

A photograph of a female boulderer, Zofia Reych, performing a high move on a yellow bouldering wall. She is upside down, with her right leg hooked over a large red ball and her left hand reaching for a hold. She is wearing a dark tank top, black shorts, and climbing shoes. The background is a dark, textured surface.

Zofia Reych

**BORN
TO
CLIMB**

**FROM ROCK CLIMBING
PIONEERS TO OLYMPIC ATHLETES**

**BORN
TO CLIMB**

Zofia Reych

BORN

TO

CLIMB

**FROM ROCK CLIMBING
PIONEERS TO OLYMPIC ATHLETES**



Vertebrate Publishing, Sheffield
www.adventurebooks.com

Zofia Reych
**BORN
TO CLIMB**

First published in 2022 by Vertebrate Publishing.



Vertebrate Publishing
Omega Court, 352 Cemetery Road, Sheffield S11 8FT, United Kingdom.
www.adventurebooks.com

Copyright © Zofia Reych 2022.

Author photo copyright © Andy Day.

Front cover: Natalia Grossman in the IFSC World Cup semi-final in Briançon, France in 2021.

Photo copyright © Lena Drapella.

Back cover: Meta Brevoort, W.A.B. Coolidge and the Almer guides.

Photo copyright © Alpine Club Photo Library, London.

Other photography as credited.

Zofia Reych has asserted their rights under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as author of this work.

This book is a work of non-fiction. The author has stated to the publishers that, except in such minor respects not affecting the substantial accuracy of the work, the contents of the book are true.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-83981-152-4 (Hardback)

ISBN: 978-1-83981-154-8 (Ebook)

ISBN: 978-1-83981-155-5 (Audiobook)

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

All rights reserved. No part of this work covered by the copyright herein may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means – graphic, electronic, or mechanised, including photocopying, recording, taping or information storage and retrieval systems – without the written permission of the publisher.

Every effort has been made to obtain the necessary permissions with reference to copyright material, both illustrative and quoted. We apologise for any omissions in this respect and will be pleased to make the appropriate acknowledgements in any future edition.

Edited by Moira Hunter.

Cover design by Jane Beagley, production by Rosie Edwards, Vertebrate Publishing.
www.adventurebooks.com

Vertebrate Publishing is committed to printing on paper from sustainable sources.

Printed and bound in the UK by TJ Books Limited, Padstow, Cornwall.

CONTENTS

2017	1
Preface	4
1 First Steps	12
2 Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory	17
3 Monty Python's Flying Circus	30
4 The Golden Age and Other Myths	38
5 The Descendants of Gods	54
6 London, 2011	62
7 Gymnasts on Rock	66
8 The Piton Dispute	83
9 A Rock Shelf High Above the Black Lake Valley	99
10 On Stolen Land	111
11 Hard Grit	127
12 Steel City, 2015	139
13 The Poetry of Mountaineering	155
14 Climbing Free	166
15 To Bolt or Not to Be	179
16 Switzerland, 2019	192
17 The Age of Plastic	208
18 The Rise of a Rock Star	219
19 'Agenda 2020'	228
20 Bleausarde with an E	238
Epilogue	246
Acknowledgements	253
Glossary	256
Acronyms	263
Grade Comparison Tables	264
Notes and References	267
Further Reading and Recommended Viewing	285
Index	289

2017

Dusk was falling fast and the narrow road to the Rila Monastery in Western Bulgaria climbed higher and higher. The plan was to arrive deep in the mountain forest early enough to set up camp in daylight, but driving past the monastery, I could barely make out its ornate cloisters and chunky tower – an odd combination that bore testimony to more than a thousand years of history. The GPS claimed that right behind the shrine there was a hotel and a restaurant, but I couldn't see a thing, not a soul in sight. I slowed down, wary of hitting an animal that could step out from the dense forest lining the road.

The tarmac came to an end and, just as the road disappeared from my map, the car started jolting on cobblestones. Then the trail forked and I chose the turn at random. I was meant to look for trail markers but, under a starless sky, the car's old headlamps weren't doing enough. I had no idea where I was and, resigned to my fate, I turned the engine off, stepped outside and squatted to pee. A sudden gust of wind brought fine and dense rain. Chilled to the bone, I crawled into the back of the car and wrapped myself in a sleeping bag. A still skinny but now very happy mongrel curled up next to me and we fell asleep, only slightly spooked by the impenetrable darkness enveloping the car.

I woke to the sound of bells and the gentle vibration of a growling dog. Groggy and stiff from sleeping in a boot that was too short even for me, I squinted, sat up and wiped the condensation off the window with the edge of my sleeve. There was a wet pine forest, a small meadow and an old firepit adorned with a scattering of soaked litter.

Cows grazed lazily right next to the car. One of them, with a big bell hanging from her neck, almost peeked in through the window.

Stefan's vibrations clearly showed what the dog thought of cattle; born and raised in a city of two million, I shared his sentiment. My distrust towards them could be irrational, but it helped me in making the decision to push on with my journey. On wet days the car liked to be moody, so I climbed into the driver's seat, praying for the engine to start without complaints. Luck was on my side.

After a little less than half an hour of jolting, we arrived at the end of the valley and a concrete-covered clearing with mountains rising steeply around it. To my right and left were dark, man-made openings. Facing one another, each led far into the depths of the mountain.

Uranium mines.

From the tunnel on my right flowed a small, clear stream – likely contaminated but still the only source of water in the area. Bulgaria's uranium-mining past made headlines at regular intervals, often surfacing with reports of tap water being unfit for human consumption. Nobody seemed to care, possibly because there was nothing that they could do about it.

The forest was still wet after the night's downpour but the birds were singing cheerfully. I was alone and I hadn't encountered anyone since driving out of Pastra, the last village before the monastery. Everybody who could be here must have checked the forecast more thoroughly than I did. Or maybe they were less eager. Either way, the forest would be dry by the evening and I was glad at the prospect of some company. The tunnels gave me a shiver each time I looked at them.

In the morning sun, steam was rising from the pine-covered mountains, and far in the north-west I could see a huge, vertical slab of granite towering over the slopes, perhaps the peak of Malyovitsa. But I wasn't there for the mountain.

I sat down, leaning against the car, and I lit the stove to brew some coffee. The dog made his rounds, wagging like a maniac, stopping at every tree to piss. Thankfully, he ignored the tunnels and we each

tended to our own business. It wasn't even eight o'clock and it would be a while before the granite boulders, tucked away in the cool shade of the pines, were dry. Having tumbled from the cliffs above some twenty-five million years ago, they sat patiently.

I was more restless but there were hours to pass. Drinking coffee, walking around in the sun, waiting for the rocks to dry.

Waiting to climb.

PREFACE

Sport climbing was officially accepted as an Olympic discipline on 3 August 2016. The decision divided the community into those excited about the inclusion and those decidedly against it. Regardless, the International Federation of Sport Climbing (IFSC) agreed to the terms proposed by the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and, for better or worse, the discipline debuted at the postponed Olympic Games in Tokyo.

The main source of controversy was a competition format different from everything the sport had seen before. Over the last few decades of indoor climbing development, climbing has matured into three separate disciplines: lead, bouldering and speed. The competitions, now organised into an international circuit of around ten events per year, follow that division.

In lead climbing, competitors have a few minutes to observe a sequence of plastic holds before making one attempt to scale a fifteen-metre artificial wall. Most don't make it to the top and whoever gets the highest, wins. In case of a tie, time becomes a decisive factor. As with outdoor sport climbing, a rope is not used as aid for staying on the wall but only to catch a climber in the event of a fall.

In bouldering, the athletes are presented with four extremely physical problems: short climbs set on a 4.5-metre wall to test their strength and creativity. A climber can try each climb as many times as they want within a four-minute window. Ropes are swapped for thick mattresses which make the frequent falls relatively safe. The results

are determined by the number of points awarded for reaching the top of the four problems, or for a less valuable midway point known as a zone.

In speed climbing, climbers compete on a standardised, fifteen-metre wall. To perfect the vertical sprint, they train on the exact same set of holds day in, day out, arguably making speed the most contrived of all the three disciplines. Incidentally, for a lay observer it is also the most exciting to watch. During competitions, the race is staged in duels with two athletes climbing side by side on identical tracks. The best get to the top in under six seconds.

Traditionally, competitive climbers excel in one, or at most two, of the three disciplines, with speed requiring a set of skills very different from the two others. However, as the IOC offered climbers only two gold medals in Tokyo, the IFSC was faced with a conundrum. After years of campaigning to include climbing in the Olympics, declining the offer altogether was unthinkable, but how could they divide one medal for men and one medal for women across three different disciplines?

After much deliberation, a new combined format was conceived: a kind of climbing triathlon in which athletes compete in all three disciplines to single out the best all-rounder. Aspiring Olympians suddenly found themselves in a difficult position: for a chance to compete at the Games, most of them would effectively have to learn an entirely new sport. Lead climbers had to pick up speed, speed climbers get into bouldering, boulderers into lead climbing.

Most competitors were plainly stunned by the decision, and the reaction of the international community was fierce. Everybody had something to say about the new format and none of it was good, but once the dust of controversy had settled, the climbing triathlon quietly came into being. It was first tested at the Youth World Championships in 2017, then in 2018 at the seniors' in Innsbruck. A year later, the combined World Championships in Hachioji became the first qualifying event for the 2020 Olympics.

In March 2020, the race to Tokyo was well under way. Tears of joy and disappointment, competitiveness and ambition overshadowed the community's doubts about the new format, but the sporting emotions were soon extinguished. A joint statement from the IOC and the Tokyo 2020 Organising Committee announced that the novel coronavirus pandemic necessitated the postponement of the Games by at least a year.

When the Olympic flame finally arrived in Tokyo in July 2021, the world – and all of us with it – was changed forever.

* * *

Despite the disruptions, climbing's ascension to Olympic glory coincided with an increase in mainstream interest on a scale that now warrants national media coverage. USA Climbing (a national federation) announced a multi-year agreement with ESPN to televise and live-stream national events, and the BBC reported on both British and international competitions. Images of climbers competing at the Olympics in August 2021 were broadcast around the world.

It could be easily assumed that the growth in popularity was a direct result of Olympic inclusion but, in reality, it was quite the opposite. Before the IOC even turned its eyes to climbing, the discipline had a well-established competition circuit especially impressive for a sport which didn't see its first event until 1986. World Cups and Championships regularly gather thousands of spectators in state-of-the-art arenas, with many more joining via the free live streams. For the IOC, well aware of the fading appeal of the Olympic Games, incorporating new and exciting sports was a move carefully calculated to attract a younger audience.

Climbing's appeal to the masses is twofold. Firstly, the colourful resin holds, screwed on to plywood walls in gyms around the world, mimic the holds that outdoor climbers' hands touch in the Alps and in Yosemite. The sport's roots go deep into the world of exploration, adventure and a countercultural disdain for the ordinary: values

extremely appealing to those stuck in the daily routine of a nine-to-five. A new car and a mortgage might be exactly what they want, but by covering their hands in climbing chalk and pulling themselves up an indoor wall, they flirt with adventure. Blistered fingers and sore muscles are enough to find a new appreciation for the safety of the office cubicle. And, with around forty new climbing gyms opening in the US in 2015 alone, the plastic holds are much more accessible than Yosemite rock.

Secondly, indoor climbing offers an exciting alternative to tired, old fitness formats. To counterbalance the effects of a sedentary lifestyle, city dwellers spend hours on the treadmill, in Zumba classes or in a crossfit box. Indoor climbing is yet another way to beat rising obesity rates, diabetes, depression and a host of other ailments associated with sitting down in front of a glowing computer screen for ten hours at a time.

The added thrill of a potential fall and the exhilarating immediacy of success or failure augment the positive effects of physical activity. Climbing, even indoors, is fitness for the body and for the mind. It's an adventure packed neatly into a gym pass that sits in your wallet next to the Starbucks rewards card.

World-class competitors like Janja Garnbret and Akiyo Noguchi are relatable because they battle it out on walls deceptively similar to those at your local climbing gym. Watching climbing competitions, every spectator who has at least once in their life touched a climbing hold can become a pundit. Despite being a complex sport combining gymnastic ability with serious tactical skills, climbing is still just about grabbing the next hold and going higher, or faster, than your opponents. It would be hard to think of a discipline easier to follow by audiences in arenas and in front of their TVs, one which so perfectly fits the Olympic motto of 'faster, higher, stronger'.

Climbing's appeal to a young audience is also connected to the sport's more adventurous side; beyond what goes on in artificial climbing gyms, there is an entire exciting world of outdoor climbing.

Before the sport took athletes all over the world on the World Cup circuit, it had taken a few generations around the globe to test themselves on rocks. Still, many climbing Olympians excel on real rock or ice, with the best example being the Czech phenomenon Adam Ondra. In 2017, Ondra completed the world's hardest rock-climbing route (*Silence*, 9c), but he is also a five-time gold medallist at the World Championships and one of the best all-round competitors. (At the Olympics, and soon after outdoors, he was overshadowed by the stunning performances of Slovenian Janja Garnbret.)

While differences in climbing disciplines and styles are fairly obvious to any participant, for a lay observer the subtleties may be not only confusing but also seemingly insignificant. At the same time, one very specific type of climbing ignites the mainstream imagination. The news of Ondra's or Garnbret's records doesn't reach far beyond specialist press, but for a few years their climbing peers from a different discipline have been making major headlines.

In 2015, Tommy Caldwell and Kevin Jorgeson captured the attention of the entire world with their ascent of the *Dawn Wall* on Yosemite's iconic El Capitan. Their epic nineteen-day effort, as well as the drama of one climber holding the other one back, made for perfect TV. Journalists flocked to Yosemite Valley to point their lenses towards the 914-metre vertical slab of granite and zoom in on two men trying to achieve their life's dream. When after a harrowing battle they finally pulled themselves over the edge of El Cap, they were cheered on by the whole world. Caldwell has since written a best-selling autobiography, and a feature film documenting the *Dawn Wall* ascent has made over \$1 million at US box offices alone. It might not be as impressive as the latest *Star Wars* (over \$1 billion), but considering that *Dawn Wall* is a movie about a niche adventure sport, it's impressive that it made it to major theatres in the first place, and has since found its way on to Netflix.

Just over two years later, thirty-two-year-old Alex Honnold changed the game forever, and in more ways than one. For the climbing world,

the big news was his completion of the first solo ascent of El Capitan via *Freerider*, a route put up by Alex Huber in 1998.¹ The big difference was the style of the climb; Honnold scaled the enormous rock face with no ropes and no other equipment but his climbing shoes and a chalk bag. Just one misstep at any point of the climb – from its start at the bottom of Yosemite Valley to its end more than 914 metres above – would have meant a fall to his death.

The next milestone came about as a result of Honnold inviting his long-time friend Jimmy Chin to document the climb. A climbing filmmaker and a high-class mountaineer in his own right, Chin took on the task with serious reservations. After all, he could be agreeing to film Honnold's death. Again, the drama and tension made for the perfect mass-audience content and, in the end, Honnold's vast experience and meticulous preparations made for a happy ending. Bringing together Chin's cinematography and director Elizabeth Chai Vasarhelyi's storytelling skills, the documentary was a major hit. The box office sales exceeded \$5 million, and in February 2019, *Free Solo* won the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature.

Circling back to Ondra, the Czech proved his exceptional versatility by repeating the *Dawn Wall* only a year after Caldwell and Jorgeson. The ascent was a feat of athleticism executed with surgical precision but, beyond a piece in *National Geographic*, it didn't attract any mainstream attention. It appears that what the general public craves is not only a story of success, but one of unlikely success, a grand undertaking with an uncertain outcome. In other words, what they want is adventure.

While the vertical granite slabs of El Capitan may seem quite far removed from the plywood climbing gyms and competition arenas, their connection is undeniable. Although very different if observed at this particular moment in their history, they stem from the same exploratory tradition of mountaineering that set young minds on fire as early as the eighteenth century. In addition, the elation of a nine-to-five office worker pulling on plastic holds at their local climbing

gym is the same elation that a professional, cutting-edge climber experiences in their outdoor exploits. The skill level and scale of investment might be completely different, but the emotions remain the same.

Combining the media appeal of climbing competition, the sport's roots in adventure and its enduring image as a countercultural activity, it is no wonder that the IOC picked it for the Olympic roster.

Campaigning for the sport's inclusion, the IFSC estimated in 2015 that there were thirty-five million climbers worldwide – most of them recreationally visiting their local climbing wall. Since then, facilities have continued to spring up at an astonishing rate and, although no official metrics are available at this moment, the Olympics undoubtedly brought climbing into the consciousness of millions more. Yet most of them – both recreational climbing gym patrons and fans watching the competition on screens – will have a very fragmented image of the sport: a snapshot of a discipline born out of two centuries of tradition and the contrived, arbitrary IOC format.

This book is an attempt at painting a more accurate picture. It is intended as a portrait of sorts but not a full historical record, whose scale would be far beyond these pages. In addition, timelines and chronicles rarely make for good reads, and history, although it claims to deal only in facts, tends to be more of a construct than an exact science. I'd rather throw the notion of an objective truth right out of the window and offer the reader *a story* instead.

It is the story of the defining moments, historical circumstances and iconic figures that have shaped the sport of climbing to become what it is today. Hopefully, some readers will find in it a reflection of their own experiences and an insight into how climbing's past has shaped them. For those coming to the climbing culture afresh, it can serve as a guidebook to climbing's myriad idiosyncrasies. To avoid breaking the flow of storytelling, climbing-specific slang and specialist lingo are explained in a glossary which is followed by grade comparison tables (pages 256 and 264 respectively).

My personal endeavours on plastic and rock are included as a counterweight to the tales of exceptional greatness associated with the likes of Tommy Caldwell and many others before him. Climbing's past is too often seen through newspaper headlines – the great successes and the tragic accidents. As much as climbing's present is usually portrayed through the very same lens, it is not necessarily an accurate one.

I remember my first steps in the sport as an adult, having devoured climbing magazines for some ten years. They developed in me an incredibly false idea that every climber was as athletic as British Olympian Shauna Coxsey, and I expected a similar prowess of myself. But climbing – even professional climbing – is ninety-nine per cent failure. Beyond the ascents, the medals and the goals, there are sacrifices and lifestyle choices incomprehensible to anybody from outside the community, along with injuries and doubts.

Through mixing the stories of the past and present greats with my own very typical climbing story, I hope to paint an accurate and full image of a sport that in recent years has captivated the world like no other. I hope you will enjoy it and, perhaps, find even more appreciation for a passing hobby that made you pick up this book, or maybe the great passion that has shaped – or will shape – your entire life.

CHAPTER 1

FIRST STEPS

*'Lying here on the fragrant meadow, on a glorious July day,
I felt a sensation so strange to the lowland dwellers:
a feeling of inhibited freedom.'*

Mieczysław Karłowicz (1876–1909), Polish composer
and conductor, died in an avalanche

I don't remember the beginning of my love affair with the mountains. As soon as I could walk, my mother packed her walking boots, a huge bag full of things apparently necessary for toddlers, our dog and my three-year-old self, and headed to the Warsaw Central railway station to board the train south. It was 1989. The Berlin Wall still stood, but the fall of the Polish communist regime was about to send ripples throughout the Eastern Bloc.

If the communists can be credited with doing anything positive, it would be the support that the state provided for elite mountaineers. Their achievements in the Himalaya, including many ascents completed in the dead of winter, were ammunition for one of the many fronts of the Cold War. But few climbers cared for politics. What they cared for were the passports and money necessary to go abroad. In the Himalaya, the Karakoram and Pamir, they were free.¹

Many of them, like Wojciech Kurtyka, excelled not only in the

greater ranges but also on the limestone outcrops of southern Poland.² While the international climbing community regards Kurtyka predominantly as a mountaineer, among the Poles he's also known for his incredible solo of a VI.5 graded route.³ In 1993, probably the only other climber capable of such boldness was the celebrated Frenchman Patrick Edlinger.

The small Polish community of elite climbers was incredibly insular. While their achievements in the greater ranges were widely commented on in the media, they were seen as superhuman feats completely out of reach of a layperson. At the same time, no rock climbing made it into the mainstream consciousness, in part because discretion was deeply ingrained in the Polish climbing culture. Displaying a coiled rope, or any other climbing gear, on top of a backpack was seen as a great *faux pas*. The culprit would be ridiculed and no longer taken seriously by their peers.

As a result, non-climbers were hard-pressed for a glimpse into the sport, and the only form of climbing my mother could dream of was hiking. Much more mainstream at the time, it could also involve scrambling and exposure, and my mother revelled in the rare moments of balancing along a granite ridge. As a single working mother, she sneaked them into her busy life only during the summer holidays and, without a passport, she would choose between the two home ranges of Sudety and Karpaty. The latter would always win, luring her with the alpine peaks of the High Tatras.

In the few years between getting pregnant and my first wobbly steps, the one thing on her mind was to be back among the grey rocks, running up and down the trails, closing her hands on the chains of the *via ferrata*, and spending the evenings in the dark common rooms of the shelters, the air thick with the scent of sweat, goulash and tales of adventure.

Perhaps if life had left my mother with more freedom than the reality of post-communist Poland allowed, her passion for the mountains would have taken her much further than the Tatras, but in times of

economic scarcity and no benefits for a single parent, the Tatras were far enough.

The smell and the sounds of the train departing from Warsaw Central station at 7.20 a.m. for Zakopane, already then a busy tourist town at the foothills of the mountains, are forever ingrained in my memory as a synonym for adventure. In a child's mind, the seven-hour journey south was a pilgrimage on the grandest scale. We passed the time drinking hot tea from a flask, peeling hard-boiled eggs and trying to count grazing cows before they disappeared out of sight.

We stayed in a house owned by an elderly couple: a six-foot-tall highlander with straight back and white hair, and his little wife with rosy cheeks wrinkled like an old apple. He was a retired forester, and the whole house was filled with horned hunting trophies, taxidermied owls and squirrels arranged in lifelike poses over every bed. In the evenings, his wife would fry us wild mushrooms served from a hot, butter-filled pan with only salt to taste and fresh bread to mop up the juices. There'd be stories of folklore heroes, encounters with bears, and of running up the mountains with no shoes 'because shoes were only for church.' I absorbed them like the bread absorbed melted butter, and studied the gullies and ridges of our hosts' weathered faces.

The morning after our train arrived at the old Zakopane railway station, my mother packed a backpack and we set off for the trails for the first time. (Back then the road by our hosts' house was not yet paved.) After walking through town, we followed the beautiful and appropriately named Path Under the Firs. The flat trail runs between a steep, forest-covered hillside above and a rolling meadow below, where sheep grazed lazily, guarded by huge dogs and sometimes the occasional shepherd. Some of the men still wore the traditional, ornate highlander's outfit. Every couple of miles there was a small bale hut with a triangular hole below the roof to let out the smoke from the open fire inside.⁴

After what seemed like an eternity to a toddler, but was just a short

walk for an adult, we left the cool shade of the firs and took a path leading uphill and towards the Little Meadow Valley, a place impressively grand despite its modest name. The vast expanse of the meadow, incomprehensible to my three-year-old eyes, was beautifully described by a keen climber, Maria Steczkowska, around the year 1850:

'Soon a sight so charming and surprising comes before our eyes that for a moment we stand as if intoxicated, unable to comprehend whether what we look at is but a dream, or if indeed, on the background of dark forests and rocky peaks, a delightful meadow blossoms in semblance of a bonnie flower.'

Steczowska was one of the first independent tourists in the Tatras, not only exploring the valleys and ridges on her own, but also guiding friends up peaks more than 2,000 metres high. Apart from the fact that she was a schoolteacher, there's very little known about the woman who in 1858 anonymously authored a popular mountain memoir. Her book became one of the first guidebooks in Poland, but most details about Steczowska's life have fallen into obscurity.⁵

I played in the tall grasses of the Little Meadow, noticing with fascination the scores of minute creatures around me, all busying themselves with staying alive and passing on their genes. Beetles climbing up thin straws, grasshoppers jumping here and there, ants, bees, flies and mosquitos – they absorbed all of my attention. My mother took out a cotton hat from the backpack and carefully placed it over my head to protect it from the early morning sun. The valley, shaped like a giant cauldron, trapped the heat so that even the gentle breeze, so cool among the trees, felt like a blast of hot air.

Three white boards attached to a wooden post signalled the direction of walking trails going beyond the valley. My mother looked longingly towards them as she prepared us a light lunch. The trails led steeply through forest-covered slopes, then up into more open terrain where the dwarf mountain pine rarely grows above head height. From

there, the rocky trail would turn into a series of stones weaving through steep scree, neatly arranged but still threatening a broken leg to anybody keen to take a hasty step. As I looked up from there, the sheer walls of granite and the rugged peaks of the High Tatras seemed within reach.

Mum wiped the crumbs off my face and clothing and packed away the tea flask. It was time to go back, but my little legs were already exhausted, and I was keen to stay among the grasses until I fell asleep. A sneaky promise of spotting rabbits on the way back was enough bait to get me going, but I spent a good portion of the journey in my mother's arms.

I don't remember any of it, but in the evening of the same day my mother spotted that my eyes were glassy and my forehead was burning. Just as she put me to bed, a nosebleed sprayed everything around me with red. Panicking and nearly certain she had killed her only child with too much walking, my mother promised herself never to take me on a mountain trip again, ready to give up anything for my recovery. Even after I finally fell asleep, she stayed up a long time, watching, praying and worrying in the way that only a mother can.

By the morning of the next day I was completely recovered and, although to this day my mother is certain I fell ill because of exertion, I'd blame packing my dirty fingers into my mouth.

During the same trip, Mum discovered that by getting up long before dawn, she could cram in relatively long excursions, run through the trails at breakneck speed, and be back in our room before I even opened my three-year-old eyes to demand breakfast. But despite the eager promises and prayers of the nosebleed night, she always took me along whenever it seemed like I could manage, and by the time I was sixteen we had walked and scrambled together through every single tourist trail in the Polish Tatra National Park – and many more than once.

The spell had been cast.