

Breathing Lessons

The sound is familiar and startling like a diving swallow, but louder, maybe a falling rock. I have heard the sound many times, the sound of the diving swallow, the violet-green swallow, those that nest on El Cap. They spend their lives diving, making that sound, the whirring that their stubby wings make as they careen around invisible sky corners in pursuit of prey. But the sound of a falling rock is more ominous and a frightening sound. My first impulse is to duck, arms over the head, then inevitably to look up—nothing—then straight out from our perch on El Cap Tower, 1500 vertical feet above El Capitan's base, I see them—two human bodies plummeting toward the valley floor. My breathing stopped.

Moments earlier on this cool evening in the spring of 1993, Allan and I had comfortably bivouacked half way up El Cap's southwest buttress in Yosemite Valley. Why were we here? That thought had begun to dominate the somnolent reverie brought on by the extreme heat of this very long day and the inert boredom of belaying.

To the casual observer, El Cap Tower is barely visible on the face of El Capitan—the awesome granite presence that greets visitors to California's most famous national park. El Cap Tower is merely a ledge named by the first climbers to reach it back in the fifties. To Allan and me, the Tower is commodious. Ledges of this size are rare on this three-thousand foot high, one-mile long cliff. To the unaccustomed, however, just its location might add one more insanity to the idea of being here. Why were we here?

Six months ago Allan insisted that we do a Yosemite route together and the Nose of El Capitan was decided upon. We both had experience on El Cap, but not as a team. We had both been high in the granite niches of the Captain's walls many times in the past, but in those days the reasons for being there were never in question— why are we here now?

Back in the sixties and seventies when climbing many of the Valley's classic routes, I trained incessantly and obsessively for these "walls". I spent months working my way up lesser climbing routes getting ready for the "big" ones. Allan, as a Tuolumne climbing guide in the seventies, had always been ready for his walls. Being "ready" meant spending hours, sometimes days, hundreds of feet off the ground, enduring the hot sun and unrelenting thirst, suspended in nylon slings, pounding pitons into cracks in vertical granite, often sitting all night in home-made three-step climbing slings on an ankle hooked under one's butt, or sleeping in a delicate nylon hammock strung between over-driven pitons.

We were ready then—not so, now. We are literally off-the-couch and twenty years older. We've been joking about our combined age being over one-hundred, and how if we succeed and can forget the difficulties, we might come back in a few years and break some kind of record for geriatric wall climbing. This day has been an eye-opening, memory-jogging, revelation. Wall climbing was hard back then and it's even harder now. I am sixty years old. Allan is forty. I haven't been on El Cap since Royal R. and I gave Warren H. more to talk about back in 1971. Why am I here now?

Bill F., the Dolt, had begun to ask that same question during his many trips up and down the fixed ropes that he, Warren H., and Mark P. had strung to this most commodious of Nose ledges during the first ascent siege. He thought someone was trying to tell him something. Why was *he* there? On one of his numerous rappels, Bill forgetfully slid down into a knot and was uncomfortably detained many feet above the ground until he extricated himself. Later, according to Warren, "he began muttering ominous biblical quotations and eventually ended his wall climbing activities—for good." He had figured out why *he* shouldn't be there.

We began the climb yesterday struggling up the first four pitches to Sickle Ledge. Two younger climbers, climbing free, passed us on the third pitch. We rappelled back to the ground and spent last night in Camp-4 with lots of time to reflect on our climbing efficiency—we are very slow. We haven't dared to step out of our aid loops except to rappel. Our wall climbing equipment is outmoded and our technique is need of resuscitation. The two young climbers were two pitches ahead of us when we rappelled.

This morning we returned to our high point on Sickle Ledge and continued the climb up the Stove Legs, past Dolt Tower, and just beyond El Cap Tower. My thoughts beyond that point ran like this:

On the ground I was scared. Up here the fear is gone. The environment is familiar, friendly. I am in my element now. The immensity of the rock and the chore of climbing it should no longer be overwhelming. But something makes me ask, why am I here? The something is the exhaustion.

This is exhausting. I am exhausted. Back in the sixties this was easy. The chimney behind Texas Flake was incredibly easy then. I wiggled up it in just minutes, completely within my aerobic capabilities. This is the nineties

and I can't even get over the initial move into the chimney. I struggle over it somehow and begin the ascent. Within seconds I am gasping, gulping down air in insufficient quantities. A quarter of the way up I have to rest, but how does one rest when it's taking everything I have to remain stemmed between two vertical, slippery walls? Stopping to "rest" does nothing but increase my agony. I struggle upward toward Allan perched above me, clipped into a bolt, his legs astride the thin summit of the flake.

When I finally arrive, totally exhausted, completely out of breath, I cannot speak, I need more air than I can possibly inhale. It takes forever for my pulse to approach normal. Unable to talk, I'm thinking, God, I hope Allan realizes that I cannot lead the next pitch—the bolt trail out to Boot Flake and the scary crack up its right side. Avoiding eye contact, Allan calmly hands me the hardware rack, "Go for it, Don."

I'm thinking, shit, is he blind? I'm dying here! Resigned to my fate, I step out and begin clipping the bolts. My pulse has returned to a more comfortable level and my mouth is regaining some moisture. As my body shifts into cruise control, my mind's eye flashes on Dolt's photo of Mark on this lead during the first ascent. I just want to finish this pitch so I can rest.

It's late afternoon when Allan follows my lead to the Boot top and we decide to rappel back to El Cap Tower for a comfortable bivouac. We are tired, but the ledge, El Cap Tower, is comfortable and we are already beginning to forget what it took to get here. We discuss Boot Flake and the King Swing—determined to go on tomorrow. After our meal, with the sun gone, we quaff a couple of master cylinders—over-sized cans of malt liquor—and settle back to enjoy two of Allan's little plastic tipped cigars. Bivouacs were always the high points of my sixties ascents and this was a nineties classic. In the back of my mind though, Why are we here?

This brings us back to the sound of something falling—back to the horror of the plummeting bodies and the instant my breathing stopped.

Before my heart can regain its rhythm, another sound. Pow! Pow! Like two shotgun bursts. Pow! Pow! The two plummeting bodies abruptly snap to a slow gliding descent below bright nylon canopies. They are now ecstatically exchanging joyous screams as they swoop to a clearing on the valley floor and their accomplices gather them and their gear into a waiting van. In a matter of seconds they are gone.

Neither one of us has said a word. I am still trying to breathe. Allan finally gasps, "Jesus, that scared the holy crap out of me!" The impending tragedy has become nothing more than two BASE jumpers doing their thing, but the horror in our initial impression is not so easily dismissed. I am still trembling. Allan continues mumbling, his head metronoming, "That had to be the scariest damn thing I've ever experienced." Well, not quite—read on.

The next morning we awake to a dark cloudy sky. Now what? I have never retreated from an El Cap route in my life and always believed it easier to continue than to retreat. Allan used the escape bolt-route once in the distant past and was not anxious to use it again, but after considering our options, we decide to pack up, climb the fixed ropes to the top of Boot Flake, and wait to see how the weather develops. If there is no improvement by ten o'clock, we bail.

At ten o'clock, the wind has picked up, and the skies are still cloudy. We can see the two young climbers that passed us the first day. They are just over the Great Roof and moving into the lowering clouds. As the wind continues to build, we bail.

Allan knows the many rappels on the escape route, maybe 14—most from antiquated quarter-inch Rawls placed back in the late sixties by Tom R., the Mad Bolter. We begin our retreat. The wind is blowing from the west so intensely that it's impossible to stay on course and difficult to find the anchors—even harder to fight our way west to reach them. Sixteen times I find myself next to Allan, our total weight suspended in nylon slings from two smarmy, almost thirty-year-old bolts on a blank vertical wall of granite, hundreds of feet above the valley floor. Each time we pull down the rappel line from the two anchors above we reduce our security by half and raise our anxieties proportionately. I'm still wondering, Why are we here?

Many hours later, having added fourteen stressful chapters to this epic of misguided adventure, we are finally on the ground and met by friends. They have been watching our daily progress and have brought us each a beer. We kneel to kiss the ground, thanking God first, for the ground, our friends second, for the beer.

After a brief respite in Camp-4, we head for Degnan's and sit out front watching the weather grow worse and drinking more beer. Billy R. shows up, goes in and buys us another six-pack. Tim M. happens by later and offers to purchase another "box of Rocks". By late afternoon and yet another box, the weather has deteriorated in sync with our sobriety. It's begun snowing up higher. We think about the two young guys up on El Cap—bad news. We lean back and open another bottle. Now we know why we're *here* —**down** here. ♦

Epilogue

The “young climbers” that climbed into the clouds the day that Allan and I retreated from El Capitan in 1993 ultimately required a rescue from 800 feet below the summit. Both were suffering from mild hyperthermia and dehydration.

Although I attributed my difficulties in the Texas Flake chimney to lack of conditioning and old age, upon reflection I must explain that my first time up the Nose in was March of 1967. It was only the 8th time the route had been climbed. The chimney had not yet acquired the layers of shoe rubber and body oils that the subsequent hundreds of ascents deposited over the 26 year interim. The chimney was undoubtedly easier in 1967.

Don Lauria♦