

I Want to Scream

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She sits regally at 19,341 feet, her craggy shoulders looming over the golden Serengeti savannas. Hikers from all over the world ascend her torso in the swirling August dust and snow, like ants on a termite mound. I am one of them, sitting inside a living-room-size green tent in the dark, surrounded by countless friends and guides. I take a final sip of hot ginger tea, savoring the warmth slithering down my esophagus to my fingertips. It is 11pm on Summit Night.

“Packs on, packs on!” our guides cry, jolting us out of the dinner tent and into action beneath the twinkling stars. The Australian triathletes zip up their puffy jackets, the Lithuanian therapist tugs her mittens on, and the American men clack their hiking poles. Bright headlamp beams dart across the boulder field, zig-zagging across a dark quilt of tents and gear and duffel bags as far as the eye can see. The velvet-black sky unfurls above me and our auspicious white beacon floats above us.

I breathe too rapidly, as one does when standing in the flimsy air at 15,000 feet in altitude.

“Today is the day,” my guide says to me, his endearing Swahili accent and smile like a sweet promise.

“Today is the day,” I repeat back, joining the single-file line.

I look up at her, at Mount Kilimanjaro, wondering if the shadowed silhouette of her is smiling encouragingly down at me or piercing me

with her unforgiving gaze. I take a small step forward, breathing like I just sprinted 100 meters, on what will be the most challenging hike of my life. And so Summit Day begins.



When my sisters and I were little, we were complimented constantly.

“They are so well-behaved!” the strangers at the restaurant observed.

“They are so sweet!” our neighbors praised.

“They are so courteous for girls their age!” our teachers sang.

To be quiet was to be a good girl. We wanted to be good girls. So we stayed close-lipped and basked in the feeling of being good.



At 16,000 feet, our exuberant guide begins to sing. Every other male guide joins in on the hypnotic melody, their velvet voices encircling us as we move up into the darkness. Their words caress my bundled ears, brush my pink cheeks, and hold my frigid hands.

Their call-and-response is the only sound on the mountain for 20, 30, 40 minutes. I can locate other groups of hikers by their clustered headlamps in front of and behind us. I know there must be hundreds of people. But the only sound heard that night is our guides’ mesmerizing voices surrounding us like a warm hug.

Tears prick my eyelids. I know then that I am

not alone. That I will summit with their help. That we are a team. That they will not give up on us. I have never been so moved.



For years, I have a recurring nightmare. The setting varies—I am walking home alone at night or sound asleep in a hotel room or alone in a public bathroom—but the terror is immutable.

My body senses my predator before my brain does; my skin prickles with unease, my palms feel clammy, and my heart speeds up, an accelerating drum beat.

My attacker grabs me from behind, heaving his body weight against my own, and I scream—at least, I open my mouth to do so, gathering my breath, only to release it at full force with no sound escaping my lips. I clutch my throat and try again. Nothing. Only a whisper of strained breath, not even loud enough to wake a newborn baby were I carrying one.

I am being attacked and I cannot scream for help. I am helpless. The predator takes his prey.



At 16,500 feet, during a five-minute break, our sweet guide asks me, “How is your cold today?”

“I’m feeling a lot better!” I muster, swiping snot from the end of my nose and beaming at him in the pitch black. Thankfully, it’s true.

“I am glad. That is what I have been praying for.”

I put my hands to my chest, thanking him, touched at his thoughtfulness.

My fellow hikers and I trudge upwards, one foot barely in front of the other, our rapid breaths coming out of our mouths in tiny clouds. We gulp oxygen like greedy panicked fish that were just caught and released.

I turn to my sister. “You know, I have never felt so safe and cared for by a group of men.” I think about this, delighted and touched at first, sad next.



Over the course of my life, there are a handful of

times where I stay quiet instead of saying No. Specifically with men. Because—I can barely type out the words even now—What if I say “no” and he does it anyway?

My therapist tells me it doesn’t matter if I verbalized the word “no” or not. That either way, I didn’t give them my consent. That it’s not always this ugly, violent, forceful thing. In fact, most of the time it’s not.

“What is sex without consent?” she asks me. I peer back at her, afraid to answer. “Why are you afraid to say the word?” she says.

“I don’t know,” I whisper. “I don’t know.”

I stay silent.

Staying silent is often how we stay safe. Good girls stay silent. I dream of a world in which we can scream.



At 17,000 feet, I lose track of time. I am there and I am not there. I sometimes find myself on the mountain traipsing in the frosty dark, and I sometimes go to a far away place deep in my mind. The quiet crunch of 16 pairs of boots surrounds me.

It must be 3am, right? Maybe 2am, I don’t want to get my hopes up. What time is it? 4:46am. My eyes widen. Where had the last four hours gone?

I realize my hood is up. I didn’t pull it up. My guide must have done that.

It feels like a lucid dream. It doesn’t feel real. Am I sleepwalking?



After one of the times I was too scared to say No, (I am ashamed to write this, because it is my fault, it is my failure), I let out a short bark of rage on my way home (it’s not enough) and pound my fist on the steering wheel.

I want to scream.

I want the guttural howls of an animal to rip through my throat, leaving it raw and bloody, tearing me from neck to navel. I want to scream so loudly

that I shed my skin, that even the mountains of Colorado tremble.

Instead, I drive home. I rip off my bra and throw it against the wall. I punch my pillow. I submit a report on Hinge. He is banned and I am broken.



Days before our Summit attempt, I am perched on a rocky crop overlooking an ocean of cotton clouds. My Merrell boots dangle over the edge, the sun scalds the back of my neck, and I feel a lump rising in my throat.

My new Australian friend sits next to me. “What’s wrong?” she asks gently, noticing my emotion.

“I’m just so grateful,” I say, tears welling.

“What are you grateful for?”

“I—” my breath catches and I quietly cry for a few moments. She puts her hand on my knee as if to say, *take your time it’s okay I’m here*.

I hear our Tanzanian guides behind us whooping and dancing and clapping. I breathe in the air that feels both crisp and warm. I clutch my warm glass teacup.

I take a calming breath. “During my divorce, I didn’t think I’d ever be this happy again.”

She squeezes my shoulder. “I know we just met, but I am so goddamn proud of you.”



At some point, I drop my husband’s hand for the last time, all the words I want to say falling to the ground between us, splintering like a delicate China plate. My unspoken truth lies there, shattered and still, for eternity.

For seven years, his metaphorical hand gripped my metaphorical throat tighter and tighter until he took the song right out of me. After my divorce, I finally let out the shaky sigh that had been stuck in my lungs for nearly a decade.

I never have my recurring nightmare again.



At 18,000 feet, I slip on the loose scree and feel myself lurching forward onto the steep face of the mountain, but just before I fall, a sturdy hand grips my elbow and rights me.

“Asante,” I exhale, unable to even look up to see which guide—which brother—was watching out for me. “Asante sana.”

The effort to even move my hand to my forehead to adjust my wool beanie is insurmountable. My bones creak and protest every 6” step forward. The air is like a refrigerator inside of a freezer. I can’t feel my left thumb.

My lips are so chapped I think they will split apart. “Chapstick,” I ask our joyful guide, meaning, *Can you please find my chapstick in one of my pockets please because I can’t find it and I can’t feel my fingers and I am cold and tired please help me?*

I point to my pocket and he finds it. “Can I put it on for you?” he asks, concern and kindness seeping through his beautiful black skin. I nod and turn my face to his. He applies the chapstick and puts it back in my pocket.



“I don’t want to end up a bitter woman who hates all men,” I plead to my therapist. “What do I do?”

And so the healing begins.

I create a list of men. Ones that I have cried in front of. Ones that have stood up for me. Ones that make me feel safe.

The list goes like this: Dean. James. Dave P. Charlie & Alex. Craig. Justin.

When I want to scream, I instead repeat this list over and over again in my head:

DeanJamesDavePCharlieAlexCraigJustin. My mantra. My prayer. My manifestation.

I begin to heal.



At 18,500 feet, the sun crests the distant peaks, lighting up Stella Point like a match catching fire. But I can’t see the sunrise properly—surely it shouldn’t

be green and bright pink. I squint. There are three smiling guides walking in front of me. Oh, something is wrong with my vision. I don't mention this to anyone.

Where is my sister?

She's over there.

Five minutes later: Where is my sister?

Above Stella Point we are on another planet. The clouds below us are indiscernible from a snow field. Monstrous jagged glaciers 100 feet high wave at us from the sides of the gray ridge where we slog the final 30 minutes to Uhuru Peak. The sun is blinding.



When we were little, my dad told us we could do anything we set our minds to. "You can be a doctor! You can be an astronaut! You could be the President of the United States!"

My sisters and I sat cross-legged in the sunroom, nodding our heads up at him, absorbing his enthusiasm.



On Day 4 of Kilimanjaro, the conventionally attractive, not-humble-at-all, flirtatious finance bro from New York begins to make jabs at me. Over the next 48 hours, I become more quiet. If I am quiet, he won't be able to put me down. If I censor myself, I can escape his notice.

But I cannot ignore my body. I cannot ignore the anxiety, the tension, the rage. So I find my voice. Because I have to. Because I am a confident woman. Because I am sick of dimming my light in the presence of men. Because I cannot stay silent anymore. Because if I don't stand up for myself I will die.

That evening, I pull him aside after dinner. "I feel like you've been rude to me."

"I'm sorry. I didn't intend that. I just tease people a lot," he explains.

"I'm not asking for an apology, I'm asking for

you to be kinder to me going forward."

I walk away as he assures me he will.

Speak the truth, even if your voice shakes.



In August 2024, we are 15 feet away from the Summit, then 10, then 5, then 1.

The tears spill over like an overflowing well as I drop my pack to the ground. I whirl around to my sister and we cling to each other, our salty tears mixing onto each other's cheeks and shoulders.

"I'm so proud of you," she sobs. "I'm so happy we get to share this moment together."

I wait for my sobs to soften so that I can return the sentiment.

My sister is one of the mightiest women I know. I look up to her so much.

And—it clicks in my head—I must be one of the strongest women I know, too. I just did it. We did it.

I am standing on top of Africa's tallest peak, the highest free-standing mountain in the world. Kilimanjaro rumbles beneath me, laughing and joyous and proud of me. She knows what it's like to be treated like trash, underestimated, hurt, abused. And she knows what it's like for a woman to stand on top of the world and finally feel peace.

DeanJamesDavePCharlieAlexCraigJustin.

I turn my tear-soaked face to the sun and close my eyes, a deep certainty washing over me as certain as the tide rises: I am worthy and I belong and I am beautiful and I am loved and I will never be quiet again.



A scarlet-tufted sunbird. At 9,000 feet, I hear it chirping cheerfully as I clomp down my sister-mountain on our final day. I beam, I twirl. I am the healthiest and happiest I have been in years.

The sunbird sings...

...The women do not.

My smile fades.

I feel heard. I feel safe. But I know I am not. I
will not be safe until all of us are safe.
Until we can all sing like birds.
Until we can all grasp hands and howl away the
horror.