

# On Enchanted Rock

Vivé Griffith

“Do you have the number for the ranger station?” You heard her voice almost before you saw her, this woman with a sun hat shading her face.

You said, “No, I’m sorry.” But the man that you love, the man sitting with you to look at the vista you’d declared breathtaking, said, “Wait. I have the park map.” On the top he found the number.

“Is someone sick?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Chest pains?” he asked. It was almost a joke, something so unlikely in a place where water gathers in vernal pools that fill with the brightest green grasses.

But she was gone.

It was your wedding anniversary. Eight years. You’d taken the day off work to be together, away from your house, where you weren’t talking about what needed to be done. You’d climbed to the top of Enchanted Rock, a massive dome of pink granite in the Texas Hill Country a few hours from your home.

There were no trails, just a sloping face of rock dotted sometimes with clusters of yellow flowers. You’d walked slowly, pausing to catch

your breath, turning to remark on the view. It was a day so clear it seemed you could see forever.

Now you sat on the dome's far side looking across to hills and a small lake, sipping water from a green metal bottle. Your skin prickled with the exertion of the climb.

You had brought a poem, one you read to the man that you love, one that ends with the lines,

*and how, if we could, we'd repeat it  
this life, many times,  
many times.*

You sat in the hush that follows a good poem, his hand folded over yours.

Then you thought you heard yelling. Distant, dismissible. And then, clearer.

“Papa! Papa!”

You stepped together out of the moment with its layered landscape, walked back to the top, and saw them on the horizon. A knot of people bent over a body, a man in a red shirt. Someone pumping his chest.

“Keep pumping!” yelled the man that you love, and then he ran. “Keep pumping!”

You followed.

The woman in the sun hat knelt beside the body, a phone pressed to her ear. So calm, so present. A man pushed on the chest. Another man in a black baseball cap cupped his hands under the head, keeping it off the hard surface. Several feet away an older woman—she could only be the wife—and a younger man clung to each other.

And now the man that you love was the one pumping.

“Paul, Paul, can you hear me?” the woman asked. She spoke English. She spoke French. English to the doctor now directing her on the phone's other end. French to the people who clung to each other. English as she answered the questions.

“Seventy.”

“No history.”

“It's a satellite phone. We're visiting from overseas.”

Paul did not respond.

The woman counted out the rhythm from the doctor. 1, 2, 3, 4 and 1, 2, 3, 4. The men took turns. They were not young, not practiced. They grew tired. Then the man that you love noticed another man, one tanned and hale in salmon shorts.

“Hey, buddy,” he yelled. “We need you.”

The man walked toward the scene. “Faster!” yelled the man that you love. He ran. He knelt beside the body. He took over.

You began to understand: You were on top of a massive dome of pink granite, a massive dome of pink granite eighteen miles from the nearest town. There was no road, no trail, no shortcut. You were alone, the small group of you, gathered around this man. This Paul.

“Tell them we need a helicopter,” said the man that you love, and the woman said, “Can you send a helicopter?”

The men kept pumping, spotting each other, leaving as little time as possible as they switched. The woman kept counting 1, 2, 3, 4 and 1, 2, 3, 4. One time Paul seemed to choke, to gurgle, and they rolled him sideways, cleared his mouth. They rolled him back, began again. And the wife and the man you now knew was the son had sunken to the ground, crumpled together.

Time moved slowly, impossibly slowly.

Then a crack shimmered across the rock. The man that you love was pumping when a bone broke, clear and loud. Everyone shrunk back, but the man that you love didn't stop, so focused was he on Paul and his hands folded one over the other on his chest.

“Something has broken,” the woman said into the phone. Then, “The doctor said this is normal. Keep going.” And the man you love did.

You had slept next to each other a dozen years, eaten the same food out of the same bowls, seen each other through surgeries and the deaths of your fathers and the skin of your arms growing looser and pebbled. But you did not know he was *this* man, this man who would run toward the scene, who would keep pumping through the most awful things.

He let the next man take over. You extended the green metal bottle. He drank deeply, handed it back. He took the bandana you offered and wiped his forehead. He turned toward Paul.

You did not know then that Enchanted Rock was revered by Native tribes as a portal to the other world, that the Tonkawa believed that ghost fires flickered at the dome's crest, that it was named for the creaking and moaning that emitted from the rock at night, like someone crying.

The men kept going.

A golf cart appeared on the far slope, moving slowly, impossibly slowly. You waved. You all waved. When it arrived a mustached man in a park uniform lumbered toward the scene. He was scared. You could see this. He carried a suitcase that became a defibrillator. The defibrillator spoke in a mechanical voice.

“Clear the chest,” it said.

They ripped Paul's shirt open.

“Make sure the chest is dry.”

The man that you love pulled his t-shirt off and handed it to the woman. She mopped Paul's chest.

“Attach the sensors.”

They put the sensors on.

“Checking. Clear the area. Information in one minute, fifteen seconds.”

Time ticked.

“Do not use charge. It is safe to touch the patient.”

Now the man with the mustache was pumping, trying to stay with the rhythm the woman counted out. Paul's white belly domed. His feet splayed, still in their shoes. His head rested on the granite, the granite that remained after 1.1 billion years had eroded the earth around it.

You stood to the side, where the rock curved and you could see the parking lot and its scatter of cars. When the ambulances arrived, you waved. You all waved. They were so small down below. You were so small near the top.

There would be no helicopter.

The emergency crews trudged up the hill. Out-of-shape men who volunteer for the local fire department lugged equipment on their backs. They leaned, hands on knees, and gasped for air.

There would be no miraculous rescue.

“How long have you been doing CPR?” asked the first man who made it to the top.

“Ten minutes? Fifteen?” said the woman on the phone. You shook your head. “Thirty or forty,” you called out.

“Doctor, how long have I been on the phone with you?” So calm, so present.

“Thirty-six minutes.” Thirty-six minutes.

And then he was in front of you, the man that you love. His face was flushed, shirt on and wet against his chest. He was there, upright and alive. “Let’s go,” he said. “Nothing more we can do.” He was already walking away.

You found your place at his side. You walked down the hill, the same hill you’d climbed just an hour earlier when all you knew to want was a view and a poem. You moved toward the spinning lights of the ambulance and confirmed it: Paul didn’t live.

“How will you get him down?”

“We’ll carry him, ma’am.”

You would wait, you thought, stand vigil.

But the man that you love said, “No, I want to go.” And right then you would give him anything he wanted, anything at all, this man you married under the oak tree in your yard eight years earlier. You tossed your backpacks in the car’s trunk. You drove out of the park and into the rest of your lives, these lives you’d repeat many times, many times.

On the way home, you looked at your camera and discovered them there, the family, just minutes before. They’re rounding the top of the hill, walking side by side, all of them. The woman in the sun hat, the son, the man in the black baseball cap. Then Paul and his wife, holding hands. If they turned they would find the Texas Hill Country spread out toward the horizon.

*Note: The poem referenced on page 78 is “We’ve Had This Conversation Before” by Joseph Mills, available on The Writer’s Almanac archive.*

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Greg Bottoms is a writer of literary nonfiction and fiction. He is the author of a memoir, *Angelhead* (2000), an *Esquire Magazine* “Book of the Year,” two books about American outsider artists, *The Colorful Apocalypse* (2007) and *Spiritual American Trash* (2013), and four prose collections, *Sentimental*, *Heartbroken Rednecks* (2001), *Fight Scenes* (2008), *Swallowing the Past* (2011), and *Pitiful Criminals* (2014). His work has appeared in *Agni*, *Brevity*, *Creative Nonfiction*, *Mississippi Review*, *North American Review*, *Oxford American*, *Seattle Review*, *Shenandoah*, *Texas Review*, *Witness*, and numerous other literary journals and magazines. He teaches creative writing at the University of Vermont, where he is a Professor of English.

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