



UNFINISHED BUSINESS

WRESTLING WITH THE DEMON FAILURE

WE HAD PLANNED ON leaving Squamish that night, after our second day on. But as we sat in the pub tipping back pints of suds and devouring half-priced pizza for our farewell meal, I raised my glass and begged for just one more day. >>

"I promise, guys. There's no way it's not going tomorrow," I said. The "it" was a boulder problem called *Sesame Street*, to which I'd been devoted since the day we'd arrived.

"Whitney," Mike said. "Don't be ridiculous. It's not happening. Let this one go."

But another try sounded like a great idea to me, hopped up on four Aleves and a Red Bull. We had been at Squamish two weeks and were walloped, but everyone agreed to stay until morning so I could have one last attempt before we high-tailed it out of Canada.

Morning came and suddenly I had second thoughts. Yet I knew I had to suck it up, because it was time. Time to end my relationship with this project. It had to be done. I had gotten in over my head

this time. I'd gotten too involved with a problem that I might potentially have to leave undone. If I didn't send today, I would be driving home, thousands of miles away, with no future reunion in sight. I loved this problem. While rock climbs can feel like an intimate relationship, it's a relationship that you desperately want to end.

I'd seen it the first day we arrived. As five people and two dogs stuffed into a black windowless van, we rolled to a stop at the only open camping site and jumped out, screaming, into the soft brush of the old-growth forest.

We'd all split up for a bit and then returned to share our discoveries. John had pointed out *Sesame Street* as we ran through the corpulent belly of the boulder

field, clapping our hands and yelling like fools.

"Whit," he said, "This problem is for you. Short, powerful. A real bitch at the end."

John punched his arm in the air to demonstrate what I gathered was the last desperate move of the problem. I drummed my fingertips together.

"Show me," I said.

A trail wound its way down to a little nook where the problem sat pressed against another boulder. I tossed my pad down in front of it.

I cinched up my shoes, chalked, blew at my hands, and gently placed my fingertips on the starting crimps. Oh, the smooth, grey granite. Those beautiful, tender holds. The second go, then third, and later ninth, then 25th, all got me closer and closer to the top.

While the relationship began as something endearing and fun, as the end of the trip drew near, *Sesame Street* sent me careening into the dark, abysmal crevasse of Unfinished Business. This is an ailment afflicting sickly obsessed climbers, one that keeps you up at night thinking about the rock, and leaves you with only enough mental capacity to select from a small, one-line answer-arse-

nal to any dialogue shot your way.

"How's your day, Whitney?"

"Foothold blew."

"Got plans for the weekend?"

"Two-finger pocket."

Air climbing—pantomiming each sequence—becomes part of your daily movement, and you start shouting beta at inappropriate moments, as if suffering from Tourette's Syndrome.

"Gaston! Crimp! High-step!"

More Aleve, a strong, black cup of coffee, and a powerful, processed bar of pure energy would do the trick. I felt like a pile—but my willpower is strong, and my head strong, so I clomped my ass out to that boulder and tossed my two crash pads down in front of the problem, both my love and enemy.

It was still early in the morning and cool. The light snuck in between the openings in the trees, throwing shadows across the rock. The luminous image is permanently imprinted in my memory.

I chalked up and sat down on my pad. My fingertips ached, but there was no turning back. If I retreated to camp now, I would be roasted by my friends, who had been eager to leave after dinner. If I didn't do the problem, it would be a long, cold walk of shame to the car. Then, an even longer drive back to Kentucky. Forty-plus hours to contemplate how pathetic I was, bested by the rock. I couldn't do it. I was too proud, too psychotic to let this one go.

The thought that I might not send *Sesame Street* and then, who knows, might never see its brilliant, shining face again, almost made me sick. I placed my fingers on the rock and wanted to recoil in pain. Instead I pressed them harder. There would be pain.

I pulled up and made the first move, then the second, reaching, straining, heel-hooking the shit out of the edge, bear-hugging the rock as if I would crush it with my thighs. Then, practically humping the face, I was staring down the final hold: the ginormous, smiling lip of the exit.

I threw my right hand toward the top and my body ripped from the rock. I became aware of life around me: the faint voice of John in the background saying, "Holy shit, she's gonna do it;" the small chirp of a bird to the right. And then it happened. I touched the lip. In that small moment a wave of joy rushed over me, until my fingertips slipped and I came smoking off, batting my hands and screaming, crashing into the rock behind me, missing

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the pad two inches to the left.

It was over. As I sat there, crumpled but technically unhurt, I heard the familiar voices of friends ("It's OK, Whit, no big deal") trying to comfort me and urge me to the van, already packed and running, parked at the trail head. It was over. All over.

This was more than a year ago. I still think about it. I run the last farewell through my mind and play with it. Imagine what it would be like if things were different or if I were there again. I'm trying my hardest to forget. I'm doing well. I have

my days, but I'm slowly moving on.

Then, just last week, while I was climbing, I met a guy who remembered me from Squamish.

"Hey, we climbed together," he said. "Remember?"

I didn't, but I played along and said yes.

"Yeah," he said. "You were that girl that fell off the top of *Sesame Street*." He paused as I looked down. "Man," he said. "That was a real heartbreaker."

Whitney Boland, from Lexington, Kentucky, recently interned at Rock and Ice.