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Waiting on a Ledge

Time to think, 120 feet off the ground

Sarah Ruth Bates



MY DAD, MY BROTHER, OUR GUIDE, AND I STAND ON A SHELF of granite, 120-odd feet off the ground. The sun bakes my ears—I've forgotten to sunscreen them. A briny wind blows stray hairs into my eyes. Below, the treetops have cohered into forest, leaves rippling in the breeze.

The world up here is simple: green trees, blue water, black roads, pinky gray granite cliff, huge blue sky, sun, rope, harness, edge. Three people next to me.

We're spending the day climbing in Maine's Acadia National Park, with a guide, because we don't know the routes in the area. I felt a little nervous the day before, because I didn't want to slow down the group, but everything has gone unusually smoothly. It was supposed to rain, but the day came out crisp and sunny.

We've just finished a multipitch route: Instead of climbing up and lowering down one by one, we all climbed to a ledge then up again to a higher one. (Picture the rope like an inchworm reaching out, contracting in, then repeating the motion.) Now we stand in a row on the second ledge. It's time to lower ourselves back down.

Our guide will go first, so that he can provide a fireman's belay from the ground. He'll hold the ends of the rope, a precaution against free fall. We preload our rappel devices onto the rope, so we'll each be ready to drop when our turns come. My brother stands closest to the edge, so he'll go first, then my dad, then me.

My dad offers to switch with me. It's perfectly safe for me to go last, and it doesn't require any extra tinkering with the gear—it's just scary to wait on the ledge alone. I say I'll be fine. The guide disappears over the edge. We wait.

The rope goes slack. "Off rappel!" the guide yells, then, "On belay!" My brother lowers off the edge. Dad and I smile, chat. His turn comes. He drops too.

The simple system of rappelling will tell me when it's time to go: My dad will reach the ground, the rope will slacken, and I'll be able to move. He'll call up to me, and I'll lower myself down.

The trees at ground level are a brighter green than usual, that fresh early-spring green, patched with the darker tops of pines. As I look at them, so

The ledges in Maine's Acadia National Park lie exposed to wind and weather. The author could look up or look down, but she had to stay put for what seemed like a very long time. MICHAEL BATES

far below, my stomach clenches. I stare instead at the rocks at my feet: dusty pebbles that our guide calls “kitty litter.”

I send my mind on tangents. I think about *Westworld*, my credit card payments, my ex. *It's been a while*. I can't see my dad and can't go check how far down he's gotten. His weight tightens the rope, so I can't move any closer to the edge. I have no watch, no iPhone. Has it been three minutes? Thirty?

My immediate surroundings don't offer much distraction. I'm part of a simple system: me, the rappel rings, the ropes running through them, and the rope in my hand. I don't want to think too much about the rope, the same way I don't like to think about how far off the ground I am when I fly in airplanes. I don't want to look down again.

Sometimes in the woods, I imagine a little red meter, like the one that pops up at the top of video game screens when you make your character swim underwater, measuring how much time you have left to survive. If you don't surface before the meter runs out, game over. If I had a meter now, it wouldn't measure a physical countdown, but a mental one.

I think of a story I heard last summer. My dad and I were on a weeklong climbing trip in the Bugaboos: a remote glacial zone in Canada, somewhere north of Montana. We scrambled up spires that towered above the ice. Our guide told us a horror story of a rappel gone wrong. A Boy Scout leader picked the wrong anchor to lower from. He sent the scouts ahead of him. The first boy rappelled down, couldn't find a place to stand, and dropped off the end of the rope.

I imagine how it felt: the rope feeding reluctantly at first, then more smoothly, the boy relaxing into the process, lowering faster into the void. Then the rope end whipping through his hands, and the fall, a thousand or more feet into anonymous ice, no life anywhere but the algae that grows on the glacier's crust. Too far down for the troop to hear the scream, because another kid followed, then another.

I've been waiting a long time. I feel tiny stirrings of panic. Panic, here, is the only thing, short of messing with the rope system, that could actually cause a problem. If I do freak out, and I can't get my hands to work, I actually will get stuck.

Nothing is wrong. Nothing needs fixing or solving or doing. Physically, this is the easiest task I've had all day: stand. Mentally, it's the most difficult.

I like an actionable task. I worry about giving a presentation at work, so I practice for it. I'm concerned for a friend, so I call her. Now, there's nothing to

figure out, nothing to change, nothing to do—except to do nothing. It feels as if that should be easy. It's not.

I used to be better at waiting. I filled time easily, thinking about a question or a problem the way you chew gum, worrying it, not for an answer but just for the pleasure of turning it over in my mind. As a kid, I very often had to wait for someone else's decision, but I'm no longer in the back seat, and that mental muscle has atrophied. Maybe it's good, out here, to relearn about waiting, to sit in my own mind and notice how quickly my thoughts spin out of control.

Climbing reveals so cleanly whether you can actually control your nerves, can read the difference between a fear you should listen to and one you should master. My body balks at heights, and I don't blame it. It's difficult to reason with the fears that evolution baked into us—to explain rappelling to my own lizard brain, which doesn't understand rope. It's like wishing you could explain to your dog that going to the vet is actually a good thing. The hormones that surge through my body vie with my brain, which knows that this is a safe situation, that I'm not a Boy Scout in the Canadian Rockies, that I will be fine.

The rope goes slack. The guide yells. I lower myself over the edge.

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