

OVER THE TOP

HOW ONE MOVE CHANGED A CLIMBER'S LIFE

R U S S E L L F R A L I C K



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Over the Top: How One Move Changed a Climber's Life

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PROLOGUE

The steady drizzle quickly drenched my outer fleece and began to penetrate deeper into my inner clothing and down my neck. I could feel it soak further into the depths of my inner resources, stripping them increasingly bare with each fear-laden droplet. Looking down through the darkness, I could barely see beyond my feet, but I knew what was there: over 1,000 feet of absolutely nothing, then cruel, hard rock jutting ruthlessly up at me with the gaping finality of shark's teeth. Teeth that I believed had already claimed the life of my closest friend and had quenched my last flicker of hope.

I could no longer control my arms or legs properly. The shivering was almost constant now, which made handling slings and unclipping karabiners a time-consuming and frustrating task. Still, here I was detaching myself from the rock face. I had to grope in the dark to find a couple of the anchor points, such was the lack of any light in the gully, overshadowed by the looming rock wall above and the rain-filled clouds beyond that.

My fingers worked in slow motion. I had to force them to open out and then grip the gear. My mental state deteriorated with each passing moment. I could feel my heart pounding in my chest and my mind spinning toward chaos. At one point I asked myself where I was going to climb to, and the surge of adrenaline that followed that thought sent me into a state of complete panic. I gasped out loud as I fought to control my body and then force my mind onto the current task.

Just undo the locking ring of the karabiner, I thought.

Grip with your fingers, then twist.

To consider any action beyond that would have killed me, without any doubt. My mind would have completely shut down, and panic would have caused a fall, sending me plummeting down the mountain.

I could no longer distinguish between the shiver of hypothermia and the shaking of raw terror. My heart was clawing at my throat in a furious rage, demanding release, as adrenaline fuelled its anger.

Untethered to any protection, I began to climb across the blank rock face in the darkness. There was nothing on which I could focus: no rock bulges, no tree silhouettes in the distance, not even the smallest of incuts to aim for with my fingers. Everything was by touch. As I progressed, foot-by-foot, my fingers were increasingly anaesthetized by the rain and biting cold. I had no idea of the quality of the rock I was holding, and I could not even tell what size the hold was until I had committed to the move. Certainly, the handholds were no more than one-quarter to half-an-inch deep, and the footholds rarely exceeded an inch. On a warm day up a roadside crag in the Lake District back in England this would have been fine, even luxurious, but not here in the blackness of a Norwegian mountain. Good grief, not here!

The rock suddenly became friendlier. I could place the sole of my boots across a ledge and rest my calf muscles, which had been screaming at me for quite some time. Everything was unnervingly still. The cold and wet had stopped gnawing at my fingers, and at least for a moment I did not even notice the merciless drizzle. Even my heart had stopped its pummeling assault on my senses. I could feel the rock against my cheek as I rested briefly.

I imagined looking at myself, alone on this rock wall. I was miles from anywhere, a tiny speck of colour on a vast, black expanse. I was totally isolated from any living thing; almost unnoticeable, utterly insignificant, yet I was alive. It must have made a peculiar sight.

All at once I became entirely unemotional, though not shut down.

I slowly and deliberately turned around and faced away from the rock. Blackness stared back at me. I could see no lights as I looked down the mountain. I could hear the dripping of water on the walls all around me and the blowing and uncertain gusting of the wind as it swirled in the gully beneath.

This was it. I knew what I had to do. The consequences were irrelevant. I simply had to get on with it.

Strangely, almost ridiculously, I felt slightly nervous, rather like a mild dose of stage fright on the opening night of a school play or like the anticipation of a part-time job interview.

I reached out my hand into the void. I was not reaching for anything, merely stretching out a hand into the night. I was unable to see beyond the reach of my fingers, such was the blackness in the gully, with the trees above and clouds masking any moonlight. I extended my leg. It wasn't glamorous or dramatic; I simply stepped off the ledge. As I lost my balance I felt a rush of adrenaline again, and the stinging stab of sweat burst from my scalp.

Too late . . .

Chapter 1

SMALL BEGINNINGS



The leader doesn't fall."

This was the reply to my question, accompanied by a look of mock horror and a twinkling eye.

It was one of my first outings with a work colleague who was soon to become a close friend. We were standing at the foot of a crag in the north of the Lake District in England. By all accounts Troutdale Pinnacle on Black Crag was a classic route. The weather was idyllic, with rays of early summer slanting their way through deciduous woodland and warming the rough granite that we were about to climb.

Even now, twenty-five years on, if I close my eyes I can still feel the warm breeze against my face and the rock on my fingertips. The roughness of the first touch gave way quickly to a treacherous, almost waxy effect as my palms began to sweat and cover the handholds, which had been polished by the years of time and the thousands of earlier ascendants. These "easy" routes often carried such a sting in the tail; overuse had made the handholds horribly greasy once sweat or rain touched them—treacherous for anyone who did not commit himself to strike upwards with purpose.

My question had been a simple one: I knew that as the second climber I was protected from any fall by the rope above me. "But what would

happen,” I had asked, “should the lead climber fall?” The answer seemed logical at the time.

The route itself was very straightforward, but for a first-timer whose only climbing gear was a pair of squash shoes and complete self-belief, it was an interesting challenge. I could feel almost every muscle in my upper body stretch and tighten as I pulled myself up the steep sections, unwilling to trust in footwork (as more experienced climbers will), preferring the gorilla approach to that of the ballet dancer.

Later, I would realize that I had never felt as physically satisfied from any other sport as I did as a climber. The burn of the arms and back, the rough abrasions on the fingers, and the sometimes-extreme cardiovascular workout in the walk-ins to a climb (especially in the winter) were always a source of profound joy and deep satisfaction to me.

Feeling my swollen forearms, like some steroidally enhanced pair of lamb chops, reminded me of my rowing days at school. This time, however, I was not reliant on a team (I have never been a team player). It was all so very peaceful as I climbed higher. There was no rowing coxswain barking out commands, no coach on the bank yelling something about straight backs and keeping the rhythm tight, and certainly no armchair experts yelling some inaudible advice from the river bank, apparently aided by their plastic megaphone half-filled with warm, substandard beer. Although I had the rope connecting me to my friend above, an umbilical cord to my advice centre, I felt very much alone, independent, and self-reliant.

It is remarkable and somewhat paradoxical how free it felt being stuck 200 feet up a rock wall with a single 11mm rope as a lifeline and with only the surface area of three or four fingertips plus the inside edge of a pair of squash shoes to keep me in touch with a very poor interpretation of terra firma! Now that I had tasted this new sport, I knew it was for me. I could now marry my sporting ambitions with my inherent love of the countryside.

I was already delighted that Dave had invited me for a climb. We had met only recently. He was working at the same hotel where I had just got a job tending bar. It was simply a money-earner for me during my gap year

between secondary school and university. I had become thoroughly sick of studying, and I knew I had to have a break if I were to have any chance of gaining a decent degree at the end of my higher education. The hotel was close to Brookhouse, the small village in which I had been raised, so I could keep living with my parents and thereby pocket more of my wages—an all-important consideration for an 18-year-old.

I had first met Dave in the hotel gym, and a subsequent cross-country run together had established our similar, highly competitive natures. Neither of us would give an inch as we raced to the imaginary finish line; coming second was anathema to both of us, even on a training run. The notion of giving up simply did not exist. It was on this basis, I had learned later, that Dave thought I would make a suitable climbing partner.

The views were spectacular as we climbed. Below me lay the very English valley of Borrowdale, winding its way back toward Keswick with a backdrop of green, rolling hills, the names of which I have long since forgotten. Skiddaw, the Lake District's third highest peak, was visible to my far right—a squat triangle that looked much larger than its 3,000-something foot height. It was pretty feeble in mountaineering terms, yet imposing and impressive on the skyline—until the great, broad footpath, the size of a minor road in places, formed a meandering scar to the summit. In my pride I silently scoffed at the poor minions who had to resort to, or even worse, actually chose to trudge up such a boring, formless lump.

There is a strange-looking hill next to it with new forestry planted between bare areas of grass. It looks like a giant Mohican haircut, and viewed from Black Crag it presented a curious sight. Among the random nature of so much of the Lake District, this sharp-edged forestry project showed the clear, deliberate intrusion of man, no doubt for good purposes, yet it seemed to me at the time a clear case of environmental graffiti. Still, a wonderful feeling of peace enveloped me as I studied each area of my view.

At the stage of the exposed traverse on Troutdale Pinnacle, I had been “gripped,” to employ a climbing word. It is used euphemistically to mean focussed, but a closer definition, for my part at least, would be “utterly

terrified.” As a climber moves horizontally across a rock face, or “traverses,” even the second climber can fall a considerable distance if he were to lose his footing. On this route, I had a risk of doing just that, since I had to take a horizontal tack for about twenty yards. A slip would have caused a pendulum effect, resulting in my being slammed into the side of the crag. Happy days!

I have always enjoyed taking risks of any sort. When I was nine, I closed my eyes while sledding down the snowy hill behind my parents’ house just for the thrill of it. How I did not break my skull is still a mystery.

Now I was delighted to find out about the risks that were the bread and butter of climbing rock faces. This was a guaranteed way of feeling a buzz, and it was most welcome grist to my adrenaline mill. One thing I could not do, however, was to stand at the top of the crag and look down. A sheer drop of over 300 feet was more than I could manage the first time out. Within months I would stand overlooking thousands of feet without a trace of concern, supremely confident in my invincibility, daring the King of the Mountains to try to find something to scare me! It only took one outing on Troutdale Pinnacle to render me a climbing adrenaline junkie. Being gripped became an essential ingredient to life, and I had found the perfect feeding ground.

As I sat on the top of the crag, I was puzzled—almost disturbed—at what I felt. It was a peculiar mix of sensations, seemingly contradictory, of adrenaline high, physical fatigue, lazy contentment, and total well-being. The walkers didn’t come here, and there were no other climbers out that day. The only sounds were the gentle clink of metal climbing hardware and the almost soporific hiss of breeze through the trees. The dull, pleasant ache of tired muscles and the tingle of sore fingertips were therapy in themselves. There was a profound sense of complete physical and emotional satisfaction, which paradoxically made me very uncomfortable. Satisfaction breeds laziness. Without thinking, I knew it was time to go. We finished the climb and returned to the car. Conquest done, spirits soaring, we went off to climb something else, anything else, so long as it was more challenging than the last.

This became my routine: working through the week in order to go climbing on the weekends. I trained almost every day so I could overcome any physical challenges. Training was an obsession in itself. In addition to two-hour stints in the gym, often interspersed with bouts of nausea because I overdid it, there were the punishing cross-country runs and the ceaseless press-ups, dips, and pull-ups, which I would do whenever I was unoccupied (100 press-ups and a load of pull-ups on the doorways during the television commercials was a common occurrence at home, much to the dismay of my mother—God bless her!).

I had found my niche, my role in life. It was to seek fulfilment for its own sake on the rock face. I was going to prove that I could do anything I set my mind to, no matter what the odds. If there were no one else to compete with, I would compete with myself. In fact, I soon became my own favourite adversary.

Soon after my initiation on Troutdale Pinnacle, I was taken on another route, this time near Langdale, again in the Lake District. It was an easy walk-in from the legendary Old Dungeon Ghyll pub, venue of climbing tales for me and myriad others. The route was an unspectacular one on Gimmer Crag called, rather blandly, D-Route. One can always tell the old routes, as they have basic, unpretentious names. In contrast, the newer ones of the time, especially the extreme routes, had names of almost mystical power: “Comes the Dervish,” “Cystitis by Proxy,” all designed I am sure to instill awe and dread into potential climbers. Still, D-Route provided plenty of entertainment on this day.

I was climbing second again, armed with my squash shoes and wearing some rather attractive running shorts. It was a pleasant, sunny day in the early part of what turned out to be a lovely Lakeland summer that year. The breeze was warm and inviting, not so humid as to be stifling, but welcoming enough to feel safe and relaxing.

There is no more beautiful a place in the world for my money than the Lake District when the weather is right. Balmy summer days with a breeze to keep everything fresh and to bring new smells with it—flowers, sheep,

the humid air, or even that strange unmistakeable whiff of climbing chalk on sweaty fingers (a strange notion to the uninitiated, but it really does carry a romance all of its own). The obvious problem is that Lakeland weather is not known for its hospitality. Indeed, it is renowned for its ability to seduce you with a cloudless sky, wait for you to disrobe accordingly, then to close in, whip, beat, and otherwise pound you into oblivion with an inconceivably hostile storm. Finally, the persistent rain will mock and deride you all your sorry, drenched way back to the safety of your car. I had yet to fully appreciate this little nuance of the Lakes. As far as I could ascertain, this would be a pleasant and interesting little route, lasting no more than an hour or so, and then straight back to the pub in time for ale and medals.

The route followed a fairly straight line, meandering logically as the fault line in the crag split its way easily to the top. Gimmer Crag caught the evening sun, and so it was always a favourite destination for a quick route straight after work in the summer months. Its proximity to the Old Dungeon Ghyll did nothing to hamper its popularity either. Dave completed the first pitch and called me up the face. As I started to climb, the reflected heat from the sun felt wonderful. The rock was firm and rough to the touch, and handholds abounded. I could really run up this one and enjoy it. I ignored the first chill on my legs as an easterly wind suddenly started to whip up around me. I hadn't noticed the bank of black clouds appearing over my shoulder, descending on us from out of the shadow of 3,000-foot Great End in the distance.

As I met up with Dave, the rain had started and the wind was insistently grabbing at my naked legs. All my spare clothing was safely locked in the car, a mere half-mile away. We could have done the route in a single long pitch, but Dave had decided against this due to our having only one rope, rather than two. This makes a big difference—especially on routes that are not direct ascents and involve traverses. With two ropes a climber can choose which rope to put his protective gear or “runners” through, which will arrest him in the case of a fall. By choosing which rope to use, the lead climber can make sure the ropes follow as direct a route as possible up the

rock, thereby reducing the friction or “rope drag” that results from a rope that zigzags up the mountain. With only one rope, this is not an option. Moreover, the one rope is usually thicker than either of the two (usually 11mm as opposed to two 9mm ropes) and is therefore heavier and more cumbersome to start with. I had not yet bought a rope of my own, so we were stuck with Dave’s big, old 11mm monster. It was heavy to start with. Now it was also wet.

As Dave started off up the final pitch, he began to traverse, ascend, then traverse back, following the guidebook instructions and making it all very hard work for himself. I stood beneath him, faithfully holding and paying out rope as was needed, blinking back the stinging rain from my eyes and feeling quite shocked at how cold the wind had become. My fleece was soaked, and the tee shirt beneath now stuck to my skin. In addition, I was wearing nothing of a windproof nature, so these garments simply served to chill me to the bone once they became wet and the wind began to blow through them.

I was miserable. I hate it when a plan falls apart. I had made provision for an easy afternoon out, and this had completely ruined everything. My misery turned to anger toward poor Dave as he struggled up the face above me.

Why didn't he check the weather forecast? I thought. Then he could have foreseen this wintry squall before I got stuck in it. He's the mountaineer, after all. Where are my tracksuit bottoms and climbing jacket? Who can I blame for neglecting to bring those? Bloody Nora, this is a right pain! Is he not finished yet? It's only graded "Severe," so what's the bloody delay about? Does he not know that I'm standing down here freezing to death? It's all right for him in his fancy rock boots; I have to climb a wet route in sopping squash shoes!

After what seemed like an interminably long delay, I was invited to join him at the top. It was hardly a relief as I watched the water run down the rock face, so I continued moaning to myself:

Finally! "Climb on!" he says. I only hope my shoes stay on this poxy rock or I'll be sliding and jibbering my way to the top. And it won't be my fault. I cannot recall a time when self-pity was not an advanced qualification of mine.

The rain had become persistent and heavy. My legs were no longer red. They were both a definite shade of blue, stiff as boards, and only slightly less numb than my fingers. I felt as if I was wearing a particularly painful pair of boxing gloves. I was forced to visually check each handhold to see if I was actually holding on to anything. The numbness was an amazing and most unwelcome revelation to me. Before then I had no idea that one could lose feeling so completely and so easily.

It is a strange phenomenon that such numbness to external touch can exist simultaneously with such excruciating pain within. As blood flows into fingers then stops and flows again, the pain of each flow of blood becomes quite breathtaking at times. Within only a year or so, I would accept this as a normal part of life as a mountaineer.

But not today.

On this day I was as mad as a wasp about the whole thing. Mad and scared. My feet rarely stuck onto any hold. I was scrambling at times and cursing wildly at the vile shoes that had become less than useless. Water seeped out of every lace hole as soon as pressure was put on them. The soles had absolutely no frictional qualities against the running rock face, and I could no longer effectively feel an edge of rock on which I could stand and rest.

I looked up toward where I thought Dave would be and yelled something. I have no idea what. Possibly something as inane as, "How far to the top from here?" I just wanted to hear something positive. Instead, all I heard was a garbled voice lost in the swirling gale around us. Then a blood-chilling sight. The rope was snaking away above me, with great bows of slack rope between each runner. Due to the dragging rope, Dave could not effectively feel the rope being tightened as it pulled on my harness. Instead, because he felt a substantial resistance, he had stopped pulling the rope in. Since he could not see or hear me, he was guessing how far I had climbed and had assumed I had climbed at least 20 feet less than I actually had. In short, were I to fall off at this point (a distinct possibility given the conditions) I would have fallen around 15 feet onto a particularly nasty little out-

crop of jagged rocks. Injury from such a fall was a certainty. Severe injury, a distinct possibility. This was in no way Dave's fault. I should have been checking the situation as I ascended, but I was far too busy being scared and angry to watch where I was going. Fortunately, I remembered what to yell, and yell I did:

"Slack! Slack rope! Slaaaaack!"

I watched with horror as the bows in the rope became bigger, and the length of my possible fall became a seriously devastating prospect.

"Can you not hear me? Dave! Daaaave! Slack! Bloody Nora! Slack!"

More rope slid down the mountain. I was apoplectic. There was nothing for it. He could not hear me, and if I didn't get moving I was going to fall anyway. Better to fall with as little spare rope ahead of me as possible. I set off at a manic rate, coiling the rope around my shoulder as I caught up with another great loop. In a matter of a minute or so, I saw Dave in the distance and a wave of relief hit me. There was absolutely no anger, just an enormous pressure release as I approached the top of the climb. We both laughed raucously as I handed him a pile of rope.

"Well, you asked for it, so I gave it to you," he said, smiling.

What on earth did he mean? I explained that I was informing him of the swathes of useless slack rope dangling around me as I clung breathless and freezing at the steepest part of the climb. He smiled again. Dave has a warm, full-faced smile that forms glowing wrinkles around the sides of his mouth and eyes. The generosity conveyed in this look made it impossible for me to be in the least irritated with him, even when he was laughing directly at me while calling me a stupid idiot. He then reminded me (he had told me before; I just had not listened) that if you want someone to take in more rope, you shout, "Tight!" And if you want more slack for any reason, you shout, "Slack!" I had been yelling out for more of the stuff that I thought was going to maim me, and Dave had dutifully obliged.

"You've gotta learn, son. You've gotta learn," was the adage trotted out (on this and many other subsequent occasions) as we gulped our pints

back at the pub. I had had my first minor epic, and although I would not admit having had such an adventure on such a lowly climb, it was strangely alluring. As Dave had said, I had to learn. Indeed I had learned and would continue to do so, almost invariably the hard way. Unfortunately, I knew of no other way.

This new pattern of life was perfect. My personality was inextricably linked to what I did: *I was a climber*. It wasn't something that I did. It defined me, and that felt good. No, it felt great. I was respected, I was interesting, and I always had stories to tell down at the pub. True, the rugby boys were bigger, the oarsmen taller, but no one could do fifty one-handed press-ups with each hand, followed by the compulsory two-finger pull-ups, and still have room for a few more pints of beer and session number two of "most gripping moments" stories. And let's face it, that's what counts, isn't it? Yes, I had finally made it.

As the weeks went by, I found myself becoming increasingly confident, not to mention capable, as a rock climber. I was also keen to see some improvement in the standard of routes we were climbing. It was all well and good impressing non-climbers in the pub with tales of derring-do on the rock face, but it simply would not do around other mountaineers, so long as I was only doing routes graded "severe" or "hard severe." Anyone who was anyone was at least up to "Hard Very Severe (HVS)" and then, of course, into the hallowed "E" or "Extreme" grades: big lads only, of course (and lasses; very sexy). The fact that I had not led a route yet was a minor detail in my book. I was hooked, and I intended to take this new obsession to the very top.

There was one final experience that confirmed my new way of life. It happened when I saw a mountain that looked impossible to climb, totally impenetrable, and I then promptly went and climbed it. That one event sealed my fate for the following eight years.

Dave and I were driving from Ambleside to Keswick, having set off early that morning from Lancaster. I was looking at the guidebook for

Borrowdale, and we were considering climbing on Shepherd's Crag, a very convenient spot by the roadside (no long walk-ins) where we could notch half-a-dozen routes in the day. I was getting impatient to lead a route, and this seemed the best way of getting into it: do a few warm-up routes, then choose an easy one as my first lead.

Suddenly, off to the right, I noticed a great round lump of a crag, set by itself in an otherwise fairly flat field. It looked like an enormous, disused, overgrown castle, its ramparts long gone. The mound on which it was built still had a commanding presence, reaching probably 400 feet high at the top. On the left-hand edge was a wall that was simply mesmerizing to a climber: vertical in places, with the rest clearly and sometimes spectacularly overhanging all the way to the top of the crag. Some of the angles looked absolutely outrageous, and the notion of seeing a body moving up such a precipice was almost inconceivable. The sweat was already visible on my palms as I pointed over to the rock and said, half-jokingly, half-longingly, "Could you imagine doing something like that?"

"I climbed it with Pete a few years ago," came Dave's surprising answer.

What? Seriously? No, surely it's not possible! I barely kept the thoughts from blurring out loud.

My mind spun like a whirling dervish. A route like this, so bold, so impossible, so completely out of reach for a mere man. And yet . . . And yet, perhaps, could I be that figure I had seen in my own mind, struggling up such a wall? I could immediately envisage the walkers who would stop and glass the area a second and third time to make sure their Nikon lenses were not deceiving them. "Could it be that such men as this exist?" they would ask. "I have never seen the like in all my born days!" Simultaneous gasps and applause rang through my mind as my penchant for mental hyperbole ran into overdrive. I had no idea that this was an attainable goal so early in my climbing career.

"That, my friend, is Castle Rock, and the left-hand edge is Overhanging Bastion. It's a VS, but they are thinking of upgrading it to HVS."

I had to have it. More than gaining silver or gold or a Lamborghini Countach, I had to climb that route. Overhanging Bastion became my Holy Grail. I could think of nothing else until we had conquered it.

I have no recollection of where we parked the car or how we accessed Castle Rock. I do not know the day or the month of our climb, but I shall never forget looking up from the foot of the route, examining the guidebook description, and then comparing it to the insane protrusion of rock spiraling wildly up above me, causing me to crane my neck back to its limit. I am sure my eyes were playing tricks on me as I remembered the descriptions of Mescaline-induced hallucinations in the late Hunter Thompson's book *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. This seemed like a granite-induced equivalent: the rock was moving, the angles looked ridiculous, and the final section of overhang would, I am sure, bring guffaws of incredulous derision from me now, if I were asked to climb it.

The first section, or pitch, of the climb was straightforward enough, with plenty of holds in a non-threatening position on the crag. If I looked down, I could still see the lush grass at a comfortably close distance beneath me. The most difficult section, or crux, of the climb came on the next pitch. It involved a step from a huge flake of rock onto the main wall of the crag. It was a move demanding balance, strength, and commitment. Dave pondered the move before stepping smoothly up the wall and onto the final, overhanging section. When it came to my turn, the adrenaline was flowing freely and I considered the move for a long time! This was a different league from what I was used to. This was serious stuff.

No matter what people say about having a rope going above you, it does little for your nerves at the point of stepping out. The thick grass at the foot of the climb was no longer reassuring; it looked like it was miles beneath me. My rucksack was not even visible. It was lost at the foot of the crag, masked by the bulges and overhanging swells of the wall to which I was clinging. I took my time preparing for the step onto the main wall. I checked with Dave that he had the rope good and tight, and was ready should I slip and fall. My heart was beating quickly but steadily; I was not filled with dread.

It was rather like when I went running up and down the hills of the Lake District. However, unlike the wandering thoughts that used to accompany my running, my mind was now completely transfixed by the problem at hand. I was either like a lion about to pounce or a deer caught in the headlights. Either way, nothing else existed but that one great bold step.

And then it was over. Once I had decided to commit to the route, it was done. The move was smooth and delicate, but also firm and strenuous. I loved it. Looking back at the gap I had just negotiated, I laughed out loud. The whole situation was so precarious, so extreme, and so frankly bizarre that it warranted mirth. The ground beneath me was no longer frightening; it was invigorating. I stared and stared down at the foot of the crag. Looking down a crag is a unique sight once the fear factor has gone. All I could see was rock, grass, the odd sheep, and my own rucksack. But it carried the fascination of the world's great vistas to me: examining the rock that I had just ascended, feeling the rush of a problem overcome, and marvelling at the beauty of cold, grey granite from such an angle. It is beautiful.

The crux was over. I looked up at the final section, and filled with confidence, I set off up the great overhang like I was super-charged. Dave had warned me that the holds toward the top of the climb were prone to creak, "but they are really sound, actually," he had assured me. I did not know exactly what creaking rock would sound like and was not sure what he actually meant by "creak." How can rock creak?

The angle of the wall sharpened with every move I made. I could feel the overhang factor kicking in, and the final section of the climb took on an outrageous angle, necessitating long, strenuous arm pulls as my feet strove to combat the natural tendency to be pulled away from the ever-steepening face. Fortunately, the holds were as big as the guidebook promised, but being inexperienced I gripped them with all my strength rather than with just enough to keep hold of the rock. This meant my arms became prematurely tired. I stopped to "shake out" my forearms, hoping to force blood into the stiffening muscles, and as I did, I leaned out and looked down the crag. I imagined how this would look from the road; the stupendous

position, the impossible angle of ascent. It was all beyond exhilarating. I was in a different world and could not recall ever being so happy. With arms tiring, I pushed on up the last few feet.

So, what does creaking rock sound like? Very similar to an old door with rusty hinges! Each move created the most horrendous creaks and groans, so much so that I felt for certain one of the rocks would give way, and I would be hurled to my doom in the ensuing rock-fall. I did not know at the time, of course, that just such an event would nearly claim me only a couple of years later. On that occasion there was no warning creak—simply the complete collapse of the tiny world of rock that I was ascending. But that was to come. Had I been leading this route, I would have certainly panicked at such noises. As it was, I reminded myself that this was to be expected, that the route had been around for a long time, and that it would all be over, one way or another, in just a few moments.

Those few moments lasted long enough for me to overcome the creaking fear, and it was a relaxed, smiling, even giddy body that joined his friend at the top of Castle Rock, Overhanging Bastion ticked off in our mental list of “great routes climbed” and later ticked off in the guidebook with a bunch of stars after the date. It was an exhilaration that I spent many years trying to revisit. The pure pleasure of that day, the weather, the company, the lure of the seemingly unattainable, the image of the heroic—these were all nearly impossible to replicate. The Overhanging Bastion had seduced me. I had conquered her, but whereas she has long forgotten the feel of my touch, I will never forget hers. Every wrinkle, every blemish, and every nuance of her granite rendered me smitten back then and pleasantly nostalgic even now. My passion was fully awakened. I had to get more of this wonder drug. Surely I had found what was for me the key to a life fulfilled.