



MIKE TEA

Going for Broke: An (Ir)Rational Pursuit of Every Climber's Dream

BY MAJKA BURHARDT

It's 7:30 a.m. and you're at the parking lot of your local crag. Today you plan to finally get on the choice route on the cliff. You've been waiting for two months to do this climb, and the perfect finger crack is a siren beckoning to you again and again. Now you're finally heeding her call.

Today's my day, you remind yourself as you cut your car's ignition. Grabbing your coffee mug, you open your door only to have it hit the car next to you with a resounding *thud*. You look up surprised, since you hadn't even seen the car, and lock eyes with the climber in the passenger seat. You know in an instant that the climber and his partner are headed for your climb. Scanning their bodies reveals that they're fit, though you think you could out-hike them to the base. Climbing out of the car, you mouth an apology to your opponent and move to the trunk in three quick strides. Less than a minute

later you're buckling your pack when your partner announces that she has to use the facilities. You fake an understanding smile and watch as the other climbing team seizes the opening and heads for the trail.

By the time your partner saunters out of the bathroom you're ready to sprint the thirty-minute approach and don't care if she'd prefer to walk. The cold morning air burns your lungs, and your calves cramp as you power up the rocky trail. When you arrive at the route's base, the other party is just beginning to climb. "We'll be quick," the leader mutters over his shoulder.

An hour later you're still waiting, and your left leg is falling asleep from the inactivity. You look up to gauge their progress, and note that the other climber and his partner still haven't dialed their French-freeing. Since it's obvious that they won't be making it up the route in any other style, you readjust your pack, remove

the number four Camelot that's been jutting into your lower back, and hope for the best.

When you finally get on the route, you can't seem to clear your head of the background noise of dogs barking and the shouts of "take" that signify the arrival of the hordes at the crag. *Quiet!* you say to no one in particular as you try and wiggle in a RP before the crux. Too late, your stemmed-out legs begin to shake, most likely from your rigorous approach. Looking down, you yell "take" to your partner, only to see that she's flirting with the belayer next door. Pulling on the runner with your right hand, you repeat yourself louder and are relieved when you feel the rope come tight. Your on-sight blown, you stack an extra RP as you hang, cursing the fate of the weekend climber.

The following Wednesday you drag yourself to the gym after work and arrive at the parking lot at 5:30 p.m.

You circle the lot, then the block, and end up parking four streets away. You start jogging as soon as you close the car door, and wait out a red light doing arm circles. By the time you've changed clothes its 5:45 p.m., there's not an empty locker in sight, and the waiting list for a lead route is seven people deep. Thankfully, your partner arrived before you and is flaking out the rope as you walk over to the wall. Your warmup crosses paths with another climber, and you keep one eye on his trembling hands and the other on your route's purple tape, praying he doesn't blow your on-sight. Upon reaching the anchor, you lean back and feel momentarily suspended above the chaos. While you're only thirty feet off the carpet, you pretend you are 3000 feet up El Cap, and wish it were so for the rest of the evening.

The next day at work you sit at your desk daydreaming about a never-ending road trip. Your climbing has stagnated, you haven't increased a letter grade in over eight months, and you're running out of ideas. Climbing fulltime seems like the most obvious escape from your rut. Your potential is thus far untapped, and you're convinced that you could be better, if not great, if only you had the time.

By lunchtime you've decided that the only way to get better is to quit your job. After a morning of web surfing and dodging your boss, you've made a hit list for your new life. The desert first, Joshua Tree next, Yosemite in June, and then points beyond. Over a turkey sandwich on rye you make a list of what you'll need for the trip, starting with a brand-new van. Fulltime climbers need vans, you reason. The few nights you've slept inside your Camry were worse than any night you ever endured on a wall. And not just any van, but one with perfect Tupperware-sized bins that are just right for each category of item, efficient drying lines for hanging wash towels, and convenient curtains to close on those nights when the van is sleeping two. *A van is a must for my new life*, you decide as you pick up the phone to call the local VW dealer.

Five minutes later you hang up the phone and wonder if you might have a hidden trust fund someplace that you don't know about. You briefly debate calling your parents to ask, but come to your senses before dialing their number. Without a trust fund your dreams of a van become wed to having a job, and you wonder how you'll ever climb hard with such limiting constraints.

Having established the fact that you need an income, you consider changing careers. Professional climber seems like the most logical choice. Of course, you'd have to climb fulltime to break the 5.14 barrier and be at the caliber that attracts sponsors, but that small point aside, you're not so sure about the pro life. You scour the magazines and catalogs, trying to discern if the facial expressions are smiles or grimaces. You think it could be hard to keep up the media image; the last time you

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tried to create an image was in high school when you ran for class president, and that ended with you demanding a recount, even though you lost 254 to twenty-three. Plus, you might have ethical issues with the available sponsors, for example, the local brewery (what would your Aunt Mabel think?).

Scratching the pro-climber option off your list, your brain arrives at the next logical choice: mountain guide. *Just another way of getting paid to climb*, you think while taking a swig of the beer you're sure would have been first in line to have you on their label.

Four beers later, you remember a small detail about guiding: clients. You decide that this might throw a glitch into the otherwise seamless plan. You don't like teaching, and in general, you don't like newbies. Just last week you averted your eyes in embarrassment from the climber desperately trying to place his entire rack on a forty-foot 5.3 slab. The funny thing about guiding, you remind yourself, is that you need clients, especially those with generous tip money. You think back to the last guide you saw at the local crag, and you consider his 1983 Subaru wagon with rust spots like Rorschach ink blots and the muffler tied on with leftover ten-mill accessory cord. Definitely not your dream van.

Better than a climbing job, you think next, would be a job with ample time off for road tripping. Teaching comes to mind, and you make a note to ask a friend if you had to have passed high school English to teach it. Nursing is also a possibility, and you think you could

look good in a pair of blue scrubs, until you realize *why* they make nurses wear scrubs and remember that you've never gotten along especially well with the sick.

Having exhausted your career options, you opt for the next best thing: a sabbatical. It takes two months, but eventually you convince your boss to let you take a month off, telling her your aunt is sick. You keep from feeling guilty by studying guidebooks to the cliffs on your hit list.



The morning you leave town, your Camry is packed full with every piece of climbing gear and car-camping equipment you own. You've lined up partners for each major stop, and you've given yourself time in between, just in case you meet other potential rope mates. Your first stop is Indian Creek, and you climb for five days straight. When you wake up on the sixth day you can barely get out of your tent and declare your first rest day, proud of your maturity. By 11 a.m. you've had your fourth cup of coffee and are bored with your book, so you start trolling the Moab café for an afternoon partner. After easily finding one, you buy an extra roll of tape and cover your strawberry-marked wrists and forearms, declaring yourself good to go.

By the time you leave the Creek you've climbed ten out of twelve days. Holding onto the steering wheel seems more difficult than it used to, so you use your knees whenever possible on the long drive to Joshua Tree. On your second day there you hand stack in an offwidth and feel your shoulder pull out of its socket as you fight to keep your knee bar. That night your left arm falls asleep, and you wake up to an annoying tingling in your hand. By mid-afternoon your whole left arm is aching. You sit at a picnic table scanning the guidebook for tomorrow's routes, trying not to wince as you turn the pages. *Maybe slabs are the way to go*, you think as you search for a likely route.

By the next day you can no longer ignore the fact that your entire left arm is malfunc-

tioning. For a fleeting moment you tell yourself that you can climb the moderates one-handed, until you realize you can't even lift a water bottle. Your partner finds another rope mate for the day, and you lie in your sleeping bag wondering if your body is cut out for full-time climbing. *Maybe*, you think to yourself, *I could do this if I'd started when I was young*. Rationalizing that this is what has kept you from greatness comes easily, if not naturally, and you happily spend the rest of your day thinking about what might have been.

After three days off from climbing your arm hasn't gotten better and you're tired of hiking for entertainment. You pull out your calendar and realize that you're not even halfway through your sabbatical. You wonder what your boss would say if you returned early. Sure, you'd have to explain that your aunt miraculously recovered — maybe she could write you a note? You also wonder how the one-handed drive back home will feel, and you reassure yourself with comforting thoughts of stops for ice along the way.

Two days later you're back at home, having been diagnosed with tendinitis in your left forearm, compounded by a torn rotator cuff. When you arrive at physical therapy, the therapist takes one look at you before asking if you're a climber. "Yes," you say, feeling triumphant for the first time in a week. You gaze lovingly at your scabbed hands and wonder what other indicators might have given you away: your tapered waistline, or your ripped back accentuated by your tight t-shirt? The therapist sighs, interrupting your self-evaluation. "Does this mean you don't have health insurance?" he asks. You meekly nod confirmation and assuage yourself by deciding to think of him as a mere hiker.

You return to your job on Monday to your boss's surprise. Using her combined shock at both your early return and your dilapidated physical state to your advantage, you negotiate a four-day workweek with little effort. You amble back to your desk and stretch your shoulder as you walk, thinking that it might be better to start your new schedule after you're finished with rehab. Back at your desk, you remove the power putty from your drawer. *Small steps*, you whisper as you methodically kneed the dark blue substance and scan the climbing web pages for inspiration. ©