



OPPORTUNITY LOST

My misguided effort to shortcut the learning curve

I'M BACK ON THE SHARP END. Kind of. After six months of healing, following two back surgeries and complications, it might be more accurate to say I am on the dull, blunted end. It's not a place I have spent much time in my climbing career—not because I am so good at climbing, but because, back in the day, I was determined to forego the clumsy stages of vertical apprenticeship and shoot straight for a skewed version of grace.

This started with my first trip to Yosemite, in 1996, when I tried to skip the real Yosemite experience. I stayed at Lower Pines instead of Camp 4, avoided El Cap, and never brought a headlamp on a climb because I never planned to use one. This might be a logical approach when cragging, or even for long routes that you know well. But the truth is, I was 19, and I had all of the experience of a handful of seasons of mountaineering and top roping, plus one summer of alpine rock climbing in the Cascades, to steer my decisions. I thought this was plenty. Who wouldn't, with a partner that was a ringer?

Eli was 11 years older than me—all of them spent climbing and guiding full-time. I did what any hungry young climber does with a more seasoned partner: I co-opted Eli's experience and made it my own. We flew around the valley, granite line to granite line. And then we hit the Sentinel. The *Chouinard-Herbert* was our goal; we had friends

who planned to spend the same day on the *Steck-Salathé*. The four of us had a leisurely breakfast and wandered up to the cliff at eight. Gardiner, Joe, and Eli's combined experience was at least 30 times greater than mine—an easy figure to calculate when you have only really been climbing for a year.

The approach seemed quick and straightforward. Someone, I don't remember who, had been up there before. We passed two French guys going the wrong way and felt smug about our collective approach precision. At 15 pitches, the *Chouinard-Herbert* would likely take us the good part of the day. It never occurred to me that it might take more. Never mind that I'd never climbed a 15-pitch route before. Eli and I wished Gardiner and Joe a good climb on the *Steck-Salathé* and settled into swapping pitches on our route's opening, low-angled pitches. I was belaying at the top of the Chessman Pinnacle when I heard the first "Allo?"

Soon a hand was pulling on my anchor. The Frenchman's foot skimmed my hip as he clambered over the anchor, right in front of me. Right about then, Eli yelled "off belay" from above, and I tried not to look up and into a questionably appropriate view of the Frenchman's aqua cotton tights while I confirmed Eli's call. The man completed his move and stood beside me at the stance. I craned my neck and saw Eli just as he saw the Frenchman.

What happened next was not my fault. Eli yelled: "Mmmhhh... Frenchies!"

"Frenchies?" the Frenchman asked. His hand was still on my anchor.

"Non," I said. And then, "Oui?" I tried again. "Comment s'appelle..." That wasn't right, either. How do you say in French, I wondered, that your climbing partner was not exactly a fan of French climbers? That he'd been delayed and hassled, on mountains and crags around the world, by this man's countrymen?

I stalled. "Je gargarize," I said. I gargle.

The man raised his eyebrows.

"Tu gargarizes." You gargle. "Il gar..."

The rope pulled on me, hard. Eli knew how to haul, and at that point, I knew he would not be afraid to do so. I don't know why I decided that conjugating the word my high school French teacher had used to perfect our R's seemed like a good

idea. But it distracted the Frenchman long enough for me to scurry past him and onto the slab above before he could start climbing again.

I made the moves as quickly as I could, but each time my foot left a hold, the Frenchman's hand appeared on the same hold. The 5.9 went quickly. The 10c slowed me down. I picked up a foot and put it back down, right on the Frenchman's hand.

"Yoww!" he yelled.

"OK?" I asked.

"I go?" he responded.

I thought about it. He was fast in his aqua tights. Faster than me. Eli tugged on the rope again, yelling, "French... eeee!"

I grimaced. My climbing partner is a bigot, I thought, and I will have to pay the price. I frowned at Eli, hoping he could sense my displeasure from 60 feet away.

"French freeeee!" he yelled. He pantomimed grabbing the anchor and pulling himself toward it. "Now!"

I saw the Frenchman's face harden.

"He doesn't mean that," I said to the man, in English.

"Stop saying that!" I yelled to Eli. The rope only pulled harder.

I grabbed the carabiner on a cam, swung my body up, grabbed again. Each move made me angrier. I could climb 5.10c.

"French free?" I said. "Seriously, Eli. That's cruel." Eli started to smile. "Do you even know what it means?"

Maybe not as fast as my partner wanted, but I could do it. I knew Eli well enough to know that having the Frenchman arrive at the belay instead of me would have been a great scar on our climbing relationship. I would then be part of his French curse. I kept going.

When I reached the anchor, Eli

grabbed at the gear on my harness. "You might have to French free again," he said.

I huffed, shook my head, and swatted his hands away from my harness. "You're a bigot," I said.

Eli looked at me quizzically.

"French free?" I said. "Seriously, Eli. That's cruel."

Eli started to smile. "Do you even know what it means?"

"Other than that you're an awful American?"

"Majka," he said, "it just means pulling on gear." He gestured to the stack of gear dangling from the rope near my tie-in point. "Something you clearly at least know how to do."

"Oh," I said. "I'm..." I was sorry, I just couldn't say it. I was, after all, the one who'd had to deal with the man in tights.

With Eli leading the hard pitches, we pulled away from the Frenchmen as we got higher up the route. I could hear their calls, but I never saw another flash of aqua. At belays, however, I fantasized about their



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Yosemite experience; I sensed it might somehow be richer than mine, that they might be learning more from the Valley, even though—or perhaps because—I had such an experienced partner. They were probably staying at Camp 4. I still hadn't technically been inside of Camp 4, even though I'd been in Yosemite Valley for two weeks. In fine Yosemite tradition, the Frenchies probably ate canned food they pillaged from the dumpster; I had four packages of almond cheese in our cooler. Granted, I was road-tripping for two months. But where I had a car, they were probably hitchhiking.

We waited at the top for Gardiner and Joe, and then started down all together. Eli told the other guys about the Frenchmen, and my French freeing.

"They're probably having an epic up there," someone said.

Everyone laughed. After a moment, I did too. But in that moment, all I wanted was to be like those French guys, presumably stuck on the face. I wanted to be

hunkering down with a torn, lemon-colored wind jacket and the dying heat of the granite as my only sources of warmth. I wanted to surrender to the night and my fate, wake up the next morning, and arrive back in Camp 4 knock-kneed and dehydrated, with a grand story. It was only

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French guys.*

a fleeting impulse of desire, though. The car, camp, and beer were all too close to make it last.

For the past 15 years, I have always assumed the Frenchies were benighted on that route. But, really, for all I know, they might have slid onto the trail five minutes after us and then did a cool-down lap up the *Steck-Salathé* by headlamp.

Regardless, in my mind, for my purposes, the Frenchies have always represented

something I'd never allowed myself to experience—that awkward and gawky time in one's climbing adolescence. An experience I never had because I was too busy standing in someone else's climbing shoes rather than my own. And then, this year, in my post-surgical comeback, I was forced to experience it.

It's tempting to say that is what an injury teaches you: it places you right back where you pretended you never were and asks you to see how long you can handle it. I'm trying my best. These days I'm climbing to climb. I'm trying to make up for my previous obsession with my abilities by letting them go. I'm French freeing whenever I need to, and sometimes even when I don't.

Majka Burhardt is the author of Coffee Story: Ethiopia, available this fall. Portions of this column appear in Matt Johansen's upcoming book Yosemite Epics: Tales of Adventure from America's Greatest Playground, www.dreamcatcherpublishing.com.

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