

Night Climbing

by

Michael H. Freedman

5/8/90

"You are standing on death," Doug said. My reaction was philosophical. It could not be otherwise, the weight of ages lay beneath and around us. Our language, our thoughts were not our own but of a deep and dead past. And that seemingly solid foundation would at some moment swallow and incorporate each of us. Though shut, the faucets leaked steadily down dirty white tiles and through the drain. All fear and dirt were showered off; our night rock climb was safely and pleasantly imprisoned in memory. Standing wet I followed his line of sight to my feet. Draining into the cluttered carpet one foot rested upon the electrical octopus feeding the stereo, lights, fan, heater, and radio. I stepped aside.

We put on a Bob Dylan record and began to dissect Herman Buhl's 1952 solo night ascent of Nanga Parbat. We had both read the only account. Still low on the mountain Buhl leaves his malingering partner and sets off with no tent and a bottle of a dangerous German stimulant -- pertvin. This drug is taken with great risk, and only in conjunction with its palliative and moderator, lamborine. Symbolically, we thought, Buhl leaves the lamborine for his disgraced tent mate. After two days and a night Buhl returns to high camp having barely survived. "Unaccountably" he had left his ice axe at the summit. The descent was formidable and delicate; without the axe no serious slip could have been arrested. Jammed in the summit snow the ice axe impaled us as well. We were fixed and fascinated.

But the late night had emboldened Doug to a small heresy, "If the Germans had treated their porters better they might have been higher on the mountain and Buhl's ascent could have been made under control." I was concerned that Doug was deviating from an absolute, Nietzschean interpretation of the climb. To emphasize this point I brought up his mother's therapist. I told him that seeing a psychologist was a weak move. "If he had climbed an 8,000-meter peak he'd have something to say, but why would a person listen to a therapist?" This direction seemed to depress Doug so I did not continue to press it.

The conversation was fitful and soon we were just listening, tired but not quite sleepy. The room was faintly lit by two tiny crystalline lights, one red the other green. They were always on when the stereo played, indicating nothing but leading outward like beacons at a great distance across an arm of a sea. And as the room became a sea of thought they assumed a mystic importance within their dark setting, like stars in the vulnerable and unsettled mind of a nomadic desert people. With Lawrence, we believed that the horrid exterior and physical abnegation of the Arab cloaked a brightness and hunger for universal thought. For us they were mountaineers.

Whatever Bob Dylan meant these lights were his accompaniment. Listening and dreaming the passages grew stronger. What meaning they held never penetrated but some wave which carried that meaning was absorbed by mind and body. It was 5:30 a.m. on a Saturday morning in 1967; we slept where we lay.

Friday night was always a source of some hope, there were dances, movies, real nightclubs, and parties. But the hope was slender. Doug and I were certainly not dancers. Jerry in a thick and self-assertive way could do practically anything -- so he could dance. But somehow he did not seem to be able to capitalize on this advantage. Movies we went to, but it is ridiculous to suppose that one will meet or "pick-up" a girl at the movies and we must have known this. At age 16 one can drive to and stand outside of a night club. Perhaps, we thought, a beautiful young woman might spontaneously prefer one of us to her date. This would happen in the few dim seconds while she passed and we loitered. It never did. Parties could be better but we did not usually know of one. In short, the standing plan was unbelievably thin. It was unadvised by any useful experience. It was from the top down rather than the bottom up. Since we wanted -- or thought we did -- immediate results no sensible cultivation of the several pleasant girls at school was pursued.

Ten o'clock, maybe ten thirty, seemed like a reasonable time to give up. Weak as our plan was it might have succeeded with more perseverance. This, on the theory that the later at night the stranger the events. But whatever our reasons we did not persevere on that night. We abandoned the exhilarating, grim, boring and frightening task of meeting the girl of our

dreams on a random street corner. We drove out from the coast, through Topanga Canyon, through the Los Angeles sprall toward our haven, the number one boulder at Stoney Point.

Jerry was the best driver in the sense that he was the most dangerous. Possibly, even apparently, the danger was illusory since we are all alive those old machines he drove now simply rust and are not exploded. This night Doug drove, he was probably Jerry's equal in a pinch because he was prepared to crash if it came to that. I worried more about consequences and was only intermittently brave. This made for the worst driving -- things like slamming on the brakes halfway through a curve. While Doug drove I told him what had happened last week at the approaching corner.

"Jerry's driving up here and drifting all over the road. Each time he got around a corner I figured that he be glad he made it and slow down from the next."

"It's interesting that you thought that was too fast, I'd consider it approximately normal," was Jerry's pretended objection.

"Anyway I didn't want him to crash my car. Finally he goes around this outside corner right up here and the wheels are about three inches from the edge of the black top. Right here."

Doug look into the canyon and registers an amused grimace. It's about 300 ft to bottom.

"So I shout: 'Jerry on that last corner you were almost off the road!' and he says 'Is that a bad place to be?' The lunatic took it as a compliment."

"You know, to flatten the corners you should use all the road. That's what it's for. I've watched you drive and you have no faith in the road. You assume when it goes around a bend that it's gone, that it just ends there and you might have to stop."

"No I don't."

"Highways have certain standards: maximum grades, minimum radii of curvature, shoulder quality, things like that. When you drive you have to trust the road and be prepared to use all of it."

I didn't mind this mild humiliation; soon we'd be at the rocks. I asked Doug if he thought T. E. Lawrence was a homosexual. He thought that he was pretty screwed up in some ways and probably had made up the part about being captured and not recognized. Maybe nothing happened, maybe he just buggered that old Sultan for no particular reason and was not captured at all. It was interesting that Lawrence was so quirky but had accomplished so much so suddenly and had seen deeply into the world. He was an extreme point -- an exception which probes the limits of what a person might do.

The last stretch of Topanga Canyon Road had nothing to do with the canyon. It scoured across L.A.'s abyssal plain. In daylight it lay beneath an ocean of warm smog but at night it was clear and cool. At the last outposts of the city several Mexican guys hung outside an all night mini market.

"These guys have even less chance than you do of getting any girls," I told Doug. Doug was our Lawrence expert, he'd read even the Arab names in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. He was still smarting, I guessed, from having his hero taken to task for minor physical perversions and did not answer. His head was now cocked downward at about thirty degrees so that a curtain of straight brown hair hid most of the road and prevented me from seeing his expression. He really did not like admitting the way the evidence stacked up against Lawrence. Did the compass of pure thought point only to a corrupt and inferior magnetic pole while the absolute lay secret and obscure to all terrestrial senses? And what stars, if any, lay above the horizons of thought? And through what science of navigation could they indicate a truer bearing?

"You've been picking on Doug more than the optimal amount. Maybe you don't know the difference between 'nice' and 'mean'," Jerry said loudly from the back seat. This nice and mean business had become a kind of calling card joke of Jerry's. About three years ago his mother, in desperation and near hysteria, had tried to tell him something rather banal about right and wrong. Somehow it had come out as "nice and mean." Jerry being a tough case had the presence of mind, even though a rough scolding, to snatch up this diamond-in-the-rough.

Our moods had little inertia. We were laughing and exploring the nice/mean paradigm as Doug bounced the Corvair Monza onto the dirt road and up to the number one boulder. Maybe this would be our contribution to modern philosophy.

On high beam the headlights lit the first fifteen feet of the west face of the number one. The last seven feet to the top were increasingly murky. By pulling up to the west side Doug had elected serious climbing. There would be no suggestion to move the lights around to the south. On the West side, most of the vertical problems were hardest near the top where it was getting too high to fall. These required commitment. Technically, the most difficult line was the horizontal traverse. It was not dangerous but required concentration and finger strength.

Jerry laconically warmed up on some extremely easy moves at the right end, or finish, of the traverse.

"I think the skin on my hands is more oily than most people's," he said. "It always feels slimy on the rock. It's not so bad on sandstone where it can seep in, but on granite my fingers really seem to skate around."

"It's more likely that you just need stronger hands, everyone's skin has about the same coefficient of friction. Also you're too fat." Now I was even for the lecture on my tentative driving habits. But then I started to change my mind. "Actually, maybe being a little bit fatter makes you oily."

"It's particularly bad if I get scared. One time when I was leading, my hands just got smeary like butter. I was completely stuck. I couldn't get down to the last piton, and there was absolutely nothing I could reach. My feet were getting tired, I couldn't stay where I was and couldn't get in any protection."

"So what happened?" I asked.

"I tried to climb down but my hands were useless and I popped off."

Though youngest by several months, Jerry was the only one shaving. Even at that age he was a big thick black-haired guy. He had no natural advantages as a rock climber. He must have liked our company because I don't think he liked climbing.

I did the easiest honest problem on that side and climbed down the back in almost complete darkness. Stars only, no moon or city lights. I knew the descent perfectly; once positioned and oriented at its top no light was necessary. Doug followed within seconds. It had felt very good. The hands were primed and felt strong enough to tear a rock in two. Doug selected the traverse, relacing his climbing shoes under painful tension. Every foot placement and every motion would have to be exact. On the second bulge, his right hand exploded off the hold, knuckles clattering loudly along the rock. I was immediately sorry for Doug that he got such a messy cut at the very beginning. His idea of first aid for such things was familiar to me.

"Don't pull those flaps off, then you'll have no protection while it's healing. Just tape them down and they'll scab tight in a day or two," I told him, but it was no use.

"It's disgusting to leave dangling skin attached," he snapped away the loose flaps with the other hand.

We had been all through this before. He thought you had to make a clean break. Taping back flaps of skin was refusing to face the facts. No good could come of it. It would only encourage a prolonged slimy leakage of lymph and whatever else was in there. If you pull it off at least it should be obvious to your body that the skin was gone and it had better respond. I thought this was rubbish.

After several tries neither Doug nor I had made the complete traverse, but both of us were climbing reasonably well. Jerry was still puttering on the large holds at the right hand margin.

"How strong do you think I'd get if I come out here every day and did thirty of these?" To demonstrate the maneuver he pulled his hulking form up onto the long ledge. I didn't think this program would produce any startling change in Jerry's body, but he did have a point. We had little systematic training. There must be all kinds of exercises we could occupy ourselves with which would make us better climbers. But would it help at the critical moment? Training could certainly help us get up small difficult boulder problems. There rock and physiology addressed each other directly

-- the size of this bump against the strength of that tendon. But what about real cliffs and mountains where an icy wind could turn highly trained hands into swaddled claws. When a Navy volunteer is submerged in cold water his temperature drops at a known rate with corrections for body fat and metabolism. They can make tables: at 55° Fahrenheit he has 60 minutes of consciousness, etc But what happens to the benighted mountaineer without equipment, no one can say. He might crouch, dig in, walk, freeze solid as a steak, or all of these. This struggle was complex, maybe, I thought, mystical.

"Let's climb one of the grooves of the main face. I think there are two flashlights in the trunk." Feeling a little uncertain I added "I bet we can get up one of them without too much trouble."

"If you want to lead its perfectly fine with me," Jerry ticked in.

"Yeah, I'd like to lead."

Doug didn't seem sure. The grooves were rounded and grubby. We had never seen anyone climbing them. Several weekends ago we had looked them over -- in daylight -- and had not found them appealing. There'd be a lot of grunting and wriggling with loose junk dribbling down the walls. To get jams it would be necessary to reach way back into the dirty innards of the crack. With his right hand cut, that part would not be fun.

"Well, our rope might be a little bit short for the long sections at the top. The last pitch of the right groove is probably the shortest. Maybe we'd be OK on that," Doug said.

It turned out that only one flashlight worked. The pitons and carabineer had been Doug's father's. These were from the late 1940's; but all were still serviceable. The rope was a birthday present from my parents. We approached through the scrubby chaparral in darkness to save our light. In September rattlesnakes might still be out at night. I tried to shake the ground a little extra so none would be taken by surprise. But it was the right groove, not snakes, that was on our mind. And properly so.

At the bottom we organized our plan. The climbing was too difficult to hold a flashlight. Jerry would shine the light while Doug led a short difficult pitch to a small shelf. While I held the light Jerry could follow and take out any pitons Doug had hammered in. Then I'd come up in the dark. Doug's task was difficult. His body shadowed exactly what he needed to see. Struggling blindly one leg and then the other would sputter helplessly out of the groove. Whatever jamming technique he was using it was not working. But he was not falling. The process was brutal but slowly he moved up. His father's pitons were too narrow to fit in the main crack. He managed to place a "short-thin" in a horizontal seam but clearly did not trust it. The protection was minimal.

Jerry was starting to waver a bit. None of us considered the climb safe but Jerry felt the danger palpably. He didn't really want to leave the ground. He started up with the rope snug from above, popping the short-thin out with two hammer strokes.

When I got up I shined the flashlight on Doug's hands. They were a mess, he had ground them up with bad jams near the bottom. They were brown and wet red in color, burnt-cedar and road kill. The previous summer Doug had made an impression on both Jerry and me suffocating a candle burning within a small decorative lantern by holding his hand over the top. This was worse.

I started first on the top section. Jerry had untied from the middle of the rope and was secured directly to the two good anchors that Doug had driven at the back of the shelf. I was to use the entire rope length in getting to the top. Jerry would follow and then we'd throw the rope down for Doug. It would not be fatal if he couldn't reach it, but it would be a pain. Jerry and I would have to walk around through the bushes back to the base and then I could lead up the first short pitch to retrieve Doug.

Jerry could no longer stand far enough back from the wall to light it so after the first bulge I was in the dark. I got our last angle piton in just above the bulge. This was by the book, I felt extremely confident. I had handled the protection correctly. Whatever happened now I would not hit the ground. I could concentrate on the moves and the light. There were no more unnatural shadows and bright swaths. Only the achingly dim starlight

on the rock. And should I start to get lost, the crack was conveniently color coded -- black.

The art of crack climbing is based on the feel and temper of the rock, so darkness was little impediment. The moves flowed in a secure succession. It is common for erosion cracks to narrow near the top. At 1-1/2 inches the cupped and tightened hand fits with perfect solidity but shoe tips no longer penetrate. The crack narrowed further to about the size of the 1 inch angle I had placed twenty feet below. I had nothing that thick left. The only possibility was our Welsh "long dong" about half an inch thick at the hilt.

The climbing was difficult here and would get worse. I removed the long dong from its carabineer and held it in my teeth. A first nauseous doubt passed. Adrenaline prickled in my extremities as I worked up the next moves, climbing and memorizing. No move yet would be impossible to reverse. I was hoping for good luck, and got some. My foot found a wide spot. Stretched out at full body length from this foothold the crack narrowed enough for the long dong. Three hammer strokes took it to the hilt. I would have liked it better if the crack had been narrower but it rang well on the last stroke and would do. I clipped into it with great relief.

The top was close and the face was already leaning back. As the crack disappeared there would be enough friction to continue up even in darkness.

"You've got fifteen feet," Doug called up. I was stunned and afraid, had I gone that far?

"Are you sure?"

Jerry remeasured the remaining rope, 6 feet finger tip to finger tip, while Doug belayed.

"Well, maybe 18 feet," he called back.

I could tell it was at least thirty feet to any top. Doug had been right about the rope being too short.

"Doug, can you untie from the anchors to get me more rope?" I shouted down.

"We already figured that."

I shifted my feet nervously and painfully on their holds, trying to think of something. Doug could just start climbing as I climbed. There would be a

kind of implicit belay since there were three good pins in. But the first section off the shelf was hard. If he fell he'd pull me off the friction slope. Everything would depend on that long dong. And if we made it Jerry would be stranded on the shelf by himself until we could rescue him. That part seemed fine. But the possibility of falling on that long dong was something else. The thought of untying and climbing unfettered over the top fluttered slightly in the caverns of my blank imagination. Could I think of nothing better than that? Crouching, I felt the holds of my feet. A cold dread competed for space with my calculations.

Twenty minutes passed before I accepted the inevitable. Climb down. My cramped feet were desperate for a change of position. I unclipped leaving the piton behind. I wasn't going to risk my life trying to bang it out. My hands felt lightly buttered as my pulse beat heavily through them. Mind and body were focussed on reversing the last moves. Reversing them slowly. The deepening fear must be borne without hurry. My next thought was detached and objective. It was working. Also, the light had improved. A waning quarter moon had risen high enough to light the plain to the west and brightened, slightly, the rocks above.

The rock was easier than on the long traverse, but the sequence was not obvious. I thought of Buhl, almost exhausted, balancing systematically on his crampons as he descended Nanga Parbat, no ice axe for reference or security. Doug took in the rope bit by bit. I was back on the inch and a half jams. All morbid and dramatic thoughts ceased. It would be a piece of cake from here, I'd rappel off the angle above the bulge and then we'd rap off one of those bomb proof anchors behind the shelf.

In the car we were talking excitedly. What a climb. We felt on track to all kinds of great things. Jerry was actually still fifteen, his birthday was in three weeks. He had to get up at 7:30 that next morning. For some reason pre-enrollment for freshman at UCLA was at 8:00 a.m. Saturday morning. Doug and I were entering the twelfth grade so Jerry properly lorded his academic achievement over us. (Later that month he dropped in at our high school. It had the aspect of visiting day at the penitentiary. When the Boys-Vice-Principal asked Jerry if he had a hall pass, his answer was a confident: "No." "Well where should you be?" "No,"

"Look, I'm going to have to put you on report." "No," etc.) Because of his early morning appointment we headed toward his parents' house in Santa Monica.

Exuberance ebbed as we drove. I made a darker appraisal of the future. I told them that at age 16 our lives were one quarter finished. This was taking the best case, no sudden accident. Any years past 64 were not worth counting. So there it was, we were one fourth finished.

Then Jerry had a brilliant thought. "It is clear when your life ends," he started "but it is not so clear when it began." At first we did not follow him. Was he quibbling about gestation? "Not really," he continued. "When you're a child your life belongs to your parents and only becomes your own when you can get away from them." This idea held the promise of solving the problem. By that reckoning we could be scarcely older than two or three and the life ahead was nearly infinite in comparison. This was more to our liking. There was a round of laughter over this deft analysis and the mutually favorable outcome. Jerry was laughing the loudest in deserved self-congratulation. I was trying to square his reasoning with my own happy childhood. But details could not be allowed to interfere with the general myth. Still, one could feel the faint lapping of eternity and no talking, no speculating, no thinking, could suppress it entirely.

At Doug's house the lights were still on and Betty was at the door. We ate her refrigerator out while the three of us sat comfortably around the kitchen table. When she left I asked Doug,

"Why does your mother wait up for us all night and then tells us that she got up early to work on her book?"