



Giving In to Gravity

by Becca Deysach



Walking down the windowless halls of my suburban Chicago high school during my senior year, I fantasized regularly about my ten-year reunion. In my daydreams, I'd show up in a strappy, knee-length sundress with a sun-browned face and strong, sinuous forearms. My stocky thighs would be rocks as solid as the mountains I had just returned from climbing. At that point, I had been intimate only with one gently sloping, bumpy piece of nameless gneiss in the mountains of North Carolina during an Outward Bound course two summers before, but I was smitten by it and the life full of knife-edge ridges, bloody knuckles, and figure-eight knots I believed the climb foreshadowed.

"What are you up to?" my pale, city-bound former classmates who worked at desks in starched suits would ask. "Ah, not much," I'd say casually. "I just got back from Patagonia where some friends and I were doing some mountaineering. First ascents, mostly."

The people who knew me better as the cute girl to ask for help with their chemistry or calculus homework would look at the wildness in my eyes with awe and envy. The fantasy usually ended there, but that image held me, made tolerable the endless hours of chasing a ball in tight polyester shorts, listening to lectures on the same topics I had read the night before, and pretending to fit into a world I just didn't believe in.

By the time I got to Prescott College in Arizona to study adventure education, I knew the name of each of the fourteen eight-thousand-meter peaks in the world, as well as the highest point on every continent. I knew that Lynn Hill had "freed the nose" on Yosemite's El Capitan (whatever that meant), that Alison Hargreaves had been one of the best mountaineers on the planet, and that I too would one day prove—as the T-shirt my grandma had given me in second grade proclaimed—that "anything boys could do girls could do better." And I knew as much about the technicalities of rock climbing as any suburban kid possibly could who had gathered her knowledge from a single day of climbing and a year's worth of *Rock and Ice* magazines. I was ready to show the mountains who was boss; I was ready to shred.

Or so I thought. I was deeply humbled the first time I went climbing with my new friends on Thumb Butte, a glowing orange volcanic extrusion rising high above our college town. With great effort, many slips, and a black-and-blue ego, I eventually heaved myself up a climb considered easy by most climbers. It shocked me to find, for perhaps the first time in my life, that voracious reading did not immediately translate into adept skill. I had never tried anything and been bad at it, and deviating from that pattern was unthinkable. That day, my

obsession with climbing became something much deeper, an unscratchable itch on every fiber of muscle tissue.

For the rest of that semester, I dedicated myself to learning the art of rock climbing by hitching rides up to the maze of erratic granite boulders above town. The sharp rocks were too steep for me to actually climb, but the effort left my fingers raw, forearms tight, and skin smelling like a kind of summer I had never known. Onlooking climbers were in awe of my tenacity. I was frustrated, though. How would I get to the Himalaya if I couldn't even climb these warm desert rocks? I'd always thought that I was a strong, competent woman—by then I'd been awarded summa cum laude on the National Latin Exam, was the head chorister of my church choir, gotten the highest score possible on the AP Calculus exam, and run a half marathon through the Appalachian Mountains. Now, though, I was nowhere near being the tough chick I wanted to be. I was still just cute.

Every weekend, different combinations of housemates and friends gave their climbing reports in the living room of the elegant Victorian house six of us had scored at the beginning of the school year.

"Yeah, we went climbing at Lower Sullies," some dude would say while making a daisy chain out of his climbing webbing. "We did that 5.8 climb, you know, the one with that sweet fist jam toward the top. That is a bomber crack, dude. Totally bomber."

"Right on."

"And that chick Vanessa was there. That girl shreds. She was leading that funky 5.9 finger crack—you know the one."

"Yeah, she's pretty badass, but it's probably easier for her to fit her fingers in the crack than it is for a guy. So maybe that crack's more like a 5.8 to her."

"Yeah, totally, dude," another one of the guys would say in the gravelly, pinched voice he used while talking and holding pot smoke in his lungs at the same time. "You wanna hit?"

At first I had little to contribute to these conversations, but I couldn't break away. I wanted to absorb it all, the "agros" and the "bombers." I wanted to know the people to climb with and the places to go. I wanted to learn the language of these people who spoke in their own tongue, all wore baggy Gramicci pants, and knew the secrets of vertical movement. But most of all, I wanted to be badass.

My determination paid off, and by that spring I was badass enough to follow some friends up some moderately challenging climbs. One evening my boyfriend, Greg, and I rode our mountain bikes four miles uphill to Thumb Butte's climbers' trail. We wove back and forth, turning Prescott's steep streets into gentle switchbacks until we reached the sharp rise of the footpath carved by climbers' feet decades before. Once we hit solid rock after a breathless quarter-mile hike, we navigated our way through manzanita and scrub oak, around basalt boulders the size of VW Bugs, and up gullies almost as difficult to climb as the rock-climbing routes themselves. The scrubby hills below were covered in long mountain shadows by the time we had our harnesses and climbing shoes on. The world glowed yellow.

Greg led Heart Route, a simple crack climb in a cozy nook

full of big handholds, good places for gear, and an easy descent. The golden hour was turning pink when I reached him at the top of the climb, and we were elated, knowing exactly why we climbed rocks. In that moment it had nothing to do with being tough.

"Let's do it again," Greg said, adjusting his worn, white helmet over his sandy-blond bowl cut, "but this time, you lead it."

Being "on the sharp end" for the first time is a big moment in every rock climber's life, a rite of passage. Leading the climb meant that I could fall down to the last piece of protection I'd placed, and then just as far below it. It meant that I could get hurt. But it also meant that I would be a leader. On my way to being the woman who would show up to her high school reunion proud of her recent South American ascents.

"All right! *Yés*." For the first time since I decided I was going to be an alpinist, I gave Greg a high five, threw the sling full of climbing gear over my shoulder, and led us up and out. The climbing felt good, smooth, as if the rock had been sculpted millions of years ago just for this moment. I wasn't scared. When I got to the top of the climb, I built myself a little anchor in the rock face, hooked myself in, and yelled to Greg, "Off belay!" I'd finally done it. I'd become a lead climber. A real badass.

As we scrambled down our descent gully, the clouds burst into flames. Red, orange, and pink blazed across the sky and coated our skin, the shrubs, and the mountains in the same smoldering colors. A fireworks display in honor of my accomplishment. Greg and I flew back down those steep roads on our bikes—hands free, speechless.

The next day, we went climbing again with our friend Ben. At the last minute, I decided not to bring the fire-engine red climbing helmet I'd gotten for Christmas; I didn't want to be constricted by its bulk and I didn't think I'd lead a climb that day anyway. But we went straight to the climb Greg and I had done the day before and I became infected with the guys' excitement to get me leading again. *Why not? Who cares that I didn't bring my helmet*, I thought, *I practically know each move by heart*. I danced up Heart Route again with ease. The guys encouraged me to lead the next route too. Infallible, I double-checked the knot upon which my life depended and set out. Unlike Heart Route, however, I was unfamiliar with The Riggings. I didn't know the secret spots for my toes, for my fingertips. My body had not memorized every crack in the rock face, each uneven feature left by the cooling magma. All I had going for me was a fierce desire to make it to the top in a peaceful defiance of gravity.

Things went fine, if awkwardly, for the first twenty feet of the climb. Although it was an unfamiliar landscape to me, I was able to find cryptic footholds and rocky nubs just large enough for my fingertips to grip. And then I got stuck. I didn't know what to do. A wide ledge stared right at me from above, and all I had to do was get up there and have a good rest. But I had no idea how I was going to do that.

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