



Hell or high water

Experienced mountain guide and adventurer, Emily Sullivan, explores her relationship with fear and how it relates to her time in the outdoors

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHS EMILY SULLIVAN



There isn't much I can do to stop my boat from flipping. I'm too late to throw a good brace, and I know I'm going for a swim. The first rule of swimming a rapid is to hold on to your gear. I don't swim often, but when I do, I try to hang on to my paddle, grab my boat and self-rescue. This rapid isn't going to allow any of that. It's a solid Class IV, and it's running higher than the last time I was here.

Immediately separated from my gear, I fight to keep my head above water. *Get your feet out front* — that part is easy. I move into defensive swimming position and use my arms to try to keep some semblance of control. But the river is in control, and I surface and sink a few more times in the churning water. All I can hear or see are the waves that engulf me. I'm not sure how many seconds pass before Paul is able to reach me in his kayak. 'Grab the handle!' Relief. My muscles relax. Moments later, Paul deposits me on the side of the canyon, and Cam paddles over with my packraft and paddle in tow. I pull my gear up onto the rocks, and take deep, measured breaths. *I'm safe. I'm okay.*

As I recover from my first swim in a Class IV rapid, I'm surprised to realise I wasn't afraid while being tossed around by the river. My body was tense but my mind was calm as I focused on keeping myself in position. I wasn't in control, but I wasn't out of control. There was a skilled team of boaters waiting below me, with no major hazards in the way. I wouldn't be on this river if I wasn't confident that our group could run it safely.

But now, shivering as I climb back into my boat, my throat tightens. I remember that we have another, more technical rapid to run next, and that thought paralyses me.

At home, a note on my refrigerator reads: 'Provisions for the next time you do something that scares you. As a wise woman once said, "There's no reason I don't got this."' The note is tattered and hastily scrawled. A piece of packing tape runs across its centre. It arrived in the mail a few years back, taped to a box of peanut

butter crackers and a packet of recovery drink. The snacks are long gone — a product of pushing my boundaries, I suppose. But this piece of paper makes me smile, and I keep it on display as a reminder of the words that once carried me up an exposed ridge in Wyoming.

Ever since I have pursued technical sports, fear has been my known companion. Whether skiing, climbing, or boating, I'm naturally drawn to progression. There's always a higher summit, steeper line, or bigger river on the horizon. And while I don't ever plan to reach the highest, steepest, or biggest, I remain motivated to push my boundaries in a calculated manner. I am committed to skill development and safe progression, but each time I dip a toe outside of my comfort zone, I become reacquainted with fear.

Our river crew is patient. The temperature is about zero degrees Celsius, and we all have cold hands and feet. But the group waits as I scout the next rapid. Below me, the river boils and churns, dropping steeply before pinching between two huge boulders. I've run this rapid before. But with higher water and my body tense in the cold, I'm not sure I want to do it again. The thought of another swim grips me. I look around the canyon, desperate for an exit strategy.

'Is there a way to portage?' I ask.

'It would be easy to walk out to the road from here — it's just up the hill!'

'Okay, I might', I reply, 'I can go alone — I'll be fine.'

Everyone in the group offers their understanding and some words of encouragement, which only makes my decision harder.

Over many years of communing with fear in the outdoors, I've learned which kind of fear is 'productive' and which kind means it's time to turn around. Today's fear isn't menacing. My intuition isn't shouting that conditions are dangerous or that I've taken on something too big. Today's fear is familiar — it says: *This is hard. It involves risk. But you're probably going to do great and be glad you tried. There's only one way to find out.*

Previous page and left: Approaching the Class IV Echo Bend rapids on a cold and clear fall day on Eagle River, Alaska.



On the East Ridge of Buck Mountain, I follow Alec as he dances his way up a personal playground of huge granite slabs. My friend is tall and graceful. He's never afraid, and he's quite fond of heights. I, too, am enamored with the ridge, but I am also frightened by it. Alec is naturally drawn to the most exposed and committing route, so I follow him dutifully. Just days ago, we summited the Grand Teton together. I feel strong and capable, even at this altitude.

The route is exposed and involves some fourth- and fifth-class moves above a long, sheer drop. I have to talk myself into committing to some of them. Though I'm confident in my ability to move through this terrain without falling, fear clutches my chest at each exposed crux. Now and then, doubts creep in. I talk to myself as needed and stop to take deep breaths. Alec flits and floats across the rocks without a worry, waiting patiently for me at the trickier spots.

A few nights ago, camped at 11,000 feet, lightning struck the peaks surrounding our tent for hours on end. There is little safety in a lightning storm at altitude, and Alec listened then as I processed my fear out loud. Now, as we move through boulders in the sunshine, he smiles as I speak my fears once again. Alec never doubts me, though I doubt myself from time to time. After a few tricky sections, we move quickly towards the peak. On the summit, we lie in the sun and laugh at my nervous energy. I'm an introvert, except when I'm afraid. If I'm scared, I'll tell anyone who will listen.

Once I'm back home in Alaska, Alec sends me a video from our climb on Buck Mountain. I'm surprised to watch myself move confidently along the ridge. My body is strong, my face tense and determined. 'There's nooooo reason I don't got this', I tell myself loudly, climbing without missing a beat. In the video, I hear Alec laugh with admiration. And so a mantra is born.

Previous page: Leaning forward and paddling strong, Sarah Bobbe warms up for bigger water ahead in Eagle River's glacial waters. Right: Alec surveys incoming clouds from a perch on Buck Mountain's east ridge.





Growing colder by the minute in Six Mile canyon, I look at the river ahead. I look up at the canyon walls. And I look over at Paul, who is now my personal guide.

'I know I can do this', I tell him. I wish I could count the number of times I've said these exact words, known them to be true, and still remained terribly afraid. 'I'm just not sure I want to.'

'I know you can, too.' He grins at me. 'You're a badass packrafter! You can follow right behind me. You'll do great.'
'Right on your tail?'
'Right on my tail.'

I take a deep breath, exhale slowly, and nod. 'Ready?' Paul begins to inch out of the eddy. It's now or never if I want to follow. I grab my paddle. I remember that my skills are dialed — I've worked hard to reach this point.

'There's no reason I don't got this', I say to myself, and I push away from the bank. **W**

Story from Dena'ina Lands and Tsésthó'e and Shoshone Lands.

www.ejsullivan.net @emelex

Left: A moment of calm on the turquoise waters of the Chickaloon River, Alaska.