

Jon Loni's Stoney Point Massacre -- A Story Twice Retold

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This is a tale of rock climbing -- indirect, to be sure, and also attentive to accuracy. It falls short on all accounts of the climbing epic, and this is certainly a disappointment to the author. I would prefer to relate a harrowing first ascent and not this small story which happened, and not to me, some time ago. Unfortunately, when carefully considered, my strongest candidates for great accomplishments lie uncomfortably close to simple mistakes in route finding. I do not mean to imply that the glory usually associated with epics (large and small) is completely nullified by bad judgement. If this were so no one could brag. But it does seem that the bad judgement should all be at the outset and finally made good through heroic efforts -- mere stumbling around in unlikely places is not climbing history.

Climbing stories improve with the telling and with the passage of time. Finally they improve to the point where they could not possibly have happened. For this reason, I like to set a limit of ten years -- particularly in cases where accuracy will be important -- and it was just ten years ago that Steve Olson told me this story. In fairness, the story was not completely fresh then, but it was rivetting, and all the details accorded with the people and places I knew. I do not believe it contained any exaggerations, or at least none unnecessary to the plot.

Eight of us had driven into Northern Baja. It was summer of 1976. The price of gold had been up for a while and there was a miniature gold rush in the area -- mines, claims, stashes, guns. In our car there was some talk about our being shot, wild west style, because of all this. In any case, it was night and we got lost on the dirt roads, and never did get to a cliff called the Great White Throne. We stopped at a pile of boulders and decided to climb around on them in the morning.

Because we were in Mexico, and they don't really have laws there in the way we think of it here, we thought nothing of making an enormous campfire. No one had an axe, so we had to burn a whole tree where it lay. Soon, by the fire, Steve was asked to tell his story about his climbing partner Jon Loni. The story, it turns out, makes no sense without understanding Loni's large size and enormous strength. Olson has clearly told this story before and begins with the disclaimer: "I don't know why everyone always says that Jon is so huge. He's hardly any bigger than I am." "Well you are practically a fucking dinosaur yourself" is the immediate reply from one of the guys who seems to know what's coming.

Olson is a large piece of metal. We were all in good shape, lanky but muscled. Olson is a little older, obviously the strongest and heaviest among us. I met Loni the next summer in Toulomne. He's a slightly larger piece of metal -- tremendous arms and hands. Even Loni would be less than 200 pounds, but these men are constructed on the plan of gymnasts -- who are generally small. Actually the construction seems slightly different; a good gymnast's muscle looks supple and healthy. By the time a serious climber is in his thirties he has thick scarring in his muscle mass. This restricts him and protects him. He may not be as strong as the gymnast move for move, but like

the rock, is difficult to damage. Some fellowship between the climber and his inanimate medium eventually develops.

The venue of Olson's story is Stoney Point. It is L.A.'s main collection of practice rocks and apparently quite a good place for riding motorcycles around in the dirt. These two worlds meet, or rather pass right through each other, at the Point. Despite a certain elastic strength typical in rock climbers, the bikers generally seem to have made the judgement that the climbers are too wimpy to be worth bothering. But on this day there is some contact and not with the expected result.

So we listen, and imagine: Loni, only slightly larger and more powerful than Olson, is working on a big rock (24 feet high) called the Number 2 Boulder. It stands in the dirt flats below the Point. He's concentrating on a new sequence. There's no danger; his feet are only a yard off the ground, but the next move is intense. He does not feel the strain in his hands or the sweat trickling toward his eyes. But distantly he hears a voice screaming in his ear: "They're killing my brother, they're killing my brother." Below Loni is a kid about sixteen. Loni decides it's worth a look, steps down, and hobbles after the frantic boy (climbing shoes are too tight to permit full running short of an emergency).

True to the spirit of the youngster's account, there are three bikers: **A**, **B**, and **C**. They are in their early twenties, slightly gutty, not small, and dressed as in the movies. **C** is sitting on the brother and punching him. **A** and **B** are watching as Loni approaches.

A picks up a nearby stick and tells Loni: "You don't want to get involved in this, mister." Then in Olson's beautiful account: "Loni said he just saw red." Every one around the fire laughed with delight -- what a wonderful expression -- and by Olson's smile we knew this would be the turning point. I had never really "seen red" and thought about that. I had once before been extremely pissed off and had said so, but seeing red must be completely different -- a new state.

For the rest of the story, the reader must know that Loni has no experience in the "martial arts." He is huge and appears well-nigh indestructable, but has no specific talents for fighting people. It must have been that he was in some danger at this point, particularly if he stepped forward and not back.

Loni bent down and grabbed a big rock out of the ground. It should be understood that while Stoney Point is rather poor in sticks and Biker **A** probably had been forced to settle on a somewhat inferior, if not comical, weapon, the earth there is well studded with stones, and many heavy possibilities must have been available, the most important being generally well sunk into the clay. As the story unfolded we were not permitted to imagine Loni's stone as anything modest or even well tailored to its purpose. This was a stone that would have given each of us some trouble had we come across it while gardening. Seeing it clearly as the fire burned and the story was told, I knew that I would have had to kick or shovel at it, kneel down to work it back and forth, and finally pull it out with both hands. Loni tore it up with his right hand, stepped forward and slammed it into **A**. **A** crumpled.

We later find out that all parties leave the scene unassisted, no report is made to the coroner, or even the police. How did **A** survive? Probably the blow was very badly timed and delivered with a bent arm. It may be that the rock was too heavy even for Loni to control properly and that he really just pushed **A** into the ground with it. It should not be entirely discounted that **A** actually saved himself by some adroit use of his stick. Any person has vulnerabilities, but it would seem the blindest of luck if an ordinary person with one swing of an ordinary stick would be able to harm or even interfere with Loni. More likely, the stick presented an awkward tangle around which -- and this is fortunate for all -- Loni could not get a clean shot.

Biker **B** with a keen mind apprehends that the situation is transformed: although only a yard or two away he escapes on foot. Surely at some initial stage **B** contemplated stomping Loni and then, perhaps, for some flickering instant helping his friend. But with a rapid and trained intelligence he discards these thoughts -- probably before **A's** body was at rest on the ground, for when Loni turned, **B** was gone.

C was slower and less lucky. He suffers some just abuse and as Loni returns to his problem on Boulder 2, the two brothers are beating the departed's motorcycles -- one with the stick which was briefly fancied to be a weapon.

In justice to the sport of bike-riding, the brothers, and Loni for all I know, left on their own motorcycles.

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