



ANDY OUTIS

THE OTHER PATAGONIA

When hiking becomes climbing

I DON'T COME FROM A FAMILY OF CLIMBERS. I didn't grow up teething on ropes, getting my fingers pinched by cams, or with an ice shelter on my bassinet. What's worse, I was a hiker before I became a climber. I wore the leather boots and wool socks, had a pack cover, and yes, even though it was only once and I'm not Canadian, wore long underwear under my shorts. I don't like to recall this part of my history, but sometimes the only way to live in the present is to admit the past.

For me, this happened in Patagonia. I'm not talking about Fitzroy or Cerro Torre, or even a rain-soaked tent filled with empty bottles of bourbon. I'm talking about the other Patagonia – the one for trekkers. Think *Sound of Music* meets the Wild West; think dusty, rocky trails and overcrowded huts.

But let's back up. I didn't get lost on my way to the Torres del Paine. Truth is, I didn't even know I was going to Patagonia – I am one of those geographically challenged climbers who views Patagonia as a small wind-scoured region of ice-ensconced granite towers, when in reality it comprises one-third of the world's eighth largest country. This is like calling Alaska Denali, or Texas Hueco. I went to Argentina with a suitcase filled with sundresses and novels, and found myself beneath an airport banner that read "Bienvenido a Patagonia" wondering why I'd forgotten my ice tools.

"**WE HEAR YOU LIKE THE MOUNTAINS,**" my second cousin Basia said at the airport. My Polish family spreads web-like over the world, and I'd come, at my father's urging, to visit relatives I didn't even know I had. I was in active convalescence, two weeks post-shoulder surgery. "You will love Patagonia," said Basia.

As it turns out, my relatives already knew that I was a climber. On the drive to Basia's house she pointed out the routes she'd done.

"I too love to climb!" she proclaimed. I followed her finger and looked at her "ascents": second-class ridges that snaked up broad, rocky peaks. I've been climbing for 14 years and guiding for nine – I'm long accustomed to others using the term "climbing" loosely. I pride myself on being broad-minded in this regard – I even have a joke about putting

a climber, a neurosurgeon, and a human rights worker in a room together and trying to figure out which one thinks he's the most important. However, a person can only be so magnanimous.

"So, this is like the mountains you climb at home?" Basia asked.

"Er... kind of."

She looked at me expectantly.

"I like... steeper things." This seemed to be the least egotistical thing to say.

"Oh, good. We have that, too." She pointed to another ridgeline.

It was steeper – third class, potentially. Then, she made her announcement: "I have arranged a climb for you with a friend of mine."

In hindsight, I should have spoken up. I should have said I still couldn't depend on my left arm to pull up my pants. Or maybe that my doctor had told me to take it easy in Argentina, or that in the past 10 days, two hours was the longest I'd been upright. But I explained none of this. I let Basia tell me about Fernando, "a nice Argentine who loves the mountains," and about the two-day excursion she'd arranged for us to Heilo Azul, a hut nestled in the Rio Azul protected area outside El Bolson. We'd reach it, apparently, by "climbing" through the forest.

BY THE TIME FERNANDO AND I REACHED EL BOLSON, I was more than ready to "climb." For the three days prior I'd been introduced as a climber to everyone I met. I endured explicit descriptions of every hike in a 20-mile radius – each junction, refugio, and slippery section of trail. Meanwhile, I was losing my balance on the stairs at Basia's house (too many meds) and stumbling about like Lurch from the "Addams Family" to protect my arm.

"I can carry your sleeping bag," Fernando said the morning of our adventure. He knew about my shoulder... as much as I had admitted.

"Fine, but I'll carry the water," I answered. I ended up with a mini-backpack, and Fernando had one that towered overhead.

The trail was rocky and steep. "We'll go slowly," Fernando said. "It's a long climb."

It's a hike, I clarified to myself.

My ankle rolled after 10 minutes – rounded mini-boulders in quicksand-like dirt filled the trail. Fernando wore boots. I hadn't hiked in boots in 12 years and wore my standard lightweight approach tennies – after all, I only hike to *get* to climbs. Fernando took the lead as I chewed on dirt, panting to keep up.

"Tell me about your climbing," he said, breath and pace even.

My shoulder hurt. It was hot. There were horseflies. I wanted a painkiller. "Oh, you know, rocks, ice, that sort of thing."

"Is it difficult like this?"

My best non-climber friend says all climbers are self-centered, narrow-minded, grade-focused freaks who refuse to wash their chalky hands before they visit the grocery store, just to prove they were recently cragging. Although I really don't blame her for thinking this way, climbers are my people, and being in this game a long time comes with certain bragging rights. "Sometimes," I said.

"Tell me more."

I watched a horsefly bite my right arm, unable to swat it with my left. My shoes and socks were grey from the dust – I used to wear gaiters on hikes like these.

Fernando stopped; I almost ran into him. "Are you all right? Your face is red. Should we slow down?"

"Fine." I knew I was being short, but couldn't help myself. I tried to get him to talk, asked him questions about his life, but he kept coming back to my climbing. I didn't want to do it, really, but he kept asking, and my shoulder kept hurting, and I had to use his arm to step over dead trees, ask him to slow down, and then, finally, give him my pack.

"I love the scenery when I climb, like the lake where we are going.

It is spectacular to sit beside," he said.

When, exactly, do you cross the line into being an egotistical elitist? *I like looking at a lake from 800 feet above it on a vertical cliff.*

"It is surrounded by beautiful rocks and snow."

I can hold onto an edge the size of your eyelash.

I couldn't stop the thoughts, which worsened with every step.

Then came the Percocet and beer, and I became the devil. I pulled out my iPod. "Look at me," I said, slurring my words. "You want to see what I do? Here." I produced iEvidence of my iProwess, photo after photo of me, glorious me, on granite, sandstone, ice, snow. A whole vertical history. Wasn't this what Fernando wanted? He'd been asking questions all day. Unfortunately, however, he'd also gone to cook dinner, leaving me there alone, scrolling through the images like a drooling idiot. He came back just as I landed on a photo taken at age 15. Balancing atop a piece of Wind River talus, I wore my favorite leather hiking boots, baggy Patagonia shorts, and a T-shirt I'd had on for 20 days straight.

"So," Fernando said, "you look happy when you climb." I looked more closely. My smile took up most of the screen. "That's me *hiking*."

"Oh."

"I'm a *climber*." I shook the iPod for emphasis. And then, I belched. Thank God – the rumbling came from deep inside, releasing the demon. I laughed first and was hysterical by the time Fernando joined in. I pictured myself at 18, trying out my "climber" identity for the first time, feeling instantaneously self-important; and now at 30, trying to be self-aware instead of self-important. And I knew, at that moment, that by age 70 I'll happily be back in hiking boots, wrinkled legs taking to trails I currently disdain – unless there's a rock at the top.

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