

MT. RAINIER SANCTIFICATION

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For nearly three hours, I'd been trying unsuccessfully to sleep. It was definitely not the most comfortable bed I'd ever had—only a thin yellow and silver accordion-style pad separated my sleeping bag from the particleboard platform bunk. I had no pillow; a pillow was too much of an extravagance to haul up to ten thousand feet. But I was glad I opted for the warmer, albeit slightly heavier, sleeping bag. Even though my bed was hard, it was warm as I cuddled a hot water bottle like a teddy bear.

The room rattled with the snores of three men, my climbing partners. I was the only woman. We were lucky to get a spot in the stone shelter at Camp Muir, the climbing basecamp of Mt. Rainier. We would be waking at 1:00 a.m. to begin our summit attempt, a climb of nearly 4,500 feet that would take six to nine hours. The sun had finally gone down, the hazy glow of the small, dirty windows extinguished at last. But it wasn't the light in the room that kept me awake. Or the snoring. Or the lack of a pillow. It was panic, silent and extreme.

Today had been harder than I'd expected. We climbed about 4,800 feet from the trailhead at Paradise with me struggling the last one thousand feet. Although I'd completed hikes with weighted packs in preparation for this climb, my pack felt too heavy. I didn't layer up and allowed myself to get too cold in the snow and wind. I was depleted, and we hadn't even started the hard part yet.

What in the world was I thinking? Rainier is a serious mountain—14,411 feet of massive rock and ice. I was tortured with possibilities—me, hauled off the mountain by a Chinook helicopter, dangling above the trees in a rescue basket or falling in a crevasse, pulling the entire team after me, where we'd all suffocate and freeze to death.

More than violent death, I feared revealing that I wasn't strong enough or brave enough. That I simply didn't have enough stamina and grit. Tomorrow I knew I would be asking things of myself I'd never asked before and discovering things I'd never known. More than anything, I was scared I wouldn't like what I found.

At some point, counting fears must have worked like counting sheep because I fell asleep.



A few unrested hours later, I stepped into the frigid air. At elevation, June feels like January. Looking up, I saw an indigo and purple sky filled with the most glorious display of stars I'd ever seen. The Milky Way looked as though God had spilled a bottle of glitter across the universe. I breathed in the magic of it all.

Despite my fears, it felt right that I had come.

We finished the morning tasks—boiling water for freeze-dried breakfasts, gathering ropes and carbineers, and lacing up crampons—and it was time to rope in. From here on out the four of us would be tethered together by a long purple rope.

Mike, the most experienced climber by far, took the lead. A kind and jovial fiftysomething with a gap-tooth grin, Mike was the quintessential Boy Scout. He would be attempting his twentieth summit today, the cap to an intimidating and perfect record of nineteen attempts, nineteen summits. Mike was incredibly encouraging and patient and never made any of us feel the least bit small.

Second on the rope was John, one of my most cherished friends but also someone I had barely spoken with in three years, not since the day I fired his wife Lara, shattered our friendship, and triggered his divorce. When my husband Matt and I picked him up from the airport two days ago, he greeted us with warm hugs and smiles, saying, "I'm really here and it's really you guys!" That's what you say to people you don't see or

talk with often but think about a lot. For the sake of the climb and our previous friendship, we were both pretending things were fine.

Third on the rope was me, the weakest link, a newbie climber and forty-one-year-old mother of three, carrying more than my share of emotional baggage.

Sterling, a twenty-two-year-old student and part-time lifeguard, filled the fourth and final position. I called him Strapping Sterling, partly because he was tall and muscular but mostly because of his handshake. He had a very firm handshake that I found incredibly reassuring. It boded well for his ability to rescue.



We began, the four of us linked together by a long purple rope. It felt surreal. There was the tiniest hint of light on the horizon. We were traversing the upper portion of the Cowlitz Glacier, the incline relatively gentle. Concentrating on my pace so that the rope wasn't too taut or too loose, I carried my ice axe in my left hand. Combined with the crampons on my feet, I felt very spikey.

I'm such a badass right now, I thought, trying to convince myself this was possible.

The last time John walked this path, he'd been on a mission: propose. None of us could imagine a more epic location for a marriage proposal. On that trip, he'd climbed with his girlfriend Lara, my husband Matt, and another buddy, Brent.

Back then, Lara was my friend and fellow dancer. We all had big expectations for John and Lara, me included. After all, I'd engineered their meeting in the first place.

I couldn't wait for them to become our married besties, to create the quintessential Mormon life together where they would sit in the pews every Sunday with their perfectly styled and adorably curious children. Waiting below as they climbed, I dreamed of the weekends we would

all hang out and roast s'mores and go on hikes, of Lara and me baking cakes and being in book clubs together. I was so excited and invested in their relationship, I even helped John choose the ring—a beautiful green emerald in a diamond halo on a gold band that I knew would perfectly complement Lara's fiery auburn hair. He carried the ring to the top of this mountain, she said yes, and he put it on her finger.

Perfect. Until it wasn't.



A last-minute purchase, my hydration pack arrived the afternoon before our departure. On the mountain, in the dark and wearing bulky gloves, I fumbled with the unfamiliar nozzle. The mouthpiece came off completely, squirting water everywhere. I couldn't get it to stop.

"Hey guys? Could we stop for just a second?" I called.

"This isn't a good place to stop," Mike called back over his shoulder, his headlamp bobbing. "It's prone to rock fall."

"Okay," I said, as water leaked. Embarrassed and not wanting to inconvenience anyone, I kept fumbling, trying to reattach the mouthpiece as we hiked. By the time I got it under control, I'd lost a fair amount of water, my clothes and gloves were wet, and I still hadn't had anything to drink.

But this wasn't the first time I'd put myself and others in a precarious position because I didn't insist that we address a problem.

After John and Lara married, we worked together at a ballroom dance studio. They were instructors and I was the executive director. Problems arose between John and Lara that bled into the classroom. Parents and students complained. Not wanting to strain my friends' new marriage, I ignored issues or tried to take care of them myself.

But, just like my tube, things were leaking.



When we finally got to the top of the Gap, we were greeted by an incredible view of Little Tahoma, a black pyramid peak silhouetted against the rainbow of the early morning horizon.

“It is so beautiful,” Sterling said. “So, so beautiful.”

I smiled. I like people who appreciate a good view. Mike let us enjoy our wonder for a few moments before encouraging us on. As we reached Ingraham Flats, another climbing basecamp, the sun crested the horizon, bathing the snow in golden light.

As we walked past the camp, John unexpectedly turned around and asked, “How are you doing, Heather?”

I was surprised and touched. When things started going badly, there were many days when John arrived at work looking as though the weight of the world was on his shoulders. I’d ask, “How are you doing, John?” There was rarely any talk about how I might be doing. It didn’t seem odd at the time. I’d taken on the role of fixer and rescuer—not just for John but for Lara too. This unevenness in our friendship made me feel needed and important, at least for a while. It was important to me to be important to them. John’s inquiry into my well-being was a nice change of pace for both of us. We’d come a long way.

Looking at the magnificent setting—the towering rock walls on three sides and the glorious view of the misty valley below—I was overcome with emotion. I couldn’t believe I was actually here doing this.

“I am deeply happy right now,” I said.

He nodded, and I could tell he was happy too.

Soon we were at the bottom of Disappointment Cleaver. A cleaver is a rock ridge that separates, or cleaves, two glaciers. It’s one of the most physically demanding parts of the climb, requiring us to boulder scramble for the better part of an hour to gain one thousand feet in elevation. Disappointment Cleaver breaks people. At this point, many realize they have underestimated climbing this mountain. They give up and turn around. I worried that I would be one of the quitters.

I decided that this was probably a good time to fess up about my water situation.

“Guys? My tube is completely frozen. I haven’t been able to get any water out.”

“Well, that won’t do!” Mike said, quickly coming over to inspect and help.

“Heather, put your tube in your coat for a little while. That will melt the ice. Here. Take my water bottle,” John said.

“I can’t take your water bottle, John. What will you drink?”

“I’ll be fine. Have you had anything to drink since we left?” he asked.

“Not really.”

“Heather, get the water.”

He turned his pack to me so I could unzip the pocket and pull his water out. It was really wedged in there, and I started to make a joke about how pulling it out was like birthing a baby when it suddenly popped free and hit me full force in the nose.

“Ahhhh!”

“No!”

“Oh, man! Heather, are you okay?”

I held my nose and closed my eyes to let the stinging subside while I considered whether I had broken it or not. After a few moments, I decided I was fine. I opened my eyes to see three helmeted heads gathered round, peering down at me.

“I’m fine. I’ll be fine.” I said, embarrassed at the attention.

“Why don’t you sit down for a minute?” Mike suggested. I found a rock and sat. Sterling noticed one of my crampons was a little twisted off the end of my boot and silently readjusted it for me.

I let him.



We'd been moving up the cleaver for about thirty minutes. Our purple rope was coiled so that we wouldn't knock loose rocks down on other climbers, which created a tight seven feet between us. It was important that I keep the pace Mike and John set for the team, so I kept pushing, even though my heart rate was too high. It's best to climb with a low heart rate to avoid sweating. Sweat freezes and makes you cold.

Each step up was the equivalent of at least three or four steps on a staircase. Everything was jagged and uneven.

As I climbed, my mind drifted to the day in the library—the dark day when everything broke.

The situation between John and Lara had been going downhill for months, often exploding into arguments at the dance studio in front of the students. An imbalance of power existed between them. He was older, more experienced, a former star and champion, and male. She was younger, with lots of new, untested ideas, fewer trophies, and female.

It was obvious what needed to change. Lara needed to stop. She needed to fall in line with expectations of how a woman should act with a partner, not just in ballroom dance but in our LDS culture generally. I believed it was Lara's duty to lift John up to achieve his vision, not challenge his authority or process. The studio gave lip service to the idea that they were equal partners with their matching co-director titles, but in reality, her job was to facilitate his success. I wanted her to recognize when she should be quiet and let John lead. She also needed to do a better job of hiding her anger and distress while at the studio.

Meanwhile, John wasn't making enough of an effort to build up his dancers and manage the dance moms' expectations. Parents and students were angry. As the executive director, I expected him to put the studio's needs (which were really my needs) ahead of his wife's. I wanted him to figure out how to handle Lara so they could focus on the kind of coaching everyone wanted them to do. He needed to take the lead with his partner and convince her to submissively follow.

With the pressure of a national competition upon us, parents were frenzied. I'd fielded meeting after meeting, trying to bridge the gap between coaches, students, and parents. I was exhausted from trying to soften harsh words that were launched like missiles between opposing parties while still endeavoring to honor the gravity of people's feelings. The parents demanded action. A bold move was necessary, and it was my job to execute it.

Lara was breaking unspoken rules. She craved an equal voice with her husband, but no one wanted to give it to her—not John, not the parents, not the students, and least of all me. In demanding it, she was making trouble. I knew only one way to handle problem women who demanded too much power; I had seen it play out in ways big and small in various systems throughout my life.

I cried all night before our scheduled meeting as I struggled with the conflicting duties of boss and friend. I hated the position I was in. I couldn't see clearly for myself the right thing to do, and so, like a rookie, I trusted the voices around me that were the loudest and most persistent, voices that championed the idea that women who refuse to play by the rules need to be expelled.

The next day, I walked into the library, looked both my friends in the eye, and fired Lara.

And then sat paralyzed in my chair as I watched their marriage crumble.



At the top of Disappointment Cleaver, Mike, John, and Sterling had their packs off, backs to the rising sun. Below us, Rainier's ridges rippled away in waves of sapphire and cobalt. We were alone on the mountain until a small gray bird, no bigger than my fist, flew up and landed on a rock. She looked around as though being at twelve thousand feet was the most natural thing in the world. Nothing lives at twelve thousand feet. No trees, no scrubby little bushes, no insects—nothing that should

entice a little bird to make such a journey. I wondered what she was seeking.

Maybe she wondered what I was seeking.



From the top of Disappointment Cleaver, we meandered to the part of the trail that traverses massive crevasses. For now, there was still an ice bridge over the crevasses. There were anchors to secure our rope as we climbed through, an added safety measure in case one of us slipped or the bridge gave way. I felt incredibly grateful to the person who had left them there. They had taken the time to put the anchors in place—not for themselves and their own safety but for those who would come after. I was struck by the kind of love strangers show for each other sometimes.

As we moved up and over the ice bridge, I looked down, staring into the crevasse's belly. As the crevasse deepened, the snow and ice transitioned from soft and shimmering aquamarine to varying shades of magnificent blue to end in foreboding blackness. Beautiful, to be sure, but in a way that hushed and terrified. Without the lifeline of a rope, to slide into that blue was to slip into your tomb and become part of the mountain forever.

I was face-to-face with the thing I had feared for so long. But surprisingly, I didn't want to turn away or hurry or panic or cry. I wanted to take it in, to absorb the terrible beauty of it. To look deeper.

A few months after that day at the library, buoyed by family, John and Lara decided to move to Utah to try to salvage their marriage. I traveled to Utah for a work project, and Lara and I met at a café. I'd hoped to reconcile but still hadn't taken the time to authentically see and understand her. She recognized this and flung all of her pain into words like poisonous darts. After that, neither she nor John spoke to me for a very long time. Eventually, they did share that they had decided to divorce. It was amicable, they said, and they loved each other more than ever.

Nonetheless, divorce felt like massive failure. Not their failure—mine. I thought maybe if I'd been a better leader and had done a better job of managing the culture at the studio, they could have worked together peaceably. Or if it were inevitable that co-directorship in title only would come to a head, maybe if I'd chosen different words at the library—if I could have just said it better—they would still be married. Maybe if I'd been a better friend, I could have helped Lara to stay connected with her faith. If I had shown up in the way I should have, maybe she wouldn't have felt the need to pull away from both the Church and John, which to me felt like one and the same. Maybe if I hadn't failed them, their happily-forever-after, with all of its eternal implications, would still be viable.

After the divorce, I numbed my pain by drowning myself in busyness and productivity, proving to the world that I wasn't also broken. Obviously, I didn't have time to be broken. I was too needed and important.

I also didn't have time for any relationships outside of my immediate family. At church, I sat alone with my arms crossed over my belly as though I was protecting it and didn't talk to anyone. I declined all social invitations from kind women who reached out to me. At work, I hid in my office and did my best to avoid all unnecessary interactions. I cried a lot—at random times and for no apparent reason. With each passing day, my husband was becoming increasingly concerned about me.

Untethered, I'd slipped into a crevasse mentally and emotionally. Stuck and traumatized, I didn't know how to get out of the place I was in.

Then one day I found the most beautiful bouquet of flowers on my doorstep. It was an ordinary day, not a birthday or an anniversary or a get-flowers kind of day. And these flowers were so lovely—the kind of flowers that I would choose for myself. The words on the card were simple. “I can never take back the words I said when I was angry, but I just want you to know how sorry I am.”

It was as though a long purple rope had finally made its way down to the place where I was trapped, and someone began rescuing me from the pit.

I just never expected that person would be Lara.



Mike was relieved when the crevasses were behind us. The change in his mood from hyper-focused to jovial made me realize that we had just overcome something significant.

All that was left was two thousand feet of switchbacks up the glacier. At this elevation and pitch, we hoped to climb five hundred feet per hour. The sun was rising in the sky, the snow was a blinding white, and the view of the blue-green world far below us was stunning in every direction.

We walked along a little footpath in the snow with the mountain sloping aggressively down to the rocks and crevasses below. If I looked down, the whole world would spin. If I just kept my eyes on the trail, I was fine. The snow was perfect—not so icy that our crampons couldn't dig in, but also not so melty that the snow moved under our feet. I took each crunchy step with careful intentionality—a promise I'd made to Matt, who couldn't come because of a hip injury. "Make every step a good step," he'd said with his arms wrapped around me, more than a little sad he had to sit this one out. He'd been here before with John and Lara and understood the beauty of the journey.

Although less physically demanding than the cleaver, this last bit was as unrelenting as an eternal step class. Mike allowed us a break every hour or so. Sterling and I were both climbing at an altitude higher than we'd ever attempted, which led to a lingering concern about altitude sickness. Without warning, altitude sickness could cripple a climber with headaches, dizziness, or nausea, making it impossible for them and their team to progress further. So far, we'd been lucky.

As I climbed, I wondered where John's mind was right now. Two nights ago, at dinner, he told me he was trying to bring a better version of himself to the mountain this time. To meet the same challenges but respond differently. A do-over.

I thought of my last conversation with Lara about a month before. Since the flowers, we had been working on rebuilding our friendship. We didn't talk about the past very often, but sometimes we ventured there cautiously. On this night, she had been talking about John and their climb and the proposal and the heaviness of it all when she turned to me suddenly and said, "Let's be honest, John was carrying YOUR expectations up the mountain."

Those words pierced my heart like a knife. For years, this fear lived inside of me, that my actions had been the impetus for so much pain and regret—the marriage, the studio challenges, the divorce—all of it shrouded in my warped expectations. At the time, I'd loved being tangled in the excitement of their relationship. I'd been eager for John to propose. What could be more heroic, more impressive, than a proposal on top of a giant mountain? I told him it would make for a story that would echo through generations to his children's children's children. I didn't stop to think that maybe my words were putting undue pressure on John to take this step before he was really ready. Maybe, at my urging, the careful development of their relationship was given short shrift in service of an Instagrammable proposal.

When Lara mentioned my expectations, it was the first time someone had spoken these things out loud, at least in my presence. My fear now entered the world, took form, and demanded that I see it for what it was.

It wasn't pretty.

Like John, to face my fears, I needed a do-over. I needed to climb a mountain, this time not staying behind, safe and sanctimonious, and without slipping invisible burdens into anyone's pack. Here I was, trudging along a mountain ridge, doing the work, managing my own journey, and not trying to craft anyone else's experience from afar.

This time I was carrying my own damn expectations up the mountain.

As I climbed and experienced the mountain for myself, I began to understand something that had never been clear to me before: I didn't create the crevasse between John and Lara when I fired her. Crevasses are caused by stressors hidden deep within the glacier; they are massive and often invisible for a very long time. A climber doesn't create a crevasse when they step onto it; they just break through the facade of ice and snow that was allowing it to stay hidden. Observing the wild and powerful mountain helped me understand that there are a few things I have control over—and many I do not. Some of the things I do not control are other people's happiness and the fundamental needs of their souls. Coming to terms with that idea was both liberating and terrifying.



There were four false summits, and Mike liked to use them to tease us. “What if I told you that was the summit?” he'd say. “Is it?” we'd ask each time, taking the bait. “Nope! It's a false summit! Hours left to climb!”

And then finally, one of his false summits looked different than the others—instead of a just a ridge of snow, this one was rocky. “What if I told you that was the summit?” he asked. “I'd say we have hours left to climb,” I said with a sigh, tired and dejected.

“Well, you're wrong because this IS the summit!” he said enthusiastically, knowing that his pronouncement would be as welcome as Christmas morning.

I couldn't believe it. The end was in sight. I was actually going to summit Mt. Rainier.



At the rim of the crater, we high-fived and shouted. To get to the highest point of the mountain, we had to cross the crater and go up

a small knoll, but now we were certain to summit. We basked in the warm glow of what we'd accomplished together.

A feeling of intense empowerment washed over me. I'd answered my own question—I was strong enough and brave enough.

At the summit, without warning or explanation, John dropped to his knees and began to pray. Mike, Sterling, and I instantly assumed the role of keeping vigil. Our time spent linked up by the purple rope had connected all of us in ways that allowed us to sense one another's needs. We knew in this moment John needed silence and space.

The wind whipped across the crater rim, gusting in fits. Underneath that noise was the subtle sound of air moving through the sky, the sound you hear with your ear next to a conch seashell but a thousand times bigger.

Sanctifying enormous pain requires an enormous altar. I realized John had come to the biggest one he could think of, bringing what remained of his bitterness, resentment, anger, and distress. When he fell to his knees, he laid these things down on the snow, each its own fatted calf, and prayed to be released from their weight forever.

And while I didn't get on my knees, because that gesture belonged to John, I stood atop my altar and said my own silent prayer. I released the weight of what I had been carrying—the parts that were mine and the parts that had never been mine to carry in the first place. I decided it was time to forgive myself. Whatever mistakes I made along the way, whatever pain I had caused, my path had brought me here, to this otherworldly place at the top of the earth. I wouldn't trade this experience for anything. I accepted the path that had brought me to it.

I had long been willing to offer grace to other people. It was time I found some for myself.

A new wind came. We couldn't see it, but we felt its power. It swirled around, among, and through us, pulling at our coats, stinging our cheeks, and filling our lungs. This was a sacred, purifying wind that exists only at the tops of the mountains, where earth and heaven meet.

The wind received the heavy things that each of us had brought, lifting each to the sky, where they transformed into tiny bits of sand and dust and blew away.

John got up from his knees and came toward us. The four of us wrapped our arms around each other in a giant embrace, the embrace of people who experience something too big for words.

Then John had a big hug just for me. “Does this mean we’re friends again?” I asked through tears.

He was crying too. “We’ve always been friends, Heather. We just needed to walk a different path for a little while.”

And with that, we walked to the edge of the summit and looked out over the world and screamed into the wind—for him, for me, and for Lara too. One final release of whatever was still hurting between us.

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