

Erosion

“Come on, it’ll be fun.”

“I really don’t want to.”

We stand on the top of a fifty-foot boulder jutting over the Red River, the July sun heating the sandstone so that we have to shift our feet to keep our soles from burning. Brandon has already jumped off three times, doing backflips off the rock and plummeting into the deep, murky waters below. I had watched him from the other side of the river as I sat on the rocky bank, the cool water lapping my feet, squinting to make out his tall, lean frame as he walked to the edge of the boulder with his hands on his hips. He looked down, said something to a guy in red swim trunks standing near him, and then backed up a few steps and stood still. Suddenly he ran two great long strides and jumped, vaulting his body into the nothingness of air, tucking his head and knees into a knot, turning midair once, twice, then straightening into a long line with hands pointed down, down, down, until he sliced the Red River open and it parted and drank him in.

He popped up three or four seconds later, ten feet from where he had gone under, and swam across the river toward me. His arms were tan and muscled, and he cut through the water almost lazily. “Impressive,” I said, smiling as he emerged dripping and gleaming and stood next to me.

“It’s your turn now,” he replied, reaching down for my hand.

He’d already tried twice to get me to go up with him. But jumping off rocks into deep rivers wasn’t my sort of thrill. I preferred reading a book on the sand, wading into the water whenever I got too hot and feeling the riverbed shape itself between my toes. But I knew

Brandon. He wouldn't stop pestering me unless I followed him up the steep climb and threw myself into the river.

“Well, I'll climb up there with you,” I said, “but I'm not going to jump.” I put my hand in his and he pulled me up, and we stepped back into the water and swam across to the path winding up the boulder.

We had arrived at Red River Gorge the night before. It was our anniversary, and we'd decided to rejuvenate our eight years of marriage by leaving the kids with my mother and taking a two-day trip into Kentucky. The gorge was deep in its summer brooding, the rocks hot and the river warm, the sugar maples and pin oaks heavy with green. I wanted to think of it as a sultry summer heat, but in reality it was just muggy, the weight of the season clinging to our bodies like a sweat-drenched T-shirt. The nights were cool though, and we slept uncovered in a log cabin as moonbeams washed over our bare skin. It was unusual, for us, to sleep without clothes, without layers of cloth or blanket. But there was something about being so close to nature, something about the rocks of the gorge that shot out of the earth and the river with its primal rush that made us shed what lay between us.

But the moon disappeared, and in the morning the sun took over, dappling our bed with unflattering light and pushing us off our pillows and into our clothes. After we dressed and before the heat began to blanket the gorge, we hiked to Dark Hollows, one of the gorge's natural stone arches, where the wind was still at work sculpting its masterpiece. As we walked under the shade of the rock ledge and through the opening, I placed my hand on the inside of the arch and felt the cool, smooth underbelly of the rock. I loved the arches—they were structures of

grandeur, but they had an air of modesty about them, as if they knew their beauty was at the mercy of the elements. In another million years, the wind and the rain would carve them so hollow that the rock would collapse, and the arches would be nothing more than a few broken pebbles scattered on the earth.

After we left Dark Hollows, we went rock climbing up Scrambled Porn, a sixty-foot crag with two deep horizontal cuts that divided the rock wall into three bulky, offset sections. Brandon twisted the rope into a figure eight through my harness as I stood next to the sandstone wall, and then he stepped back to belay me. I reached around the rope and laid my hands on the rock. It was cool to the touch, rough and unforgiving, so different from the smooth arch I had felt that morning. I ran my hand over the holes and divots, searching for a handhold, the eroded edges passing beneath my palm until I found a small ledge. I grasped it and heaved my body upwards, lifting my foot to stand on a precarious narrow shelf, clinging to the rock and shaping my soft flesh to the unyielding stone.

Brandon had taught me how to rock climb when we first started dating, nine years earlier. It was the first of many hobbies he would rope me into over the years. After rock climbing came woodworking, which I found tedious and time consuming; then there was clogging—Brandon had been on our university's dance team, so I too learned how to dance. He taught me how to shoot rifles and pistols, a useful enough skill but a painful one when I hadn't pulled the shotgun tight enough to my shoulder. There had been tennis—fun, but I never did win a game against Brandon—and dirt biking, which was terrifying when I'd had to speed down treacherous hills just to keep up with him. There was skiing too, which I particularly disliked. I kept falling into Utah's famous powdered snow, my ski mask hiding my freezing, frustrated face, but I got up

again and again because I wanted to impress him. It was as though he were filling me, forming me, connecting with me through climbing and shooting and dancing and skiing.

I could only remember one hobby of mine that he had tried. He had read a novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*. He enjoyed it, but had never picked up a book of fiction since.

“Just climb,” he had instructed me when I encountered my first crag nine years ago, “and don’t touch the rope.” So I had climbed, as I was climbing now, clutching jagged lips of weather-beaten rock as it clawed my calloused hands.

The rock walls I climbed always seemed to have character, although I had a hard time deciding exactly what that character was. On one hand the rock seemed passive, oblivious to the miniscule life form attempting to make its way up her rough body. On the other hand she seemed cold, merciless, able to flick me off with one trick handhold or unmount me with the shock of a spider that made its home in one of her dark, recessed holes. And when on occasion I fell from her weathered face, I thought perhaps she was angry, maybe at the wind that wore her away, particle by particle, with its harsh gusts and mild breezes. Or perhaps she was still outraged by the Red River, which had cut its path through her 310 million years ago and shaped her against her will as the water forged its way through canyons and centuries.

Perhaps too, then, she was irate with me. For even as I climbed her ashen cliffs, little pieces of rock were brushed away by my white-chalked hands. Erosion is usually defined as a force of nature—the wearing away of earth by water and air. But it is a human force too, a corrosion achieved by hands and words and silence, action and inaction and apathy. I could feel, as I inched my way up the bottom third of the crag and onto the torso, the ragged, sharp surface that had been torn up by the wind and the water. I could see the silvery veins running wild

through her sandstone skin, the bits of rock dust caught in gossamer webs, the eyehook steel bolts hammered deep into her sides by rock climbers wanting to scale her towering terrain.

When I finally reached the top, I stood on the ledge and looked out over the miles and miles of sandstone cliffs that extended in either direction, and then I looked down at Brandon, a speck on the ground. I was sixty feet above him, but we were still connected by the rope, a literal lifeline. I had come to enjoy rock climbing over the years—one of the few hobbies he had wanted me to learn that I actually liked—but still hated coming down from the top. Some people say it is all about trusting the person who is belaying you: he holds your life in his hands. And this is true. But it is also about trusting the rope. It's the only thing connecting you to your belayer as you step faithfully off the edge of a sixty-foot cliff into nothingness. Rock climbing ropes are strong—they can hold hundreds of pounds—but they too can erode, they too can wear away, especially if left out in the sun, the wind, the rain, and if you slip and the tension is too great, the rope can snap in two, and you will fall like a rock from the sky and return to the earth from where you came.

Of course, we had checked our rope before we climbed, so when I held my breath and stepped off Scrambled Porn, Brandon and the rope held me, and I sailed down the rock wall, kicking off the face to pick up speed, breaking off little shards of rock with my shoes.

We climb out of the river and onto the dirt path that leads around the back of the boulder, pushing branches and brush out of the way as we scramble up the natural stone steps on the east side of the rock. There are a few other swimmers standing on the top when we make it up, and I follow Brandon to the edge. Leaning over slightly, not wanting my feet to get too close, I peek at

the quiet water fifty feet below me. It is a long way down. And I don't particularly like swimming.

"Come on," Brandon says, "it'll be fun."

"I really don't want to," I reply.

"You'll regret it if you don't—trust me, it's a rush." He smiles, encouragingly, pestering me with his expectations.

I step closer to the edge and look down again. There is no rope connecting us here, now, and if I jump I will have to hope that I don't end up getting lost in the maze of water and drown.

I look over my shoulder at Brandon, who has backed up to give me room, anticipating a response that I don't want to give. The rock is hot and gray, and there are bits of dried, brown moss dying beneath Brandon's feet. I look down at my own feet and see rock dust, divots, holes, and I wonder how much of this rock has already disappeared into the wind, how different it must be than what it once was. The sun scorches my back and the heat is making waves in the air in front of me, and suddenly I can see us, Brandon and me, standing on this promontory of weathered earth, and it is disappearing, waning, eroding, it is wearing away beneath us, and so I jump.