

Babes on Belay

Four young climbers hit the road in search of big rock, girl power,
and a heavenly interlude of physical bliss

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Article written by Elizabeth Weil

The problem with an all-girl, cross-country climbing trip is that it doesn't remain all-girl for long. The rock-climber boys see sports bras drying on the slackline and take to sneaky strategies, like bivying in their trucks right next to your campsite. Still, the North Conway crew was making a valiant effort to remain Y-chromosome-free.

Two weeks ago they'd lit out from New Hampshire; 2,400 miles later they'd landed here in Beef Basin, Utah, to hone their crack-climbing skills on the erupting red-sandstone crags of Indian Creek. The all-girl plan hadn't been a huge deal, really: They'd simply wanted to train on their own. It wasn't that they didn't have boys to climb with—in truth, three out of the four had strong, young climber boyfriends, one of the small perks and complications of being a contemporary climber girl—but, as Sarah Garlick, the blondest and waifiest of the four, explained, "climbing with our boyfriends isn't nearly as much fun."

Sarah and her friends Janet Bergman, Sheyna Button, and Anne Skidmore were all 24, all solid amateur climbers, all poised on the precipice between college and adult life. The girls—who were, of course, young women but mostly referred to themselves as girls—lived in North Conway, a vacation and climbing town in eastern New



Hampshire's Mount Washington Valley. Anne and Janet had started climbing together in 1998, as freshmen at the University of New Hampshire at Durham; they'd met Sarah when she'd drive up on weekends from Brown University, in Providence, Rhode Island, to climb at nearby Rumney and Cathedral Ledge. The year before, Sheyna had appeared as a new face at Cathedral Ledge; they'd adopted her instantly, because she seemed to pull herself up rock on grit alone.

Like many of their peers of both sexes, the four held down various disposable jobs around North Conway to support their rock habits: Janet worked as a freelance writer; Sheyna managed the terrain park at Attitash; Anne was starting out as a photographer and cobbling together shifts at a climbing store and a coffee shop, where Sarah jerked lattes as well. As for careers, well, they had ideas—geologist, nonprofit manager, aesthetician, photo editor—but right now they wanted jobs they could quit, or at least bail on, for six weeks at a time.

Trips like this used to be the sole province of guys. Not anymore. The girls had put together their own racks of climbing protection, and they'd tricked out Janet's Subaru wagon and Sarah's Toyota truck themselves with a dozen bins for food, clothes, and gear. Under Sarah's camper shell there was also a sleeping bunk that she'd built with her dad. The plan was to spend three weeks in Indian Creek, then drive to Camp 4, in Yosemite Valley—stomping grounds for every big-wall great from Royal Robbins to Dean Potter—where they'd rendezvous with their boyfriends and test their skills on 3,000-foot faces. From there, Sheyna and Anne would head back to New Hampshire. After a brief

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pit stop in North Conway, Janet and Sarah would fly to Peru to attempt the first all-female ascent, via the 14-pitch Original Route, of La Esfinge (the Sphinx), a 17,470-foot granite wall in the Cordillera Blanca.

That April, as always, Indian Creek was a mecca for rock rats. The rutted roads were thick with mostly male and coed groups, camped where the piñons give way to cottonwoods down by the creek. Their all-girl posse attracted attention, but thus far the crew had been able to simply focus on the rock and one another. They had a friend climbing with them for the Indian Creek stint, a 31-year-old publicist from Boston named Alycia Cavadi, and the only guy around was Janet's 27-year-old brother, Andy. Andy had just gotten out of the Navy and driven his own truck out from California, plus he made killer peanut-butter-and-pineapple pastries, so no one had the heart to turn him out. Day after day, the girls woke up to a high-desert Eden, emerging with teeth unbrushed and hair in knots to do yoga, knit, and swap barrettes before hitting the rock all afternoon.

In one more week, they'd be leaving the idyllic spaciness of Indian Creek for the hothouse of Yosemite. Along the way, they faced gnarly off-widths, gobies that wouldn't heal, the predictable road-trip squabbles, routes with macho names like Way Rambo, and, more than anything, the not-unwelcome distractions of climber boys.



THE NORTH CONWAY CREW: from left, Sarah Garlick, Anne Skidmore, Sheyna Button, and Janet Bergman (Jeff Lipsky)

"I'VE NEVER HAD GIRL POWER like this before," said Janet, crawling out from the tent she shared with Sheyna. Dark-haired, quiet, and freckle-faced, Janet was the group's de facto leader and its most committed climber, even toying with the idea of going pro. She sat in the morning sun, her blue eyes deep and clear as a piece of stained glass, stretching her powerful arms while Sheyna balanced on the slackline.

"Oh, my God, I'm glad I'm not a boy," Sheyna said as she fell, landing with the rope between her legs.

A few minutes later, Sarah emerged. She'd had a nightmare, she announced groggily—a man chasing her with a knife. Janet said she'd had one, too: She and Sarah had found a huge bin of Patagonia pants on sale but had to leave the store without buying any.

The crew took their time, warming themselves like lizards on the red earth, and it was noon before all the gear and lunches were packed and they made the short drive to a cliff called Scarface Wall.

In the warm early afternoon, Sheyna slouched on a marbled outcropping, contemplating a 5.10 route called Wavy Gravy. "Pretty gnarly roof move not very far off the ledge," she said. With her loose brown pigtails and comic-book-heroine figure, Sheyna was an incredible natural athlete. She was also the least experienced climber of the bunch.

"Do you think I should just do it?" she asked.

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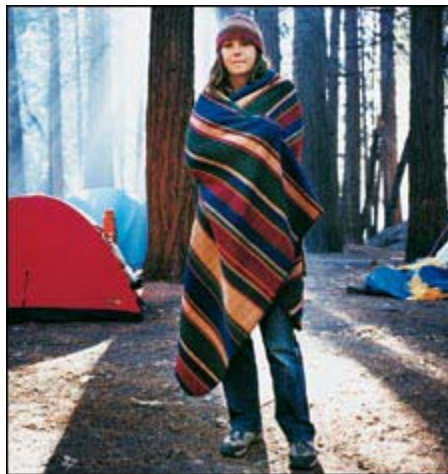
"You're all giggly—it's cute," said Anne, her thick waves pulled up against her head. Anne was easy to underestimate both on and off the rock. She'd been climbing longer than the others, having started in a gym, but she'd switched to traditional climbing only two years ago. In trad climbing, the climber places her own protection, whereas in sport climbing the routes are already bolted.

"I'm, like, nervous-excited," Sheyna said.

"Push it up, Sheneyney!" Sarah called out as Sheyna cinched her harness around her strong legs and left the ground.

"Way to go, honey," Anne said. "Killer."

As Sheyna laybacked up to the anchor, the shiny scar that ran the length of her spine shone in the sun. After lowering off the climb, she assessed the damage—chunks missing from her left hand and right index finger—and the group scrambled around the crag to watch Janet fist-jam up a long, hard line. The other girls stretched out on the trail below her, Sheyna's head on Anne's belly, thrift-store plaid shirts pulled over bright, tight sport tops. After nearly half an hour Anne called out, "I know you can do this, Janet!"



BABE IN THE WOODS: Sheyna getting cozy in Camp 4 (Jeff Lipsky)

"I'm so, so exhausted," Janet replied.

"C'mon, J-Nut," said Sarah. "Fire it to the top."

In the sky, which they were now a part of, you could hear the clouds moving. The road looked as if it were miles below. Finally, Janet reached the top and sat in her harness, wiped out. "That squeeze chimney at the top was practically a joke," she said. "Do any of you guys want to follow?"

No one volunteered. The sun had nearly set anyway, so Janet came down, the girls restuffed their heavy packs, and everybody headed back to the car.

"Man, I'm so buzzed," said Sheyna. "That was so rad! My mom thinks all this stuff I do is dumb and that I should care more about work. But the only reason I ever work is so I can climb and snowboard and ride my bike."

THE PHYSICAL LIFE IS HEAVEN for young women. But as obvious as that seems these days, it used to be a well-kept secret. I learned it firsthand back in the late eighties, when I was 19 and working as a volunteer ranger at Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Park, running up and down a mile of vertical relief every day and biking 50 miles to mountain hot springs on my day off.

Nothing can compare to being alone or with other girls, sweating the pure, clear sweat of youth, enjoying day after day of adrenaline followed by perfect sleep. For the first time since childhood, your body is fully organized, you feel great about yourself, and you're ensconced in a subculture with a ready-made sense of belonging and a ban on practical thoughts about the future. Your goal for the day is to bag your fourteener, flash your 5.12, beat your own speed record—that's it.

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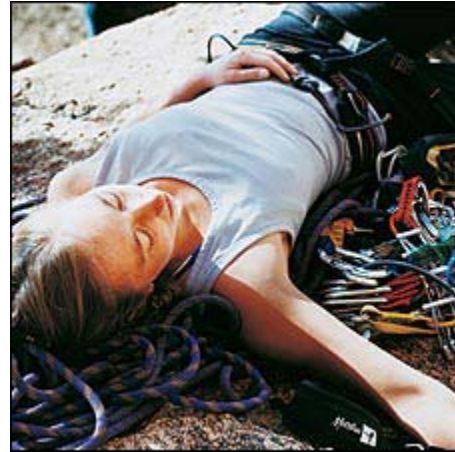
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All the things I got from running and biking—fitness, focus, calm, direction—you get ten times over from climbing. It's also a nearly perfect sport for women, one in which balance, finesse, and strength-to-weight ratio are more important than stand-alone power or speed. That's why, relatively early on, men had to accept women as equals.

Climbs are rated according to an old class system that ranges from 5.0 to 5.15: A 5.1 climb is cake; at 5.13 you enter the realm of physical specimens who also happen to be climbing maniacs. By 5.14, you're talking mysticism and special effects, what my formerly 5.12-capable husband describes as "*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* stuff."

At that rarefied level, women have proved themselves frighteningly strong. In 1979, an 18-year-old kid named Lynn Hill put up the first ascent of 5.12+ Ophir Broke, a 400-foot route outside Telluride, Colorado. In 1993, she became the first person, male or female, to free-climb—that is, ascend without artificial aids—the 5.13+ Nose route up Yosemite's El Capitan, North America's classic big wall. In 1994 she was the first to free the Nose in one day. Both feats remain unrepeated by anybody, male or female.



GROUNDING: Sarah rests up for the next ascent. (Jeff Lipsky)

Other women followed. In 1999, then-18-year-old Katie Brown on-sighted—climbed without having seen the route before—a 5.13d called Omaha Beach, at Red River Gorge, Kentucky. And last fall at Smith Rock, in central Oregon, 24-year-old Beth Rodden redpointed—led without falling—a thin seam called the Optimist, rated 5.14b, the hardest climb ever completed by an American woman. Her husband, 26-year-old Tommy Caldwell, arguably the country's best male climber, tried the route but failed to link it up.

The whole world had changed in the 20 years between Hill and the new generation. Whereas Hill learned her chops trad-style on the cliffs of Joshua Tree, Rodden cut her teeth on plastic holds. She and her peers were not so much feminist as postfeminist; they'd grown up in climbing gyms and reaped the benefits of Title IX, the 1972 law mandating gender equality in scholastic athletics. They'd never think of sitting in a meadow in a lawn chair with a nice pair of binoculars, watching their boyfriends' studly moves.

NONE OF THE NEW HAMPSHIRE WOMEN—so postfeminist they called one another both "hon" and "dude"—imagined she'd be the next Lynn Hill. Their more immediate role model was Heidi Wirtz, a.k.a. Heidi Almighty, whom Janet and Sarah had met the year before at Indian Creek.

At 34, Wirtz had fed her climbing jones with a smorgasbord of jobs, including baker, crab cooker, log peeler, builder, landscaper, guide, and speed climber at SeaWorld. She'd spent two winters living out of a tent in Crested Butte, Colorado, and nearly a dozen camping in her truck. In British Columbia's Bugaboos in 2002, she put up a 5.12 first free ascent called Bad Hair Day with Lizzy Scully, the 31-year-old publisher of *She Sends*, a Colorado-based climbing magazine for women. It was just the kind of thing these road-tripping girls admired.

Of the four, Janet was the closest to leading the committed life. She was working on moving from 5.11's to 5.12's and specializing in "off-widths"—cracks too big for hand-jamming but too small to wedge your body into. Peru would be her first major expedition.

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Sheyna, on the other hand, was just getting started. A serious snowboarder from Center Ossipee, New Hampshire, she'd learned to place gear only six months before, at Cathedral Ledge. She was a natural, drawn more than the others to climbing's life-or-death bargain. Five years earlier, her older brother had died; he'd spent the four years before that in a coma after a car crash. Since the coma, she said, she felt like she'd been living for both of them, which meant she'd been going full-blast. The long scar was from a snowboard accident; she'd broken her back so badly that she'd had to have vertebrae T11 and T12 fused. In another snowboard fall, she'd shattered her tibia and fibula; they'd been mended with a titanium rod. Sheyna was comfortable trad-climbing at 5.10, but not much higher—though things wouldn't stay that way for long.

If Janet and Sheyna were ramping up, Sarah and Anne seemed to be shifting focus. Anne, tall and poised with a sly, silly streak, came from a well-to-do Connecticut family—she'd flown out to Utah while the rest had driven—and displayed the best technique of the bunch. But for now, at least, she seemed to have the least fire in the belly to push herself further. An ace photographer—she'd nearly swept *Climbing* magazine's reader photo competition in 2004—Anne would spend hours taking pictures on a static line instead of climbing. In her quieter moments she talked about trading her retail shifts for a job as a photo editor and, possibly, way off in the future, family life with a husband and kids.

"What do you think is the right age to get married?" she asked me one morning. She'd been invited to the wedding of a friend, the first in her group to marry, and it had gotten her thinking.

Sarah—Janet's longtime climbing partner—was preparing to let go as well. A petite North Carolinian, she'd enrolled in a Ph.D. program in geology at the University of Wyoming and was moving to Laramie in the fall. She and Janet climbed at roughly the same level—competent 5.11, working on 5.12's, the upper limit for most mortals. She too had considered going pro but had since abandoned that goal. Even the top women climbers, she pointed out, had a hard time making ends meet.

"I'm not sure I want to live that way," Sarah said.

ON THE GIRL'S LAST DAY in Indian Creek, Sheyna emerged from her tent announcing that she'd been up all night thinking about her boyfriend, or freshly ex-boyfriend. As everyone knew, Sheyna had moved his stuff out of their group house just before she'd left New Hampshire. She'd been working 16-hour days, she said, and whenever she came home, their room would be a mess, laundry everywhere, and the bed unmade.

After some painful conversations, her ex, a pro climber, had moved to Boulder. Now he was leaving messages on her cell phone, and she missed him. "I've never had a guy cry over me before," Sheyna explained as she slid onto the tailgate of Andy's pickup, spoon poised over a salted avocado. "But he's just really spoiled, you know?"

So far the trip had been going pretty smoothly. But the emotional undercurrents were more complex: These women were shockingly nice to one another, really—lending gear, kissing each other goodnight—but that didn't mean a few tensions didn't threaten their cohesiveness. First, only Sarah and Janet were training for Peru. Second, Sarah would soon be abandoning the gang for Wyoming. Third, Andy, sweet as he was, had provided an entrée for male



WHERE THE BOYS AREN'T:
dinnertime at Yosemite's Camp 4
(Jeff Lipsky)

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interlopers, several of whom had parked their trucks for days right next to the girls' campsite. And fourth, and perhaps most destabilizing, Sheyna was officially single, a situation guaranteed to trigger drama and chaos.

The morning drifted by as always, a slow mix of yoga, coffee, and discussions about the questionable appeal of Victoria's Secret underwear. Sarah preferred the selection at T.J. Maxx and, as she would do today, occasionally climbed in a girlie camisole. Around noon, the girls scrambled up to the Way Rambo wall, emerging from the boulders under a party of three handsome men.

"Sick! This is gonna be sick!" a shirtless guy in dreads yelled to his partner as his friend started up a route called the Monk. The boys' comments stood in stark contrast to the girls'. While the guys shouted, "Sports action! I like to take in sports action when I can, and run from whipper to whipper!"—"sports action" meaning drama, and "whipper" meaning fall—Janet and Sarah, who was climbing in a red cotton-and-lace camisole, affectionately hooted at each other, "Hey, white legs! They're hot!" and "You rule! And you rule in sexy lingerie."

Janet was lighthearted and joking, but there was a depth to her that made her seem older than she was. She'd found a real home in climbing, a break from the equestrian circuit she'd competed in back in Chagrin Falls, Ohio, and an outlet during her parents' pending divorce. "It's all about flowing through fear," she said, airing out her feet and watching Sarah on belay. "It's just raw living."

Last winter, Janet's mother had come up to New Hampshire, taken a bunch of Janet's friends out to a bar, and asked the obvious parental question: "You all know people who have died climbing. Why do you do it?"

"There's no good answer," Janet admitted now, wiggling her toes in her flip-flops. "You just have to do what fulfills you, and for me climbing is fulfilling."

As her friends belayed each other, Sheyna joined the boys, heading off with a buzz-cut climber in painter's pants. Her plan after the trip was to train as an aesthetician, maybe out west, and work in a resort town as a facialist and massage therapist. Her mother, for her part, hoped her daughter would come home to New Hampshire. But Sheyna was having too much fun; she was committing to nothing, at least for more than a few hours at a stretch.

Finally, around sundown, she reappeared, face lit up, fresh red gobies dotting her arms. The light was perfect, mysterious, and kind, bringing out beauty in the rock that you never knew was there. While the others sneaked in a last route or two, Anne ascended a static line, collecting her camera and jumaring toward the sky. The cottonwoods shimmered, the dirt turned gold, but back at camp that night, everyone's nerves frayed from a long day on the rock, emotions ran high.

Anne's simple question "What should we have for dinner?" boiled over into an outburst from Sheyna about how certain people never bought any food, even though their parents were loaded—the standard too-close-for-comfort stuff. Meanwhile, Sarah had turned inward, worried about whether her relationship with her boyfriend, 35-year-old adventure cinematographer Jim Surette, with whom she lived in North Conway, could survive her going off to earn a Ph.D. in Laramie.

Janet paused to join Sarah for a moment, the two girls sitting close on the tailgate like the roommates the four all used to be before Sarah had moved in with Jim.

"She's not just leaving her man behind," Janet reminded me warmly, though not without making her point: At the end of all this, Sarah would be abandoning her climbing partner, too, and the trip was already half over. Tomorrow the girls would be leaving Indian Creek, pushing

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through Las Vegas and on to Yosemite.

"You know, right now I don't even know if I want to go to the valley," Sheyna confided just before she turned in. She was worried about climbing over her head, worried about her money running out. Plus, she said, "Everyone's going to have a boyfriend."

The moon shone like a sequin, and the air smelled like sweat and sage. Sheyna pulled her knit cap tight over her head, as yet unaware that a single girl in Yosemite was as rare as summer rain.

TWO WEEKS LATER, SHEYNA WOKE UP under a pine tree in Camp 4, her green flannel pillowcase set right on the fallen needles, her body wrapped in a sleeping bag. They'd arrived ten days ago; along the way, Andy had peeled off for Alaska, and they'd side-tripped to the Salt Lake and Oakland airports to pick up the other girls' boyfriends.

Now, after more than a week of climbing, as many as seven men were hanging around the campground. Anne's boyfriend, 27-year-old Bayard Russell, a guide in North Conway, was shaking out a tent, and Janet's boyfriend, Freddie Wilkinson, 24, another North Conway guide on a break from leading trips up Alaska's Mount McKinley, was cooking hash browns. But the real reason for all the guys was that Sheyna and her ex were truly through, and she looked vulnerable, wild, and sad, wrapped in her tangled bedding.

Sheyna had come into Yosemite like a force of nature, and as many as seven men were hanging around the campsite:
"Hey, Sheyna, whatcha up to?"
"Hey, Sheyna, wanna get on some rock?"

Sheyna had come into Yosemite like a force of nature. Now, after folding her bedding, she hitched a ride out to El Cap Meadow, to sit among the irises with six unattached boys. Her stuff was in one guy's car; seated on her right was a man who'd been buying her beer and cookies; and yet another guy was fishing his van keys out of his pocket so that Sheyna could watch it while he did a push ascent, without sleeping, of El Cap's Pacific Ocean Wall. She'd been spending her nights drinking wine at the search-and-rescue site, and in the mornings, as she left Camp 4, she'd had her pick of climbing partners: Ryan, Ivo, Bob, and Andrew.

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"Hey, Sheyna, whatcha up to today?"

"Hey, Sheyna. Wanna get on some rock?" She knew the name of every guy changing his shirt on the side of the road, and they knew hers. As she put it, "I don't think there are too many girls around here."

Today's winner in the battle for her attention was Bob, a 31-year-old guy "kind of from Arizona." As he and Sheyna climbed at Arch Rock, on the western edge of the valley, Bob stared up at her determined, tanned face. "I can tell you've been climbing at Indian Creek," he said.

Bob was strong and steady-eyed, with golden hair and golden skin from years of climbing, surfing, and working construction. "I've never seen anybody pick up climbing that quick," he told her. "You must have been hanging out with people who were really pushing you. Mega-senders. I mean, God, you're so smooth."

Bob had brought a loaf of wheat bread and peanut butter, and while he climbed a tough 5.11c crack, Sheyna told me about her girlie side, the part that loved going to the Bellagio in Vegas, even though, by her own admission, "that city brings out the evil in me." She also, at the moment, wanted to visit a spa. "I like to be pampered," she admitted. "Facials, waxing... I could use a facial."

Sheyna, with all her charms, caused some affectionate eye rolling among the girls. But truth be told, even the guys who'd been explicitly invited were cramping the all-girl scene. Women climbers cite many reasons for preferring female partners to male. Among them, predictably, are the inevitable intrigues that crop up when young, carefree men and women with beautiful bodies spend lots of time hanging around. Lizzy Scully, the *She Sends* publisher, cites a less obvious peril: "Men freak out when women cry." For this largely compatible bunch, however, the problem seemed to be sheer absence.

For five days now, Sarah and Jim had been up on the Salathé Wall, 35 pitches of exposed off-widths and strenuous crack and aid climbing. Nobody knew when she was supposed to be down—the last time Jim had climbed the Salathé, he'd taken only 15 hours—and the fact that days had passed was provoking concern.

GARLICK!!!! WHERE ARE YOU???? Janet scribbled on a sheet of notebook paper that she slipped under Sarah's windshield wiper. Of course, in addition to her worry, Janet had her own agenda: She'd already ticked off two big walls with Freddie—Tangerine Trip, a wildly overhung three-day aid route on El Cap, and the Chouinard-Herbert Route, a 15-pitch free climb on Sentinel Rock. Wasn't it time she and Sarah started training for Peru?

Shortly before Freddie was to return to Alaska, he and Janet, along with Anne and Bayard, spent a day noodling around at the Cookie Cliff, a popular day-climbing site just off the Merced River, with routes like Wheat Thin and Pringles. On a single-pitch, bolted 5.12 route called Nutter Butter, Anne belayed as Janet struggled on the crux move near the top. Freddie, buoyant and flinty-eyed as always, leaned against a downed tree with Bayard, whittling a twig into a pair of chopsticks and discussing how fashion is safety, because if you look good, you feel good, and if you feel good, you climb well, and if you climb well, you climb safe.



FIRE D UP: Sheyna on Cookie Cliff, in Yosemite Valley (Jeff Lipsky)

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"I have no idea what I'm doing up here," Janet groaned.

"You're going to send," Freddie called.

"Oh, my God, this totally sucks."

"C'mon, J-Nut. Smart feet, baby. Breathe. Don't forget to breathe."

Freddie, of course, meant well, but he missed Janet's drift. She was at her limit; she needed him to tune in.

"There's no hands, and the feet suck. I don't think I can do it."

"Just go fully friction. You can do it, baby."

And then Janet fell.

Not a big deal—only ten feet—but it was Anne who consoled her while Freddie stared sheepishly at his twig.