

## The Climb

By Lily White

When I was younger, I thought nothing of stepping on a worm, or frying an ant under a magnifying glass. I might have been curious about the carcass of a raccoon left on the side of the road, but felt no sadness at its passing. A dead goldfish was merely flushed, with no accompanying tears.

Now that I am older, and a parent, I am acutely aware of the fragility of life. I wince while walking past a squashed baby bird on the sidewalk. Unbidden tears squeeze out when I see cruelty portrayed in the movies or when I read about real world violence in the newspaper. Often I will wait until Tuesday to read Monday's paper, and Wednesday to read Tuesday's paper, and so on. By looking backwards at world events, they seem less immediate and I am able to face *The New York Times* without becoming emotionally overwrought. This can prove awkward during conversation since I am forever out-of-date. If I keep moving in this direction, I might end-up completely unable to cope. I'll become a hermit, paralyzed by fear and incapable of leaving my cave.

I first became aware of this growing emotional instability while reading a bedtime story to my 7-year-old daughter. We were reading the *The Silver Slippers*, a book that I had found discarded on the sidewalk in front of a neighbor's house. The story is about a young girl who isn't very good at ballet but wants to be the prima ballerina at her dance recital. Her mother gives her a necklace with a pendant of silver ballet slippers, and tells her that if she tries her best, and works harder than the rest of the girls, that she will have a chance. She need only look at the pendant to give her strength and to remember her purpose. During the section when the mother explains to the little girl about how she needs to work harder than all of the other girls, I started to get teary-eyed. This would have been fine had it been an isolated incident, but every time we read the book aloud, I would start to cry in the same part of the story. It was getting weird.

“Why are you crying, mommy?” Jolene was looking at me with a mixture of fear and amusement.

“Well, I don’t know,” I replied.

“Stop!” she squealed.

I smiled, but I was as disturbed by this as she was.

I tried to figure out a pattern to what made me cry. Was the trigger that the little girl wasn’t as good as the rest, and had to work harder? Certainly, this was something I never had to worry about. Things had always come easily to me—not ballet, certainly—but the piano and the saxophone. Perhaps it was the girl’s attentive and nurturing mother--so unlike my own mother--that made me sad. I closed my eyes and tried to imagine myself as the little untalented ballet dancer with my own mother giving me a pendant--or more likely, *not* giving me a pendant. I waited for the tears of self-pity to come, but nothing happened. No tears.

Before this, I had always considered myself a tough broad. I routinely scream at meter maids. I work with power tools and empty mousetraps for my neighbors and friends. In my capacity as a free-lance jazz saxophonist, I lead several bands, and have recorded four CDs under my own name and played in festivals and concert halls around the world. While at home in New York, I’ve always prided myself on being able to handle many different situations. When the club owner at Sweetwater’s refused to pay our band, I punched a hole in the wall with my sax stand in front of their 300 lb. bouncer. It didn’t solve the problem, but it sure felt good. Playing at a Hell’s Angels’ club in Belgium, one drunken man menaced our band expressing his aesthetic displeasure with a pantomime of masturbatory movements. We were trapped. Then our guitar player stepped boldly over the monitor speaker, thrust his guitar into the gigantic man’s belly and began to solo his heart out. I joined in with him trading 4 bars at a time building up into a blues frenzy. At first, the guy looked stunned, weaving back and forth. I didn’t know whether he was going to grab the guitar by the neck or punch me in the mouth. Then he toppled just like

a rhino shot with a tranquilizer gun and fell into a waiting lawn chair. He gazed up at me misty-eyed for the rest of the night. That time, we got paid.

Perhaps that is why I found that Saturday afternoon last February so distressing. I was slated to sing at a Bat Mitzvah in some remote town in New Jersey. The agent asked me if I would sing a special song by teen idol, Hannah Montana. Normally I hate pop tunes, but this one wasn't too bad. It was an inspirational number titled "The Climb." As I worked on it, I found that I actually liked it. The lyrics contain a positive message about trying your best and working toward a goal--much like the girl with the silver slippers. As I worked on singing the song at the piano, I noticed that I would begin to tear-up a little at the chorus:

There's always gonna be another mountain,  
I'm always gonna wanna make it move,  
There's always gonna be an uphill battle  
Sometimes you're going to have to lose  
It ain't about how fast I get there,  
It ain't about what's waitin' on the other side,  
--It's the climb.

Since I had to perform "The Climb" in public, I had to make sure to rehearse it enough to build up some emotional calluses. I didn't want to risk breaking into tears in front of an audience. The answer was repetition. I practiced it over and over again, but no matter how many times I played it, the part about the 'uphill battle' always got to me. Pathetic.

The day before the gig, I knew I should keep practicing the song, but I was too busy. There was my workout at the gym, and then grocery shopping, and after that, I only had a couple of hours of *CSI* episodes to watch before my daughter came home from school. I decided to rely on my professionalism to pull it off. If I had any problems, I would simply call on all of my memories of nasty maitre ds, demanding mothers-of-the-bride, and bratty Bar Mitzvah boys to steel myself. I was already so sick of "The Climb," it would be difficult to keep from sneering while I sang it.

I arrived at the Temple B'nai Shalom in Kearny at twelve fifteen for a one o'clock start. I set up my music stand with the printout of the Hannah Montana lyrics in large font. Since the band was made up of a bunch of musicians I didn't know—guys at least twenty years older than me—I wanted to make sure we could talk through the song before the guests started to arrive. After a brief run-through, I felt confident we would do a decent job.

As the waiters put the final touches onto the table settings, I looked around at the room. It was a modest place with beige walls and patterned beige carpeting. The ceiling was made up of water-stained, low hanging acoustic tiles. On each table was a centerpiece of five or six balloons weighted down by a brick wrapped with colorful Mylar and ribbons. *Strange*, I thought. Usually, the centerpiece of any Bat or Bar Mitzvah table was an elaborate declaration of the dominating hobby or interest of the birthday girl or boy. I've seen Star Wars centerpieces; literary centerpieces with Harry Potter book cover reproductions, Mets and Yankees centerpieces, Rock 'n Roll centerpieces, and even Musical Theater centerpieces--for the emerging gay Bar Mitzvah boy. Clearly, these folks hadn't spent enough money. At least they hired a band and not a DJ, so their priorities were in the right place.

The guitarist leading the band told me confidentially that the young birthday girl was mentally disabled, and that it was quite a difficult task for her to learn the entire haftarah portion of the torah. *Whatever*, I thought, and continued to set up my instruments and microphone. Just then, the mother of the birthday girl came up to me on the bandstand. She was overweight and dressed in a dowdy polyester skirt suit—pretty lowbrow compared to what people usually wore to these things. She asked if we had learned the Hannah Montana song, and I reassured her that we had. She smiled weakly and went back to her table. I turned around and rolled my eyes at the keyboard player.

We played a few cornball tunes as the guests filed in—"Girl from Ipanema" and "It Had to Be You"—and I wondered where all the kids were. Usually at these events there are 30 to 40 thirteen-year-olds running around hopped-up on sugar, but I didn't see any. After everyone was seated I noticed a slight girl at a table directly in front of the bandstand. She wore a pink flowered party dress complete

with a bow in the back. On one leg was a brace that began somewhere underneath her skirt and disappeared into her shoe. This must be the Bat Mitzvah girl, I thought. I checked my information sheet: her name was Rebecca. The two girls on her left looked a couple of years older and were giggling and whispering to each other—some cousins, perhaps, who had been forced to sit there by their parents. The young woman on her right was in her twenties and was most likely a nanny or tutor. I realized that this birthday girl didn't have any friends at her table that hadn't been either paid or coerced into being there.

I examined her 13-year-old face as I traded off playing the melody of “Unforgettable” with the guitarist. She didn't look terribly handicapped or anything. Except for a pair of thick glasses that sat crookedly on her face, and her thin, somewhat ungainly appearance, she could have been a regular girl at a regular party. She just looked a little “off.”

After dinner, her mother cued us to do the Hannah Montana song. I picked up the microphone and announced,

“This next song is dedicated to Rebecca and her mom.”

The pianist began to play the slow, steady pulse of open fifths on the piano. Mother and daughter met on the dance floor. It was four o'clock in the afternoon and the room was bathed in the harsh light of the Kearny sun. Rebecca had a huge grin on her face as her mom held her close and rocked her back and forth. I began to sing.

I can almost see it,  
That dream I'm dreamin', but  
There's a voice inside my head says,  
I'll never reach it.

On the word “reach,” my voice cracked a little.

*Shit, I thought. That never happened on the verse, before.*

I was worried. All I had to do was get through this one song without screwing it up, but I kept thinking about how hard it must have been for Rebecca to make friends when she wasn't one of the smart or cool kids.

Every step I'm taking,  
Every move I make feels  
Lost with no direction,  
My faith is shaken.

*She's fine*, I reassured myself. She's got her whole Jewish faith thing going for her: strong family, strong community, etc. She's probably got a rich daddy who spoils the hell out of her. Of course, if they had any money, they wouldn't be at the Temple B'nai Shalom in Kearny...

But I, I gotta be strong,  
I gotta keep my head up high.

*Ok*, I thought, *here comes the chorus*.

I fell apart. I kept singing, but the sounds that emanated from my mouth were otherworldly. Each note I sang was surprisingly painful. With every word, my throat would expand and explode into a yawning pre-sob, leaving the tone empty and unsupported. In a desperate attempt to squelch my emotions from the outside, I clenched my jaw tight, creating a stiff mask. To shield the crowd from my frozen, horrid grin, I whirled around and sang to the startled drummer. My only hope was that the musicians would not start laughing. One titter, one quizzical look, one raised eyebrow would have triggered an emotional meltdown resulting in a puddle of tears, piss and goo on the bandstand with a Shure SM58 microphone floating in the center. Fortunately, they all kept their heads down and played their parts.

Finally, we came to the end of the song. I turned around and faced the dance floor, and to my surprise, no one had their hands over their ears. No one was rushing to grab the microphone away from me. They all must have assumed that I had a really strange voice. I breathed a sigh of relief and let the page of lyrics fall to the floor behind me, never to be sung again. I turned to the band and counted off a fast dance tune to erase the memory of the whole experience, but there was a tap on my shoulder. It was Rebecca's mother:

“Could you play the song again, so that Becca can dance with her uncle? Tell them that it’s in honor of her late father.”

*Oh God.*

There is an old proverb: “The oldest tree bears the softest fruit.” If I had to compare myself today with a fruit, I suppose it would have to be a peach. Though I may seem fragile on the outside, underneath the thin fuzzy skin and the sweet pulpy fruit is a peach pit that is hard and strong.

After becoming a mother, it’s not only my own little girl that I have begun to care about. The emotional world that used to end at the tip of my nose has expanded, and I feel more connected with people in general. As the world encroaches, I am more vulnerable to its joys and its sorrows.

As my daughter grows up, she will inevitably begin building her own thick skin. She may remember me crying at inopportune times and laugh about it. *My mom was such a hormone case-- she used to cry while reading me bedtime stories!* What I hope for her is that she won’t be afraid to occasionally let down her guard. For with each protective layer that falls away, there is more to feel—both good and bad. There is no harm in feeling too much; the real danger is not feeling at all.