

3rd prize, prose

Cathedral Rock

By Sally Gales

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Her fingers wrapped around the rock, pads probing the jagged points, avoiding the sloping edges. Quivers started in her other arm – barely noticeable – but each tremble ticked like a clock counting down. Ann closed her eyes and inhaled. Her index finger latched into a narrow crevice and she exhaled as her body rebalanced onto the rock face. She could still feel the room lingering on her skin.

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The thick air had coated every inch of her as soon as she had stepped through the threshold. It eddied around her clothes, through her pores, and lodged itself so deep, no soap or loofa could scrub it loose.

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Ann clenched her hands into the pointed rocks. She focused on her feet, confined within shoes two sizes too small, perched on less than an inch of sandstone. Scanning the rock face, she spotted her next move by her left knee. A slight gust of wind carried the impending desert night – sage, ozone and an unidentifiable sweetness – past Ann’s face. Inhaling deeply, she lifted her foot to the small conical protrusion.

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The smells of the room had hit her next. Assaulted by aromas left to simmer in the sealed room for months, Ann struggled to move further inbound. Dried sweat, acidic cleansing chemicals and dust, mingled in the air – an eau de parfum that brought tears to her eyes. She took a tentative step forward but her movement allowed another scent to wrap itself around her legs and climb towards her nose. Heavier than the other flighty smells, the aroma hung close to the ground, bonding the other scents together like mortar. It was pervasive and there was no way to ignore it once she identified its source – decay.

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Ann pressed her foot against its new purchase. She didn’t breathe – didn’t dare add more weight onto the hold. The small rock held and Ann pushed forward. Her body rose up, one leg flagging and one arm reaching. The ascent felt like hours but was barely the length of a single breath. Ann plunged her fingers into a jagged scar in the rock, once again anchored to safety. She felt the exertion in her shoulders and legs, a familiar and welcome sensation. Blood red pooled near the base of the sandstone wall but at Ann’s height, cool greys washed the rock in shadow. They dipped in crevices, making them seem deeper, and stretched from protrusions, creating illusion of larger, better holds.

Ann scoured the surface above her for another place to grab but the shadows shifted, playing tricks on her eyes.

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The room had tried to seal itself into darkness but the sun would not be shut out. It barraged through the cracks in the window shade, an insistent busybody casting hot spots on every surface it touched. The room was a collage of light and dark – two extremes battling for supremacy but neither giving way.

Ann knew the room in another lifetime. As she took a tentative step forward she remembered the book-lined wall. Leather bound in every color, the books had carefully been arranged by hue so Ann could walk from one end of the room to the other besides a rainbow of literature. Her favorite section had been the violet column in the furthest corner.

Stepping through a ray of light, Ann blinked to regain her lost vision. She peered towards her favorite corner but neither light nor sight could penetrate the inky darkness.

“Who’s there?”

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Re-chalking her hands, Ann steadily ascended the wall. She climbed ever up, leaving the ground further behind. She first climbed this wall with her father...

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“Is your knot good?”

She couldn’t speak past the lump in her throat so she nodded.

His fingers ran across the rope just in case.

“This is just like all the times we did it back at the climbing center.”

Ann felt her pulse jump.

Her father knelt down and forced her to look at him.

When had the greys started collecting along his temples?

“I’ve got you, Annie.”

He ran a finger along her cheek.

“Don’t worry, I will never let you fall.”

*

Ann felt her muscles relax as she found her rhythm. Left hand, right foot, right hand, left foot. The shadows stopped confusing her as she let muscle memory take over. She had climbed this cliff over a hundred times; she knew it better than her own apartment.

Ann felt rather than saw the moon peek up over the horizon and she smiled.

This was exactly what she had needed.

She was so glad she hadn’t let the others dissuade her from coming.

Sure, she had been nervous on the four-hour drive out here, but she hadn’t fallen from this wall since that first time. She didn’t need anyone; she didn’t need a rope.

Ann looked up at the top of the cliff. She was almost there.

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“It’s Ann – Annie.”

Ann stopped at the edge of light and dark.

She waited, listening to the other sounds outside: tree branches rustling, wind whistling, and a woodpecker working away in the distance. Life thrived outside that room but inside, Ann struggled to hear even her own breathing.

“Annie?”

The voice croaked, a dry, raspy, unfamiliar sound, before barking out in a sterner tenor:

“I don’t know any Annies. Who are you? What do you want?”

Ann waited until silence permeated the air once more before stepping into the shadow. She stood at the threshold, allowing her eyes to adjust until small, huddled forms began to take shape in the corner. A tall metal floor lamp, turned off; a small table, kicked over onto its side; and an armchair, turned with its back to her. She tried to crane her neck to see around the chair’s back but shadows kept its owner in the dark.

“I know you’re still there. Do you think you can fool me? I’m not that senile. Now answer my questions.”

“It’s Annie...”

Ann approached the chair.

“I’ve already told you. I don’t know an Annie.”

The voice rose louder but a quiver of doubt echoed in its wake. Ann put her hand on the tall back and took a bracing breath before stepping around to the side.

“Dad?”

It wasn’t her father.

The shriveled-up form swaddled in blankets couldn’t be him.

He was tall. Muscular. He could lift her high off the ground and twirl her in a circle that still made her giggle. Her father was full of life. Ann looked at the translucent skin hanging off bones, the wisps of white down flying out in every direction atop his head, and the clouded eyes that blindly searched the darkness. Her father’s brown eyes were nowhere to be found. This imposter could not be –

“A-”

She watched as the man in the chair carefully stretched upward. His face furrowed and his mouth mawed the air. And then the sun finally won over the dark. Her father’s cataract eyes focused and his face lit up. Tears sprung to Ann’s eyes, as her father’s face split into a smile.

“Annie!” he exclaimed.

She knelt by his chair and accepted the small, cold hand he extended.

“Hi, Dad.”

“Annie!” He couldn’t seem to get over the joy and surprise of saying her name. “How are you? Where have you been?”

“I’m good, Dad. I’m sorry it’s been so long, I’ve been stuck – “

Her father waved his hands in the air, like a baby bird’s wings.

“Bah, don’t worry about it. I’m just glad you’re here.” He smiled so brightly, Ann couldn’t help but smile in return. “Where is your mother? Has she seen you yet? She is going to be so excited!”

The smile slipped off Ann’s face. She tried to hold on but her father slipped out of her grasp.

“Did you have a good day at school? Your mother tells me you’re acing all your classes.” He continued to talk into the darkness. “Keep up the good work and we’ll head out to Cathedral Rock this summer.”

“Dad -” Ann tried to touch her father’s hand.

He recoiled at the sudden contact.

“Who are you?” he demanded. “What do you want? What are you doing in my house?”

As she watched, her father’s body shrank back into his chair.

“Get out!”

Ann stumbled back at the unexpected outburst.

“Get out!” he yelled. “Get out of here! I don’t want you to see –”

Ann couldn’t tell who was talking to.

She stood frozen, hovering in indecision.

“Get out, I said! Go on! Go!”

*

Rock crumbled to dust in her grip and she stumbled.

Her heart pounded, threatening to leap out of her chest. Dust and pebbles rained down on her head. Gasping, Ann groped at the wall in blind panic despite years of experience.

She could feel the abyss beneath her yawning, inviting gravity to tip her over.

Her torso peeled away from the wall in slow motion.

Her toes clenched and she felt her arm extend.

She couldn’t speak.

She couldn’t breathe.

Ann’s shoulder yanked, threatening to pull itself out of its socket, but it held.

She hung suspended over space, waiting for the air to return to her lungs. Beneath her, she could feel the void’s sudden disappointment at being denied a meal. A breeze pushed against her back, encouraging her body towards the rock and Ann pulled herself forward.

Her skin was covered in sweat; it drenched her shirt and dripped down the side of her face.

Reaching back up, Ann found another – more secure – hold just as her arms began to shake.

Looking up, a tickle bubbled in her throat.

Ann pulled herself over the wall and collapsed at the top before bursting into laughter.

The sounds echoed into the twilight sky as tears spilled onto Cathedral Rock.