

## Notes from Hell

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*One of the largest climbing competitions in America, Jasper's Horseshoe Hell challenges pros and amateurs to stay awake and on the wall for 24 hours straight.*

I turn off of the highway and guide my car along the rutted path leading to Horseshoe Canyon. It's 8 p.m. and pitch-black. The earlier deluge has tapered into a steady patter of drops. After a treacherous mile bouncing through pond-sized puddles, I can see the lights of the trading post. There's no official lot, but about two dozen cars have pulled along the path.

I've made it to 24 Hours of Horseshoe Hell, one of the biggest endurance rock climbing competitions in the United States. I'm always pitching the scrappy "culture" assignments—music camping festivals, cardboard boat championships, a week in New York to write a bunch of stories about Arkies-made-good, covering an actor's wedding in a local bar, where I end up fucking (or more correctly, getting fucked) by a gorgeous gender-queer being in a bathroom with shaky, graffiti-covered stalls, during the only time out of the hundreds I've been in that bathroom that it has never smelled like piss. I get these assignments largely because my newspaper is underfunded, like most newspapers, and I'm willing and able to sleep on floors. And I have a wide network of cross-country friends with floors.

The woman who checks me in says most people are at a hot-dog roast up the hill. There are, three men and a woman huddled under a white tent out front.

"Have you seen a tall guy with a red, curly mohawk and a short guy with a blond, curly mohawk?" I ask them. These are the local Little Rock climbers I'll be following, Dave and Baka.

"No, but you should totally go on this zip line with us," one of the guys says. He smells like beer.

"Right now? It's dark and raining."

"You got a head lamp?"

A few minutes later, I'm following this guy up a muddy, steep trail. Turns out, my new friends are all reps from Backwoods, an event sponsor. The zipline is 3,200 feet long. The wire screams like a freight train.

"You're a lightweight," Morgan says, strapping me in. "So curl your feet up in a cannonball, okay? You ready?"

He starts me with a massive push. I hug my knees and soar over the canyon, rain pelting my face like a Super Soaker bazooka at close range. Lights pinprick the darkness below, marking campsites. The wind is so crisp that I think of Utah in winter, rather than in Arkansas in fall. It's incredible, it's trippy and a minute in, it's over.

Afterwards, I spread my sleeping bag in the back of my car and wait till morning. Horseshoe Hell officially begins in twelve hours.

I crawl out of the backseat nine hours later. There are too many cars to count, haphazardly wedged and nearly touching. At 7 a.m. a heavy mist shrouds the green hills.

Inside the trading post, they're selling coffee for a buck, but it's BYOM (bring your own mug) because this is a no-trace event. Volunteers in yellow T-shirts mill about, and restless climbers squat by open trunks, going over gear and strategy. Nearly 1,000 bodies will cram onto this mountain over the course of the weekend. Competition registration filled in 15 minutes and crashed the website. Tommy Caldwell, Sonnie Trotter, Brittany Griffith and Jasmine Caton—names that are probably a lot more impressive to people who aren't me—are among them, climbing for Patagonia.

To earn a horseshoe, each competitor (teams are made up of two) has to climb at least one route an hour for 24 hours. Additional routes are worth extra points and harder routes are worth more. Despite a preponderance of alcohol (carted in, since Newton County is dry), the unfettered enthusiasm, community emphasis, and healthy looking young people everywhere gives the event a wholesome aura.

About a fourth of the crowd is in costume. Two college-aged girls in blue tights, red striped shirts and black frame glasses, channel the Where's Waldo character. They live in Tulsa, about three hours west. They've never climbed in HH before, but they climb at HCR fairly often. "Our goal is to stay awake and not die," one of them announces. There's also Cheech and Chong, a gorilla and a banana, a handful of superheros, and a couple of guys in suits and Romney and Obama masks.

I find Baka and Dave. Baka bounces on his toes, burning energy and nerves. He's at least half a foot shorter than Harrison, but their heads seem, more often than not, to be at the same level. He greets me with, "Get some pictures of us at 4 a.m. That would be hilarious!"

Dave seems sleepy.

As the team names are announced, Dave translates: "Beta is how to do a climb. You're not supposed to yell to someone how to do it on their first go, it's just kind of bad ethics. But sometimes you get so excited, and you're like, 'put your foot over there,' and then you're like (he clamps his hand over his mouth). So that's Another Premature Beta Spray."

As "Is that a number two cam in your pants or are you just happy to see me?" collects their scorecards, Baka jabs Harrison's arm. "Dave, you totally missed that! That guy actually had a number two cam in his pants!"

A cam is a chunky bit of plastic that climbers wedge into cracks to hook into. I didn't miss it. The guy is wearing blue spandex briefs.

The climbers face their partners and repeat the Climber's Creed, which changes every year and this year includes whole verses from the Eminem song "8 Mile." Then someone fires a shotgun, and they're off. People scatter in all directions, sprinting towards the hills, backpacks swinging. These packs have the water and food the climbers will need for 24 hours. They have to carry all supplies themselves.

Baka is strapping on his harness, and Dave is crouched at the base of the wall, breathless and red-faced, when Deb and I catch up. All around them, climbers are already on the 40-foot wall.

"That run killed me," Dave mutters. It's about 78 degrees and the air is a soupy 90 percent humidity. He chugs coconut water. The route is mid-grade, and they scale it quickly.

Twenty minutes in, they've both completed two climbs. As Dave secures his figure eight knot for a third go, his girlfriend shouts encouragement. "Your haircut looks like an early-90's lesbian!"

"It's more like an Irish warrior. That's way more bad-ass," Baka says.

"I think maybe the 90's lesbian is more bad-ass," Deb says.

Deb and I head to a bouldering wall, where non-competitors have tossed down pads. A box of climbing shoes on-lend is tipped on its side, and there are shoes and people everywhere. Those with pads and chalk share with everyone, and strangers stand beneath strangers with lifted arms to break falls. People pop beers, and Lisa Rands, maybe the best female boulderer in the world, makes the rounds correcting technique.

By mid-afternoon, the sky has gone from overcast to threatening, and the temperature has dropped 20 degrees. By the time the clouds break, I am with Andy Chasteen, the founder of Horseshoe Hell, in the trading post's tiny back office. Outside the window, the patch of sky that we can see is a dark shade of bruise.

A medic leans into the doorway and says, "Andy, are you going to do anything more official about the weather? It's raining real hard with a lot of lightening."

"The announcements we've been making are that we don't recommend climbing in the lightening at all," Chasteen replies.

"Maybe if you give them a break on 5 o'clock routes, in case anybody is more worried about their route count than their life," says Leinau.

Chasteen relays the message into his walkie, so that the crag-volunteers can spread the word. But then he says to Leinau, "That's not going to de-motivate people. Tommy and Sonny won't stop."

Leinau says, "I know. This just makes it a little more clear that they are the ones deciding to climb."

The rain slacks around 6:30 p.m., and a Horseshoe Hell guide named Jason (he created most of the routes) and I take the four-wheeler up to the North Forty. The air seems luminous, everything lit with that watery half-light that comes when a storm fades just as the sun sets. The first climbers we find are Tommy Caldwell and Sonny Trotter. They're on a somewhat protected route, but they both have wet hair. The pink tie-dye tees they wore this morning are gone, and they're climbing in nothing but neon green shorts. They work quickly and efficiently, without much conversation.

A few minutes later, I find the Waldo girls again. They're psyching themselves up for their first climb, ever, in the dark.

"We're on Five Hour Energy and candy corn pumpkins, our recipe for success," one of them chirps.

I find Baka and Dave again, and a miserable looking Deb in a giant rain slicker.

"Did y'all stop in the rain?"

"No," Dave says glumly. "And I wasn't totally happy with it. It's not my bag." He glances at the oblivious Baka.

Baka disappears and then comes back, still traveling at a trot. "On the backside there are two 5.8's and a 5.9 open," he yells.

As the group heads toward the routes, Baka clutches two bagels (each with one bite missing) in one hand and a gallon jug of water in the other. He dumps his stuff at the foot of the mountain and hurriedly knots his rope. His mannerisms are twitchy and his words rushed, like he's overdosed on non-drowsy cold meds.

"Dave, are you ready? Now we just have to find what we can. I wanted my lowest to be 9, but 8's aren't that bad, and there's three of them right here." He's already partially up the wall, clipping himself into the first bolt.

It's 10 p.m., only halfway through. At the first of three check-ins, the North Forty is hopping. Dozens of climbers sign the log, re-tape fingers and chug complimentary cold-brewed coffee. One guy eats cold Chef Boyardee from the can. There are a few battery-operated floodlights, and everyone has headlamps, so the place twinkles like a small-town carnival. The chatter and buzz are back.

Down the ridge, I sit on a flat rock and chat with Sonny Trotter's wife, Lydia, while the guys climb sheer 70-foot sheets. They move like dancers, precisely replacing one foot with another, gripping a half-inch knob with their toes, pointing, stretching and lightly leaping, each move flowing into the next. Even Zambrano is impressed. "I can't believe they're still doing 5.12's," she says.

At 1 a.m., Zamarano and I head to the Patagonia cabin to sleep. The porch railing is lined with at least a hundred beer bottles, and we are greeted by a cluster of men in various degrees of slump. At someone's feet, an unzipped medic's bag spills its contents. Nate Borchert, the HH logistic coordinator, has an IV bag rigged to a post and a needle in his vein. Borchert slurs something about drinking since this morning and how they give themselves IVs to prevent hangovers.

We sidestep the drunks, remove our caked shoes and enter the cabin — a haven of blonde wood, with duffle bags of rope, granola bars and vitamin powders spread abo

ut. From the sleeping loft, we can hear the activity on the porch. It seems the IV's have worked their magic. The walkies crackle to life in what we can only assume is a volunteer-wide trivia game.

"What's the highest mountain in Africa?" the radio sparks.

"Keel-uh-mah-jar-oooo," the porch guys say triumphantly.

At 6 a.m. the guys are gone, but the IV bags still hang limply from the posts. Back at the North Forty, in the chilly, periwinkle dawn, I find the Little Rock guys. Volunteers are passing out bananas, which Dave declines. Apparently, he puked a few minutes ago. "Too much caffeine and not enough food," he hypothesizes.

He completed his first triathlon at 13. When he crossed the finish line, there was an ESPN camera in his face. He puked directly into the camera. "I did see the clip. There is this picture of me running towards the camera, then cut," he recalls. "It didn't get on the camera, but it did get on the guy's feet."

For the first time all competition, I spot Brittany Griffith and Jasmine Caton, the Patagonia/Black Diamond-sponsored women's team. They're in pullovers and ski-caps, studying the route guidebook and sipping Pabst Blue Ribbon. Yes, PRB, at 7 a.m.

"Don't judge," Griffith says, raising the can.

They choose a route, and I follow. Even 21 hours in, they're animated. Caton strips off her teal pullover and lifts ropey arms to the rock. As she tugs, waves ripple between her shoulders.

These women have the most defined back muscles I've ever seen. Griffith hops around more than necessary on the belay, to keep alert and warm.

By 10 a.m. it's done. In front of the trading post, it looks much the way it did 24 hours ago, except that now the crowd is dustier and bloodier and costumes are missing pieces. Soon the climbers will be off to sleep, the volunteers to climb, and I'll come back the following year for a different newspaper.