ALL MY LIFE I've climbed. When I was a kid and afraid of being hit by my father, I bailed out of the kitchen window of our apartment and climbed the drainpipe to the roof.

By adulthood I'd learned to rock climb — often with a partner on the other end of the rope that would catch me if I fell — but I still had trouble trusting anyone, so I chose climbs where the chance of my falling was unlikely.

One day my regular climbing partner, Julia, and I were exploring a local crag. She fell unexpectedly, and, as usual, my rope caught her. (We were tethered together for that reason.) She was shaken and bruised but otherwise OK.

That evening, as we talked over burgers and beers, Julia asked why I never fell. I asked her what it would be like to catch my 200 pounds when she barely tipped the scales at 110. Julia shrugged and looked away. I sensed she knew it wasn't our respective weights so much as my mistrust of people. As a kid I'd vowed never to allow myself to be vulnerable. But I offered to test it out at the climbing gym.

In the gym Julia and I put on our harnesses and tethered a rope between us. As I climbed the wall, I clipped carabiners around my rope along the way: ten, twenty, thirty feet above her. I paused. I was supposed to let go on purpose, to free-fall through space and let her catch me. Julia gave an encouraging smile. She looked awfully small from all the way up here. My leg began to shake like a sewing-machine needle.

"This is bullshit!" I called down.

"Fletch, I've got you!"

A thin film of sweat greased my chalk-whitened knuckles. I closed my eyes and let go.

I fell backward about ten feet before the rope snapped taut. Julia was lifted several feet in the air, but she'd caught me. She was laughing hard. I couldn't help but laugh, too — from gratitude. I was beginning to let go of a lifetime's worth of mistrust.

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