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The Win

Chris, Max, and I eagerly jogged down the steps of South Alabama's Rec Center towards the rock wall gym to climb for the second time this week. As Max and Chris bantered, I was quietly anticipating climbing the wall again; silently hopeful is what I tended to be when I thought about that wall.

"You ready to climb, Max?" Chris asked as we reached the tall glass wall separating us from the gym.

"Ya damn right I am!" Max replied as Chris opened the glass door and we all walked in. We quickly grabbed our harnesses and Max and Chris continued to tease each other, promising to race up the wall, or finish the most difficult route as they trotted over to it. They passed me by, paying no attention to anything but their new competition, as I made my way over to a black route I'd been trying to complete for months, determined to get it this time. All the routes were color coded: black was considered the easiest, a series of routes meant for beginners. I had improved every time I climbed, so maybe I'd finally be good enough to finish it this time. I put my legs through the hoops of the harness and tightened the straps around my waist and thighs. I stuffed my hand into my chalk bag and gripped the chalk as I looked up and thought about the path I planned on taking. I rubbed my hands together and took a deep breath. This gym was filled

with tall men in their twenties, and occasionally the fit female. The climbers here who made the routes deemed the route in front of me as easy, a route kids climb when they first experience rock climbing. I deemed that their upper body strength had corrupted their sense of difficulty—either that or that they were pretentious assholes.

I grabbed the first hold and lifted myself off the ground, placing my feet at the beginning foot holds. *Ok Abie, remember, foot, foot, hand, hand.* I had climbed the same twenty holds since I first came here with Chris, knowing where to put my fingers and body weight for each individual hold. I felt like I knew this part of the wall better than I knew myself. I placed my left foot on another familiar hold, then the right, then I reached for the next, pulled up, and repeat, that's all it took. *See? Easy,* I told myself, interpreting the ease of climbing my route as a good sign. But then I reached the move I could never make, the move that made me jump off the wall every time and forbade me from completing this oh-so easy route. To grab the next hold, I had to fully extend my body as I held on to a teeny-tiny pinch hold below my waist, as my other hand reached for that next plastic rock. It looked so far away—was it two feet away? Three? Five? It was far away enough that I didn't think I could reach it even if I could fully extend. *Damn those tall rock climbers.* Due to the way the wall curved, if I didn't reach that hold within a second after letting go of the one I was holding, I'd fall back off the wall and probably swing around the corner and hurt myself. I looked down. I couldn't see Max or Chris nearby, and if they were close, they were not paying any attention to me. I gave myself a small push and reached for the hold, just to get a feel for what I needed to do, but as soon as I let go I felt myself fall backwards and my hand never got anywhere near that next hold. I quickly grabbed the previous hold to stabilize myself, my heart pounding and my energy running low. I looked at the other people climbing the wall as they laughed with each other and took turns coming up with new crazy

moves, like climbing with one hand or climbing upside down. I clung to the wall, still holding on to those last rocks I could touch on the route. I wanted to cry, but instead I took another deep breath, climbed down a few holds, then jumped off the wall, watching my goal get farther and farther away as the rope lowered me to the cushioned ground.

After hours of trying to climb that mountain of bullshit plastic holds, we left tired, and most of us fulfilled.

“My arms are dead,” I said with a chuckle as I slipped my climbing shoes off, trying to find a silver lining to my failure.

“Yeah, mine too,” Chris exhaled with exhaustion.

“I couldn’t finish the route again. I can’t make that one goddamn move,” I complained. Chris frowned and put his arm around my waist.

“I’m sorry cutie. I’m sure you’ll get it soon, you’re strong,” he said to me. Chris and Max could climb; they got each other’s jokes, and they weren’t self-conscious, but I felt like I had to prove myself to them every day. I never understood their jokes, or even what we all had in common. I just tagged along. I was the outsider; I was the girlfriend.

“But I’m not,” I said with anger.

“Yes, you are. The people who make those routes are just stupid; they don’t know what easy is,” he said. Chris and Max then began to talk about who was better at the route they came up with this time as we passed a sign promoting the Indoor Ironman Triathlon. I slowed down to a stop to look at the sign.

“What are you doing?” Chris asked as he and Max stopped and looked at me. I gazed at the large cardboard sign. It read: “Indoor Ironman Triathlon, complete by the end of the summer and win a free T-shirt!” I saw that sign every day for the past month we came to the gym to climb. Max and Chris joked about completing the challenge in no more than seven hours, “like the way it should be done,” they said. I saw that sign and often thought of signing up. I mean, what if I could do that? But I always told myself I couldn’t. Biking 112 miles, swimming 2.4 miles, and running a marathon seemed impossible for me, even with a month to do it in. I stared at the sign a few seconds longer, contemplating whether I dare to challenge myself again after the continuous cycle of fails. Did I really want to make a fool of myself again? *Fuck it*, I thought to myself as I stormed to the front desk and got the attention of the student worker. Chris and Max followed behind me curiously to see what I was doing.

“You’re signing up for the triathlon?” Chris asked, looming over my shoulder.

I could tell Chris and Max were at least a little impressed, but I don’t think they thought I was going to go through with my promise. I wasn’t sure I would either, but I kept telling myself I would, even if it might have been a lie. It felt good to make such a claim, but at the same time it scared me. I was so tired of losing at everything; I couldn’t handle another loss. I silently hoped this could be my one win.

The next time we went to South’s Student Rec Center, I didn’t head to the rock wall with them; I got on a cycling machine instead. I told Chris I’d be busy on the bike for at least an hour, and then we went our separate ways. For a time I tried to watch *Bill Nye Saves the World* on my phone as I pushed through the pain of working out my legs for who knows how long, but as I heard Bill talk about how people are denying climate change and how it’s hurting our planet, his voice started to fade away and my mind wandered.

I imagined myself three years ago in school walking up to my English teacher during class to ask for makeup work after missing over a month of class. I was having problems with abdominal pain, which kept me from moving out of bed most days, and other days I was too depressed to leave the soft mattress of my bed. I approached her as she typed away at her computer and ignored the abundance of kids yelling and throwing paper balls at each other or gambling for dollar bills playing cards.

“Excuse me,” I spoke with a slight smile. “Is there any make up work or extra credit I could do?” The teacher stopped typing and looked up at me, staring at me with a look of suspicion for a moment.

“Where have you been?” she asked with disdain in her face. My smile vanished; I was too tired to sell my illness to someone again.

“I’ve been sick,” I said flatly. She kept looking at me, and I knew she didn’t believe me.

“Do your parents know you’ve been missing this much school?” she asked.

“Yes—” I said, ready to give her the same story I had to tell everyone.

“Because you’ve missed a lot,” she said, interrupting me.

I pushed harder on the pedals of the cycling machine, now breathing heavily. I remembered the computer room in school with the large windows that reached the tall ceiling, and how I had to go there every day for summer school. I missed a lot of that too, from the same physical and mental health problems, but when I did go, I worked as hard and as fast as I could. Once, when class was over, I was walking through the hallway towards the front door when two

teachers stopped me. One of them was my summer school teacher, who was really more like a babysitter.

“Why are you missing so much school?” the other teacher asked.

“I’m sick,” I answered dully, as I had for what felt like the millionth time to every confused or concerned teacher or acquaintance.

“Well, with how much summer school you’ve missed, I really don’t think you’ll finish,” my teacher said sternly.

“I will,” I said, my brow slightly furrowed. I walked past them quickly and slammed my body against the door to push it open as I left. And I did finish. I finished the course two hours before the end of the last day.

Chris walked up next to me, my legs still spinning, and brought me back down to earth.

“We’re leaving,” he said with exhaustion in his breath.

My chest hurt. So did my legs. I felt like I was made of string and that I’d collapse on myself at any moment. I looked up at the screen of the machine.

“I biked three miles,” I told Chris, catching my breath.

“Hot,” he replied. I laughed and left my seat; my legs were so used to the resistance of the bike I felt like I could fly. Picking up my feet felt easy, but putting my weight back on them felt risky, like they’d just give out and I’d fall flat on my face. The feeling of adrenalin made me want to bike forever; I smiled and jogged over to the computer to clock in my time, even though I barely had the energy. *I think I can do this*, I told myself, that speck of confidence left in me growing ever so slightly.

For the next few weeks I continued to bike rather than climb; the burn and jelly-like feeling in my legs never went away, but I began to tolerate it and even to wish for it. I thought the same about walking around my block every day. It was fulfilling to try something and feel like I was accomplishing something, not just clocking in hours on a computer, but also feeling and seeing my muscles getting stronger and more defined. There were times I'd walk past my bedroom mirror and stop to admire the progress I'd made.

One day as I was on my morning two-mile walk, I listened to the birds chirp and watched the sunlight peeking through the trees, lighting up the asphalt I walked on. I remembered one day my mom was driving me home from middle school. I was looking out the car window, admiring that same sun peeking through different trees as we drove by and the light blurred.

"How was your day, sweetie?" Mom asked in her cheerful voice with her equally cheerful smile.

"Fine," I replied, gazing out the window, watching the afternoon sun blanket trees and shrubs with yellow light. But I wasn't fine, there was something really wrong. I felt it but didn't know what it was.

"Ok, well, do you want to hear about my day?" she chirped. She was looking for anything to just have a conversation with me.

"Yeah, sure," I sighed, hoping that strange feeling would go away if I talked.

She started to talk about her job, but I couldn't listen to a word she said. I was too focused on the feeling that something was watching me. I felt lightheaded and kept my eyes open wide, darting my vision around to take in everything around me. *I'm scared*, I thought. *Everything is fine. Why am I so scared?* My breath quickened, and my mind became fuzzy. I did my best to

reassure myself. *Don't worry, you're almost home. Almost home. Almost. Home.* When we arrived, I got out of the car and quickly walked to my room, avoiding eye contact with Mom. In the car I could manage to respond to her with appropriately timed 'uh-huh's and 'cool's, but I couldn't do that anymore. As I shut the door to my room, I fell against it, covering my face with my hands. That's when I felt tears weaving through my fingers. I gasped and pulled my hands away from my face. *Why am I so scared?* I thought to myself. I started to pace around the room, hyperventilating. *I'm ok, just keep moving. Keep moving.* I saw myself in the mirror and stopped, looking at myself in horror. *Is that really me?* I walked closer and examined my wide, tearful eyes and puffy red face. *That...doesn't... look like me.* My face and body looked like it belonged to someone else, like I was trapped in a stranger. I cried harder and lay down on the floor, my head became more blank and disoriented as time went on. I felt like an animal. I couldn't make conscious thoughts anymore, just the words "*I'm dying*" over and over again. I could only think of how it felt like everything was coming to an end. It all felt so dreamlike. Colors had no depth, objects felt almost two dimensional, as if I were living in a picture. I stayed there crying, holding my legs to my chest; I couldn't move, I couldn't even think to try, and the few moments I had the ability to, it physically hurt to try. I lost sense of time. I thought I was going to be stuck in this state of terror until I died, and in that moment, I didn't feel like a person, but just a body. After what felt like forever, I had the will to move my fingers. It took a while, but eventually I could crawl. I continued to cry as I gripped the carpeted floor so tight my fingertips and knuckles were white. I did my best to make it to the door to open it as I called for my mother. First it was just a soft, slurred version of the word 'Mom.' but it eventually became something that my Mom could hear from the other room. She ran to my room, swinging the door open, falling to the ground next to me.

“Sweetie what’s wrong?” she gasped, as she put her hands on my back. My sister Erin ran into the room after her. They didn't seem real, they seemed like distorted figures made by my thoughts.

“I don’t know,” I whispered through shaky breaths.

“Should we call an ambulance?” Erin asked in a panicked voice, as she squatted down next to me.

“I don’t know,” Mom said. I couldn’t see her face, but I could tell how worried she was. She asked me what I was feeling, and I told her as much as I possibly could in that state. And then she made her diagnosis.

“She’s having a panic attack.”

“I need help,” I mumbled. “I need help.”

“We’ll get you some, honey,” Mom said, rubbing my back, and she began to feel a little more real.

I breathed in slowly, stopping my mind from remembering much more of that time as I walked. I got good at that, stopping myself from dwelling on past attacks; after all, they had become the norm for me. I had dealt with problems in my head for years and never spoke a word about it until that day, and I hated myself for it. I had denied myself proper help for years, for so long that I had become an entirely different person. I didn’t mean for it to get that bad. At the time it felt like no one listened to anything I said anyway, and I didn’t want to burden people with my problems and my suicidal feelings. I didn't want them to think I was just some freak. I felt alone and broken, like if I told people it would get worse. People would see me differently;

they'd see me as messed up and insane. I was convinced that staying quiet was safer and if I did say anything, I'd lose my friends and would be thrown into some mental institution.

After admitting to my mom that I needed help that day, I went to therapy and taught myself that I shouldn't be ashamed of needing help. I exercised and socialized and learned to express myself rather than bottle up emotions when I felt threatened or stressed. It took years, but I slowly regained parts of myself I thought were gone forever, things I thought had been ripped out of me because of my own messed-up head. As I kept walking for the triathlon, I focused on the flowers in people's yards and the breeze in my face as I finished my morning routine. When I reached my house and walked inside, I saw myself in the hallway mirror and stopped. I saw the muscle I had gained and how I looked less like a tired mess and more of a normal human being with their shit together, I *felt* like a normal person with their shit together. *That's me*, I told myself, and for the first time in a long time, I felt like myself. *I can do this*. I thought.

After a few weeks of walking and biking, there was one day left to complete the triathlon for South and I hadn't even started the swimming portion. Stress weighed on me as I raced against the clock. When Chris and I got to the gym, I ran to the locker room to change. As I clumsily slipped on my bathing suit and sped walked to the pool my heart beat a little faster and the feeling of worry grew in the pit of my stomach. *I have to do this*. I jumped into the pool, submerging myself in the cold water, and I began my first lap. I began to wonder what events led me to suffer so much with my mental illnesses, or why I got so sick when I did, or why was I doing this now? What was I trying to prove, and who was I trying to prove? I swam on and all sound became distorted by water covering my ears. Flashes of memories zoomed through my mind as I pushed through the water.

I remembered the year I chose not to make Christmas cards with my grandma—I told her it was because I no longer believed in God. I was twelve years old, trying to figure out my identity like most preteens did, so naturally religion was the first thing I rebelled against. I remembered how my grandfather screamed at me and pulled me out of my chair by my ponytail. The feeling of his massive hand pulling me out of a chair by yanking my curly hair was still fresh in my mind.

“You go down there right now and make cards with your grandma!” he yelled as his face became red like some angry tomato. I turned to him, sobbing.

“Don’t you ever touch me again!” I screamed.

I remembered telling my dad about it and nothing happening. I’m sure now they’d pretend that never happened, just like how my second grade teacher lied to my parents and said, “I’d never hurt her!” after repeatedly hitting me on the head with a pen in class or even when she punched me in the arm for working ahead on my class work while she was giving a lecture. As I swam more, I thought of the countless boys who had harassed me in my younger years, their voices echoing in my head.

“It’s a dare, you have to do it,” Three said as they tried to make me do everything they wanted.

“Oh, I don’t know this one,” Two said as they cornered me in a skating rink.

“You’re my girlfriend now,” One said as they kissed me with no warning.

I thought of them all as I backstroked my laps, counting the lamps on the ceiling to see how close I was to the pool wall.

I was doing this challenge because I was angry, because I'd give anything to spit in the faces of everyone who doubted me or put me down. I was sad and tired, and I just wanted something, just something for myself. Anything to make me feel like a person and not a bystander taking everything thrown at her, or what those awful people had made me. I needed something that was mine, I needed a win. I needed to pedal my last mile, walk my last step, swim my last lap, and finish this damn thing. I was done letting things happen to me and adapting to them. *I'm done with not having a choice*, I thought as I pulled myself out of the pool. I stood up, feeling fatigued and lightheaded from the hours of swimming, but I had never felt better. I had finished. *I won*, I thought, as I looked down at the pool, my reflection staring right back at me.