

Foreword

I was twenty nine, living in London and looking forward to the big three O. No really, I was. My thirtieth was the year I'd always planned to go away again, get out of London. I'd been thinking six months cold (ski season), six months hot (diving/surfing) - New Zealand kept popping into my head as the destination of choice. Then at the kitchen table of a friend in Balham, Cupid struck, shooting me with a golden-headed arrow that filled me with happiness but pinned me to London, like a bug in a display case. I fell in love with Kai, a wonderful Welsh Norwegian and put my plans on hold. One year later we were living together in my little flat in Stoke Newington.

Two years later, London, the gritty city, city of my birth, is getting me down. My other half wants to travel, live abroad, have adventures - but not for a couple of years. So I stay, and after a while I suffer. I am sick of the dirt and sooty black boogies, sick of having to book friends four weeks in advance, as everyone including me, is so busy, and most definitely sick of Hackney bloody Council. The angry bus drivers, the traffic jams, the litter, the mess, the crowds are wearing me out. My thirty-first birthday arrives and the pull of *away* gets me. After long, heartfelt discussions, I move to Cornwall, just for a year, to complete an MA and become an accomplished outdoor climber. Two birds, one stone. Well that was the plan. But that is not exactly what happened.

Well, it might, I don't know yet. I am writing this foreword before the events that will fill chapter two and beyond have actually happened. I've planned this book with the aid of an imaginary crystal ball to fit in with what I know about the universal story structure. Read Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* to get the idea: he says that stories, when pared down to their core, follow a series of 12 stages. The story's protagonist has a call to action, which she refuses at first. She then leaves her ordinary world, faces trials and tribulations in the special world, overcomes these and learns something about herself. When you think about it, all good stories fit this structure. Think of Max leaving the ordinary world of his bedroom to meet the wild things in *Where the Wild Things Are* or Luke Skywalker answering Princess Leia's holographic call for help in *Star Wars*.

I have laid out a basic plan and over the next five months will go through the experience of trying to become a confident outdoor climber. I will write the story to match these 12 steps as the adventure unfolds, a chapter for each step. This is a big task because first, I need to find climbing partners I trust to hold me safe on the other end of a rope. Secondly I know 'trad' climbing common in Cornwall is way beyond what I am used to, as the climber climbs up bare rock and has to place her own gear. Am I setting myself

up to fail? But worse, my plans involve a crisis in chapter eight. Campbell says that for a story to matter, the readers must feel like they have experienced this crisis alongside the story's protagonist - as well as the change that comes about by surviving the crisis.

And even worse still, I am scared of falling. Yeah right, I know everyone's scared of falling, but I really am. I have a phobia of falling down stairs, known as climacophobia. Around 10 per cent of the UK population have a phobia and there are some unusual ones about: like cacophobia - the fear of ugliness - and enetophobia - the fear of pins. But ugliness and pins, well, they're not going to kill you. A fall down a flight of stairs will. Actually no, that's my phobia talking; a fall down the stairs *could* kill you. When I was younger, I actually believed I would die falling down stairs, which meant I was free to do other risky things without worrying, like riding a motorbike around London, walking around on my own late at night and enjoying my part in the early nineties rave scene.

So, this being a book about my struggles to overcome my phobia and break into the world of outdoor climbing in Cornwall, I am a bit worried about chapter eight. What else might I break? As I have created this crisis-containing plan, will some part of me, conscious or unconscious, force real life to fit it? Will I be tempted to exaggerate, or even invent scenes, to make my story better? What happens if the coming summer passes in blissful happiness? Or when I am dangling upside down with blood running into my sensible climbing helmet, will I be thinking, great, this fits very well with my flippin' story structure, just before I pass out?

Let's hope not.

JS Wight 2007