



BENCHED

Injury, drugs, and other dirty secrets

I'M ON DRUGS. It's best to get this out in the beginning. This is not by choice. I'd like to say that this would all be more fun if it *were* by choice—if I were having a Hunter S. Thompson moment in my writing career. But, as you will soon understand, I would make a very pathetic Hunter S. Thompson. Even saying that makes me shudder.

Here are the facts: 12 years ago, I fell off a ladder. One month ago, I had back surgery, and I was doing just fine for the first two days. I was in a perfect haze of morphine and Valium, and my mother was taking care of me in the mountain town of Frisco, Colorado, close to the hospital. Thus, we often saw other people with various forms of casts, and blank,

druggy eyes. The various accoutrements of a spring ski town were nice distractions, and there was no climbing in sight. That suited me fine—I'd been told it would be three months before I was ready for anything vertical. But then we left Frisco and descended into Boulder.

Eldorado Canyon and the Flatirons are impossible to ignore as you drive from any direction into Boulder. I was driven beneath their jagged spine from south to north in a drugged-up daze, and by the time we arrived in Boulder proper, I was convinced that every car we saw headed in the opposite direction was full of climbers heading out to do exactly what I could not do. Realistically, this was

certainly true. Anyone heading anywhere was likely going to do what I could not do, seeing as I could not work, recreate, or pick up anything more than five pounds. But I didn't see people going to jazzercise or the dentist. I only saw climbers.

Within 30 minutes of pulling into town, I ran into Andy in the grocery store. I was limping, he was striding. I had the post-surgery ghostly glow; he had the post-bouldering-session, early-season-tan combo. We hadn't seen each other in almost a year, and I mentioned the surgery first thing to get it out in the open, and to establish reason and justification for any actions or reactions.

"No way," Andy said. "Bummer. What happened?"

I looked back at him blankly. "What happened?"

"People have been taking some bad ones lately."

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At that point I wanted to lie. I probably would have told Andy that I'd popped my disc on the tweaker move in the middle of my new sick FA, had my mother not been next to me. But the effect on my mother's fear index for my chosen profession far outweighed the humiliation of the truth.

"I fell off a ladder," I said.

"Ouch."

"In my socks."

Andy looked quizzical, or perhaps, in hindsight, bored, but I took his head tilt to mean he wanted to know more. I proceeded to explain more. "Big wool socks—fuzzy ones. On a shellacked ladder, in a cabin, in Washington. It was 12 years ago, I was..."

At this point, even medicated, I could tell I'd lost him. "Bam!!!" I said. "Just like that."

He snapped back to attention. "Bummer." He looked at the lemons next to us, and picked one up. "Sorry about that," he said. He shifted his stance, mentioned a bike ride. I started telling him about my plan to go to Target, but he was walking away before I even got to the reason—I needed stool softener to combat the side effects of the morphine.

"I hope you get better fast," he called over



his shoulder.

My mother, who'd been silent for the conversation, reached over and took my arm. "Honey," she said, "I think we should take you home."

The next day I woke up to news of climbing grants. I read of wonderful trips where people were planning to do glorious things on rock and alpine walls far and near. I read with a sickened feeling in the pit of my stomach that had nothing to do with a side effect of medication, but rather of the human condition. I had not applied for any grants, nor did I have climbing plans. What if I would never climb again? I suddenly hated the people getting the grants. I hated the people in the magazine — this magazine. I hated the sport. I started crying. When my mother asked what was wrong, I told her my back hurt. In reality, my conscience hurt, but how do you explain that?

We are not supposed to say these things. As far as I can tell, we might not even be supposed to feel these things. I would check with my therapist, but I don't have one anymore. I knew intellectually that I didn't hate anyone — that most of the people getting these

grants were my good friends — but I couldn't make intellect override emotion. Not then, not medicated.

I'm a bad druggie. I was never that kid in high school, college, at the crag — I could never just let it all go and party. Now I know why. I never wanted to be this person. The deep underbelly of raw emotion that has no

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check. Except this time, I had no choice. I had a prescription, I had signed up for a plan with a renowned neurosurgeon, and I was in for the ride.

My back surgery was not my first rodeo. I've been benched before — I've even written about being benched before. But I've always written about it from the point of view of *after* the injury. Now, my writing — about doing first ascents while being in the last stages of rehab — offends me. *Oh yeah*, I want to say to

my former self, *what was it like when it was bad? Scared to tell us?*

Writing about being benched during an injury is a bit, well, ickier. Injury is like an annoying cousin you have to see at awkward graduations that interrupts an otherwise active life. It's there. You will go through it, but you spend most of your life living without thinking about it. I'm the same. I see people at the coffee shop with their leg in a cast, and then before I know it, they are back climbing 5.13. It seemed like just a week's passed in between. At least it did to me. Now, I can tell you that Sarah was out for three months, and it was another two before she was pulling down at maximum ability. During the time she was down, I wrote her a note suggesting that it must be the perfect time to get to all the things one always wants to do but never has the time to do. Now, when I get the same notes from others, I want to write them back and ask them if they'd like to come over and find out how much they can get done while lying in a prone position, rotating ice packs, and tripping out to the opera on NPR.

But who wants to hear any of that? I didn't. I remember a friend even telling me a

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few years back about a similar back condition. He'd ended up not needing surgery, and it was his first day back in the gym in a year. I was being compassionate in between my training laps on a crimped plastic stemming climb. When he got into the specifics of pain or rehab, it would always conveniently be time for me to give the route another go.

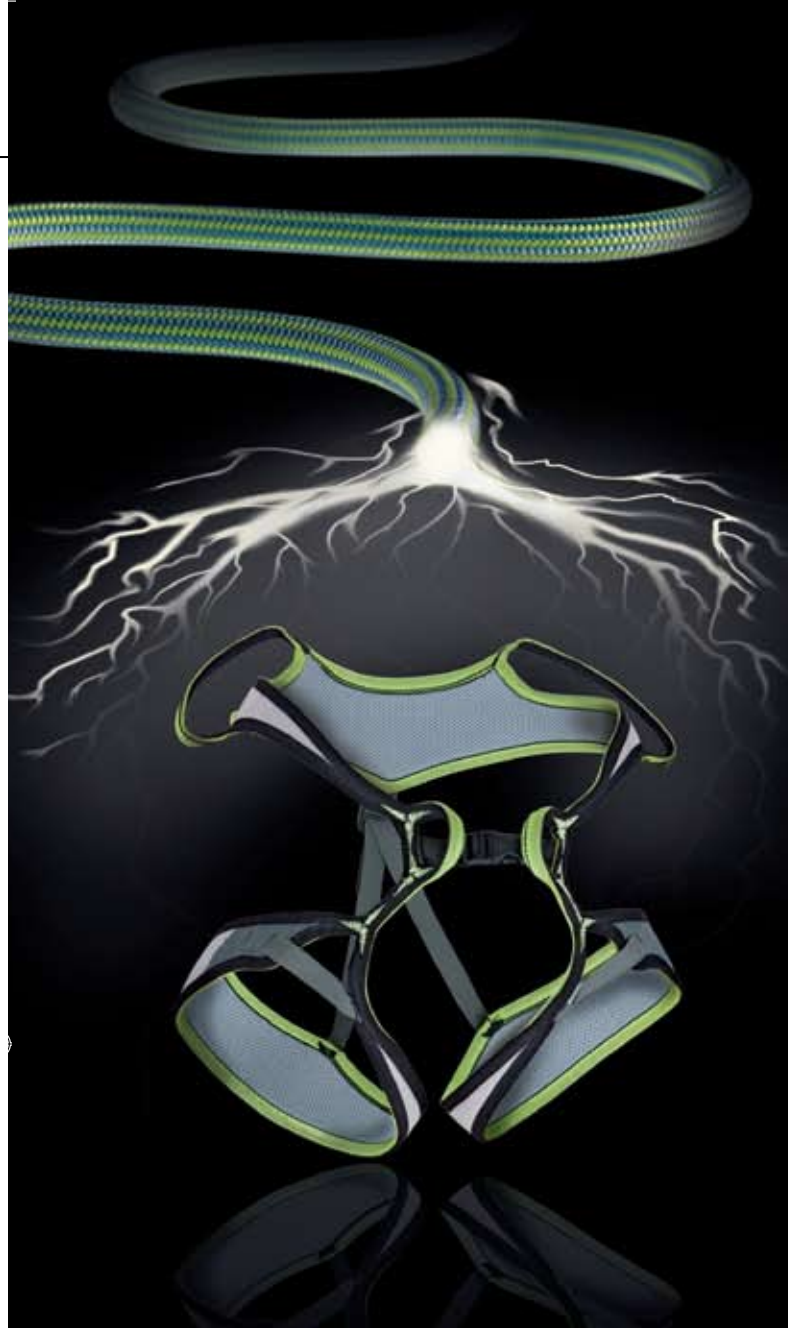
Now, everyone I meet seems to have an injury story, and most are worse than mine. They tell me their stories to make me feel better, like Dick who divulges he had spine surgery that took three years of recovery. I have three months. I feel inspired, heartened, and resentful at the same time. The first two emotions are easy to explain, but the third is the part I hate. I know there are people who have it worse—either from a sports injury or a freak accident, let alone the people in Haiti. I have a home, clean water, and I actually had a doctor to give me the surgery I needed. I know context is important, but right now, while medicated, it feels too abstract. It's emotional bootstrapping I'm not sure I have the strength to do.

Today is exactly four weeks after they cut into my back. I'm now in Bozeman, Montana, rehabbing. It's the middle of May. My spring will be spent doing pelvic tilts and leg raises while others grab crisp rock edges and climb perfect couloirs. My boyfriend Peter and I just moved into a house here—though I mainly came in and sat down while he did the moving. This morning, I went into the garage and surveyed the parts of my life we did not bother to unpack. My ropes, rack, screws, boots, packs, parkas—everything still in bins and duffels... everything waiting.

In high school, before I even owned a harness, I would go into the local gear shops whenever I could and stare at all of the shiny and colorful gear and clothing. I would sneak peaks at rope-soloing devices, try on technical jackets, carry around packs loaded with duffle bags of sand so I could feel the weight. Today, inside the garage, I feel that same daydream starting again. I want to reach into a bin and run my fingers through my slings. I want to heft a rack over my shoulder. I would, but I still am not allowed to bend over.

Today is the first sunny day since we've been here. It's been rainy and wet, and while most of my friends are going stir crazy, a fellow benchee, Doug, recently said that every time he wakes up to the gloom he pumps his fist into the air and says "Yes, another shitty day! Another great day to be injured!" Today is a great day to be outside. 🪓

Majka Burhardt has been the author of Whipped since 2004, during which time she has written about some form of injury three times. She's renaming the column if she gets to a fourth. Read more of her (lucid) work at www.majkaburhardt.com.



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