

MEMOIR: THE UPS AND DOWNS OF CYCLING BY ERIN OLDHAM

Summary: This is a middle excerpt from my hybrid memoir/self-help guide on love and relationships (Title: Love's Puzzle). Each chapter combines personal experience, relationship and neuroscience research, and anecdotes. This chapter is about the final collapse of my second rebound marriage. Dating comes next.

Chapter Title: Forced: Mismatches and Missed Matches

He was chasing invisible opponents up mountains; I was chasing invisible demons inside my head. "Dammit, 'DaKing' just took it away from me!"

"Who's the king?"

"Some guy out of yarmouth."

"Oh, you mean a biker. He took what away from you?"

"Cyclist... Erin. King of the mountain."

"Oh." I tried to keep my rolling eyes from rolling.

His journey took him to the edge of his capability and to the edge of my patience, racing up steeper and steeper hill climbs, trying to capture 'king of the mountain' status on the strava app on his phone. All you had to do was start the app as you began the climb. Your speed was compared to the men and women that had used the same app on the same stretch of hill before you. I imagine him whipping the phone out of his back pocket the second he got to the top. *Did I do it? Am I king of the hill? Yes!* A ding alerting him of his demotion often arrived during the ride home. *"DaKing is now King of the Mountain"*. At his best, or his worst, mainly according to me, he would dash back within hours to the same spot, sometimes again and again, to reclaim his fame.

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Words not meant for me were seeping through the hundred year old floorboards of the dining room.

"Fuck!" *What now?* I leaned my head into the stairwell leading to the basement.

"Steve, you okay?"

"I can't get this fuckin' chain on"

"Do you need help?"

"Erin..." Exasperated, he said, "No, of course, I don't fucking need help."

Okay, done. I am so glad my time listening to him curse in the basement is coming to a close. I had announced my intentions for divorce just two weeks earlier. There were so many items that were affixed with only curse words in that basement.

I agreed to his plea. I would sit down with a relationship therapist and discuss the undiscussable one more time. They were both looking at me. They, Steve and the therapist, wanted to know my 'intentions'. They probably meant about divorcing the guy sitting next to me. However, I stuck to other more logistical topics, as long as I could.

"I get it. I know this race is really important to you, Steve. Obviously, the timing sucks. But, you have no other options and I have no other choice. So, I'll bring you down the mountain." The mountain on the divorce limbo agenda, Mount Washington, is only open to cyclists twice a year, once for a practice run and once for the real deal, a mountain hill climb race. The pre-divorce plan was to stay in Steve's sister's condo in North Conway with my three children, and for all of us non-racers to wait at the finish line on the top of the mountain to drive Steve back down. The mountain is too steep and too dangerous to descend by bike. The last part is challenging even to walk up at a 22% grade. The race is known as one of the toughest climbs

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in the world for cyclists. You are banned from coming down alone. In the post-divorce announcement flurry, he couldn't find anyone else to escort him to the bottom.

Hours before the race was to start, I bolted up from the musty beige couch in the mountain side condo. It was 3 a.m. Anger seeped in. *What am I doing here again?* My purposely calm repose was broken. The light coming up the basement stairs had been piercing through my eyelids for hours, and I couldn't take it anymore. One might think of turning off the light. I didn't. I thought that it must have been left on intentionally by Steve. I was trying to stay out of his way and let him prepare for the big race. I was trying to be nice, just enough to maintain some of my tiny fortune and a bit of my dignity. He and I were to enter serious divorce negotiations directly after this trip and I didn't want to lose.

I surmised that Steve was sleeping in the basement, mentally and physically preparing himself for the hill climb up Mount Washington. As it turns out, he wasn't in the basement at all. He was on the second floor above me. I had no way of knowing. By that point, we communicated only to avoid communicating.

Steve rushed to pull his bags together. We were aiming for a 6 a.m. arrival. We pulled into the base parking lot just before 7 a.m. after a tense car ride, all eyes straight ahead, arms crossed and no talking. The lot was full of cars but surprisingly empty of riders. I pulled over to the side of the aisle to let him go. Steve pulled his bike off the top of the car.

"Steve... So I'll meet you at the top."

"Yeah." He turned, ready to walk away.

"Steve, how will I know where to find you?"

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"Erin, just pull over to the side right below the summit. It's not a big deal. Everyone does it."

"But..".

"Erin. I don't have time for this."

"Fine." Eyes now released from the prohibition to roll, rolled away.

He was in panic mode. He rolled his bike away from the car. Head down, absorbed in his preparation. *This is what I have to do. This is not where I want to be. Suck it up, Erin. We are almost at the end.*

I stared at the shadows of the riders that invaded the pavement as they rode past on the narrow winding road at the top of the mountain.

"Where is he?" I muttered to myself.

I held my hand up to shade my eyes from the sun to search for him. The cyclists snaking their way up the mountain pass had slowed to a trickle. I turned my attention to my 10-year old triplets hopping from rock to rock atop a leveled area off the road where our car was jammed to one side, precariously balanced over as far as I felt I could go. *Steve said we would be okay up here.*

"Be careful guys", I aimed at the triplets. They were unconcerned. He was not their father. He was another one of their mother's dubious plans.

Each time a cyclist came into my peripheral vision, I searched their bike jerseys for the skull that should be emblazoned on their chests. The small group of lead racers had passed me first, next a larger group of unbelievably strong cyclists, then a steady stream of terribly strong cyclists continued for a while. I went back to the car to check the time again. My phone was

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off; it was being saved for emergencies. It had been almost an hour since the time when he estimated he would ride past me in a triumphant show of force.

Unseen to me, everything had come screeching to a halt at the bottom of the mountain minutes after I drove away. His shiny new chain was stuck. The week before the practice run, which was the same as the week after I asked for a divorce, he searched for equipment to strengthen his bike to ensure the imagined victory in his head. His modus operandi when things went awry was to order and spend in order to fill himself up. After his first divorce, he spent thousands of dollars souping his low end red Saab convertible with so many bells and whistles that it was harder and pricier to fix. Shiny silver tailpipe, equally shiny rims and the piece de resistance: a computer chip to turbo-ize your ride (okay, going turbo on an open highway was actually pretty fun). Although he made it faster and potentially cooler, he ended up having to sell it for far less than the blue book value.

In his compulsion to have the best of the best for the race and in light of the second divorce looming large, he ordered a sleek bike chain. The night before the race, he forced the chain on. In his haste to get to the top of the mountain, his very first move on the bike was to slam his right foot against the clip, offsetting the chain, now stuck. With bike mechanics standing all around to assist him, he proceeded to shove and rail against the chain until it snapped. With no backup, he was finished before he began.

* * *

This was, no doubt, a heartbreaking reminder of his failure four years earlier on the same mountain climb. He couldn't cycle to the top that time either. He wasn't strong enough. Race over, he drove, dejected, to the coffee house in town where he doused his disappointment with

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available women on Match.com. That was the precise moment I got caught in his web, when I accepted his invitation to meet.

“Hey Erin. I like your profile. Wine sometime?”

“Hi Steve. Your profile was hysterical. Thanks for writing! Sure, wine sounds great. When? Where?”

“Erin, How about the Wine Bar on Wharf Street. Tuesday, 7pm. And, I promise you, I’m a good guy, not an ax murderer or anything!”

Birth and death on the mountain exactly four years apart. Match.com was the online stomping ground for hookups, desperate divorcees, and willing men and women. Mainly, they were willing to say anything to get a date, anything to provide themselves with validation of their existence, and confirmation that they will be whole again given adequate time.

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