

The belayer should anchor if the stance is unstable. But the most important point is **ALWAYS ANCHOR OR KNOT THE BELAY ROPE!** Do this even on ridiculously short climbs to maintain the habit and to set a good example. (Source: John Dill, NPS Ranger, Yosemite National Park)

DARKNESS – STRANDED

California, Pinnacles National Monument, Condor Crag

On the evening of November 15th, park staff assisted two climbers down from a climbing route after they had become stranded due to nightfall. Both climbers were uninjured.

The climbers were able to place a cellphone call to a friend around 6:00 p.m. after they could no longer climb in darkness. They were near the top of a 500-foot route on the Condor Crag formation in the High Peaks area of the park. They were in different locations on the route and could not complete the final 100 feet without additional light. Rangers contacted the party via cellphone and determined their location and condition before the phone battery was exhausted. With an overnight forecast of 25 degrees F and gusting winds, rangers and search and rescue team members were dispatched to climb to their location. The crew of a California Highway Patrol helicopter located the pair using infrared radar and a powerful “Night Sun” floodlight. Assisted by monument staff, the climbers then completed the route and descent. By the time they got down at 1:00 a.m., they’d been on the route for 14 hours. (Source: Brett Hergert, Operations Supervisor) *(Editor’s Note: In the not too distant past, these climbers would have spent a night out—and maybe worse. Cellphones and the technical equipment available to rescue personnel have changed the game of climbing considerably. Maybe we should revive the notion of creating no-rescue zones...)*

FALL ON ROCK, GEAR SLING CAUGHT ON CAM DURING FALL – STRANGULATING CLIMBER

California, Kings Canyon National Park, Obelisk

My name is Patrick Callery. Our friend David Shirley and I were climbing with Ishun Chan on the South Face route of the Obelisk when she was tragically killed on November 8. This report of the accident is provided with the hopeful intent to provide some answers for her many friends and loved ones and with the hope that her tragic passing may in some way better inform the climbing community of potential dangers in our sport.

Sometime in early October I pitched Ishun on a trip to the Obelisk. A classic backcountry rock with an arduous approach, the Obelisk had been on my to-do list for years, and Ishun was enthusiastic about joining me for it. We half expected we’d eventually cancel the trip plan given the lateness of the season, but continued fair and mild mountain weather throughout

late October kept the window of opportunity open. As the weekend approached, David also joined in. We grew a little apprehensive about the forecast for cold temperatures, but it would be only marginally colder than we had comfortably dealt with on Charlotte Dome two weeks prior, and the weather was forecast to remain stable throughout the weekend and several days past. Out of the many fine routes on the peak, we chose the South Face as our objective given its comparatively low rating (5.6 per Secor and Vernon guides), fewer anticipated pitches, and sunny exposure. We knew it would be a long day and anticipated hiking out Sunday night in the dark, as we had done on the Charlotte Dome trip.

The next morning, we rose at 5:30 a.m. and started hiking at 6:00 a.m. We made good time on the approach and arrived at the saddle northeast of the Obelisk around 7:15 a.m. We took our time changing shoes and gearing up, and found the approach down the east side of the Obelisk more tedious with bushes than expected. After poking around the base of the South Face and studying the topos and other route beta, we settled on the most obvious "vegetated gully" that appears at the base of the South Face route. Entering the gully appeared tricky and awkward, so I offered to lead a pitch on the face to the left and traversed in to the gully about 100 feet up. Ishun followed, and we belayed David up from the proper gully entrance to save time. Above here, the gully appeared easy and we unroped to climb the next 150-200 feet solo. We continually discussed whether we were really in the proper South Face "long, broken chimney" or rather the "recess" mentioned in the Vernon guide. Much of this part of the gully was fourth-class, with a few steep and awkward stemming/chimney moves to get around chock stones and bulges. Upon reaching a particularly difficult bulge, we opted to rope up and continue climbing. It was now a little after 9:00 a.m. Our intent was to top out by noon so as to get a good start on the pack out before nightfall.

Ishun took the next lead, starting up and over a steep bulge that she adamantly noted was somewhat stiffer than 5.6. Yet another bulge higher up was similarly difficult, but also cleared in good style. About 70 feet up, the gully ended in a steep wall. She found an awkward exit to the right, climbing out of our sight, though we had excellent voice communication here and she relayed some of what she saw. The steep face directly above the top of the gully looked intimidating and she thought she might traverse right to see what lay above. She was starting to move a little more slowly now and I remember continually looking down at my watch, concerned about our pace. It was now about 9:45 a.m. I shouted from below that if things didn't look right, she should put in an anchor and bring us up to discuss our options. She proceeded a little farther and I hollered out that she had reached the halfway mark on the rope. She responded that she would climb another

10-20 feet and anchor. After a couple minutes, I heard the terrible scraping noise of a steep slab fall and the rope fluttered as Ishun cried out.

Surprisingly, the rope did not come taut. In this brief moment I rationalized that she had either caught her fall or stopped on a ledge. David and I called up to see if she was OK. There was no reply. We shouted a few more times and heard nothing. Moving quickly, I pulled the rope tight, locked off the belay, and backed it up. We fixed a Klemheist to the rope and reinforced the anchor for upward pull, then tied off the rope to the anchor and stepped out of the belay. About half the rope was out, so we reasoned I could reach her on the other half. We also had a single twin-rope (for the third climber) and I tied this to my harness to trail up. David put me on belay and I proceeded on the free half of the lead rope, clipping the pieces Ishun had placed on lead. The climbing was difficult as she had said and my heart was racing. I tried to climb quickly but deliberately. Eventually I reached the top of the gully and could see Ishun to my right.

At the top of the gully, she had exited right and climbed up and right over steep slabs about ten feet to a tied-off knob. Much of this face was very modestly featured, and conspicuously lacking the copious chickenheads we had found on the first pitch far below. She was now resting about 20 feet to the right and slightly down from this last piece. She was oriented vertically with her back to me and I could see a piece fixed to the rock directly above her. One arm was thrust upward and she was leaning against the wall. I continued to call out to her in as calm a voice as I could muster, trying to reassure her (and myself) that everything was going to be OK. I climbed up to clip the top piece, then down-climbed and proceeded to traverse out to her on steep and surprisingly blank friction, with a few small footholds for balance. As I got to within ten feet of her, David called out from below that I was now out of rope. I'd misjudged the rope length and now couldn't reach her. I inched back to the left to more secure footholds, tied into the haul line, climbed back up to the high knob and clipped it. After David put me on belay with the haul line, I untied from the lead rope and traversed back out. It's hard to remember exactly, but by this point at least 30 minutes had passed since the fall.

When I reached Ishun, I could see her gear sling was pulled tight under one shoulder and around the other side of her neck. The gear sling itself was hanging from a single cam, the trigger bar having caught and held on a small knob directly above her head. This is what had stopped her fall without loading the rope. There was a loose runner clipped to the rope, indicating she may have been trying to sling a knob when she fell. She did not appear to be breathing and I wasn't sure if I was detecting a faint carotid pulse. There were red trauma marks on her neck and thin white foam at her lips.

I was horrified to find that I could not release the gear sling, as it was

holding her entire body weight. We were 20 feet out on a pendulum exposure and I could not find sufficient footholds to apply enough leverage to pull off the sling or to lift the cam from the protrusion above. The surface features available (a few small, rounded knobs in inconvenient locations) presented only very marginal protection between our position and the last good piece. What followed was almost mechanical. Somehow I was able to rig a lowering system near the previous good piece and release Ishun from her position without causing a further pendulum swing. I am wracked with doubts as to whether I made all the right decisions in administering emergency care while managing the anchoring in our precarious position. All I wanted was to get her off the rock safely and see her wake up. I tried to hold out high hopes throughout the ordeal, but deep in my heart I think I knew she was already gone.

(Editor's Note: A long description of the down-climbing and extrication and followed. Mr. Callery offered the following, which will serve as the analysis.)

First, Ishun [was] an excellent climber and quite experienced leading on backcountry trad routes. She [had] a solid understanding of protection and anchor dynamics and is a careful route finder. She [was] an exceptionally strong climber and share[d] my unhealthy enjoyment of suffering heavy packs over long approaches to reach remote backcountry gems. She had many long backcountry routes under her belt, most recently a two-day outing to climb the South Face of Charlotte Dome, which we successfully completed in good style two weeks prior to the accident. She [had] demonstrated very solid capability leading sustained 5.8 trad routes, with raw technical ability well into the 5.10 range. I would like to emphasize my opinion that this accident was not a result of inexperience or exceeding abilities.

It appears she may have simply slipped and come off her stance, perhaps while trying to place protection. She should have taken a swinging pendulum fall on the steep slab, with the likely consequence some scraped limbs, a possible bonk on her (helmeted) head, and at worst maybe a sprained ankle. The cam catching on a small knob and stopping her fall was an extremely unlikely occurrence with a devastating outcome.

(Editor's Note: This report was edited from a posting by Patrick Callery on SuperTopo and SummitPost. Climbing Web sites often have deeply personal postings such as this one. We appreciate the candor and specifics provided, even though not all the details we seek are embedded.)

STRANDED CLIMBER, EXCEEDING ABILITIES, INADEQUATE CLOTHING, EQUIPMENT AND FOOD AND CLIMBING UNROPED

Colorado, Rocky Mountain National Park, Lumpy Ridge

A party of three (two males, early 20s, and one female, 17) began soloing Organ Pipes (5.6) on the Twin Owls formation, Lumpy Ridge on January