

The Climb of the Century

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FOR SEVENTEEN YEARS I'd kept as secret as a blabbermouth like me could an idea for a first ascent in Yosemite Valley. Each year first ascents seem increasingly hard to come by, especially in areas as popular and accessible as Yosemite. Yet this one was strikingly obvious. For all those years I fretted and worried that someone would beat me to it. But I worried even more about doing it myself.

Between September 28 and October 3, Chauncey Parker and I climbed Upper Yosemite Falls Wall. In what some climbers view as an absurd application of Comici's famous dictum about the ideal line being the one where a drop of water falls, Chauncey and I climbed directly in line where the world's third-highest waterfall normally plummets down, varying little to left or right. We climbed it when it was bone-dry. That's what made it possible, something like the exact opposite of the situation where ice *aficionados* wait for conditions and temperatures to make their activity possible.

Surprisingly, dry conditions aren't all that rare. Most years, unless there has been an exceptionally heavy snowpack the preceding winter, Yosemite Creek, and consequently the Falls, dry up. A brief window permitting climbing usually occurs sometime beginning in mid September. In dry 1987, this period was longer, the creek having dried up earlier.

If Chauncey and I had been caught on the wall when the Falls resumed flowing, we would have made mountaineering history. If, for instance, a surprise deluge in the high country started filling the water table, we might have been the principals in a new type of death. Jed Williamson would have had to create a new category for us in his annual *Accidents in North American Mountaineering*. Somehow, that seemed too high a price to pay for fame.

I feel our route was the last great unclimbed line in the continental United States, certainly the last great *most obvious* unclimbed line. In all modesty, I see it as the climb of the century. I hope my fellow climbers will at least grant it was the season's sensation.

Let me clarify this. For certainly longer and harder climbs have been and will be done than Waterfall Wall. But Waterfall Wall was special; it had charisma. It was unique, whereas other routes seem like a variation on a theme. Naturally I exaggerate, though not completely. All first ascents contain an element of mystery, involving as they do the setting of hand and foot where no person has ever been before. But to place oneself in a location where for eons



COLOR PLATE 1

Photo by Rick Sylvester

YOSEMITE FALLS.



COLOR PLATE 2

Photo by Rick Sylvester

YOSEMITE FALLS dry

trillions of tons of water have almost continually cascaded down involved more than mystery. It verged on being a mystical experience.

Or I should more accurately say that the *idea* of the climb was mystical. The actual experience involved the usual hard work and suffering, both physical and mental in this case, as we were constantly aware of potential death by water torture. As I mentioned to Chauncey, "I don't mind suffering in the usual way. I just don't want to suffer in any *new* way."

Aside from the fear of dying, I felt certain qualms about going up there. I wondered if our presence might somehow be construed as a desecration or sacrilege. My feelings were akin to the idea that the footprints and high-tech litter left behind on the moon detract from its romance. *Climb of the Century?* Perhaps it might be viewed as the *Crime of the Century*. Well, just so it didn't become the *Death of the Century*.

I had met Chauncey—he went by "Chuck" then—about fifteen years ago when I gave a slide show in Phoenix. We'd shared some desert climbing, including an old aid overhang that enjoyed a brief distinction of being the hardest free pitch in Arizona. This was 5.10c, so I'm obviously talking history.

A chance encounter a winter ago at a local search-and-rescue meeting reunited us. Remarkably, Chauncey still had the same wheels, the same '63 Dodge van he'd had in the desert. Wealth of experience may be the only association climbing bears to riches.

Sunday, September 27. We sorted our gear on the Valley floor and then commenced hiking up the Falls trail with loads so heavy we couldn't straighten up. We bore far more hardware than necessary. It's a bad sign when you can get into your pack only with the help of your partner. It's another bad sign when you hear your partner muttering and groaning to himself all the way up the approach.

After about a vertical thousand feet, we left the trail for the base of Upper Yosemite Falls Wall. That area is one of the natural wonders of the world. Yet, few hikers bound for the top of the Falls trail stray from their appointed rounds. If they did detour from the beaten path, they might marvel at the huge horizontal granite with its many pothole pools created by the action of the falls. We spent our first night there, sleeping poorly due to the crazy buffeting winds which are a strange nightly phenomenon of the Falls Amphitheater. They were to plague us every night.

The next morning we ascended the gully used by *Arrow Chimney*, *Arrow Direct* and *Tower of Geek* aspirants. That involved a bit of ropework. The grunt section was followed by a scramble left over an exposed but ropeless traverse to the start of the route. We were now a couple of hundred feet above the ground on a beautiful ledge directly in line with the dried-up waterfall. It was my first time back there in seventeen years. I had forgotten what a unique and magnificent place it was.

In 1970, Bugs McKeith, an excellent and popular Scottish climber, tragically later killed in a fall on Mount Assiniboine, and I had done a route, *Via Sin Agua*, that followed a prominent flake system directly up a few hundred

feet before traversing an obvious line left. Reputedly, it had never enjoyed a second ascent. Sometime after that climb, I'd gotten the idea that Bugs and I had skirted the main issue, that of continuing straight up the wall to the Fall's mouth. I started to feel that that was the real climb and line. As a result, the wall had grown to obsess me. Its blankness oppressed me. Fear tormented me. Blankness meant slow progress, and the slower, the more chance of being caught if the waterfall started up (perhaps more accurate: started *down*) again.

The ledge we walked out on to start the climb was the same one I'd always figured John Muir had traversed and subsequently written about. Now, there was a nonspecialist, unlike so many of today's climbers. Were Muir alive today, I'm sure he'd view climbing in its broader context of adventure and exploration. The type of fellow who seeks out the tallest, most wildly swaying tree to ascend during a violent storm is a man after my own heart.

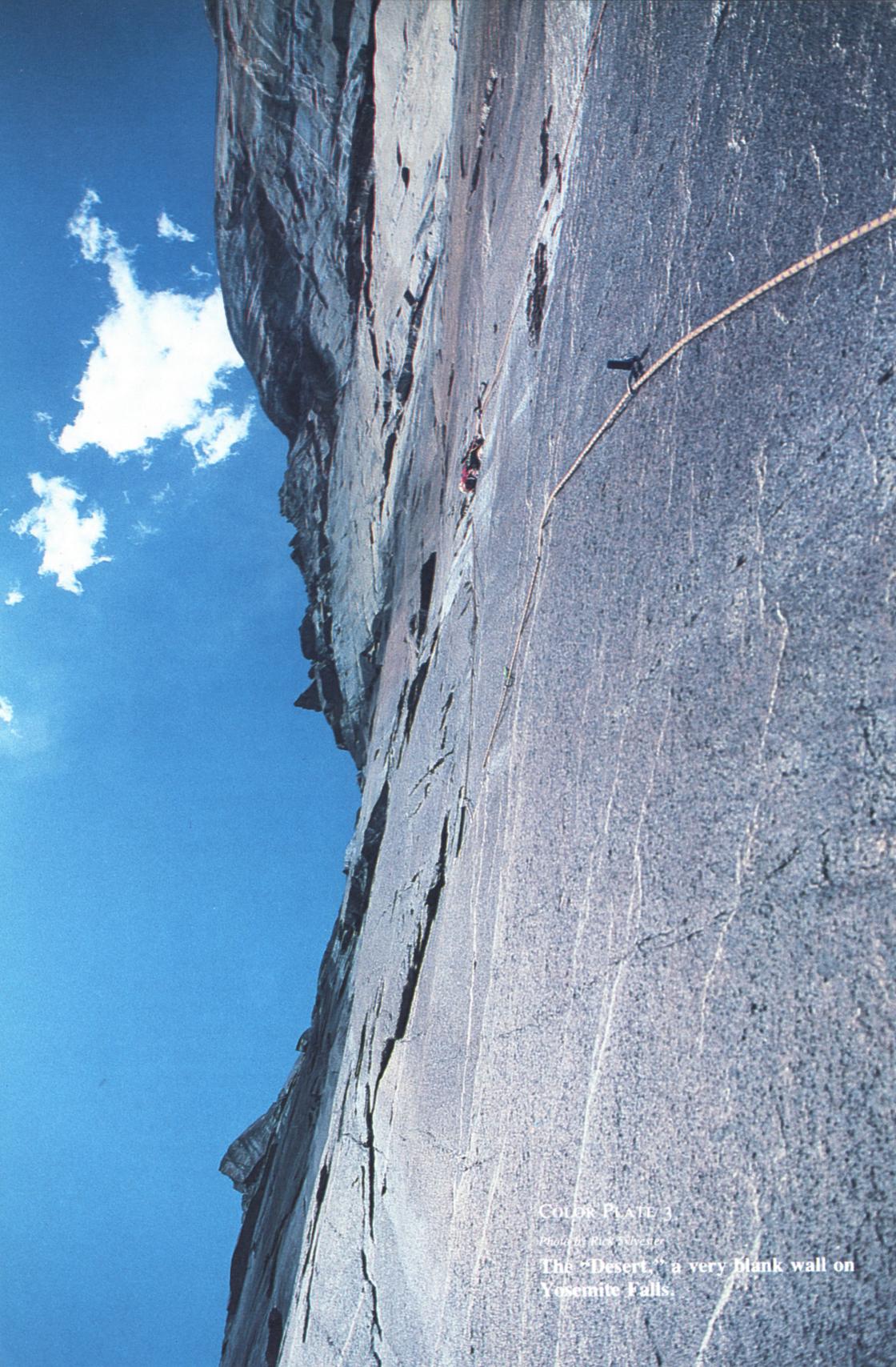
If you sense that I've an axe to grind, you've sensed correctly. I have several in fact. All these years, I had been a bit amazed at the fact that *Vía Sin Agua* had never had a second ascent. Was I mad at this? Perhaps. *Vía Sin Agua* is a great excursion, an excellent itinerary in a unique location with lots of free climbing. There was no reason it shouldn't have had a second ascent. Of course, Bugs and I never expected it to become popular, but not to have a second ascent! Was this because it was perceived as a sort of gimmick climb, possible only when the Falls are dry? No, I actually think my main peeve is different. Many present-day climbers are caught up in the so-called numbers game, climbing solely to push their difficulty level. Who today is going to bother with a 5.8, A3 route? I get caught up in this myself. Pushing limits is worthwhile, but it represents only one of the many potential rewards of climbing. Whatever happened to climbing, even pure rock climbing, for things like the sake of exploration? Yes, I know; the numbers game can be viewed as an exploration of limits, admittedly a very engrossing and stimulating pursuit. But what about old-fashioned exploration, experiencing new territory, the adventure of the unknown, just plain curiosity as a motivating force? (Be careful! Curiosity killed the cat, Sylvester!)

Chauncey set down his load. "Whew, no more load carrying!"

"Yes, only hauling now."

"Well, let's begin suffering."

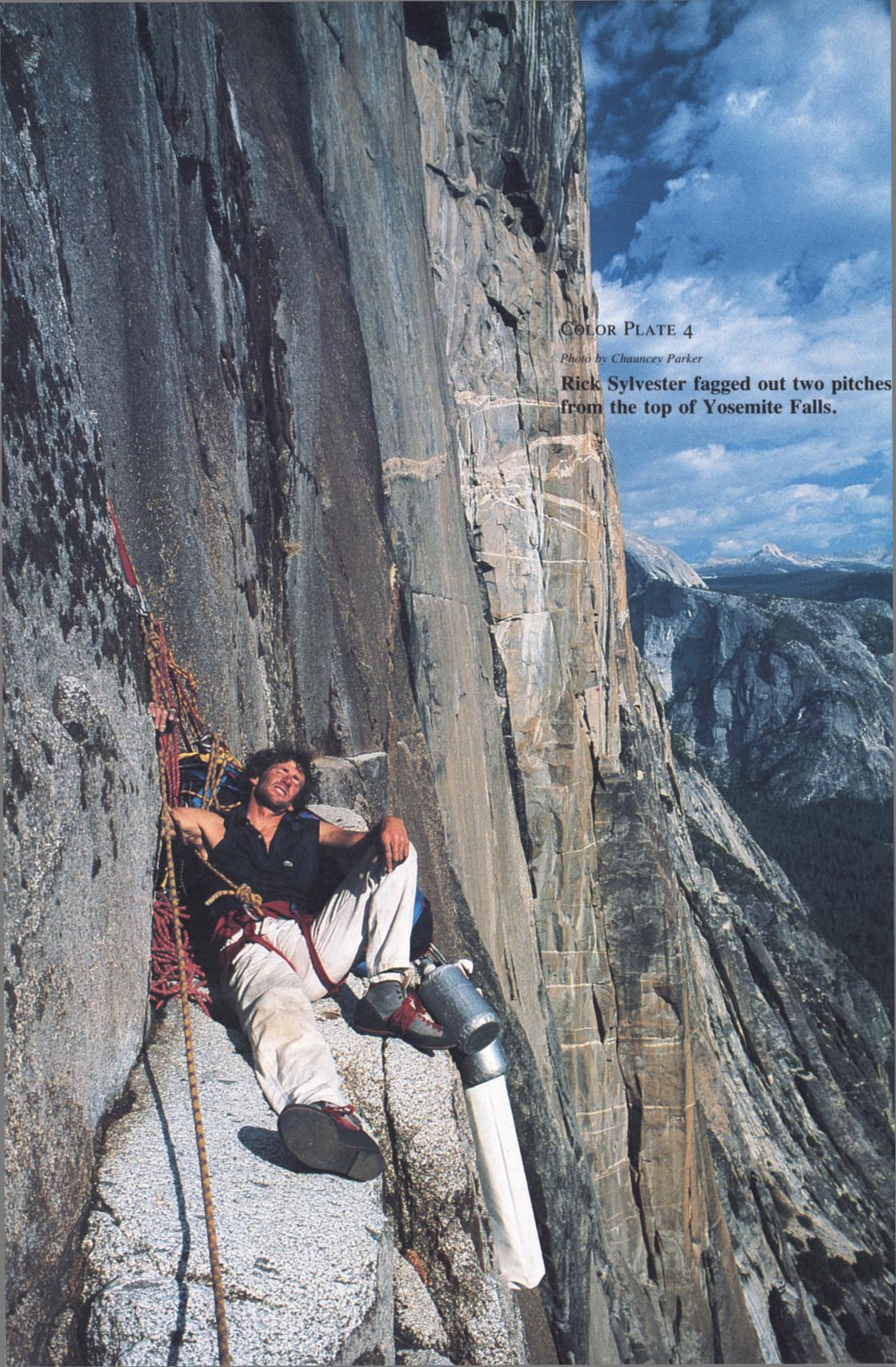
Chauncey and I reclimbed the pitches Bugs and I had done so long ago. It struck me that it was left to me to make the long-delayed second ascent of at least the first pitches of *Vía Sin Agua*. There was no sign of a bolt I'd placed on the initial pitch which Bugs and I had used for a necessary leftwards pendulum. However, I was surprised to discover one of my pitons at the first belay, Centipede Ledge. That archaeological find left me with strange feelings, although perhaps not so strange as my reactions a few minutes earlier to a 15-foot fall I'd taken. Just after encountering the largest rock frog I'd ever seen on a big wall, I was unexpectedly dropped when a piton behind an expanding flake pulled. To fall on the first 50 feet of a major route was a first for me. On



COLD PLATE 3

Photo by Rick Switzer

The "Desert," a very blank wall on Yosemite Falls.



COLOR PLATE 4

Photo by Chauncey Parker

**Rick Sylvester fagged out two pitches
from the top of Yosemite Falls.**

one of Chauncey's first leads, he suffered a similar fate and matched my fall. We hoped those wouldn't prove symbolic of worse things to come.

If we were looking for bad omens, there seemed no dearth. Just before setting out, I'd alerted John Dill, the Valley's long-time and very capable search-and-rescue technician, as to our plans. When I found John at the search-and-rescue cache, he was recreating the situation which had led to an Austrian's death on El Cap's Nose. He was trying to figure out the subjective errors the climber had made. Bad signs? In the days leading to our climb, an almost unprecedented number of recent climbing accidents had come to my attention. If I were into symbolism or unduly superstitious, I might have put off the climb for yet another year. But I knew that if not then, reputedly the second driest year in recorded Californian history, I might as well forget it.

I'd signed out for the climb. This was a non-mandatory procedure in Yosemite, unlike, for example, a park like the Tetons, where it's a firm regulation. It is the first time I'd signed out for a Valley route in over fifteen years, when it used to be required. I wanted to be sure of covering as best I could any potential liability in case we ended up needing a rescue. I had a gut-feeling worry, the fear that had kept me off the wall all those years, a fear that I was fated. No matter when I went out on that wall, a storm would ensue. No matter how stealthily I snuck up on it, even if I padded my hammer with a handkerchief, as I'd done doubling for Moore playing Bond in the climbing scene climax of *For Your Eyes Only*, the wall would know. The Shadow had nothing over that wall. And even if I had found not one, but two, lucky pennies just before the approach hike, deep down I knew I was doomed. Like many, I shared the deep concern that I'd already gotten away with too much, that maybe this cat had already run through all of his nine lives. At least I couldn't have made it simpler for John. To check on us, he had a clear view right from the porch of his search-and-rescue office. No daily drive down to El Cap Meadows. He only had to stick his neck out the door.

What was it like up there? That might be an unfair question, one Chauncey and I should possibly decline to answer if directly asked. This attitude might stem in part from Kurt Diemberger's classic, the one many climbers, including me, feel bears the most beautiful title in mountaineering literature, *Summits and Secrets*. That suggests, and perhaps rightly so, that there are secrets to be discovered high up. Possibly only those who make the effort, who essentially pay their dues, should be rewarded with the knowledge. So I've toyed with the idea of keeping the secret of Waterfall Wall. But, what the heck. Today I feel in a magnanimous mood and I won't be hard-nosed.

The wall, 1430 feet in height, is monolithic, very blank. Whereas *Via Sin Agua* followed a natural line, this new route was a typically modern climb, not obvious, subtle, involving the connecting of obscure and thin features. Earlier I had speculated that with *Via Sin Agua* Bugs and I had avoided the real issue. But of course we couldn't have done Waterfall Wall then, at least not in the current best style. Copperheads hadn't been invented yet. We would have been forced to resort to a lot more bolt drilling, i.e. defacement of the rock. Of

course what would that have mattered, except to ourselves, to our own exertion? Judging by the overwhelming popularity of *Via Sin Agua*, who was going to follow us up Waterfall Wall's more demanding and more dangerous line to discover all the telltale holes, shameful evidence of our opting away from the full challenge, the scary zipper potential?

The climbing was predominantly hard aid, mostly A4. In one pitch we used more hooks and copperheads than I'd used in my whole previous career. Frankly, that had been a record of wimpishness of which I was quite proud. For despite the fact I'd done over thirty big walls including the Big Daddy, as we used to call El Cap, this house-of-cards, hold-your-breath, mental-sweat, more-engineering-than-elegant-ballet-movement climbing is a type I've never particularly relished. Wasn't it Patrick Henry who had exclaimed, "Give me free climbing or give me death." Isn't it the license plate of New Hampshire which contains the state motto "Climb free or die?" I've long preferred the healthy physical sweat of honest free climbing to the mental sweat of hard aid, though I readily admit that the self-control and relaxed mind essential for success is equally true in both disciplines.

Several of my leads—and Chauncey's were as bad or worse—represented the thinnest aid pitches of my life. Dowels, hooks, copperheads, tiny RPs—it was enough to make grown men vomit. On one pitch the only piece I had thought was any good, a #3 Friend, came out before Chauncey reached it jūmaring. During one of his leads, Chauncey remarked that it was the first time he had ever felt a sense of security from moving *onto* a hook. Another section he dubbed the "Rolaid Crack" for the relief it, at least temporarily, afforded. Can dowels hold falls? That was a question that had never occurred to me before Waterfall Wall. How can we rely on this stuff? Not to mention, how can I maintain any last vestige of self-respect playing these games now that I'm a parent?

Just before setting off for the Valley, I'd become aware of a unique possibility. A couple of local climbers had acquired the newest wrinkle in the great ethics controversy, a battery-powered Bosch drill. What an inspiration! Perhaps they'd let me borrow or rent it. I mean, of all the potential first ascents and new routes in the world, could there be a single one more than Waterfall Wall with its time-bomb waterfall ticking overhead where its use would be more justified, where the time element was more critical? The Bosch was the perfect solution.

But then my old spoilsport traditionalist conscience broke in! "If you're going to deface the rock, you should pay the price, e.g. hard labor." Believe me, I'm no puritan, but I'd long known that the whole point of climbing, especially in this day and age, was *how*, not *what*. Some might think that the purpose was to get to the Fall's mouth. But they would have been mistaken. It was really *how* we got there. If it was just to get to the top, why should we ever have bothered to leave the tourists and the trail? That's faster anyway. It had begun to seem as if everyone had forgotten Lito's classic essay, *Games Climbers Play*. The Skinner-Watts-Griffith crowd at the first so-called Great Debate in Denver surely seemed illiterate enough on the subject.

Besides, save for the hard work of bolting, what is to keep climbers honest? From the very start of my climbing career, I heard tales of Cro-Magnon specimens who reputedly could bolt more quickly than nail A3 or A4. Perhaps I lamented I had never had the strength to be numbered among their ranks. But with the facility of a Bosch, can anyone assure me that it would be used only where there was no chance for even the thinnest hard aid placements? C'mon, get real.

The very instant I started placing the first bolt in new terrain, in the section we called "The Desert"—dead vertical, hammer stretched overhead—I knew with absolute certainty that not trying to borrow the Bosch had been an unmitigated disaster of uncalculable dimension and sadness. Naturally, later I knew I was dead right not to have taken one along. And the later it becomes, the further in time from the completion of the route, the more faded and dimmed the memory of that exhausting work under the enervating sun, the more certain I become of my chosen path of ethical purity. As it turned out, we used only 20 bolts and dowels for actual progress.

One last word before leaving the subject of style and ethics. That lone bolt I'd placed on *Via Sin Agua* seventeen years before that was gone still haunted me. Why was it gone? Had the Falls washed it away? If so, how long had it taken? How many years had it been able to withstand the nearly constant bombardment? Or had it fallen victim to the winter ice build-up? Yes, that might be more likely. Wait a minute! Forget about mundane concerns like the ethical purity of arm versus battery-powered drills. We might have a real breakthrough here. We might have the first self-perpetuating big-wall first ascent here. It was one thing when Valley golden boys one-uped the Europeans by having the second clean pitches to preserve as much of the first-ascent flavor as possible. But this, where even the bolts and the dowels get removed, clearly represented a step beyond! So much for subsequent ascents becoming vastly easier due to prior route knowledge and fixed gear. Here, future parties, assuming there would ever be any, would be plagued by doubt and uncertainty as to what they could expect. They might well be faced with the price of the same rigors as the first ascensionists yet for vastly diminished rewards, since they couldn't claim the glory of being first.

All the hard aid meant hard work and that meant slow climbing. That in turn meant more chance of getting caught in a storm and a resultant resurgent waterfall. Like many adventurous endeavors but more so, what this route was all about was calculated risk.

As it turned out, it took six days, exactly double what I'd estimated. I had assured one potential partner who had work commitments that he'd definitely be back in Tahoe after three days. Well, Bill would have lost his job. Three days in a row, Chauncey and I barely made more than a pitch. It was slow going, almost embarrassingly so. But of course there was also our heavy load, much of it unnecessary pitonage as well as the unnatural heat beside the nature of the climbing. We may have been slow, but we hold the record. That was a consoling thought until Pat, one of John Dill's co-workers, remarked after we

got down, "You looked like trash up there." So much for swelled heads.

I had the odd pitches and Chauncey, the even. The right-facing flake system of *Via Sin Agua* turned into the right end of a huge ledge which cut horizontally across the face. This Bugs and I had christened "The Sidewalk." Parts of it were so broad that one could walk unroped without a sense of panic. To gain the ledge required a wiggle through a hole. I'd forgotten how tight it was. The haulsack needed to be unpacked to get its contents through.

The next morning Chauncey started the fourth pitch, the first onto new territory. I could scarcely contain myself. At last, after all those years, after all the planning, hopes, worry and secrecy, it was really happening. Chauncey was traversing into the Eye of the Waterfall, the Headwall, the Desert. His pitch took most of the day and twilight caught me just twenty feet above his belay. A tricky diagonal rappel brought us back to the same bivy as the night before. The way things looked above, it appeared to be the last real ledge and definite feature we would find for a while.

It also brought us an essential piece of luck. Chauncey found a couple of pools in the flake-and-ledge system, one containing clean water, the result of a seemingly impossible spring in the middle of the barren wall. We ended up cutting it pretty close. Perhaps we could have finished if we had run out of water. I'd had to do that years before on the first ascent of *Son of Heart* where my partner and I climbed two-and-a-half days in 100° heat with no food and more important, no water, to finish ten day's effort. I was younger then. On Waterfall Wall, I found myself doing something new, having water relayed up to me in the middle of a lead so I could slake my thirst and wet my dried mouth, the latter as much the result of the tension created by the hard aid as by the heat.

While the leader died a thousand deaths strung out on A4, often requiring five or six hours to progress a single rope-length, the belayer was in a totally different world. Ironically, his problem was boredom. The second had lots of time to meditate on where he'd gone wrong. He had whole days to ruminate on what genetic character fault or sin of an ancestor he must be atoning for. Else, why had he been attracted somehow to this perverse activity, this mind-numbing, body-ravaging, soul-destroying madness, rather than, say, something civilized like golf.

For diversion there were occasional hikers on the Falls trail to look and shout at. There was also the almost daily party suddenly and dramatically appearing on the skyline near the tip of the Lost Arrow Spire. A twosome would turn up like clockwork almost the exact time each day. Wonderful air shows were put on by the swifts as they zoomed and swooped in the updrafts. Who says animals don't play? One day a rare peregrine falcon put in an appearance. Modern belay devices allow safety without constant pinpoint attention to the rope. That meant the second could even read. Chauncey polished off the entire book I'd taken along. I have mixed feelings about the practice. It's unnerving to be sweating blood and then glance down and see your belayer totally oblivious, lost in literature.

Naturally we had a great view. We could see most of the east end of the Valley. And it, us. We were potentially the best show in town. We could see and be seen by Yosemite Lodge, Camp Curry, the core village area with the market and Visitors' Center, just about all the campgrounds, and even, at one extreme, the west-facing rooms of the luxurious Ahwahnee Hotel and, at the exactly opposite extreme, the Camp 4 parking lot. We should have stuck out like sore thumbs. (Pat's "trash" seems a trifle harsh.) Yet, I've a feeling that fame eluded us. I have the strongest suspicion that virtually no one spotted us up there. We'd probably have to resort to something really drastic, like writing accounts for the *American Alpine Journal*.

The wall's exposure was enhanced by its steepness and blankness. The huge flat granite slab directly below, so much more unfriendly in appearance than the pine carpet at El Cap's base, proved at first a frightening factor for me. Then, after a couple of days, I got used to the vertical world, and my thoughts became disassociated from the ground. Fear turned into contempt. The last two days of the climb I scarcely noticed the exposure. Occasionally I'd glance down in an attempt to give myself a jolt but it hardly worked. Besides, I had more important things on my mind, such as food. Why does your partner's always seem better, not to mention more plentiful?

My attitude toward the sky evolved similarly. The climb had begun, as I'd insisted, under a perfect blue sky. Eight years earlier, two of us had done the hard approach and spent the night near the start of the route, intending to climb it. The next morning, a couple of clouds had appeared and I said, "Let's beat it." Two days later a thin trickle of Falls was flowing again.

On Chauncey's and my second day a cloud build-up began. The next couple of days it started earlier and became greater. The sky changed from blue to downright scary, the clouds showing black bottoms and the smell of water was in the air. As the climb wore on and the debilitating heat continued to beat down oppressively upon us, I found myself, seemingly perversely, wanting clouds, welcoming the relief of shade when they were directly in front of the sun. It wasn't that I didn't care any more. That attitude is mostly true only in cheap literature and bad films. Rather, I was willing to gamble with the odds of potential future death versus the all-too-certain harsh reality of my present discomfort.

By day we sweltered, performing the scary hard climbing without a breath of cooling wind. And the torture continued into the night when we slept fitfully, buffeted about by the continually strong, chilly gusts which regularly arise just after dark only in that amphitheater of Yosemite. It was like the Patagonian express-train winds, jerking at you like a terrier all night long, leaving you too bleary-eyed and sluggish to set out willingly the next morning. It was the worst of two worlds: Yosemite's reflecting oven by day and a high-alpine bivy by night. The wind against Chauncey's water bottle beside his portaledge sounded like someone shaking a martini.

If that weren't enough, things happened on the climb that had never happened to me before. Halfway up we were reduced to one hammer when the

handle of Chauncey's split in two, the head flying over his shoulder. We had to relay mine back and forth between leading and seconding. This was facilitated by a third rope, a technique I'd created on *Son of Heart* so that I could still get more gear if I were in the second half of a lead and prone to my characteristic lack of good foresight. I didn't like to dwell on the consequences of losing that last hammer, especially if retreat, i.e. replacing anchors, proved necessary.

At another point I stupidly dropped something. I'd always prided myself on having dropped very little gear during the course of my climbing. But we'd already taken up the practice of sharing Chauncey's portaledge after I dropped my Forrest hammock spreader and spent one of the worst nights ever, squeezed against the hard wall. I hadn't taken a portaledge due to the extra weight, figuring the hammock would be fine for just the couple of ledgeless nights. Wrong, wrong! It's hard to believe how few years ago it was that single-suspension-point hammocks seemed the state-of-the-art cat's meow. As in the case of the Bosch drill, once you know of the existence of something better, suffering seems intolerable.

My first thought was that I'd dropped the drill. The frayed end of the bit of parachute cord that connected it to me dangled from my gear sling. My mind ran riot for a moment, then went numb. "The climb's over; the dream's finished" flashed through my mind before I discovered I still had the drill. It was safely nestled in the bolt sack. It was two hooks that had fallen. If it had been the drill, we would have been stopped cold. And I knew I would never have returned. Repeat all the hard work to get that high? Experience brain death again on all those A4 leads? No way!

Then there was the bizarre. Earlier, just before embarking onto the new territory of the virgin wall, I'd gotten my upper body wedged in space between blocks near the bivy ledge. What might sound funny resulted in pure claustrophobia and trauma. It was difficult to maintain control and fight down the rising paralyzing panic. And if this wasn't enough, halfway up the climb in the middle of one more A4 lead, Chauncey cavalierly announced we were climbing on the wrong rope. Mistakenly, he'd failed to bring along his newest and best one. Instead, our lifeline was one that contained a worrisome sheath fray. I felt it wouldn't be inappropriate if another fifteen years passed before we climbed together again.

On the fifth day, the climbing began going faster as we had a real crack system to work with. But Chauncey's disappointment was keen when it became apparent that we wouldn't reach the top that day but were in for one more night out. The next morning began with another A4 pitch, another "Morning Eye Opener" as we called it, that was hard right off the bivy belay. My nerves were getting a little frayed. Fun was fun, but now we just wanted to finish. I had figured the hard aid was behind us. The capper was having to drill some more, on the last day. It didn't seem fair. Nothing seemed fair any more. When I started to go free off a hook, trying to clamber onto the first decent ledge in days, I couldn't complete the move. I'd forgotten I'd clipped

into the hook. I couldn't get a boot back into the *étrier*. I was in danger of ripping back onto the A4. At last the ordeal ended with the consolation of ending on a beautiful ledge. The top looked less than half a pitch away with easier going.

It was Chauncey's lead. My enthusiasm turned to consternation as I kept paying out more and more rope. What was going on? Chauncey finally yelled "Off belay!" when there was no more rope. Just where was the summit? Was this a cruel variation of the old "It's just around the corner" routine? My pitch, the eleventh, was also a full rope-length. But that one was pure enjoyment — well, as much enjoyment as one can experience in that fatigued state. It consisted of moderately difficult free climbing on perfectly clean rock. I could still free-climb; I hadn't forgotten how! I exited from the world of the vertical and found anchors just above the lip of the Falls.

The creek bed was solid bedrock, like a huge trough or the bottom of a pipe. It was a fantastic spot. It was for things like this I'd gotten into climbing. But as we stuffed our gear into packs, we realized it was the end of the day.

I don't think I'd ever been less confident of success on a major route before. I never believed the route was in the bag until we were hiking down. But we didn't appreciate the victory at the time, for the descent was a cruel trial. Despite being devoid of all food and water, our loads were still killing. The ridiculous amount of hardware by itself just about filled them. The trail, mostly cobbled, did not lend itself to any rhythm, and certainly not on a moonless night with a burned-out headlamp. We raced to make it down before the Valley's last restaurant closed. Our appetites were well honed. Not to be able to appease them until the following morning loomed as an unthinkable calamity of tragic proportions. In our state, pain *per se* was no more acute than a pleasure missed or even deferred. Thus, for me the descent was a Bataan death march. And the Four Seasons had closed, but the Loft stayed open an hour later, until ten, and we made it.

A week later I returned to the Valley with my family. On the wall I'd resolved to share this special place with the special people of my life. I wasn't spending enough time with my family. And the kids grow up so fast! There is a danger of losing something more irreplaceable than a first like Waterfall Wall. We hiked up the Falls trail. We left the trail and cross-countried over to the wondrous Falls base area. I explained to Cheyenne and Terray that whereas the rock was smooth from all the water, it was nevertheless nothing like the glacier polish that delighted them along the flanks of Lambert Dome. We explored the huge granite base area, venturing as far as we could without ropes into the gorge below. We dipped in the spring-fed pool. My family gathered garbage—we made it a game—and an article or two we had dropped on the climb, including bits of my broken plastic hammock spreader.

An evening later as we toasted marshmallows around a campfire, it started to drizzle. But it wasn't enough to affect the Yosemite Creek watershed. The Falls remained dry. It was another week and a half before the first real autumn rains came to thirsty California. And the Falls flowed again.