

## So You Are

Linville Gorge was my first time doing ropes outdoors. My friends and I signed up for a rappelling class and drove out to Table Rock in June. We split the driving, which I was grateful for. A warm, long car ride will prove how overwhelmingly exhausted you are after a full day outside. The drive was shorter than we thought, and the weather was perfect.

It was still early enough for cool morning air and the sun to flicker low through the trees as we cruised up and around the mountain. We reached the parking lot and looked around for our guide. The guy with a curly mullet and mustache, La Croix in hand, waiting patiently in a camp chair by the open trunk of his Subaru. Definitely a climber. He later told us he'd be sleeping there to guide a couple more trips up the mountain tomorrow.

The three rappel techniques weren't too complicated, although I feel I never fully got the handle on the main one we used. Lowering myself on a third hand felt like I just wasn't strong enough. I couldn't pinch the sling correctly and spent the first half of each rappel jerkily inching my way down.

Jason, our guide, seemed pleased we were all intermediate to advanced climbers, at least in the gym. Before our last rappel, we hiked up to do a little impromptu top roping. A narrow, overgrown passage led us up to a 100-foot wall, a mixture of choppy ledges and smooth slab.



I tie in and Jason is belaying me from the top, which at the time, I had never heard of. For most of the route I couldn't see him and that made me a little nervous. And of course because he couldn't see me, the rope was going to be somewhat slack. I'm tied in, I'm safe, but when my body doesn't feel the upward tug on my waist after each move, that idea of safety goes away. I find it difficult to speak rationally to myself when I stand on the tips of my toes on a one inch ledge 100 feet in the air.

I move upward steadily using my rest spots to glance to the Blue Ridge Mountains looming behind me. As I near the summit the rock gets chossy. I reach for my chalk, I'm perpetually reaching for my chalk when I don't need to. The dryness of the excessive chalk feels overly-smooth and insecure, and the persistent sweat on my palms feels just as bad. What am I doing? I start thinking. Every move I fumble to find a hold, and my body panics until I do. My leg begins to shake. I try to focus on my breath and stay in the moment, but I feel the disappointment setting in. This is far below my grade and I am struggling. This isn't even a lead climb, and I am struggling. I'm scared and exhausted and I want to stop. Maybe I can't be a

climber. Where's the adrenaline and excitement that's supposed to outweigh my fear? I can't find it when I'm on that wall.

I'm coming over the lip and I can see Jason. He yells down words of encouragement and takes in the rope. I exhale as I find the quartz crimps above my head and pull myself up. Finally standing on the top with him, I take in the hazy blue-green mountains. "Not bad, huh?" he says. The view is amazing, and yes, it does feel like a reward for the struggle of the climb. Sometimes I feel as though I could stare at those mountains until the end of time.

I haven't been climbing for too long, there's some things I've learned and some I haven't yet. I can feel when I need to shift my weight, or grip a little tighter, or stand a little taller. Like a lot of climbers, I've practiced and trained, and eaten right, and paid attention to and worked on my weaknesses. I've dedicated time, effort and money to this sport, and I should be fairly confident in my skills. But sometimes it's hard not to let one bad climb grant you permission you to forget all of that.

My second time climbing outside I was on a group trip in New River Gorge National Park. The West Virginia forests are dense and damp and filled with an infinite variety of mushrooms. The walls are a choppy swirl of golden browns and oranges, forming a smooth, beautiful, and dense rock. It was at the end of our day, and I felt I'd climbed fairly well. Except for one 5.10. I knew I would abruptly swing out if I went for a difficult move, and asked to come down shortly after.

I tie in to what would be the final route. I get on and steadily make my way upwards; I'm starting to struggle soon into it, and it's starting to rain. I fumble my hand upwards, tapping slick holds and panicking, desperately reaching for anything somewhat dry. The chalk in my bag is turning to paste, and my mind is turning to chaos. I move my hands, but my feet stay on whatever safety I think I've found. In



the gym, I pride myself on the high steps I can take with ease. Here, I am a stretched out idiot frozen on this route.

Maybe I don't have what it takes to be a climber after all. Maybe a love for it and training and practice aren't enough. Maybe there's something in everyone else, in all my climber friends, that isn't in me.



Maybe this is as far as I go. I don't feel like a climber. All these rambling thoughts are drenched in self-pity, and soon I become angry at myself for not finishing routes.

I've climbed outside a few times now, and Pilot Mountain has become a close-by favorite. It's a gorgeous spot and a fun hike out. You can drive up to the summit and stand at the overlook with the crowd. The bathrooms are not pit toilets, which is luxurious. The land scattered in the distance is flat and farmy, clusters of dark woods and open pastures. After the first bit of trail, you cross down some uneven rocks onto the gravelly ridgeline path.

The morning sun coming around the tall, choppy walls is built into your warm-up. There are dozens of great routes to choose from, and the access path stays pretty convenient. I think the first time I went out there, I was a little disappointed with myself. I hadn't climbed nearly as hard as I had wanted to, and sometimes, when your vision is tunneled by self-deprecation, it almost feels like a waste of a trip. Which is a terrible way to think; I don't recommend it. I hadn't tried as many routes as I should have; I climbed slow and sloppy on each route, and I wimped out on several, claiming I was too tired.

When I'm on the wall, I get to a certain height, look down, then back at the wall. Why am I doing this? I'm terrified. It's not even fun right now. I stop to rest, but my tired mind is now rampant with visions of the rope cutting, the holds crumbling, and the anchor magically jumping out of the wall.

How do you climb when you don't feel like a climber? When you're comparing your slow fumble up a face to your friend's speedy send? When you look down and clearly see boredom on your belayer as you take your fifth fall at the crux? What do you do?



I'm learning that climbing isn't about being fearless. Fearlessness doesn't equate to skill. I think it's more about learning. Learning the problem, the process, and the risk. Learning yourself, your body, your mind, and your capability. That fear of falling? It's actually good. It's your body telling you to be careful. But I think we have to learn to befriend our fear instead of shoving down deep within ourselves. There's a way to take it up the wall with you without letting it take charge.

I've climbed outside a lot more now, and I'm increasing my confidence each time. I'm used to the rope stretch, the harder grades, the holds that aren't color coordinated, and the occasionally bloodied fingers. Sometimes I do great, and sometimes I feel like I suck. And it's all okay. The more you climb, the more you realize the level of physician dedication that follows. Honing in your climbing skills doesn't really happen overnight. One person's strength training, gym routine, and mobility exercises are another person's once-a-week climbing session. There's no point in comparing yourself to the climber

beside you. Owning your place in climbing, wherever you are in it, is also synonymous with mental dedication. Know when you've given your best, and don't get angry with yourself when you know that's all you got. You will improve your best, but not with a temper tantrum at the crag. Sometimes it takes talking yourself out of a panic and embracing the whipper you're about to take. And sometimes it will take gratitude for how far you've already come and knowing your journey isn't over until you say it is.

A big help in all this is surrounding yourself with the right people. Luckily, I've found the climbing community to be welcoming, inclusive, and supportive, and if you can surround yourself with the right people, the journey towards the climber in you can be a lot more fun. You'll be completely pumped out, angry, and beyond ready to give up, and you're asking to come down, and all it takes is your friend going, "Are you sure? You got this, man." And then all of a sudden you've fought your way to the anchors. The right people will pull strength out of you that you didn't even know existed, and that is a pretty remarkable feeling.

Climbing is humbling and reminds us we are not nearly as tough, as strong, or as fearless as we think we are. There must be something we like about that; otherwise, we'd throw out those horrid-smelling climbing shoes and never look back.

You may not always feel like a climber. But you're doing it. So you are.