

The High Wire

THE WORST SIGHT IN THE WORLD,
AT LOOKING GLASS ROCK

Nights are the hardest. I hear the overgrown rhododendron branches thumping against the plastic litter that carries him through the trees. I grit my teeth and try to sleep but the present slips away, fading into the Appalachian air.

The climbers grunt as they labor to tote my partner's body down the trail. Heavy footsteps stomp. Headlamps bob and weave, scattering paths of light through the burgeoning darkness. I'm forced to view the scene with open eyes, over and over.

February 2, 2019, morning. The eyebrow features on *Dinkus Dog*, Looking Glass Rock, seemed squinty and ominous. There was enough gear on the first pitch, but it was finicky. I wished I carried Tricams. My pro felt marginal, but I pressed on to a belay stance and built a three-point anchor.

"Off belay!" I shouted down to Jed.

Bushes rustled as our friend and longtime climbing partner Mark meandered through the vegetated boulder field below. I pulled up rope and flaked it across either side of my master point as Mark reached the base of the slab.

"Hey! How are y'all?" he shouted up.

"Glad you made it!" I replied.

We had driven four hours west from Raleigh that morning to meet Mark, who came up from Charlotte. Jed and I had reached the nearby town of Brevard an hour ahead of Mark, so we hiked in to the South Side.

Initially, we had intended on the classic *Titties and Beer*—known as "the world's hardest 5.8" until a welcome grade change in the North Carolina guidebooks corrected it to 5.10a. Upon strolling past the aesthetic line of *Dinkus Dog*, however, we decided it would be easier for Mark to find us here. *Dinkus Dog* is also a Looking Glass classic—a letter grade harder at 5.10b—but it was two straightforward pitches directly off the climbers' trail, as opposed to the other's meandering five pitches, located farther down the wall.

"We'll finish up and rap down to you! We can hop on *Fat Dog* next." I pointed over at the climbers rappelling from the climb next to us. Mark nodded.

The sun felt warm on my face and lit up the backdrop of the blue Appalachian skyline, balmy on this February day.

Jed led up the second pitch, slotting gear into the crag's trademark eyebrow-shaped crevices. His pieces were good, but the second pitch was more sustained than the first.

We were all smiles at the bolted anchors. The climb marked our hardest trad lead to date and an onsight for both of us.

"What an awesome climb!" Jed exclaimed, wrapping his arm around my shoulders.

"Great lead!" I said. "Holy crap, that second pitch went on forever."

Jed waved down to Mark, excited that his longtime friend had arrived to join us.

We carried one rope because the route we had originally intended to climb required only that. Our guidebook called for two ropes to rappel straight from the bolted anchors at the top of the crag to the ground, but a climber on Mountain Project had mentioned it was



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possible to rap with one rope by using the tree halfway up the route.

"I'll go first and keep you from swinging," Jed said. I pointed out a slotted eyebrow feature 20 feet to the left of us, and we walked along the top of the crag and set a directional to make his rappel route vertical to the tree, avoiding wear and tear on the rope on the slabby rock. Jed planned on reaching the tree, then anchoring to it and redirecting the rope for a loose diagonal rappel for me. What we didn't account for was that the angle in the rope caused by the directional would eat up some of the rope's length.

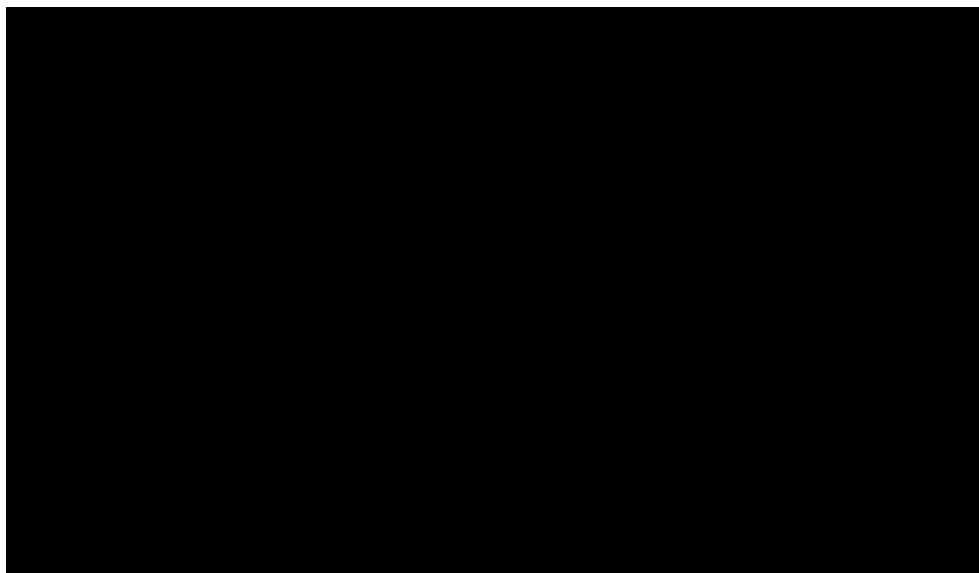
Jed came to the end of the rope three feet shy of the tree. I shouted for him to find a stance, place gear, and clip into it so I could remove the pro at the directional, freeing up enough rope to reach the tree.

He shouted back up, "No worries, I've got it! Stay there."

A bubble of frustration rose in my throat, but I swallowed it. Jed was competent, would figure it out. He always figured it out.

We had tied knots in the ends of the rope and always used a prusik back up. And yet—he fell. Off the end of the rope and out of sight. I watched, helpless, as the ends of the blue rope sprang upward, his body free falling into space, a glint of light reflecting off a carabiner.

I saw everything from above, dissociated



LEFT: Amanda Ellis and Jed Niffenegger on top of Looking Glass, before the accident. ABOVE: Looking Glass Rock, Pisgah National Forest, North Carolina.

from my body. Jed fell about 150 feet, from his stance above the tree, smacking ledges and then tumbling down the slab into the vegetation below. Then—nothing. He was gone. My bloodcurdling screams floated in the breeze as I fell limp against extended slings, swinging free on the bolted anchor. I had witnessed my partner die. Not only my climbing partner—my fiancé. My partner in life. My partner in love.

February 4, 2019. The hospital monitors beep. My body sticks to the leather recliner as, dazed, I try to sit up and shake my mind free of the nightmares. I get my bearings. We've been in Mission Hospital in Asheville for two nights. Jed is alive, his body banged and battered, but none of his injuries life-threatening. I, however, feel dead inside.

Muted shadows dance across the bright white sheet that covers him. The shades are wide open; Asheville's downtown skyline a contrast to the azure mountains in the distance. I am relieved not to be able to see Looking Glass. I try to conjure beauty in my mind. The mountains have always awakened a deep sense of awe in me, but now—nothing.

The beeps continue, reminding me that he's alive. Few climbers survive such harrowing falls with the prognosis for a full recovery. But Jed had survived—with only broken ribs, spinous processes, missing skin, and a ruptured right Achilles.

Now the windows are awash in sunlight. For the moment, I can contemplate the high-wire circus act that defines the line between life

and death. A simple misstep brings the whole show tumbling down.

Why walk the high wire, then? Why climb cliffs or mountains? Will we ever climb again? I don't think I want to. I grasp his bandaged hand. He's sleeping, but a slight smile graces his face. I know what he would say.

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I remind myself he didn't fall because the system failed. He had removed the safety backups so he could reach the tree instead of anchoring in while I freed the bend in the rope. Whether it was poor judgement or a bad plan—he lost his balance and slipped. It was human error, identified in every retelling of the tale. Human error we can strive to address.

These nights in the hospital, the accident replays on an endless reel in my head. Even when I sleep, the images continue in my dreams—in agonizing slow motion, a handful of times each night. Only time and space will slow the cadence.

Three days after the accident we return home from the hospital, and the reel slows. Months later, it still thrums somewhere in the back of my mind—no longer playing through my dreams but, now that I am climbing again, a reminder to remain attentive.

Amanda Ellis is a freelance journalist based out of Raleigh, North Carolina.