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The Edge

A young mother and her dog face up to a ledge

Amanda K. Jaros



AS I STRAPPED ON HER SADDLEBAGS, MY BLACK LAB, GAIA, FLATTENED her ears back and gave me the droopy-eyed look of someone who had been wronged by the world. She seemed reluctant to get moving this morning after a rainy night in the tent. My thigh muscles hurt from the previous day's climb up Slide Mountain, so I understood her pain, but I knew once we were walking, we'd loosen up.

"You're fine," I told her. "Your pack isn't that heavy. I'm carrying everything." I checked over the campsite one last time and we walked to the trail.

We were a day's hike from the car, and a few years from the last time atop a mountain. I'd escaped home two days before, leaving my husband, Rob, with our 18-month-old son, Cedar. This was the first time I had been away from Cedar for more than a day or two. It was also my first time backpacking since before I was pregnant. This long-awaited getaway from the mundanity of motherhood filled me with exhilaration. And having by my side the pup who'd trekked through the Pacific Northwest, gone on myriad day hikes and weekend trips, and been my best friend for six years made it all the better. Today, deep in New York's Catskill Mountains, we faced eight and a half miles up and over Cornell Mountain, then Wittenberg, to a campsite on the far side.

The rain from the night before had left behind a fog that clung to everything. The air felt thick and damp. I overheated as we ascended Cornell and when a breeze blew the fog away, I breathed deep the cooler air. The trees became more squat as we gained elevation, and the scent of wet pine wafted past. At times, I took off Gaia's pack, hauling it up the rocky slope to make it easier for her on the steep slabs and tall boulders.

My thoughts drifted. What was Cedar doing right now? Was Rob making sure he napped at the right time? What would they do all day? Then I stopped myself. Cedar was well cared for. I had to let go. This was my time. Time to focus on my steps, my dog, the world around me. Since becoming a mother, the only heavy backpack I'd donned was the framed Kelty into which the baby fit safely. That blue baby carrier had made day hikes around home possible. But I hadn't been able to get away to climb mountains, spend nights in a tent in remote locations, or walk for days. That had created in me a new kind of emptiness.

My days of early motherhood filled up with challenges, some large, but usually an onslaught of small, persistent struggles. Most evenings, I'd sit

Amanda K. Jaros with her hiking companion, Gaia. AMANDA K. JAROS

Cedar in front of his bin of Matchbox cars or his baby bookshelf while I busied myself preparing dinner. By the time the broccoli was sautéing and the tofu was browning and the pasta water was boiling hard, Cedar's favorite car would have disappeared under the couch or he'd lose sight of Snuggly under the pile of books and he'd begin his dinnertime wailing. He wouldn't be soothed by my assurances from across the room. As he bellowed, my stress level rose to match the rising temperature in the kitchen.

"Every time," I'd grumble to myself, "every damn time I cook dinner, he cries." All I'd dreamed about for months was having a break from this routine motherhood had brought me. Now I was here, thinking of my baby.

Walking in the woods I actually had the space to reflect on all this. No one was interrupting my thoughts or distracting my attention. As I listened to the birds chattering and chipmunks skittering away, I remembered what backpacking did for me. In addition to the inspiring views and the beautiful forest life, when I hiked alone, I could pay attention to myself, something I'd had little chance to do in the past eighteen months.

With Gaia panting heavily at my heels, we reached the tree-covered summit of Cornell Mountain. Past that, the path descended gently for a few hundred feet, then arrived at a feature unlike anything I'd ever seen on a hiking trail before.

We walked out onto an open, twenty-foot-high rock ledge. The giant mass we stood on had an open fracture down its middle, which formed a nearly vertical, V-shaped crack, narrow at top, widening toward the bottom. About halfway down there was a tiny outcrop with enough space to stand, then another drop. The lower half had more fissures and flat spots and places to gain footing, but the incline was just as steep. This huge crack between the rocks, which was closer to a technical climbing situation than a hiking trail, was the route. And there seemed no way that Gaia would be able to do it.

I took off both of our packs and searched for another option. A more gradual, or at least dirt-covered, route must exist where Gaia could get traction to ease herself down. But there was nothing. On all sides there was a drop-off. After a pleasant morning walk, we'd come to the brink, the edge of the mountain.

Gaia had shadowed me closely all the previous day, rather than racing back and forth through the forest as she did on day hikes and past backpacking trips. As soon as we stopped walking, she hadn't waited for me to take off her pack but pawed at the dirt, then plopped down and was asleep within minutes. It was almost as if she was just not up for this hike but was making

the best of it for old times' sake. Even in her young, bouncy years, this slab would have posed an impossible feat.

I learned later that this rock wall was called the Cornell Crack, and there were many stories of dogs being unable to maneuver it. It was simply too steep. There were plenty of reasons to turn back, not the least of which was that my heart fluttered at the idea of navigating this thing myself, let alone figuring out how to get my 90-pound dog down it. Farther on, Wittenberg and Panther Mountains might hold more tough rock walls like this. If we kept going, I might be putting Gaia into more risky situations.

It made sense to retreat and spend the day on Slide. Here was the perfect opportunity to relax atop a mountain without the pressures of everyday life. And even though I was trying not to, I missed my baby anyway. Putting him out of my mind seemed almost as impossible as Gaia descending this ledge. We could camp in the col again, or spend the day hiking back to the car. I sat on the ledge and pulled out a few of Gaia's treats, which she munched enthusiastically.

I thought about other trails I'd trekked, other risks we'd faced. Gaia had hiked with me for extended months at a time, she'd forded rivers and walked up mountains, she'd traversed narrow cliffside paths and icy snowfields, and she'd done it all bravely and obediently, and in most cases, joyfully. The determined, insistent part of me that thrives on challenge roused. I had to find a way. We'd never turned back before.

And we wouldn't now. I could not go home having failed to complete this hike. Rob wouldn't care how far I'd walked, nor would the baby, but I would. Allowing this trail to defeat me would mean more than just a trip cut short. It would mean I'd lost track of who I was. And I'd never forget it.

"We've got to do this thing, puppy," I said. "I know you can." I put more bone-shaped snacks in front of her. I rubbed her head and tried to remain calm. She'd see me go down, then she'd follow. Somehow.

I grabbed the shoulder strap of my pack, leaned far over the edge to get it as low as possible, and let it fall. It hit the halfway ledge and bounced, toppling over and smashing onto the ground below. The two water bottles popped out of the side pockets and disappeared into the trees. I then did the same with Gaia's saddlebags, which slid down the rock and tumbled a little when they hit bottom.

Gaia watched as I did this, rising to her feet and walking back and forth. If ever a dog had a look of anticipation, it now overtook her furry face. She knew we had to go down there, and I knew she was worried about how she was going to do it.

“OK, Gaia,” I said. The packs were down. Now we had to go too. “We can do this.” I chucked my trekking poles ahead of me, then eased myself into the cleft of the crack. There was just enough of an angle that my boots could grip the sides. I held the top of the ledge and lowered myself backward. My boots stuck and I was able to reach the halfway ledge without incident.

Gaia whimpered; her head hung low. I squatted to lower my center of gravity and scooted down the last ten feet. Gravity pulled me fast and I leaped off the rock and onto the level ground. It wasn’t that bad; I’d done it. But then I looked back up at Gaia.

“Come on, girl. Come on. You can do it.” She paced and cried in distress. I coaxed her. She wouldn’t budge. I ordered her. She bent down and tried to put her front feet over the edge. Then immediately backed up and cried some more. I stood helpless below my trapped dog.

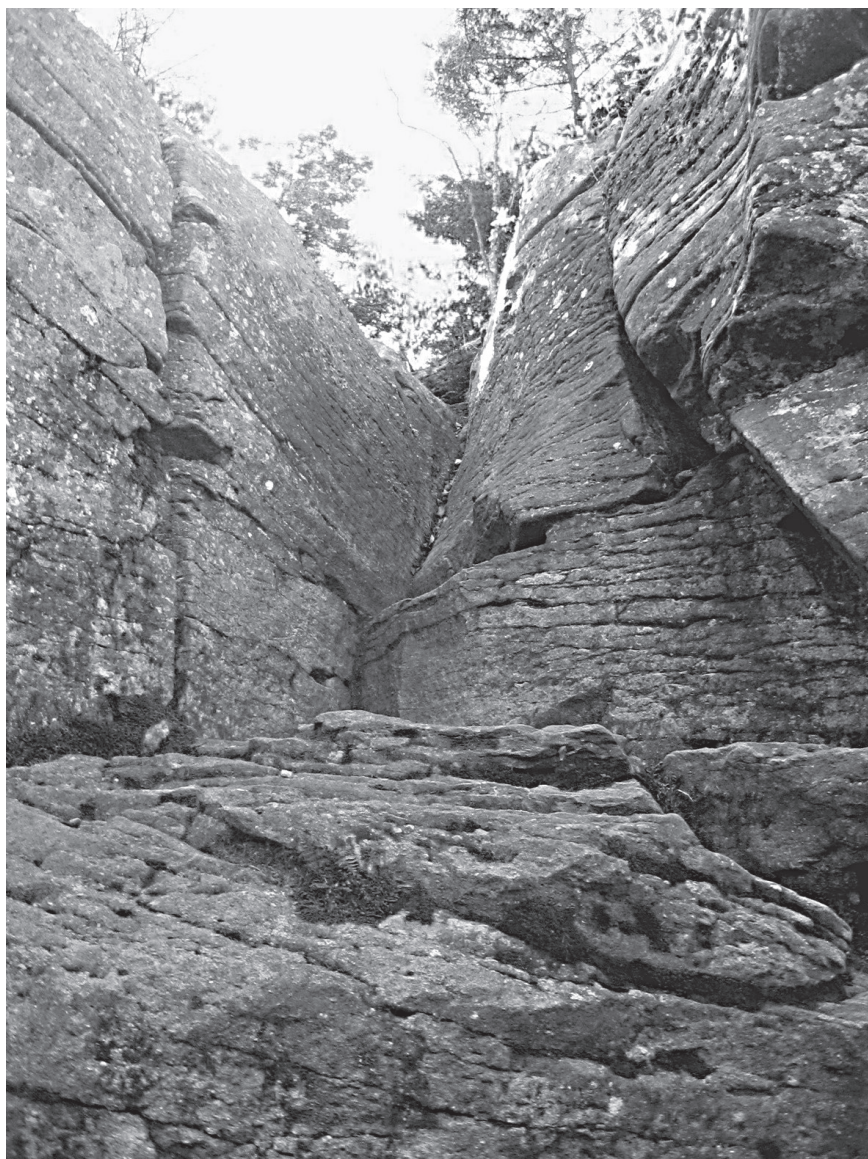
For what seemed like hours I called, she whined, and we both became more and more scared. I climbed back up to the halfway outcrop where my head was just below her feet. I petted and encouraged her from there. She wanted to obey me, she wanted to follow the trail, but she couldn’t find a way. Finally, it became clear that she could not do it on her own. I’d have to force her.

I got her leash. I’d pull her down and somehow support her weight part of the way. I stroked her head, offered her more treats, and told her she could do this. Then I hooked the clip to her collar, clenched the leash tightly, and pulled.

The connection between us made all the difference. Once she gave in, it happened like a rumble of thunder. Her claws scraped the gray rock as she moved vertically headfirst. I braced myself as her body hit me, claws and all. I tried to grab some part of her, but her fur slid through my fingers as we stumbled toward halfway. I let go of the leash and she barreled past. She jumped onto the dirt below, then staggered around the clearing pretending that that crazy thing had not just happened.

“Good dog! You’re the best dog ever!” I hopped down after her, scratched her ears, and pulled out more treats. “You did so good!” I sucked in big breaths as tears burst out. I caught her up into a hug, and as she licked my face, I could feel that her trembling matched my own.

Looking back up at the crack, one part of me felt shock. Another part was bragging to myself that I knew all along we could do it. I watched Gaia circle the area, panting hard, recovering her own sense of stability. It wasn’t just her saddlebags that didn’t fit her right. She wasn’t the same as she used to be. My girl wasn’t too old, but she wasn’t her young self anymore. I began to see that



The Cornell Crack. AMANDA K. JAROS

the time we had shared together, just us two, had passed. Perhaps her role as family dog had come to suit her more than adventure dog. Perhaps my role had shifted too. There would be many day hikes to come, but I knew that this was our last backpacking trip together.

That thought mingled with the astonishment of what we'd just done and caused me to blunder over to a gray slab and drop myself down. I placed my hands flat on the rock as if that would steady me. They were impossible things. Had she, I, my life really changed that much?

Suddenly I craved my baby. I had an ache in my chest that was only quenched when I held him close. Love and fear and a desperate quaking of more emotions than I knew existed bound me to Cedar. Sometimes it rose in my stomach, causing nausea. Sometimes it felt like my lungs simply couldn't get enough air. But always, holding him against my chest was the only remedy, the only way to begin to ease the pain of it, almost as if the clipping of his umbilical cord had not truly severed the physical connection between us.

In those evenings back at home when I was trying to cook and Cedar was crying, I'd turn all the burners down, including the one that raised my own temper, and go to him, my voice soothing and stable. "Aww, what's wrong, Cedar? Where's Snuggly? It'll be OK." And when I picked him up, he'd wrap his tiny legs around my hips and grasp my shoulder with his chubby hands. We'd both take a few breaths into our relief at having found each other again. Our connection would overpower the hard feelings and I'd carry him back to the stove. I'd resume cooking with him on my side, both of us distracted by the giant bubbles spitting out of the pot and the steam swirling into our eyes.

I needed to be home caring for my son. But I also needed time alone to think and hike through the mountains. These needs existed together. If there was a way to reconcile the two, the answer hung over the rock ledge above me, invisible, ethereal, out of reach.

When my legs had stopped stammering and my heart rate had slowed, I gathered up my water bottles and dug into my pack for some food. Gaia looked at me with hope in her eyes as I opened a chocolate bar. I pulled out some more of her treats and handed them over.

Though he was 150 miles away, Cedar was also here, attached to me in inexplicable ways. Whether I hiked with a heavy backpack or a tiny day pack, I knew that for many years to come, if not forever, no matter what trail I attempted or how far I hiked, the weight that I carried would always include my son.

The sun kept on its path overhead as Gaia leaned against my legs, her dirty dog stink filling the air. My girl and I had walked many miles together. She'd kept her four big feet moving by my side over countless ups and downs. We'd

had struggles, but we'd never failed. Maybe if we had turned around at the Cornell Crack it wouldn't have been a failure either, but simply a different route for us to travel. Either way, all paths led back home.

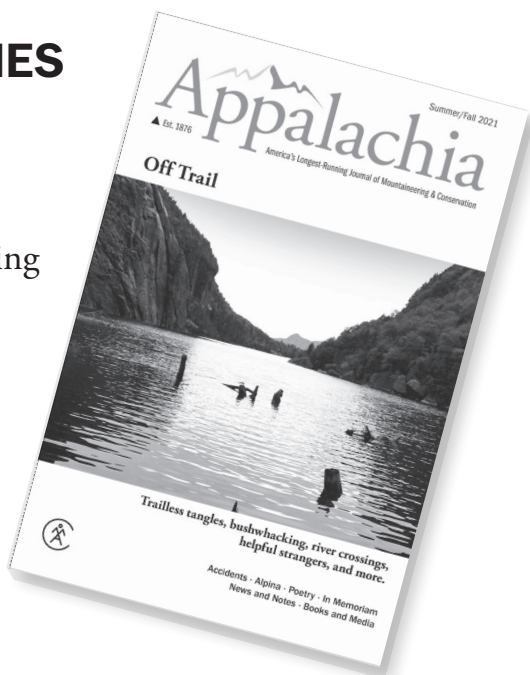
AMANDA K. JAROS holds a master of fine arts in creative writing from Chatham University and is the editor-in-chief of *Literary Mama*. Her work has appeared in journals including *Flyway*, *Terrain.org*, *Stone Canoe*, *Newfound*, *Pilgrimage*, and elsewhere. She lives in Ithaca, New York, with her husband and son. Her amazing dog Gaia, who was the best hiking partner Jaros ever had, died in 2013.

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