hand to Lance. “How 'bout you just take my arms and I'll pull you up.”

“Get the fuck out of the way. I don't trust you to hang on to me.”

Dave stepped back. How would he explain this to Lance's parents if he didn't make it? How would he explain it to Teri? Whose idea had it been to climb the cliff? *It was Lance who went first. Dave was just supporting his friend. He tried to call him back, but Lance was drunk and wouldn't stop.* This was what he'd say. It was getting easy lying to Teri. A benefit of distance.

He waited. No fingertips appeared. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Is it tough?” Lance asked, his voice wavering.

“It shouldn't be as tough for you. You're taller. You barely have to jump. But I can see the top. I'm almost there. I can go get—”

Lance jumped. His fingertips danced on the ledge. Dave grabbed his arm and pulled, helping Lance over. When they stood together on the ledge, they shared a long laugh. It felt worth it. A staircase of easy footholds was all that remained.

Moments later they stood atop the cliff and turned around. A faint cheer erupted from down by the river where several campers lined the opposite bank to watch the conclusion of their climb. For about thirty seconds, Dave felt a rush of satisfaction wash through him, cleansing him of his anxieties. He raised his arms above, feeling big and mighty standing over all the people gathered below, tiny as ants. His eyes rolled skyward in splendid awe. No longer was anything above him. He shuddered in bliss. Then he

looked down and was dumbstruck at the stupidity in what he and Lance had just risked. Going down the same route would be impossible, especially when they reached the tricky pair of ledges. The regret struck him in his gut, and now he and Lance were stuck, a chasm away from the truck that would take them home.

He could never tell Keri or Shanti about his feat of freestyle climbing. They wouldn't be awed by the fact that any slight misstep might have cost him his life. Quite possibly, if he told them about this weekend, they'd wonder why they had chosen to be with an idiot. Even if the story impressed them, they'd listen to it once but then yawn at subsequent retellings, not understanding that a man is nothing without his stories.

Lance sat on a rock and rubbed his head. "I can't believe I did that," he mumbled.

"You were a little drunk."

"Yeah, but what about you?"

He was right. Drunkenness always made stupidity a little more socially permissible. Dave had no excuse. *Damn that Keri. Damn that Shanti. Damn security. Damn safety. Damn everything.* "I need a drink," Dave said. "I'm thirsty."

"So now what?" Lance asked.

"We walk. We find another way down."

About a mile or two farther along the plateau, away from the view of the campgrounds, they found another route, an easier, much safer descent. When they reached the camp an hour later, Kirk and Darryl were eating breakfast and drinking beers. Neither Lance nor Dave brought up the climb. Dave knew they'd be ridiculed for it, Kirk probably saying something like, "If you thought you could grow your dick by climbing a cliff, now you know it ain't true."

Dave grabbed a can of piss beer, popped it open and chugged it. He grabbed another and did the same. He wanted to forget the climb. He downed four more, which earned him applause from Kirk and Darryl. This was the best thing he'd done all weekend. He took a bow then climbed back into the truck bed and fell asleep.