



## CONE OF PROTECTION

How I beat my biggest climbing nemesis: myself

I'D LIVED IN COLORADO 10 YEARS before I climbed in the Black Canyon of the Gunnison, the only place I've seen that pulsates beauty and fear at equal frequencies. Tight, 2,000 feet deep, dark-green water surging over house-sized boulders through its inky depths, the Black fills humans with imprudent desire. Up close, the cracks bottom, the rock flakes apart, blocks from TV-sized to car-sized boom hollow, and the route-finding is epic. No one comes to the Black to have "fun." We come instead for a taste of our own mortality.

But let's back up. Before Colorado, I lived in Washington State: home to the Cascades, Fred Beckey, and the generally shared sentiment that if you lead 5.10, you're badass. Then, in 1999, I moved to Estes Park, where everyone warms up on 5.11. I was 22, green, and aware I could not hang. When the Big Guns started talking about the Black, I figured I should stay away—I was getting schooled just fine in the Front Range.

Problem was, I kept staying away. The next year, I was too busy... then it was too far for my ailing Subaru... then it was too much for my ailing shoulder. Suddenly, a decade had passed, and any time friends mentioned the Black, I'd slink into the corner.

In the meantime, I specialized. We all do it. It starts with picking a major in college, or only dating taller men, or solely driving manual transmissions. And, like many of us, I specialized in my strengths. I'd climb only on my best days, on routes in good condition and that suited my build and style. I scoured the world for thin cracks that didn't overhang and had perfect tapers. If I found "adverse conditions," I would politely demure, declaring a rest day. Eventually, this philosophy became a problem. It left me crippled on slab runouts in Corsica and paralyzed at the dime-edge Roof Wall in Eldorado Canyon. Last year, when my demons had me gripped at user-friendly sport crags in South Africa, I knew it was time to get over myself... and visit the Black.

**THE BLACK CANYON:** steep, sharp, solid, loose, poisonous (ivy), face, crack—pick any or all adjectives, and you're probably right. Ironically, as much as I feared the Black, it was still much more in line with my trady skillset than, say, Ceüse, the scene of an earlier slapdown. Now 32, I had to face the thing that had morphed me from a game-for-anything youngster to an older climber cloaking her fear of failure (and just plain fear) in disinterest.

On the drive from Boulder, I ticked past excuses for not descending into the stygian depths. I couldn't claim newbiehood. My gimpy shoulder recently operated on and rehabbed, neither could I claim pain. And several months into a stable relationship, I couldn't invoke mental hardship. *I was gonna have to climb as just me. In the Black. Now or never.*

But what to climb? I told myself and my Black partners—Sarah Garlick, Danika Gilbert, Kirsten Kramer, and Julia Niles—that I saw this trip as a vacation. I wanted it to be OK, I said, not to scare the pants off myself, to lower the bar and climb well below my limit. Kristen, an Alaskan who lives in a schoolbus between doing first ski descents on Denali, summed up the group's response best: "Alright, then."

Our first two days, we party-climbed shorter, five-to-eight-pitch 5.10 trade routes like *Journey Home* and *Comic Relief*—swapping stories and belays across rope teams. Three of us were Black virgins, and we descended and ascended each day protected by our Black veterans, Danika and Julia. The Black was more like the Grey those days, though I knew the true canyon lurked in the larger depths.

We were four beers into our second night when Kristen made an announcement. She hadn't traveled 3,400 miles for a watered-down Black; only the *Scenic Cruise* (V 5.10+), probably the best-known route here and certainly one of the cleanest, would suffice. I flippantly told her I'd join her. I was banking on a rowdy night and ensuing memory loss to waylay these plans.

At 7:45 a.m. the next day, Kristen shook me out of bed. "Wanna keep your promise?" she hollered.

We reached the base of North Chasm View Wall at 9 a.m. At 9:03, Kristen dropped the rope in poison ivy.

"You know what PI looks like, right?" I asked, snatching it out.

"Lighten up," she said. "We're going home tomorrow." At 9:06 a.m., Kristen peed on my big cams, having "forgotten" they were there.

I had a sudden urge to pack it in. But that would mean the infamous "Walk of Shame": steep talus-hopping and two loose, dirty pitches of lower fifth class back up the Cruise Gully.

Instead, we started into the deep vee of the *Cruise's* initial crack. My first lead, a 5.8, felt strenuous. I had to huck, plan, and pull. At the belay, still breathing heavily, I was disconcerted: the route's easiest climbing still felt *hard*. It wasn't supposed to be this way, was it? I took in rope and watched a free loop dangle. As Kramer disappeared under a roof below, fishing out gear, I leaned off the anchor and looked up, trying to spot the crux through the arching cracks above me.

I realized I was still playing the same game I had in the Estes days,

except I'd replaced specialization with expectation—the semi-twisted idea that if I climbed at a “moderate” grade, I had to do so *casually*. But there, atop a 5.8 pitch up which I'd just labored, with nothing more than a topo, 1.5 liters of water, and a windshirt—and 12 pitches left to the rim—nothing felt casual or “scenic” about this *Cruise* anymore.

**THREE PITCHES LATER, ON THE FIRST CRUX**—a steepening hand and finger crack—I let go. As I led out, each move seemed harder than the last, because I wanted (and expected) them to be easier. It was anti-Zen. A big 140 feet off the belay, I placed a No. 3 Camalot and hung. I just stopped. Everything. Stared at the wall. *Maybe it's OK if this is hard*, I thought. Somewhere in the midst of falling in love with climbing, I'd become confused and thought our sport should be easy...and when it wasn't, I'd shied away. But climbing really isn't meant to be easy, is it?

As I continued up the *Scenic Cruise*, I considered this. Kristen led the next pitch, up choss pegmatite to a slung horn, and then traversed down and left to an unprotected, left-leaning layback and then the belay. I followed. I let myself be nervous. I felt the tenuous positions, scanned the potential swings, and savored the singular fingerlock that made it all come together. I met her at the stance, grabbed the rack, and headed up, letting this hyperawareness wash over me.

Every pitch that day felt real—as if each move *mattered*, like climbing had when I first started, 17 years ago. And moving quickly enough, we reached camp before dark, to stories of others' vertical conquests. Around 11 p.m., the talk switched to Thailand's sport climbing—next on the list for several of our crew.

“You've been, right?” someone asked me.

On the steep crux crack,  
each move seemed harder  
than the last, because I wanted  
(and expected) them to be easier.  
It was anti-Zen.

“Not yet,” I said. “But I will.” I pictured myself hangdogging, sweaty with the Asian humidity, on some tufa-studded 5.11 warm-up while, between cigarette breaks, 5.14c Euros glided up gnarly 5.12+ climbs adjacent. But this time, the image didn't make me want to run—instead, I wanted to make the Thailand trip a reality.

Maybe “de-specialization” is the answer. If we let ourselves revisit the climbing challenges we've long avoided, we can get that wide-eyed newbie feeling again—the beginner's mind. And we can ride that glow as long as we let ourselves. But to do that, we first have to admit what we're bad at. I'll go first: I'm bad at overhangs, making butter-cream frosting, and waiting my turn. ✂



Senior Contributing Editor Majka Burhardt, the American Alpine Club Rockies Section Chair, is ramping up for spring in the Black by getting schooled and scared on Northeast ice.

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