

A Climbing Life

By Hal Herring

My hands hurt. My hat kept inching down over my eyes. When I kicked in my frontpoints, my toes slammed against the rockhard leather of my old SuperGuides. I swear I could feel the full steel shank leaching away the last warmth in my feet. I was just starting to follow the approach pitch to a new ice climb, and the long crux pitch loomed above, thin, whitish, infinitely unattractive now that I had decided it had to be climbed. A friend who had come to take pictures was standing nearby.

"I hate this," I said. "I don't even want to be here."

"I know," he said. "Isn't it funny how you never hate climbing when you're away from it? It's just while you are doing it that it strikes you as unbearable."

We hung a rope on the descent, and while we worked to free it my friend got a very fine picture of the struggles of the second ascent party. By dusk it was all over. I built a raging fire in the woodstove at my house, hesitated exactly thirty seconds before cracking open a bottle of single-malt scotch that I had bought as a Christmas present for my chiropractor. Life was very fine. I loved climbing. Thin ice climbing in particular.

There is a broad expanse of dark granite that is known as the Parking Lot Wall, a thousand feet above the shadowed canyon trailhead. It faces dead south, soaking sun and heat as early

as February. Climbers with four wheel drive and high clearance buck the snow on the road and park in the ice ruts at the trailhead and climb up snow and ice covered talus to the sun. It may be zero in the parking lot, but there are somnambulant ticks already waving their little clenched fingers from the bushes at the base of the Wall.

The routes here all bolted face routes, established on lead, with hooks and hand drills in the early eighties. The run-outs are impressive, the holds thin. High on a route called Graupel Wars, named for the pellets of snow that pelted the first ascensionists, I lose my rhythm and began to labor. The last bolt is sixteen feet behind me. I gauge the fall, make a long reach, and pull through to easier ground. This may be my seventh time to do the route, but suddenly there is glory all around. At the belay I contemplate eight successive Februaries right here at this wall. Is it time to move on to something new, redirect the huge amount of time and energy that I spend in this canyon, or on the peaks that rise all around? Naaah.

The route is seven pitches, three of 5.10, with a big roof at mid-route that makes retreat problematic at best. It is April, and the approach is long, the trail a luge run. Treacherous hard snow makes travelling the talus fields less enjoyable. I struggle on the first pitch, amazed at how it seems like every

spring I start anew with the skill level of a beginner. The wrong stopper slides down through the crack, and as I pull it out to try another, it cams somehow, and sticks upside down. My right hand, locked off on a small jug, starts to burn, my feet, on slopers, start to paddle. This is no bolted route with clean, airy falls. Up here there are things to hit, dihedrals to bounce between, real threat. I am sweating in the cold updraft, reaching for the biner that holds my little TCU's. I couldn't whistle a note if it meant my life. I hate everything.

Wrangling upward, I am cussing the whole way. I build the belay with no real sense of relief or joy. A friend that I had asked to come with me on this climb had bowed out, claiming lack of motivation and fitness. He is 37 years old, and has climbed more routes than I probably ever will. "You know you can do it," I said, "It's only 5.10, and the gear is all there." "I know I could do it," he said. "I just wouldn't have any fun on it."

I have brought along a nineteen year old hotshot, a guy who climbs 5.12 on bolts and is ready to start walling and making the move to another level. He arrives at the belay and shakes my hand. "That felt kind of desperate to me," he says. He is a little spooked, I can tell. I hand him the rack, already trying to concoct a multifaceted argument for retreat. I feel weak and uncoordinated, the sun is like a radioactive flash, the air and the rock is too cold. I am a struggling writer, trying to leave behind a career as a struggling laborer. I have been sitting at a goddamn computer all week, trying to be coherent and imaginative. Why would anybody in their right mind seek further struggle? Is not the battle of the day to day fierce enough without looking for, and finding, the kind of mortal peril inherent in any runout rock climb or creaking icefall? I desperately want to be sitting on the porch at my house, talking to my wife, cooking a big dinner. The hotshot takes off, up a long offwidth that takes small pro in a crack on the face.

I hear him cussing. He was a high-

school boxer, and breathes in a fighting cadence when he is in trouble on a rock climb. I hear it now, shh,shh, shh. There is a rattle of gear, scratch of fabric on the granite, that unique, bad sound, followed by one even worse, the whip-pop of a stopper failing to hold. He ragdolls down, a wrap of the rope around his ankle. Flipped upside down, he fends off a narrow ledge with one hand, while keeping the rack pinned to his chest with the other. When he comes to a stop, caught by a blue Camelot, I admire the fact that he held on to the rack so consciously. He is going to make a good partner. If I ever go climbing again.

I lower him to the belay and tie him off. "What do you want to do?" I ask. "Give me a second," he answers. A full two minutes goes by. "I guess we should keep going," he says, looking at his feet. "It's too early in the season for me," I say. "I want to get the fuck out of here." And never come back, I might add. We engineer a retreat. Once it is decided, we are both happy, and make jokes while deciding on the leave gear. The sun is just right now, the breeze comforting. The snow filled canyon below is spectacular. Some honed party will grab our retreat gear and throw it in their haul bags to keep as leave gear for themselves. "Booty!" someone will say happily when it is first sighted. "See who's mark is on it." "Probably a couple of fuckin schmoes, in over their little heads." I search the rack for gear that I have found in the same way, while saying the same things, and come up with a couple of old stoppers and a tricam. We sacrifice a valuable #11HB offset for safety and leave the wall.

For two days I contemplate the failure, while also failing to get any good writing done. It is the question of energy, again, direction, priorities. Climbing has been my focus for so long now that it seems totally natural to think of little else during the warm months. I have always looked at the world with the vision of a climber. On my way home from the crags, or the canyons, I see people, neighbors, working in their

yards or tending their livestock, watering, weeding, landscaping, and I wonder what it would be like to share their concerns, to wake up at ten o'clock on a sunny weekend morning and think, "What will I do today?" rather than be already halfway up a long talus slope, looking up at the wall, figuring a line, belays, pitches, cracks. Or already on some harshly demanding sport route, or lapping a 5.10 on top rope, training, always training for some goal. Is it right that I should see relaxation or yardwork as something so profoundly inferior to what I do every weekend?

By Wednesday, I am at the crag, trying to get in six pitches in the long May afternoon. The creek is raging below, the rock is warm. What started out as a training day has become something else, something very fine. I set a #9 Stopper in a bottleneck and make a series of layback moves that feel smooth and rehearsed, though I haven't climbed this pitch in more than five years. When I reach the belay, it occurs to me that during the lead, I had not a single thought of anything but the next move. All of life, all struggle, on every front, was condensed into that sequence of moves. It is like being washed clean, awakened. There is no reason to demean the feeling by calling it endorphins or the byproduct of adrenaline. I do not need to name it to know it as a rare, fine thing. At sunset, I solo a three pitch 5.6, and on the descent, run into my hotshot partner from the retreat. He's fired up to try again this weekend. "If we get the super alpine start," I say, "We can recover our gear before a bunch of schmoes get up there and grab it."

What is a climbing life, really? A list of places, summits, moves, weather, and attendant terrors or joys, the images burned onto the surface of memory by the intensity of the experience. The geographical circle, if you stay with it for years, expands—the Bitterroot Range, the Gallatins, the Livingston Range, the peaks of Glacier Park and the Tetons, the Kootenays, Bugaboos, Humbugs, Sierra Nevada, a hundred

lesser crags, each with their own distinct wonders of sequential moves, technique, demands on muscle, heart, lungs. And of course, at some point in life, it comes to an end, not usually through rockfall or avalanche, or multipitch tumble, although these claim their share, (and one of the first notions to fall away from any long term climber is the idea that it is somehow romantic to die in a climbing accident) but through the slow attrition of the human body. When you are deep into late youth and on fire with the love of climbing it does not occur to you that there is a price to pay for all those knee pounding approaches or that fierce tendon stretching grip on a two finger pocket in the limestone. At the height of one's powers, it does not seem possible that they will ever diminish. Other people's injuries, other people's lack of motivation to take on the ascents that most inspire you, seem like mere weakness, to be quietly disdained. This is an arrogance that can be forgiven, I think, since it cannot possibly be sustained throughout one's life, except by the dullest among us.

Some people that I much admire are able to climb intensely for a period of years, and then quit, to devote their energies to raising a family, building a business that will sustain them, or simply finding another pursuit. I used to see these people as more evolved than I am, better adjusted and more decisive. Now, as I approach or pass the age when many of my mentors and partners quit climbing, I understand that there are dozens of factors that influence a person to distance themselves from the rigors of the mountains.

Since I began this essay (Yes, I work at a glacial pace, and some years are so cold that the ice never moves at all), I tore up my right ankle while at work on a trail contract and lost a winter's ice climbing, and a spring's mountaineering, plus a core level of fitness which I had never even known that I possessed until it began to disappear. What is that litany of other people's injuries that is so incredibly boring to

listen to over a cold beer? Lower back, neck, tendonitis in the elbows, wrists, trigger finger, oh my god, my knee! Pop the ibuprofen, slug back a Demerol with that first beer of the evening (six beers later, great climbs are planned, epic fairytales that will never leave the front yard). Almost all the people I started out climbing with made their living as laborers of one stripe or another, and they have all fallen before the scythe of joint breakdown like so many acres of ripe wheat.

The incessant demands of the middle years of life now crowd my own days, so much so that I have not even the time to be nostalgic about the long months of idleness required for climbing hard, for training and recovery, pondering new routes, searching maps and saving up cash for small plane trips to recon new territory. This spring, I held writing work in one hand, and my mother's illness in the other, and felt, without the time or capacity to worry about it, the slackening of the muscles in my forearms, the gradual easing of the maximum capacities of my heart and lungs. When my mother died, my fifteen month old son was downstairs with my wife, perplexed by the silence of the house, which had been so raucous, even during the illness, with the coming and going of sisters and in-laws, grandchildren and friends.

My best ice-climbing partner is dead, too. While we were waiting by a roaring campfire for the search and rescue helicopter to take us up to the Mission Mountain peak where he lay buried in an avalanche, I noticed a spotting scope, set up by the Sheriff's department and focussed on the distant collapsed wind slab that killed him. I looked through the scope and noticed the line of dark, solid rock beyond the couloir where he was headed with his partner, and I moved the scope to better see the line that they had planned to climb. Another climber came behind me, moving the scope again, to study the line. "It's beautiful," he said, "a classic winter climb, with a little of everything." I nodded. A member of the

search and rescue team was nearby, and he was furious that we had moved the scope. "You people are sick," he said, bringing it back into position on the avalanche.

Sick with an addiction, perhaps, with that need to travel upward in the places where the world is still being formed, carved by rain and snow, ice and gravity and unrelenting sun and wind. As I understand the Chinese concept of feng shui, there are elemental forces in rugged canyons and exposed rock faces that have a direct and usually negative effect on human beings living far below them. The unbounded elation of a climber is perhaps linked to these forces, of being present in that vortex from which they are born, embracing them in all their fierce ambivalence. Such a place, for a climber at ease in the game, is like the ocean for a skilled surfer, neither negative or positive in any human sense, simply fraught with the energy of the planet. Certainly, for me, there have been places on rock walls where my mind and spirit were quiet in a way that they have never been on the ground. It is easy to be addicted to a feeling like that, and addiction, by definition, is hard to shake.

This summer I planned to do other things. I worked, ran the river, rode my bike, spent long hours wandering with my son and my wife. There was fencing and haying to tend to, irrigation worries, the horror of mowing the lawn. Climbing came back to me, without that sense of urgency that it had in the past—I have done so many of the local lines that most appeal to me, and although I consider the risk in almost any desirable climb acceptable, I question the wisdom of taking great risks on lines that I have climbed many times before.

So it came back to me slowly. I dropped to 5.8, even on short climbs, and only climbed harder as a follower, and I let myself be irritated by the vast amount of time spent waiting for my partner to lead what looked like completely straightforward pitches. I find great pleasure in easy snow couloirs,

the ones where you don't need a partner, don't need to co-ordinate the demands of absolutely disparate lives and personalities in order to climb.

In July of 1995, I was stormed off the second pitch of an obscure spire in the Bitterroots called the Chisel Tower. A week ago I went back, with a partner who is a devout Mormon, and a veteran of many Utah desert routes. For reasons beyond my comprehension, he refuses to wear a climbing helmet, and doesn't like to trail a second rope when leading. I don't have the same faith he has in the glories of the afterlife, so I insisted on the latter. I took the first pitch, a 5.7 corner, that was far more aesthetic and clean than I had remembered. The next pitch, which required a traverse across bad rock to a beautiful splitter crack in the dead center of the face was also a joy, to me at least, since I didn't have to lead it. The top of the spire is a giant detached block, no larger than a good sized couch, and just below the breakline, climbers of a generation ago wrapped slings around the whole tower for a rappel station. The slings were bleached and frayed and rat chewed and looked terrible. The faded initials of people I knew were on a couple of them, people I had climbed with ten and eleven years ago, and have never seen again. Stooze that I sometimes am, I had brought no long slings of my own, and we had to rig an elaborate and nebulous back-up to the slings in that stacked choss, with just enough slack so that my weight could test the ancient slings without engaging the backup, which we certainly did not plan to leave behind. The slings held. Far off to the West, at the head of the canyon, the stark white and gray face of Castle Crag shone in the sun, the crackline leading from bottom to top clearly visible, a place where I once struggled and suffered out a long day, nine years ago, finishing on prusiks in total darkness, after fighting to follow the final pitch free, not knowing my partner had aided it, not being able to communicate because of a cold wind that roared like something from the hostile reaches of

space.

A climbing life. Even at the profound amateur level at which I live it, I am proof that it produces no wealth, of tangibles like money, or even intangibles like wisdom. To paraphrase Mark Twain, "If an ass goes out climbing, he'll not come home a horse." Boy, have I seen that one proved a thousand times. The idea that climbing teaches values like perseverance and teamwork that can be applied to life in general is, for the most part, bullshit. The idea that it is not a selfish pursuit because it can inspire others to greater achievement is also bullshit. It is not a metaphor for anything else, and if you take my advice you will not climb (except at risk of your life) with anyone who says that it is.

There is beauty in the mountains, and in the human striving to climb them, or their ramparts. If there is more to it than that, it will take me another twenty years to find it. Perhaps I'll let you know. Or vice versa.