

Don't Fall

Adventures in Love, Loss, and Lead Climbing

By Sophie Smith

“It's a terrible thing, I think, in life to wait until you're ready. I have this feeling now that actually no one is ever ready to do anything. There is almost no such thing as ready. There is only now. And you may as well do it now. Generally speaking, now is as good a time as any.”

— *Hugh Laurie*

Author's note

It's taken me a long time to figure out what this story is about. It's about travel, but it is by no means a travel guide (I do not recommend my itinerary, nor my general approach to travel to anyone sane). It's about love, even though that's the last thing I was looking for, and I did a very bad job of navigating it. It's about coming of age, and finding yourself, and overcoming loss, but honestly, all that happened much later (and I swear, it's not as cheesy as that makes it sound). Oh, and it's also about rock climbing, where the sole objective is to increase the vertical distance between oneself and the ground, through a combination of scrambling, pulling, balancing and jumping up a vertical or overhanging rock face. There's a metaphor in there somewhere.

(Please note that I'm in no way qualified to give climbing advice either, and the technical definitions in this book should be taken as nothing other than a literary device.)

I've written this story using the notes, letters, journals and photographs from the three months I spent in South America, and the eight months I spent travelling in Europe and Asia. I've changed the names of the people involved (they might have their own narratives to tell), but I've tried to be as accurate (and entertaining) as possible.

Chapter 1: South and Central America

The Warm Up: the short or easy climb you start your session with, in order to warm up the mind and body for the real project.

“Gav, look, you can ride mountain bikes down the side of a volcano in Ecuador!”

I waved the massive tome of the *Lonely Planet Guide to South and Central America* tantalizingly under my little brother’s nose. He glowered, and moved as far away from me as the tiny airline seat would allow.

My Dad leaned over from the seats in front of us.

“That sounds *muy divertido!*” he enthused, employing one of the fifteen or twenty Spanish phrases he had memorized, after weeks of lessons, in preparation for the trip. My Mum, who was pretending to be asleep in the seat beside him with an eye mask over her face, had attended the first two Spanish classes, and then refused to go back after she had decided that the teacher was useless. She insisted that she would be able to survive in South America for six months using “hand signals and charades”.

I tried to match my Dad’s energy, as I flipped through the guide book which had become my bible, showing him the various “adventure activities” that were available, as I fought the sinking feeling that had been threatening to draw me down for the past few weeks: that this grand adventure on which we were all embarking, at my suggestion, was going to be a fucking disaster.

I come from a far-flung family. Parents who wandered from England to South Africa to Australia. Cousins who drifted to America, Canada, and New Zealand (my dad’s backpacking adventures through Africa, South East Asia and the Middle East in the seventies alone are worthy of their own memoir). Thanks to our worldly relatives, I could navigate a baggage check in and find my way through an international airport alone by the time I was ten. Travel was always just what we did as a family, and so it hadn’t seemed strange that my parents (who were in their late fifties) had decided to piggyback onto my Grand South American Adventure. Not only that, but they’d somewhat eclipsed my own modest summer plans by selling most of their belongings, renting out our house, and finding a new home for the family dog so that they could backpack together *for a year*. I’m not saying it was a competition or anything, but they sure showed me who the real “adventurers” were. Mum had confided in me that she and Dad *really* needed this...but I hadn’t been sure what that meant.

The four of us landed in Buenos Aires eight hours later, jet lagged and strained, and my brother immediately cloistered himself in one of the colonial-style four poster beds of our charming B&B, and attempted to go to sleep. I watched him, feeling equal parts guilt and frustration. I had roped him into coming on this trip with me, after two years of studying Spanish in University

had left me with a burning desire to explore South America and practice with actual Spanish speakers. Gavin had just finished his high school exams, just got his first serious girlfriend, and as the date of our departure approached, had just decided that he did not want to spend his first summer out of high school on a foreign continent with his sister after all. Plane tickets were, however, already purchased, and since my parents had already rented out our family home for the duration of their own adventure, he'd been left with no choice but to come along.

People always commented on how similar my brother and I looked, with the same round face, round, hazel eyes, olive skin and curly brown hair, but he had grown a foot taller than me since I'd moved out of home three years earlier. This was going to be the first time since then that the two of us would be spending any length of time alone together, and at the moment, he wasn't talking to me.

My mum, Kathleen (shortened to Kath - *not* Kathy) started rifling through her behemoth of a backpack, convinced she had left some vital piece of equipment behind when she and my dad, Robert, had packed up all their worldly possessions in preparation for their "both our kids are legally adults" year abroad.

"I can't find the fucking head lamps!" She burst out, before sitting abruptly on one of the other beds, and groaning.

Even though people said my brother and I looked alike, they said my brother resembled our mum - perhaps in personality even more than appearance. She refused to dye the grey streaks in her short, thick, dark hair; never put on makeup; and was stubborn, compassionate and artistic. She had practiced law in England, raised two kids in Australia, studied art and photography, and worked as a special needs teacher.

My Dad was already off at the front desk, grilling the clerk on the best spots in the city for walking tours, tango shows, architectural landmarks, and cultural "must-sees". In a few minutes he would be back in the room, and start berating Mum and Gavin for the very idea of *sitting down* when there was a whole new city to explore. People always tell me I look like my dad, although I'd somehow managed to inherit neither his height nor his metabolism - he was tall and wiry, with round wire rimmed glasses, and short cropped grey hair. He had studied medicine in Liverpool before leaving home to backpack around the world for five years, and was a frustrated but determined guitarist and surfer.

And me? I was two years into an Arts Degree, and I had been working part time in a rock climbing gym since I moved out of home, tying ropes, cleaning toilets, and teaching annoying groups of children and their parents how to put on harnesses and belay safely. The best thing about that job was that it was flexible enough to allow me to cobble together this Summer trip as an alternative to spending a semester studying abroad, and lucrative enough for me to buy a random assortment of flights based on "places I'd heard of that sounded cool", but which didn't

logically follow much of a path. Like most twenty one year olds, I was equal parts bravado and insecurity about my looks, my brain, my social skills, and my ability to hold it together around my family.

The plan, such as it was after six months of tinkering, was as follows. Gavin and I would be travelling together for three months, from Buenos Aires to Iguazu Falls, then north to Ecuador, up through Panama, Costa Rica and Nicaragua. My parents planned to travel together for a whole year (just like they had done when they first got married), starting in Argentina, then down through Patagonia, before taking a boat to Antarctica (my dad had managed to get hired as ship's doctor) and then north through Bolivia, Chile, Central America, Mexico, the United States, Canada, and then on to Europe and the UK to see their family. At that moment, in that hotel room, with my mother's belongings strewn on the floor, my brother curled up in bed, and my Dad's overly energetic footsteps approaching, I failed to see how any of us would survive the first night.

Three days later, at around eleven pm, I sat on a bar stool beside my mother, as a ridiculously gorgeous Argentinian hipster mixed our fourth round of pisco sours. It's not possible to eat dinner before midnight in Buenos Aires, so we had resorted to filling our empty stomachs with cocktails while we waited for a table. Alcohol, it transpired, was key in dissipating the tension of travelling with your nearest and dearest. After the first day, and the first successful Skype session with his girlfriend back home, Gavin had either come around to the idea of travelling, or resigned himself to the fact that there was no alternative. Either way, he had reverted to his old, funny, affectionate self, and was at that moment deep in conversation with my Dad (who had calmed down to a more manageable level of enthusiasm) at the other end of the bar, unpacking the various pros and cons of our parents' upcoming adventure to Antarctica.

“So explain to me again,” Mum was saying, “what's happening with you and Eli?”

Eli was the boyfriend I had left back in Sydney. We had been together nearly a year, and been friends for nearly three. He was gorgeous, kind, funny, with long, curly pirate hair, a twinkle in his eye and a loud, infectious laugh. We spent long afternoons lazing around the beaches, or going off on adventures of a weekend, usually with a crowd of friends.

I had always found Eli irresistible, but never quite breached the sanctity of “friend zone”, until one day (after a spectacularly messy break up with the boy I'd been seeing), I blurted out what must have been a rather amusing confession, in which I referred to my feelings for him as “kind of, a bit of a crush, I guess”.

I waited for him to say he liked me back; or to grab me and kiss me; or to reject me on the grounds of our friendship. Instead he had said:

“Ok – let me know if you ever want to do anything about it.”

I waited for the punchline, and when it became apparent that there was none, I felt like punching *him* in exasperation.

“You idiot! I’m *telling* you I want to ‘do something about it’ right now!”

Regardless of this slightly awkward beginning, we were good together, and my family all loved him, especially Mum.

“We’re doing long distance,” I told her. I was used to people being incredulous when I explained this, but I was confident we would be able to manage. Well, reasonably confident.

“He’s going to miss you,” Mum mused, sipping her drink, and giving the gorgeous bartender an appraising once over. “I wonder if you’ll miss him? Maybe you’ll get distracted by someone you meet here...”

“Mum!” I was appalled. “I can keep it in my pants for a few weeks, for God’s sake! Besides, I’ll be with Gavin the whole time, it’s not like anyone is going to hit on me in front of my brother.”

“I was only teasing, darling,” Mum placated me, “I’m sure you are very committed.”

“We both are!” I pouted, although, if I were to be honest with myself, I didn’t really know if that were true. It was an easy, relaxed, happy relationship, and for the most part we were on the same emotional level – happy to see where things went, not in any rush to make plans for the future. I loved this new intimacy I was feeling with Mum - playing girlfriends going for drinks, rather than mother and daughter. It was about to come to an end, however, as we were going out separate ways the next morning: Gavin and I heading North; she and Dad, South.

After saying goodbye to Mum and Dad around 1.30am, Gav and I had gone out to explore the city after hours, or, in Argentinian terms, just as everyone was getting started. In the first bar, we latched onto a large, boisterous group of local students (several of whom were phenomenal dancers), and we followed them as the night wore on, going from bars to nightclubs, losing ourselves in the city’s beating heart, emerging only after the sun had come up. Our ears still throbbing from the beat of the dance floor, our feet aching from the whole night spent trying to keep up with our new friends, our heads pounding from too much Argentinian wine, we crawled through the airport and onto an unnervingly tiny airplane, bound for Iguazu Falls. When I unpacked my bag a few hours later, I found a tiny, leather bound notebook packed on top of my clean underwear and sensible fleece jacket.

Mum’s handwriting was scrawled on the first and second page, with one of her small, delicate sketches at the end, depicting a snowy mountain range.

Darling Sophie,

I know these last few days have been kind of tricky, with everything so up in the air, and everyone feeling insecure and jetlagged. Thank you for being so positive and brave! I love that you were the one to get us all to go on this adventure - we needed it.

I'm sure you and Eli will manage to make the distance work, and I think once we are out of the way, you and Gavin will have so much fun! Dad and I will always be only a matter of days out of contact, so keep in touch and we will help out however we can.

All my love,

Mum xxx

I could hear Mum's soft voice as I read the letter, with her slight English accent (which persisted, despite the two and a half decades she had lived in Australia). I could picture her sitting up in bed in the B&B, wearing her rectangular reading glasses, and scribbling in her cramped, left-hand-writing, as she tried to reassure me (and herself) that everything was going to be ok.

On a hot, January afternoon, Gavin and I disembarked the bus from Bocas Del Toro in the middle of San Jose, the grimy, crowded capital of Costa Rica. We had been travelling for a little over a month, flying from Iguazu Falls to Quito, then to Panama City, then catching buses north to Costa Rica. We had survived a freezing mountain bike ride down the side of volcano in Ecuador; white water rafting (and nearly drowning) on the Amazon river; a case of viral meningitis on a boat in the Galapagos (me); being attacked by bedbugs in Panama (also me); and a severe case of "travel panic", where we had decided that this whole trip was the worst, and tried (unsuccessfully) to change our flights to go home early. Although we had spent several days fighting and not speaking to one another, by the time we got to San Jose, we had reached a point where we felt comfortable with one another, and fairly confident that we were going to survive the rest of the trip.

The hostel where we were staying was familiar - all the hostels had started to merge together in a kind of montage of dodgy looking bunk beds (we had each brought our own sleeping sheets), lockers that didn't lock, and kitchens with the ubiquitous "free breakfast" (instant coffee, instant pancake mix and syrup). We had developed a routine whenever we arrived in one of these places: dump our bags, shower, and go see who was hanging out in the garden (there was almost always

a garden), to ask if they were interested in a game of cards. In this particular hostel, we ended up with a loud group of Americans, who decided that we needed to go and buy more drinks before we could start a game.

In the supermarket, I rounded a corner to find Gavin being berated by one of our new friends over his choice of drink. In Gav's defense, he had only legally been allowed to buy alcohol in Australia for a year, where it was prohibitively expensive; and had grown up in a household where junk food of all kind was banned; so at that point he chose his beverages based on two criteria: low cost, and high sugar content. The American wrestled the four pack of Vodka Cruisers firmly from his protesting grasp. "You can't drink that!" he stage-whispered to my bewildered little brother.

"Why?"

"Because that's a girl's drink!"

He declared that Gavin had been spending too much time with his sister, and threw me a mock-disapproving glare. I couldn't help laughing at the whole exchange, even though, ethically speaking, I objected to the attribution of binary gender roles to inanimate beverages. Gavin sheepishly purchased his manly rum and coke, and the three of us headed back to the hostel with the group.

Sometime during the night, I mentioned to Gav's new mentor (whose name we discovered was David), that we were travelling up to the mountains the next morning, and suggested he join us. The invitation was genuine, but I was more than a little surprised when, at four am, he was waiting at the reception with his backpack, sunglasses and hangover. The bus trip was three hours of hot, bumpy torture. Gavin and I distracted ourselves with our recently acquired skill of macrame bracelet weaving (I never said we were cool). Our new friend sat beside us, slightly green about the gills, miserably questioning what the hell kind of people he had shackled himself to, as the bus lurched up along the ungraded mountain roads. We managed to make it to the beautiful mountain village of Monte Verde without anyone vomiting on anyone else, and we fell ravenously onto a huge plate of \$2 tacos.

We spent the next week together in Monte Verde, and slowly got to know one another better. David looked like a very well brought up boy who had decided to embrace the backpacker look, letting his blonde hair grow extra-long and investing in an impressive collection of brightly coloured tank tops, which he paired with surfer shorts and sandals. He had a smattering of large, graphic tattoos on his chest and down one arm, and had taken to wearing a tangle of hemp and string bracelets, which he bought in each new town as he travelled. He had a loud, American arrogance, which I found both annoying and endearing, but he was also surprisingly easy to talk to, and pretty gorgeous to look at, although I chose to ignore that fact. He told me he had come travelling after breaking up with his last girlfriend, and quitting his corporate job, which he had hated; and I told him about my degree and my boyfriend and friends back home. We went zip-lining, which everyone loved, and canyoning, which everyone (except me) hated, and

discovered a huge old tree that was completely hollow inside and most likely full of scorpions, something we only thought of after we had already climbed up inside it.

We split up for a couple of weeks while Gavin and I travelled to Nicaragua, and David attempted to learn to surf in a little Pacific surf town called Malpais, which was where we found him, with three weeks left until our flight home. David had stumbled upon a fantastic, eclectic group of people: a tiny German girl called Stephi, who had been a professional gymnast, and quickly earned the nickname “little ninja”; another Australian called Tess, who had quit her corporate job after only six months and bought a one way plane ticket, and told the dirtiest jokes I’d ever heard; and a tall, bearded med-school dropout from Vancouver called Ryan, who took personal offense if anyone besides him tried to light the campfire. We all spent the next few days in the idyllic little beach town - really no more than a collection of laid back hostels, surfboard rental shops and bars, with dilapidated Internet cafe at the end of the single “main” street - surfing, practicing yoga on the beach, and cooking hot dogs and s’mores (at David’s insistence) on campfires as the sun went down.

David and I got into the habit of walking down to the beach together after everyone else had gone to the bar or to bed, and having long conversations about our plans for the future. I had recently decided to go into a masters of teaching after I finished my degree - an idea I had briefly entertained in high school (to loud snorts of derision from my own dear teachers, as they peered out from behind mountains of essays, and clutched their cold cups of coffee).

“So why do you want to do it now?” David asked, as we gazed out over the silver waves. The moon was full, and the late afternoon rain storm had cleared to leave a starry sky in its wake. I shrugged.

“Honestly? I don’t really know. I think I would be good at working with people, rather than in some office job... I don’t hate kids... I can’t really think of a better idea...” I trailed off, glancing at him to gauge his reaction.

“Hey don’t look at me - I’m about to start my first degree at twenty six. It’s taken me this long to even think about what I want to do.”

I loved these conversations. I never felt judged or pressured to say the right thing, and I always felt I could be honest. By the way, I had been wrong back in BuenosAires, when I’d told Mum that a) having a boyfriend and b) travelling with my brother would keep me from being “distracted” by guys. I’d stayed staunchly faithful to Eli, but I had also drunk a bottle of tequila in the jungle on Christmas Eve with a tall, Canadian raft guide; gone hiking to a “secret waterfall” with an incredibly cute local guide in Boquete; and salsa danced the night away with a devastating Brazilian in Bocas Del Toro. Gavin had accused me of leading these guys on, but I, perhaps naively, insisted that I was then free to drink, dance, and hike with them without it

leading to anything, as long as I was honest from the start. The boys tended to take my brother's perspective rather than mine.

David was different. I don't mean that he'd taken my side on the whole "leading them on versus being friendly" debate, but he had never once tried anything beyond the bounds of being completely platonic, and I felt comfortable with him.

Our much-anticipated return to Sydney was soon upon us, and just as it was time to leave, after weeks of homesickness and insecurity, I suddenly felt as if I could keep travelling indefinitely. On our last night in Costa Rica, David and I sat by the campfire and reminisced over how crazy the past few weeks had been - how different we felt, how much the experiences we'd had were changing us. He fell silent after a while, and we stared into the flames of the dwindling campfire, as the waves washed in from the Pacific: all the way from Australia, where my real life was waiting.

"Don't leave. Stay here with me".

He said it so quietly that I wasn't sure I had heard him, and so I pretended I hadn't. And then, the next morning, I left.

We flew down to Santiago, Chile, where we were met by our weathered, wind-swept, wayward parents, fresh from the mountains of Patagonia, and looking happier than I had seen them in years. The four of us regaled one another with travel tales, swapping photographs, luggage and gifts, and warming ourselves in the palpable relief we all felt that we had made it this far. All the fears and insecurities and stress under which we had arrived in Buenos Aires had evaporated in the ten weeks we had spent apart. Gavin and I had survived this bizarre social experiment of a trip, somehow managing to keep our relationships back home intact over the three months we were away, and even more impressively, managing not to kill one another when we got on each other's nerves.

I sat on one of the tiny twin beds with the contents of my backpack spread out around me for the last time. The apartment we had rented for the two nights we were spending in Santiago was cramped and charmingly old fashioned. Mum appeared in the doorway, lugging her monstrous hiking pack over one shoulder.

"Do you have room for a few more things in there?" she asked, dropping the pack to the floor with an audible thump.

"How the hell did you carry that up a mountain?" I asked incredulously. "It's bigger than you are!"

"Well, it was smaller before we got to La Paz. You know I hate shopping, but your Dad insisted we check out the markets, and I couldn't resist getting a few gifts for people."

She started pulling dusky-coloured woven wool rugs, shawls, hats and scarves out of her pack, and unravelling a collection of leather belts and colourful beaded necklaces, laying each one out on the bedspread with instructions as to who should receive it.

I heard Dad and Gavin returning from the shops, and they clomped into the room with a plastic bag hanging from each arm.

“We got stuff for a picnic lunch!” Dad announced, with the satisfied air of a philanthropist who has just bequeathed a million dollars to a charitable cause. “Apparently there’s a fantastic view to be had from the top of San Cristobal Hill – it’s about a two hour walk.”

I saw Gavin roll his eyes behind Dad’s back, and dump his bags on the counter.

“What’s all this stuff?” he asked, indicating the mess on the bed.

“Ah! I think we’ve got something for you somewhere here!” Dad said, momentarily distracted from his grand plan.

He disappeared into their bedroom and emerged with a lumpy package in one hand, and a small, drawstring bag in the other, which he handed to me before pulling Gavin over to the other bed.

“We found this in La Paz, and I thought it could be something fun for you to learn, now that you are getting so good at guitar!”

“Oh yes, Gav’s musical skills were very popular.” I said, smirking at him. “He had to beat the girls off with a stick whenever we stayed somewhere that had a guitar to play.”

“Shut up.” Gavin groaned. “Besides, you were the one who kept nagging me to play so you could show off your singing.”

“I was just looking out for you, little brother.”

He rolled his eyes again, and opened the package, to reveal a small, handmade instrument that appeared to be a cross between a ukulele and a mandolin, but with far too many strings. He strummed it hesitantly, and it gave off an unpleasant twang.

I burst out laughing.

“It just needs tuning!” Dad blustered, and busied himself tightening the strings at random while Gavin sidled back to the counter and began tearing apart pieces of bread and putting them in his mouth.

Mum nudged me. “Look at yours!”

I opened the little bag, and inside I found an exquisite pair of silver earrings, each shaped like a breaching whale’s tail.

“We bought them in a little shop in Ushuaia.” Mum said. “They’re from the very last place on earth where you can get a cup of coffee.”

“Yes, not too many cafes in Antarctica” Dad chimed in, abandoning the strange little instrument on the bed, and slapping Gav’s hand as he reached for his fourth piece of bread. “Let’s finish this packing later. That hill won’t climb itself!”

As we sat in the airport café the next morning, taking photographs of one another, both Gavin and I moaning about the long flight ahead; none of us felt a shred of foreboding. The only apprehension in my mind was my nervousness at being reunited with my friends and boyfriend

after ten weeks away, and having to return to work and university in just a few short days. I didn't know that the next time my family would all be together, everything would have changed.

Two months later, half way through a remote and physically demanding horseback trek through Torres Del Paine National Park in Chile, Mum began to experience pain and swelling in her legs. At first she thought it was just fatigue and over-exertion, but despite being dutifully ignored (in the time-honoured manner of all doctors' families' illnesses), the discomfort worsened.

I was on the fourteenth floor of the library building at the University of New South Wales, researching an essay on the *conquistadors*. It was getting late, and the library was almost empty, except for a couple of other students from my Latin American History class who also, it seemed, had left the essay till the last minute.

I glanced at my phone to check the time and saw a call coming in on an unfamiliar number. "Hello?" I whispered, craning my neck to make sure I wasn't within earshot of any of the library staff.

"Soph? It's dad."

The line was crackly and punctuated by blank spaces of sound.

"Dad? Where are you calling from?"

"We're in Santiago... can... hear me?"

"I can't quite... Santiago? I thought you were in Patagonia?"

"We had to fly back here... Mum... hospital."

"Mum's in hospital? Why? Is she ok?"

A litany of infectious, tropical diseases parades themselves through my brain, as I felt myself starting to panic.

"It's alright Love...she has a touch of DVT... she's getting some treatment...going to...home."

I had vague memories of my Dad arguing with his own mother years before, telling her that if she wasn't careful, she would get deep vein thrombosis (DVT) on her flight home. It seemed like a disease for old people, and Mum wasn't old. Something in Dad's voice sounded off, even though the patchy connection.

"Can I talk to Mum?"

"She's resting right now darling, but we'll call again tomorrow. We have to... the doctors approve Mum...travel."

After we hung up, I suddenly felt like I couldn't breathe. Something was wrong, something he wasn't telling me. I called Eli, and begged him to come and pick me up, then spent the next half hour frantically googling DVT. According to every source I read, there was no reason for Mum

and Dad to come home if the treatment was successful. Mum would need a few weeks of rest, but then she should be completely fine...

When the doctors in Santiago told my mother she had cancer - a large, inoperable tumor in her lung - she wrote in her diary that she didn't feel anything, only that she felt sorry for my dad. Then she wrote about going through preliminary treatments, and the struggle with the language barrier, and wanting to come home.

Then the pages are blank.