

The Other Side of Fear

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“Jump!” my cousins yelled from our favorite swimming hole on Moose River.

I was ten years old, wearing a one-piece and standing on the edge of a cliff. I considered my options: leap out into the air and pray, or scramble back down the rocks and retreat. Neither appealed. I shivered from fear and cold. My hair, slick from river water, lay matted against my swimsuit.

“Just jump!” the voices called again.

I clutched a handhold tighter but knew I couldn’t stay forever. I gave myself a countdown: three (held breath, clenched belly); two (closed eyes, bent knees); one (did I have to?!); zero.

The time I spent dropping stretched long— breathless, screaming, suspended —until there was the sharp crash of landing. I lifted my head out of the water and took a sip of air. Words dissolved; the future evaporated. All that existed was that copper-colored stretch of water and those shiny faces whooping, congratulating me for being brave.

I was a scared kid. When sleepovers with friends involved watching horror movies, I carefully arranged my knees to block the screen. I avoided the basement in our house; a small window in it looked too much like one I’d seen on a Dateline episode about a young girl who got kidnapped. Most of all, I was afraid of heights, and learned to use that phrase—“afraid of heights”—to avoid activities that frightened me.

In middle school, my parents sent me to a summer camp where I couldn’t opt out so easily; the whole point of this camp, it seemed, was to put me in the way of my fears. We took backpacking trips in which we crossed scree fields and scrambled up peaks. When traversing loose rock, I occasionally looked down and saw the steep slope I might tumble down if I slipped. In such moments, our counselor Liz walked back to my place in the line of teenage girls wearing backpacks. She was a handful of years older with a stubby blond ponytail poking out from her trucker’s hat that read “Hi Mom!”

I leaned against the slope as she told me to breathe, encouraging me to think through what would happen if I fell. She taught me that some fear was a signal to pay attention to a dangerous situation, but other times, it was a construct of my mind—a belief I could dissuade with careful thinking. Worst-case scenarios often fell apart under scrutiny; if I lost my footing, I’d probably slip about ten feet, maybe scrape my knees and elbows, then get up and keep going.

Something shifted at camp. I soon became obsessed with seeking out situations that scared me. I believed that moving through my fear in the outdoors would make me strong, indomitable. The phrase *afraid of heights* no longer became an excuse to avoid doing something; it became the reason to do it. I was never tempted to skydive or bungee jump, but I did want to push my body and see what it was capable of. I camped alone in the Grand Canyon, hitchhiked alone through rural Chile, and lived alone in remote cabins in the Arctic. While living in northern Alaska, I often winter camped by myself, and once backpacked solo through the Brooks Range for fifteen days without seeing another human.

I remember one moment on that trip through the Brooks Range, clambering out of a river whose banks had formed a steep canyon. I was scrambling up loose rock when I found myself unwilling to move. My mouth turned dry, my pulse quick, my throat tight. I didn’t want to go up; I didn’t want to go down. There was no Liz to tell me to breathe, to ask if the fear was in my head. My forearms ached from grasping the holds beneath my palms. I remember looking up at my dog, Mason, who’d already crawled out of the steep section and was napping on some wildflowers as he waited for me to catch up. I was exasperated, wondering why I put myself in these positions that, in the moment, I *hated*.

I eventually slowed my breath, convinced myself I was okay, and crawled out of the canyon. When I found my footing on wildflower-covered ground, I felt elated. That’s what hooked me: the shimmering moment after the fear.

During those years of pushing myself outside, I still got scared, but moving past and through that fear became an end in itself, even more important than reaching the destination I was heading toward. It seemed like a noble self-improvement project to do what didn’t come naturally to me, though it would be years before I realized that the courage it took to climb mountains wouldn’t help me much in the face of life’s scarier moments.

A year after that Brooks Range trip, I applied to become an instructor for NOLS, an outdoor education organization that takes students on wilderness expeditions around the world. That winter, I received the email telling me I'd been accepted. The note included details about the Instructor Course we'd take about five months later: a 24-day backpacking expedition through the Talkeetna Mountains of Alaska in late May and early June. The course would be a blend of training and assessment: getting accepted *into* the training was the first step toward becoming a NOLS instructor; passing that training was the second.

I was at once delighted and terrified. This was a different type of fear: the fear of looking bad in front of other people. It didn't matter how many miles I traveled or how many times I practiced tying a bowline; nothing would change the fact that there was still that scared kid inside me, the one who panicked when she looked down. I suspected I'd have to reveal that fearful part of me to others on the course.

The real panic accompanied that word *reveal*. I was used to camping alone, which meant I never had to look weak in front of anyone besides my dog. I imagined a moment when we'd be climbing a mountain and I'd cling to the slope. It'd be obvious to everyone I was unworthy for the job. I'd have to return to civilization and break the news to my fiancé and parents and friends that I'd failed.

The first couple weeks of the training, we snowshoed, played games, practiced map skills, made cinnamon rolls and pizzas on our camp stoves. In early June, we set up camp and decided to spend two nights there so we could do a peak ascent. That night, as we sat around eating cheesy pasta with sporks, I used binoculars to scan the snowy ridge we planned to ascend, my heart pounding in my ears.

The next morning, we reached the ridge leading to the summit and a few of us paused for a snack. Wolverine tracks checkered the snow in a messy shuffle along the cornice—the animal's trail meandering right at the precipice. On the leeward side, we heard, then saw an avalanche: first, a boom like a canon; then, giant puffs of snow pummeling down the mountain as billowing clouds rose in the air. One of the instructors put her face in her hands and turned away from the edge. She explained she was afraid of heights.

I paused my next handful of trail mix. *She* was scared, too? I couldn't believe it—both that she was scared, and that she was admitting it. She was a skilled whitewater kayaker, a bright sparkle of energy on our

course, a veteran instructor so competent that she was now training this new batch of instructors. Knowing she was scared of heights meant that the fear I carried might be okay. Her admission gave me the courage to admit that being up there was challenging for me, too.

I stepped slowly toward the peak, keeping my attention on my breath. When we reached the summit, my fear dissipated; we'd made it! Someone spotted a dot in the distance moving along the cornice we'd just climbed. I looked through my binoculars and saw a wolverine. He scampered down the ridge at an impressive clip. We shared the binoculars and marveled at the luck of seeing this elusive animal. This rugged landscape was his home.

When the wolverine disappeared from our sight and our jitters settled, we gathered into a huddle and a friend recited a poem by David Morton.

"Who walks with beauty has no need of fear," she said. "The sun moon and stars keep pace with him."

I passed the training and started leading NOLS backpacking courses in Alaska. My second season working for the school, I decided to push myself more: I enrolled in an all-women training to become a mountaineering instructor. Becoming a backpacking instructor had been a stretch; mountaineering would be a leap. I'd have to learn about ice climbing, crevasse rescue, avalanche management. I wasn't sure why exactly I was drawn to this training. I wanted to witness the glacial landscapes where mountaineering could take me, but I also believed that my character depended on overcoming what daunted me. The same nerves I felt before my Instructor Course returned as I approached the two-week training. This time, I worried I'd show my fellow NOLS instructors I was unfit—like I didn't belong and shouldn't be an instructor at all.

A month before the course, I called a friend and told her I was nervous. She laughed, then quoted Psalm 27: "Whom shall I fear?" She said I was full of worth and lacked nothing; the other women on the training weren't better than me. I appreciated her encouraging words, but they weren't easy for me to believe. After all, the women I'd be traveling with *did* seem better than me: they were climbers! Mountaineers! *Real* NOLS instructors! On the phone, my friend also reminded me that I had bigger fish to fry than impressing people I barely knew. She was right, and I was terrified of those other challenges, too.

In March, two months before the mountaineering course, David, my fiancé at the time, and I visited his parents. When his mom picked us up at the train station, she explained that David's dad had had a biopsy that day. That night, David and I lay awake in his childhood bed. He curled up in a ball, his back to me. I scratched his spine softly, with no idea what to say. Every word I found came out meek; *I love you; I'm sorry; I love you and I'm so, so sorry*. I'd been scared of so much recently—not only of looking bad during my mountaineering training, but also contending with the commitment of getting married, the complicated logistics of hosting a wedding, the question of where David and I would live. Those fears receded in the face of this situation none of my worries had prepared me for. I tried to focus my energy on tickling his back, wanting to offer him the only thing I could think of, tiny as it was. When it came to the big things, I felt helpless.

The next day, his father was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer.

This wasn't a journey I'd elected to go on, a situation whose risks I could assess, an environment where I could control the outcome. New fears flooded my mind. I was supposed to be David's person, his soon-to-be spouse, and he was facing a situation bigger and scarier and sadder than any I'd been through. I didn't know what he might need from me in the coming months and years. I kept imagining a time when he'd be grieving and I'd sit there with leaden legs, a pounding heart, and a tight throat, with no idea what to say.

That May, I clambered into a bush plane that would land on the Matanuska glacier in the Chugach Mountains of Southcentral Alaska. We flew over snowy valleys, crevassed glaciers, and barbed peaks as evening light tinted the ice pink and coral. We spent the next few days skiing up the glacier so we could make a base camp near Marcus Baker, the highest peak in the Chugach. Our plan was to climb it. I was terrified. I was out on that glacier to test myself, though, hoping to work past and through my fear, even as what was going on at home with David and his dad scared me much more. For those other fears, practicing my self-arrest wouldn't do a thing.

At our high camp, we could see, briefly, the start of the ridge we hoped to climb before it disappeared behind blowing snow. It had been stormy for days, but the conditions were deteriorating—rapidly. We stood outside making a plan when a gust ripped a sleeping pad out of one of my tentmate's hands. The black foam toppled down the glacier and out

of sight. Our two instructors shouted over the wind that we'd hunker in our three separate tents until the storm passed. They said we needed to shovel regularly to keep our tents from getting buried.

The first day of our hunker, between shoveling shifts, I read a lengthy biography of Thoreau on my Kindle. Then, the wind picked up even more. The four of us in the tent had to brace the poles of our Hilleburg as it rattled and roared. We could barely hear each other over the vigorous flapping of the fabric. We had to send someone outside to shovel every twenty minutes. Outside, it was hard to stay standing upright, both because the snow was getting so deep as it drifted and because the wind was so powerful. I leaned into the shovel to brace myself against gusts, and sometimes stumbled forward involuntarily. The pelting snow sliced my face as I tried to dig out the door of our tent. The snow walls we'd built to protect the tents from wind were crumbling into a sad heap. We were shoveling for our lives.

Back inside, it was no longer possible to read. The tent fly clattered like mad and none of us could move from the corners where we braced the poles. At one point, a pole bounced to the floor—an ominous sign that it could snap and shred our tent in these conditions. It was a horrifying thought; without a tent, we'd simply and swiftly die. I thought about Adrienne Rich's poem "Phantasia for Elvira Shatayev." The poem describes how the wind began to tear at the tents of an all-women's climbing team, how "the cold felt cold until our blood / grew colder than the wind / died down and we slept."

At one point, an instructor came to check on us. When I smiled at her, she looked steely in return.

"This is serious," she said. She tried to obliquely explain that this is the kind of storm people die in—the kind of storm that Elvira Shatayev's all-women's climbing team died in. The kind other climbing parties attempting to summit Marcus Baker had died in.

Hours passed. One of my tentmates turned to me with tears in her round blue eyes. She said she didn't want to shovel. She didn't want to go outside. She was terrified, she said, and wished she were anywhere but here. I nodded and told her that I could shovel during her shift, that the storm would eventually pass.

When the winds calmed and the tent clattering mellowed, we emerged from our tents in puffy gear, giddy and laughing. We hadn't seen each other in days. We exchanged Michelin-man hugs and traded stories about our experiences during the storm, laughing about someone peeing

in someone else's boot—not wanting to head even to the vestibule. We learned that the instructors had gotten a forecast through their InReach estimating that gusts had blown at least eighty miles per hour.

In the following days, we watched huge avalanches pummel down nearby peaks. We skied toward the toe of the glacier, tails between our legs, humbled by the storm and elated we'd survived. We did not climb Marcus Baker. We did not summit anything.

Because of all this, I never faced the situation I'd spent two weeks of that trip—and several months before it—feeling nervous about. I'd repeatedly imagined kicking steps up an exposed ridge, afraid of slipping and falling, yet the most serious situation we faced was different than the one I'd dreaded. All the energy I'd spent being scared about being scared had been for nothing.

My other fears didn't go away so easily. As we traveled down the Matanuska, David's dad would have his first scan to monitor if the cancer had grown. I wouldn't know the results until we stepped off the ice and returned to cell service. One night, I looked over the landscape of ice and cried, scared about what news I might face when we left the mountains. A friend on the course comforted me, said she'd do anything for us. But there was nothing to do.

Fear is a future-oriented emotion. I've been afraid in the moment before: of a bear charging me, of wolves approaching me, of a cornice breaking apart beneath my feet. But even in those moments of terror, I mostly feared what came next. Would the bear bite into my flesh? Would the wolves attack? Would I keep falling? During the mountain storm, I didn't fear the wind itself; I feared what it might do in the coming hours—tear our tents, take our lives. Fear makes it hard to focus fully on the challenge at hand and trust that what comes next will be okay—and even if things aren't okay, that I'll be able to navigate through that, too.

That first scan showed no change in David's dad's tumor. After, there would be more cycles of scans, all accompanied by “scanxiety:” the fear that the cancer has grown, and the accompanying fear for David's dad, for his mom and sister, for David himself. This fear wasn't as easy to get over as my fear of traversing a scree slope or even surviving a mountain storm. Worst-case scenarios didn't fall apart under closer scrutiny. I clung to better-case scenarios, ones in which David's dad would recover and we'd celebrate holidays each year and he'd meet our children and fill our inboxes with news articles. But I didn't get to choose. Being afraid didn't give me permission to opt out of what I didn't think

I could handle. And I knew there wouldn't be elation after facing these kinds of fears—no giddy euphoria of making it through the storm, no adrenaline-powered feeling of being indomitable on top of a peak.

A few months after the mountaineering training, David and I visited my family and hiked to the spot where my cousins and I used to jump into the Moose River. When we reached the swimming hole, we passed around a Ziplock of pepitas while I stared at the cliff. It looked smaller than I remembered—more of a boulder, really. I waded into the river and my limbs glowed orange. Here I was, exhilarated again. I didn't even need to jump.

David soon followed. His hair split into a middle part, and we grinned at each other as he swam toward me. Overcoming the small fear of dunking into cold water helped me forget so many of my bigger fears at the time, even helped me stop thinking about the dreaded words we'd just heard: *the cancer has spread*.

I wish the bravery to jump off a rock—or cross a scree field, or weather a windstorm—were still enough. I want to be brave now, too: count down from three and face what I can barely bear. But courage these days is more of a march than a jump.