

Untitled

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EL CAPITAN: I wanted to approach but then I didn't. Like David tackling Goliath. It would be the fulfillment of a dream but fear was my predominant emotion now that it was really happening. Somehow I could never quite believe it was real: we were actually going up to climb El Cap. I was afraid Bev would tell me she'd changed her mind and didn't want to do the climb after all, or that she thought we'd be too slow, or that we wouldn't be able to haul the sack.

I'd climbed for two years in the valley and somehow never been interested in El Cap. The original impetus for doing a wall was that I wanted to sleep in the sky. At that time Half Dome seemed the ultimate one could desire, replete with waterfalls on the left sweeping down into a variously colored rope coiling along the base of the Apron towards the Sentinel at the Valley exit; Mirror Lake sitting on the right like the seventh level of the Inferno, the waters receding whenever parched climbers stoop to sip. From this vantage one wakes to mist crawling along the Valley floor and curling up the sides while the crescent moon scurries behind Middle Cathedral Rock to hide from the advancing sun. El C, the Cathedral Rocks, and North Dome become dwarfed misshapen lumps with only the stark smooth face containing reality. When asked when I would climb El C, I'd laugh, shrug a "Don't want to, there's no view, nothing to see from there."

True. The view looking out from the wall is not particularly inspiring, but nothing can surpass the enormity seen when waking on the face. The wall that confronts one when carrying up the haul sack has no relation to the rock one sees when hiking up to climb the pinnacles at the base. The former is incredibly huge, formidable, a surrealistic scene more part of the sky than born of earth.

It first occurred to me to climb the Captain when Annie and I were coming down off the Column after a three-day epic. That morn we were destitute and parched. The night had been one of trial by thirst. We had been through thunder and lightning and baked onto the rock. Our second night, a storm front advanced; we spoke of giving up climbing. Ominous black clouds were joined by lightning sufficiently accurate to make us wonder why we were the target.

"Have you ever thought there might be a God after all?" Annie asked. We huddled in cagoules, precariously perched in belay seats. "When I get back to the city, I'm going to grow fingernails and buy a

dress." Annie appealed to the gods, offering sacrifices in return for safe deliverance. We solemnly promised not to mention climbing once back in Berkeley.

But Chris and the sun met us on top. Chris brought a quart apiece of OJ and milk plus a half gallon of water. As we walked down North Dome gully, Annie and I talked of climbing El C.

This vague interest did not become a passion until I went up on the Pacific Ocean Wall with JB. Going up the first seven pitches of this not yet completed route, I knew I must spend some time climbing to the sky. Bev mentioned she might be interested. Several men either offered "to take me up it" or asked if I'd like to do the climb with them, but I wasn't particularly interested in "being taken up it." Doing an all-female ascent, the first all-female ascent in fact, was not a significant consideration: I simply knew Bev much better than any of the men interested. Being up there with another woman can be incredibly comfortable, relaxed, and hilariously funny, but, with men, even close friends, there is always a certain pressure to prove that women can do things, as well as the tendency to whimper when things get tough and to let them do it for one.

The Climb: We decided to fix four pitches and with this start, hopefully to reach a ledge our first night. The first three pitches went well, the hauling still fairly easy since not all gear was packed yet, but our afternoon start prevented us from fixing the fourth that same day. Our next trip, halfway up the fourth pitch, the hammer smashed my finger in preference to the pin. Was this fear subconsciously influencing materials to give occasion for retreat? Or were these genuine omens warning us to desist in our challenge? X-ray plates pronounced the suspectedly broken finger unharmed; thus the borrowed alarm was to insure our pre-dawn departure the following day.

Dinner was a final indulgence in orange milkshakes and hot apple pie, neither of which succeeded in driving away the fear creeping in. I ate with three friends but not really there at all, finally fleeing for the phone to call a man unseen in four months. There being little left in the way of procrastination after taking four days to fix as many pitches, I reluctantly headed for the tent to quake in terror of the coming day. But I ran into a friend just back from the city who wanted to talk and hear the news. "Come stay with me tonight," I begged. "I'm so afraid."

Fortunately walls are too active to permit terror to share the mind with action: if not leading, belaying while keeping two ropes running smoothly, unpacking the camera from the haulsack to take a picture, digging out extra pins and attempting to grab some food keeps one occupied. The first day was to be our most difficult climbing: the dread Half Dollar (a flaring F9 chimney), a steep, difficult face pitch that can also be hooked (either alternative equally undesirable), and the "F9 A3" pitch were waiting for us. Except for the face pitch they were not as bad

as their reputations. That one; I stood on a grinding wiggling hook, looked at the next placement, and gave it to Bev. She strategically placed a hook behind a large nubbin which broke off and hit her in the head. Grumbling about the inferiority of the alternative placement, she kept on hooking.

Hauling was our biggest problem in this section: the bag was the heaviest and the rock had the lowest angle. In doing walls, this is no doubt the factor which places women at the greatest disadvantage: a fast male team can get away with 80 lbs., about half their weight; but on our slow journey the sack rivaled my 120 lbs. At first, we were forced to wait until one of us had cleaned the pitch and we would then haul together. Ferrying the sack across Mammoth Terraces was a major obstacle: just barely able to lift it between us, we'd stagger a few feet, drop it, and get ready for the next lap.

Upon reaching the ledge that night, we promptly passed out. Pitches blend together, but the nights stand apart, each unique in the position we had to assume: gingerly on one's side on a long narrow ledge, or a night-long battle to regain territory on the sloping variety.

The next few days were routine, one much like the other, the pounding in of pins succeeded by their extraction. Once as I cleaned a pitch, cursing to the best of my ability, Bev burst out laughing. "It sounds so funny to hear another chick swear," she sputtered. Thereafter I tried to exercise more creativity in my cursing, a difficult feat in tense situations.

As it was, the Fates spun their threads favorably. The storm which had struck earlier, delaying our departure, never returned to take advantage of us now that we had fewer avenues of escape. The heat was oppressive on our second and third days, so much so that one mid-day we pitched our rainfly and retreated beneath its shade. Our water dwindled. The winds battering the brow of the Captain—gusts that blow the rope out horizontally and stuff its end into distant cracks—were not entirely unwelcome.

Traversing gray bands to reach the Nose, we got thoroughly lost. Without a topo and with no idea how far we had to traverse, we tried a crack straight up, one to the left and then climbed right as far as possible to examine possibilities there. At least there was a ledge for the night of restless sleep, filled with strange dreams. I woke to find myself on a narrow ledge 2000 feet off the ground. I turned to tell Bev my dreams. She had dreamt of traversing over to the Salathé to get a route description.

Fortified with our dreams, we picked a likely crack and started on the last leg of our journey. After sleeping at Camp 5 that night, we reached Camp 6 early the next day to find a quart of water awaiting us. Exhausted, we collapsed for an extensive lunch and debated the wisdom of fixing two pitches and spending the night there. The gray clouds floating in from Tenaya Canyon made us wonder who would reach the top first: the storm or us. Shouts from the summit clinched the decision: we would go for it.

Three pitches later I flailed about, trying to clean a flaring crack/chimney in the dark by headlamp. With a pack on my back, could I squirm up high enough to unclip from the next nut? I finally struggled onto a 10x24-inch stance to be told that it was my bed. "And don't you dare complain," Bev said. "Mine's even smaller." Having never bivouacked in slings, I didn't really know what to do. Bev was extremely helpful. "Figure it out yourself." After standing there long enough, I did.

Once settled, this remains one of the most memorable and beautiful nights of my life. Despite any physical discomforts of my position, I was glad to be there. Serene in the knowledge that we were only three pitches below the top and would reach it early the next morning, I settled back to munch gorp and read Asimov science fiction. The rock swelled into a roof up to the right, a beautifully sculptured curve that I could just perceive in the beam of the headlamp. Cars twinkled by, 3000 feet down, threading their way along the flowing moonlight below me where the river had been earlier that day. I leaned back to await my last sunrise here and, perchance, to sleep.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Yosemite Valley, California.

ASCENT: El Capitan, First All-Female Ascent, 3 D Route (Salathé Wall for 1000 feet, Muir Wall for next 1000 feet and the Nose for the last 1000 feet), September 25 to October 2, 1973 (Sibylle Hechtel, Beverly Johnson).

