THE CLIMBING LIFE

Red and Blue



Photo: Geoff Bennett

We were nineteen and drunk, and Jake was performing a ceremony to sanctify his view of the world. Shadows from the university buildings surrounded us, a grand Gothic scene undercut by some administrator's decision to locate a kitschy fountain, lit by a revolving sequence of red, blue and white lights, smack in the center of the courtyard.

Barefoot, I stared into the shimmering water as Jake kicked off his shoes and rolled up his jeans. When the fountain glowed red, he clambered in, and I followed. The water was deeper than I thought; my pant legs dragged as we sloshed to the far side and out. "Red is for passion," Jake intoned, while the puddles collected at our feet. "For life at the extremes of emotion. Tonight we make a vow—better destruction than the tyranny of moderation."

Then he splashed back in, floundering through the now-blue water. He vaulted out, droplets flying and catching the light, and waited until I stood beside him again. "Blue is for detachment," he said. "To life with nothing you're afraid to lose. To living without the weakness of love or fear. You understand, man? You swear?"

"As much as I understand anything you say," I replied. "Now c'mon. I thought we came here to do something stupid."

At the bar earlier, we'd decided to cap the evening by scaling Northwest Washington University's historic Reavis Hall. We were new friends, English majors who'd met at the gym. In our minds, we were Lord Byron's offspring, scornful of the common herd and of the rules created to limit those, like us, who dreamed so greatly.

Jake glided up like a cloud-cast shadow to the ledge at the base of a window. I had my own method, right hand crimped over a sill, left toe dug into the space between two masonry stones. "Good rock," I yelled in drunken surprise, as if an architect would have constructed a building out of the crumbling slop that formed our local mountains. We wove higher. The surface felt pleasantly gritty under my fingertips but gouged my bare toes, and when we reached the fourth floor, my arms ached. Still I couldn't resist one last flourish. I manteled atop the low wall enclosing the balcony and stood to my full height, my heels over the air and my arms spread in triumph. At that instant, a cop's spotlight tossed my outline against the side of the building.

I jumped onto the balcony as if electrocuted. "We're fine." I waved at a squad car I barely glimpsed through the blinding light. "See? We're OK. Everything's cool."

"Stay there, you idiots. Don't even think about climbing down," the officer bellowed. His keys rattled as he worked the lock below.

"Were you afraid?" Jake asked.

I shook my head and laughed. My answer felt so shockingly true, no false bravado, not even drunken foolishness: I hadn't been scared of the fall or even of the cop racing up the stairs to bring us to justice.

"Then you know what?" Jake said. The lights snapped on in the hallway behind us, casting the officer's shadow. "We can't stop here. We have to push it. We have to become real climbers."

In the end, the cop let us off with a warning because, he said, we were unique, the first clowns in his experience dumb enough

