

FATHER'S DAY

The best way to explain climbing to your family? Scare the bejeezus out of 'em. ...

NO ONE IN MY FAMILY IS A CLIMBER. In Minnesota, we Burhardts stick to sports that suit our locale: in summer, we find new ways to exploit the 10,000 lakes, and in winter, we ski. So when I began climbing, my various antics were lumped into what my father calls “gallivanting around in the mountains.” After a decade of visits home during which I was forced to explain that the gobies on my limbs meant I’d been climbing (and not on the receiving end of domestic abuse), I decided to remedy the situation. The best way to understand climbing is, after all, to climb. I took my dad to Lumpy Ridge when he visited Colorado in 2002.

Before we go too far, I should explain the dynamic between my dad and me. I was the type of child who hyperventilated over a paper cut, cried if I had to walk barefoot on pavement, and asked to visit the emergency room once a week—for indigestion. By age 3, I’d been branded as the “one with the delicate constitution,” and by 4, I introduced myself as such. When, at age 6, I refused to wear my Halloween ghost costume without my princess tiara, my dad started the “Toughen-Up-Majka Campaign.” (I like to think his efforts led to my becoming a full-time climber and guide—but in reality, he had no such intentions.)

My father is the type of guy who offers cheeseburgers to vegans, tells you what time it is in Singapore when you ask for it in Boulder, and gives advice in the form of math problems. Retirement for him has meant days spent rollerblading, running, windsurfing, and taking the dog on 15 walks. My father’s athleticism made him a natural choice to take climbing—but what I wanted, more than to share the sport, was for him to stop calling my job and passion “vertical holiday-ing.”

Out at Lumpy, we did the requisite prep: a 5.6 toprope (he flashed it); an intro to gear (he cleaned even the smallest nuts); and a primer on equipment (he’s an engineer and knew more than I about the

criteria for dynamic materials). We were flying up *The Dog*, a three-pitch route on the Left Book, barely an hour after leaving the trailhead. He looked almost casual as he laid back the crux 5.7 flake, on the first pitch.

As I led the second pitch, we jovially discussed our favorite canines. Then I stopped below a two-foot roof; it’s a one-move wonder to a jug. “Pay attention here,” I said. “Use this hold.” I chalked an edge at waist height and highstepped onto it.

“My leg might not do that,” my dad said.

“Sounds like you need to toughen up,” I told him. As my dad guffawed, I scampered above, setting a near-hanging belay in a pod.

My father started up, climbing almost faster than I could take in rope. I belayed double-time as I planned all the other routes we’d do that day. Then his progress stopped. I leaned out from my perch but couldn’t see him. I pulled on the rope. “You can do it!” I yelled. The clouds grew over the Divide. I loosened my shoes. I yarded as hard as I could. “Dad! You’re not *that* old,” I hollered.

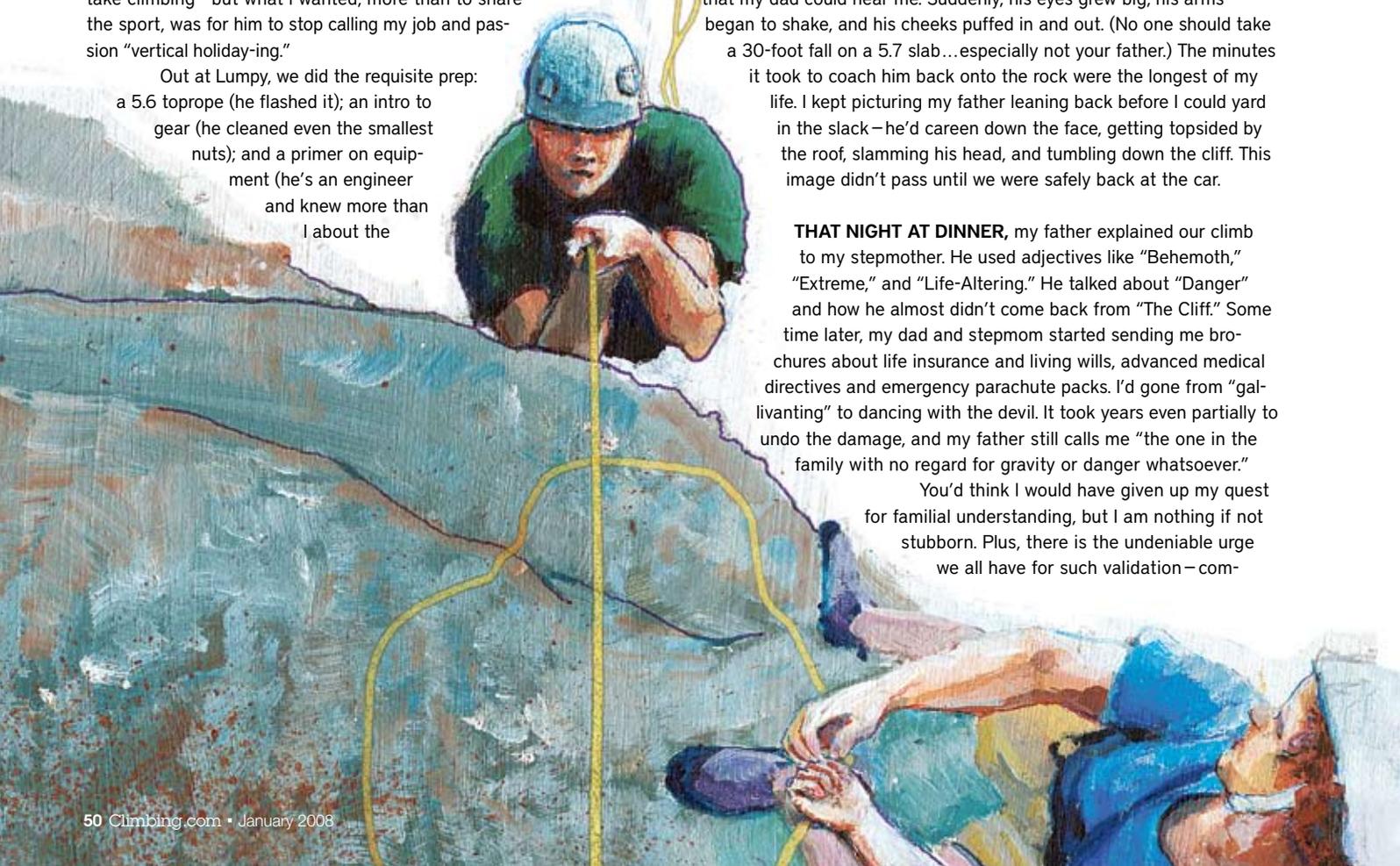
I couldn’t hear his response over the wind. Minutes passed without movement. Before I could decide whether my father had met his match or if a 6:1 hauling system might bruise his ego, he peeked from beneath the mini-roof, his hands wrapped so tightly around the rope I could see his forearms flexing from 70 feet.

“Hello!” he called out, grinning as he batmanned, a 30-foot loop blowing in the breeze below him.

“What the hell?!” I said, my voice quivering but still loud enough that my dad could hear me. Suddenly, his eyes grew big, his arms began to shake, and his cheeks puffed in and out. (No one should take a 30-foot fall on a 5.7 slab...especially not your father.) The minutes it took to coach him back onto the rock were the longest of my life. I kept picturing my father leaning back before I could yard in the slack—he’d careen down the face, getting topsided by the roof, slamming his head, and tumbling down the cliff. This image didn’t pass until we were safely back at the car.

THAT NIGHT AT DINNER, my father explained our climb to my stepmother. He used adjectives like “Behemoth,” “Extreme,” and “Life-Altering.” He talked about “Danger” and how he almost didn’t come back from “The Cliff.” Some time later, my dad and stepmom started sending me brochures about life insurance and living wills, advanced medical directives and emergency parachute packs. I’d gone from “gallivanting” to dancing with the devil. It took years even partially to undo the damage, and my father still calls me “the one in the family with no regard for gravity or danger whatsoever.”

You’d think I would have given up my quest for familial understanding, but I am nothing if not stubborn. Plus, there is the undeniable urge we all have for such validation—com-



pounded, of course, by the fact that most of my career revolves around climbing. It's not that I want to call up Dad and tell him about the microwave-sized loose block I stepped around at the sixth belay on *Astroman*...or how I caught a partner just inches from a ground fall. No, I don't want him to worry. But I do want to share what it feels like to top out and watch the sunset over El Cap. Still, these days, we talk *around* climbing, not about it. "Yup," I might tell him the evening after sending my hardest route ever, "I went climbing today. How was your bike ride around the lake?"

Today, my dad and I hike and ski together. On the slopes, he stays close on my heels and yells, "Relax! Relax!" and then wonders why it has the opposite effect. Still, we enjoy the connections we have. Our trip up *The Dog* has become family lore and sufficiently scared away most of the other relatives...on my dad's side.

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FORTUNATELY, I HAVE TWO PARENTS. Just a few months ago, Uncle John, my mother's brother and the misfit and daredevil of the family (and not a climber himself), sent an email: "Why Warren Harding is my own Personal Hero." While stranded on a cruise ship, John, now 57, read about Harding's first ascent of the *Nose* in Bonnington's *Quest For Adventure*, and he's been obsessed ever since. (In 1969, when my dad was marrying my mom, John took off on a solo, cross-country motorcycle trip; he credits this journey with his understanding of Harding's exploits.) John now knows about Harding's favorite wall cocktail and the dimensions of the Bat Tent, and can give a blow-by-blow account of the FA of the *Wall of Early Morning Light*.

John also mailed me Harding artifacts: 10-page communiqués between Batso and other climbers, videos and a VCR to view them on (on one tape, he even posted a yellow sticky note reading, "Harding's a little drunk—have to listen carefully. View twice."), and a copy of *Downward Bound*. I half-thought about forwarding everything to my dad, but realized that Batso might worsen matters there. I stuck with Uncle John, and so, the other day, tired and battered from my first trip up the Harding Slot, on *Astroman*, it was him whom I called first.

"The Slot!" he said. "But you're bigger than Warren. That bugger was 5'6"! Was it heinous?"

We discussed the Slot for 10 minutes, and John said he'd love to try sometime. We laughed, and then got serious. We decided Uncle John would ride his motorcycle to Colorado the next summer and we'd climb together. As I hung up, my thoughts turned to *The Dog*. I wondered what my father would say to Uncle John. Would he warn him against climbing? Suggest life insurance? Tell him about the secret, hand-over-hand batman Beta?

Dad and I talk daily, while Uncle John and I see each other twice per decade and didn't really know each other until we shared climbing. But maybe understanding never comes where you expect it. For now, I'm relieved I can stop looking. Most of all, however, I'm relieved that the next trip up a Lumpy Ridge 5.7 might start—instead of start only to immediately end—another family member's climbing career. 

Having given up climbing together, Senior Contributing Editor Majka Burhardt and her father still share a love of pastries and poodles.