

## Half Dome, June 1999

by Josh Smith



When you stand at Mirror Lake and look up, Half Dome appears as remote and inhospitable as the moon. Below it, slabs of granite ribboned with shrubs rise steeply for three thousand feet, then the face itself shoots up from a few scraggly trees, looming over the valley like a brooding, capricious monarch. Its rugged, vertical grandeur is an odd contrast to the people wandering around the lake, strolling up and down on the pavement, and jumping off of rocks into the creek. To Rick and I, walking along the lake shore, the mountain appeared every bit the, "crest of granite...perfectly inaccessible...the only one of all the prominent points about the Yosemite which has never been, and never will be, trodden by

human foot." (from the USGS survey, 1865, as quoted in *Fifty Classic Climbs of North America*, Steve Roper, Allen Steck, 1981). We looked in vain for traces of human footprints on the remote monolith, then headed for the cabin to pack and plan for the hike to the base of Half Dome the next day.

The trip was Rick Bradshaw's idea. He had been thinking about Half Dome for twenty years, and when he suggested to me that we climb the North West Face route, I said I'd love to. Rick is a terrific climbing partner. He is strong, strong-willed, and tempered by 30 years on the sharp end of a rope. He also has half a dozen Grade VI climbs (climbs taking two or more days) to his credit. More

importantly has a superfluity of the emotional equilibrium necessary to prepare for and execute a big climb. I lack Rick's experience, but felt that I could also contribute to the expedition. I was also eager to see him in action and pick his brain about big wall climbing.

We started training about two and a half months before our trip, both by honing our crack climbing skills and by starting the long process of aerobic training. For a climb of Half Dome's magnitude, the best way we could prepare ourselves was by developing an excess of strength. I am a decent traditional climber, but I lack experience on big walls, and have never spent the night on a cliff. Rick has plenty of experience climbing big walls, but was rusty at traditional climbing, having spent recent years focused on hard sport climbing. And neither of us had ever attempted climbing a Grade VI in a day before. This was truly to be an adventure and not a casual jaunt.

The training process was important in psychological ways as well. Rick and I needed to coordinate our climbing styles and get to know how the other reacted 200 feet out at the end of a rope. On Half Dome, we would need to be able to predict the other person's actions in stressful and exhausting situations, and before this spring, neither of us had ever done a multi-pitch trad<sup>1</sup> climb with the other. For us to climb 22 pitches in a day unambiguous communication would be critical.

We started climbing cracks in White Rock, we headed up to Questa Dome to climb a moderate multi-pitch granite route, and did the 15 pitch 5.8 South East Ridge of the Needle in the Sandias. We climbed the Needle in less than four hours, which I thought was a good sign. We discussed strategies for training, for gearing up, and for preparing ourselves mentally. Rick spent hours and hours

going over gear and figuring out what we would need to take on the climb and what we could leave behind. He combed the climbing stores in Santa Fe and Los Alamos looking for better ways of going fast and light. I downloaded numerous descriptions of the route from the internet and poured over them, trying to construct a picture of the route in my mind before I had ever seen the rock. I filled my backpack with gallon jugs of water and hiked up to the top of the ski hill, emptied the water, hiked down again. I got up at 6am and ran until my calves cramped. And I studied the route maps and the descriptions some more. As our departure date neared, I began--without ever having seen Half Dome--to believe that we would climb it easily and be back in camp for dinner. Twelve hours on the face if everything went as planned.

However, nothing ever goes *quite* as planned, and my confidence began to wane even before we left New Mexico. Both Rick and I have medical problems that make grueling physical exercise difficult. Rick is an insulin dependent diabetic, and I have Addison's disease (a disorder of the adrenal glands). Both conditions must be managed carefully to avoid dementia, debilitating exhaustion, and other states that make long climbing days difficult.

I have managed to control my Addison's quite well since its onset in 1996, but in training for this trip, I pushed myself over the edge and ended up in the emergency room on the Monday before we were supposed to leave. Addison's crisis is triggered by stress, and I had gone overboard in virtually every dimension, pushing myself at work, pushing myself mentally, and pushing myself physically. On Sunday night, I began throwing up, and by morning, I knew I was in the grips of my first real Addison's crisis since the onset of the disease. I called Stephanie, and she took me to the ER, where I received massive doses of hydrocortisone and fluids, which quickly pulled me out of danger. I

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<sup>1</sup> See the end of this paper for a short description of some of the terms used.

was able to return to work on Tuesday, but I was shaken and worried that I wouldn't be recovered by Friday. I was also worried that my body wouldn't be able to handle the stress of a week in Yosemite.

However, I wasn't about to back out. I had become obsessed with the climb, and I was convinced we could do it, even if I was still in less than perfect shape. I had also missed a big climb in 1996 when I first acquired Addisons, and it had been a bitter disappointment. I was not going to suffer a repeat performance in 1999. In reading the descriptions from the net, it appeared to me that climbers of virtually every ability had been up the North West Face. Regardless of medical issues, we could and would do the climb.

I was more worried about weather and the other people than dropping dead of Addisons crisis. Half Dome is one of the most recognizable rocks in the world, and the Regular Northwest Face route historically draws a crowd. One story I found described how hopeful climbers had made the trek to the base of the cliff only to find 21 people in front of them, waiting to climb. Our solution was to prepare ourselves as best we could and to attempt not to worry about factors beyond our control.

On Friday afternoon, June 18<sup>th</sup>, we threw our bags in Rick's 4 Runner and headed for the airport. We had two large packs, one smaller climbing pack, and a huge cooler full of climbing gear and food. We already had a good jump on traveling fast and light. We made it to Reno only a little late, picked up our rental car (a maroon Chevy Malibu) and headed out towards Yosemite. That night we stayed in a run-down motel called the Carson Inn in Carson City, Nevada's capital

After departing Carson City, we headed straight on to Tuolumne Meadows and the high Sierra. I had never been to the Sierra Nevada mountains before, and

driving into the high country was an incredible experience for me. Stephanie can testify that I wax rhapsodic over rocks at the most inopportune times and all out of appropriate proportion. I waxed and I waxed as we got close to Tuolumne, and I thought I had stepped into heaven as we entered the Park and drove into the Meadows proper. A white mountain stream follows the road, creates crystal pools of snowmelt amid towering evergreens. And everywhere is granite. Domes of gray rock rise out of the earth like the backs of enormous elephants, splintered here and there with cracks, sometimes sporting a roof or a vertical face. The green of the trees sets off the white of the snow, which sets off the blue of the sky, which is reflected by a thousand pools of meltwater. The air is clean and clear and carries an uplifting scent of pines and snow. Rick drove as I exercised my neck muscles, trying to drink everything in.

We stopped near a moderately sized rock called Drug Dome and pulled out our climbing packs. We had selected a climb called Oz as our first warm-up. Oz is 4 pitches, roughly 500 feet tall. It traverses left over an angled crack, then up a vertical finger-sized crack to a 20 foot roof. It escapes the roof to the left, then wanders to the summit. We skittered over the snow to the base of the climb, geared up, and started climbing. Each pitch was fascinating. Rick took the first lead, running the rope out 20 feet without protection at one point, climbing up to the easy slanting crack. I started up the crux pitch, rated 5.10d, which is protected by bolts and no gear. I tried to connect my feet with my mind and meld them both with the granite so that I could begin to learn when I would stick and when I wouldn't on this unfamiliar, knobby rock. I felt awkward and overgeared. I was carrying everything I would take on Half Dome, and it seemed inappropriately bulky and heavy on a small route like this. At the most difficult part of the pitch, I made a move, then couldn't find a quick draw to clip into the bolt. I

gabbed a cam, looked at the bolt, looked at the cam, put it back, then dug around again for a quick draw, couldn't find one, and slid off. It was almost a relief to fall and realize that climbing in Tuolumne was just like climbing in New Mexico, and that bolts work the same everywhere. I found my draws, made the moves, and completed the pitch. The next two pitches were amazing, taking us up first a 5.10a finger crack, then up a 5.10c finger crack around a bulge. The cracks were perfect, the gear good, and the exposure better with every minute. At the summit, we were exhilarated, saying, "hey, we might be off of Half Dome by noon." (Actually, I think that was just me. Rick maintained a positive but more realistic attitude). The view from the top of Drug Dome showed all of the Meadows, and we took a moment to snack and enjoy the view.

Riding high, we decided to drive into Yosemite Valley proper, then head out to the cabin we had reserved outside the Valley. If the Great Pyramids are more impressive than Yosemite, I'm not sure I want to see them. Since I started climbing five years ago, I've wanted to see Yosemite. I've seen pictures, I've heard descriptions, I've read and read and read about climbs that mean nothing to me on walls I couldn't properly visualize. However, nothing can prepare one for the sheer magnitude of the walls. In a matter of minutes, I experienced epiphany stacked upon epiphany, culminating when El Capitan appeared around a corner, sticking up above the trees like the world's largest movie prop. Everything I had read crystallized, and on El Cap I saw the Nose, the Salathé, Tangerine Trip, the Heart, and the North American Wall (Rick has climbed both the Salathé and Tangerine Trip, and I admit a guilty jealousy of those accomplishments after seeing the wall itself). I strong-armed Rick off the road and jumped out to take pictures of El Capitan and of the waterfalls. Rick said he had never seen the waterfalls so big. Yosemite Falls was fountaining off of the rock in an

explosive, thundering plume of water. The printed Park guide called it the 3rd tallest waterfall in the world. Off to the right of the waterfall, I could see Lost Arrow, one of Yosemite's most famous climbing landmarks. As I was taking steps into the world of the present, Rick was walking down memory lane. He reeled off stories about each formation we passed, telling me about the Chouinard-Herbert route on that buttress, describing the Steck-Salathé route on this other buttress, naming climbs, climbers, and draping the Valley in history for me.

We drove on, glimpsed Half Dome through the trees, and headed back down the loop road. On the way back, we picked out another warm-up route to climb the following day. My friend Kennan had recommended the Direct North Buttress of Middle Cathedral (the DNB) as a good Valley starter and warm up to Half Dome. He said it would get us ready for long, multi-pitch routes, complex route finding, and climbing quickly through varied terrain. He also warned that that some people said DNB stood for "Do Not Bother." The guidebook called it a classic and gave it a full three Yosemite stars, so we decided that it would be our fare for the next day. Seventeen pitches long and rated 5.10b, it was no joke, but both of us had climbed strongly that day in Tuolumne, and only the third pitch was rated 5.10. Rick went so far as to say, "Hell, this'll be a romp. We can sprint everything up to 5.9." We looked at the route from across the river. The route follows a line of natural weakness up the huge formation called Middle Cathedral. It starts on a pillar, trends left, then shoots up to the top of the formation in a single line: maybe 1800 feet of moderate cracks. Easy fare for climbers such as ourselves, we decided. Boasts and brags are made of such frangible stuff.

We headed to the Evergreen Lodge, which is 30 windy minutes out of the Valley. It lies, according to the brochure,

“in John Muir’s favorite corner of Yosemite.” John Muir must be a man of less discriminating taste than I had thought. The country around the Evergreen is pretty, but unremarkable, chiefly distinguished by thick second growth forest. The Lodge is attractive, constructed of rough-hewn logs, and has a restaurant, a bar, and a store packed into a single building. We checked in and discovered that we had been assigned a cabin with only one bed. I distinctly remembered asking for two beds, but the harried clerk said, “your reservation is marked with “Do Not Move.” The DNM. The DNM usually means that someone has been here before and specifically wants that cabin.” I said that I didn’t remember asking for the DNM, but that we’d make do. It was obvious that we weren’t going to find another accommodation, particularly not after being branded with the DNM. The cabin was nice enough, but so small that we’d have difficulty squeezing a sleeping pad on the floor next to the bed. We set an alarm for five the next morning and called it a day.

We departed early the next morning, stopping briefly on the side of the road to make coffee before descending into the Valley. We parked and made the short walk to the base of the DNB. I was worried that we would see crowds of people. After all, this was Sunday and we were climbing a Yosemite classic. However, there were no other cars at the parking area, and it didn’t appear that we were going to be elbowing people out of the crack. I took that (at first) to be a good omen. We decided that I would lead first and that Rick would take the crux. The first pitch is 5.7, and I thought I would make short work of it and link the first two pitches together, gaining us some altitude quickly. After about fifty feet, I started to get worried. I was struggling, sweating, and peeling skin off of my knees and elbows as I tried to arm bar and body cam my way up a chimney. Was I doing this wrong? Had I forgotten how to climb? I was worried because I

thought there was a real chance I might fall off of a 5.7 (a horror greater than the fact that I hadn’t been able to get much protection in the chimney). I did *not* want to start my first pitch of my first day in the Valley with a fall. Both my ego and my elbows survived, and I didn’t fall. After exiting the chimney, the climb became the vertical hike I expected, and I was soon at the belay. I was very curious as to what Rick would think of the pitch. As an old Valley hand, I was sure he would know some tricks that I hadn’t been able to think of and would tell me that I just needed to hone my skills a bit more and how to go about doing it. However, when he pulled sweating into the belay, he said, “Wow, I would call that classic 5.9 off-width. That was hard.”

We switched over the rack, both commenting that the first pitch couldn’t be indicative of the way the entire climb would go. Rick took the lead on the crux of the entire climb. He placed some gear, then moved left towards a bolt. Between the last possible protection and the bolt was fifteen feet of completely unprotected climbing, setting him up for a possible 30 foot fall. Rick paused briefly to look it over, then moved quickly up towards the bolt, mantled up on a sloping shelf, reached up and clipped the bolt. I breathed a deep sigh of relief, since a fall would have had serious consequences, possibly a broken ankle or worse. However, Rick didn’t look happy yet. He clipped another bolt, climbed up, climbed back down, climbed up, climbed back down, climbed up, and fell. “This is hard.” Second pitch follows the first. I was starting to think that we might be in for a long, long day. Rick tried a few more times, then pulled past the bolt by holding onto the draw. Generally, Rick can onsite bolted climbs up to about 5.11d, and I knew that if he was struggling with the moves, that something was wrong with the climb, not with him. It was supposed to be a 5.10b pitch, and should have been easy. We were geared up for a long, long

climb, and the extra weight made delicate face climbing more difficult, but it shouldn't have made it impossible. Rick finished the rest of the pitch, and I followed with the confidence inspired by a top rope. At the crux, I slipped off, too. I did manage to work through on my second try, but I was infinitely glad that Rick had been leading on that pitch. We discussed it at the belay, and decided that the pitch would have been 5.11 in White Rock.

More intricate climbing followed, and I made delicate moves over the face of the rock, occasionally finding places for protection, but only occasionally. I had been hearing for years that grading in Yosemite is stiff, and a 5.9 in the Valley might rate at least a number grade increase at any other place. Tuolumne had seemed within normal bounds to me, but the DNB was living up to the worst stories I had ever heard. The route seemed to receive little traffic. Could that be because it was very long, graded very toughly, and had a very difficult line to follow? There was no one queued up at the base. In fact, we were the only party on the entire buttress of Middle Cathedral. I looked up, and Rick was having difficulty deciding where the route went. Route finding was the last thing I expected to have difficulty with on this climb. According to the topo, one simply had to head left a little, then go straight up to the top of the formation. So why did it appear that there were three possible ways to go on this pitch? I relaxed and let Rick work it out. Across the meadow, El Capitan rose out of the meadow, and a line of sun kissed the tip of the Nose. Beneath El Cap, a shroud of mist graced the green of the meadow, winding in and out of the trees, buoying up the morning. The river burbled hundreds of feet down, and I belayed, enjoying the air, enjoying the place.

Over the next two pitches our fears about route finding were confirmed. We often couldn't guess where the route went, and wasted valuable time

wandering around, knowing which way was up but unsure of how to get there. Seventeen pitches is a long way, and the farther we got up, the more difficult it would be to retreat. Spending the night on the face of Middle Cathedral was unappealing to me and we were moving slowly. At one point I started up a crack only to realize that I was in the wrong place. Some previous party had made the same mistake I had and I found their retreat gear a hundred feet up from the belay. I clipped into their gear and pendulumed to the left as far as I could go. Sure enough, there was another crack over there. I swung again, ducked into the crack, and climbed up farther to set a belay. Rick followed and pendulumed into the crack as I had done. We looked down at the section of crack we had just bypassed. The topo called it a "5.8 off-width." It looked like a people-eater to me, and we had just sneaked around it. Good planning on our part. Above us, a whole series of chimneys shot towards the top of the formation. The route finding difficulties were over, but I guessed that the physical part of the climb was just beginning. We had a snack and drank the last of our water.

At this point, we had been climbing in the sun for about seven or eight hours, and both of us were very thirsty and hot. The sun finally went behind the formation, giving us gracious relief for the chimneys. Rick lead the next pitch, and when I followed it, he declared himself exhausted. His blood sugar was out of whack, and neither of us had any water left. We looked up. The top of the formation was at least six or seven pitches away. We decided that I should take the lead for a while in the hopes that Rick would be able to stabilize his blood sugar and regain some energy. I began running pitches together when possible. The climbing seemed to be improving immeasurably, and I actually began to enjoy the moderately difficult upper pitches. Even the grading was beginning to come in line, and 5.9 felt like 5.9 again. Unfortunately, however, the top three pitches were chimneys. We

climbed a 5.6 chimney, A 5.7 chimney, and a final 5.8 chimney. The 5.6 chimney was incredibly physical. It is a constricting slot set at about seventy degrees, virtually impossible to protect, impossible to fall out of, and nearly impossible to make upward progress in. I inched my way upwards, afraid that I would slip and fall, wedging myself into the crack like a cork from which only vultures would be able to extract my desiccated corpse. I am accustomed to thinking of 5.6 as free range terrain where I can wander at will with ease and confidence. That chimney brutally disabused me of my pretensions. The final 5.8 chimney also seemed like a bad joke. It was more vertical and wider and was actually a lot easier to climb than the 5.6 chimney, but it was filled with dirt and chock stones. I chimneyed up, looped an arm around a chock stone, and wallowed over onto a small shelf that was covered with dried holly leaves and dirt. I could feel spiky leaves and dirt grinding into my face as I squirmed into the crack, seeking purchase and protection. I tried to spit out some of the dirt, but couldn't muster enough saliva to do more than dribble a little.

"Screw this," I thought, and began jamming in gear whenever I could and pulling on it. I placed one nut, put a sling on it, and stood up in it, driving it into the crack. All thoughts of style were gone from my mind. It was nearly eight, we had been climbing since six thirty that morning, and I wanted to get to the top of the formation, get down, and get a goddamn drink of water. I was worried about Rick, I was hungry, and I had had enough of this stupid formation. If Half Dome was anything like this, I was going to go home and not climb in Yosemite again. I didn't like having my ego stepped on in a 5.8 chimney. Half Dome has three hundred feet of chimneys in a row. If they were like the chimneys on the DNB, we'd be in them for twelve hours. Time to get up, time to get down.

We topped out about eight, realized that we had about an hour to get down, and no idea where the descent was. Both of us were tired and leery of making mistakes. Rick is extremely tough and stoic, but he wasn't saying much, and I knew that he was fighting against both dehydration and low blood sugar. I was feeling blasted as well and more than a little weak. Water would bring us around quickly, but the nearest water was 1800 feet below. We simul-climbed around the top of the formation, looking for the narrow band of ledges that forms the Kat Walk, the trail to the descent. We finally found what appeared to be a break in the cliff and made our way delicately across the face, walking unroped on narrow fourth class ledges far above the earth. The entire seventeen pitches of our route were spread out beneath us, awaiting one false step. If it hadn't been so late, the traverse would have been exhilarating. As it was, I kept thinking of the conflicting need to go faster and make it to the descent gully before we lost the daylight, but still guard against the laxity that exhaustion and hurry breeds. From the valley far below a bull horn blared out. I couldn't make out the words, but Rick said, "Didn't they say something about the Kat Walk?" I thought he was delusional, but politely refrained from saying anything more than, "you really think so?" He speculated that the Park Service was getting ready to tow our car. I had been dreaming about the two liters of grapefruit juice in the cooler, and if we made it back to the car only to find the grapefruit juice impounded by the parking police, I wasn't sure I could take it.

We made it to the descent gully and found a small pool of water at the top. Each of us drank a cup or so, draining the small pool completely. The musty drip-water was the best drink I've ever had. I have never been so thirsty, and I hope never to be so thirsty again. I had serious doubts about our ability, given our respective medical disorders, to make it through the night undamaged

without water. The small drink gave us just enough energy to bounce down the gully, which ran nearly uninterrupted to the valley floor. We moved as quickly as we could, down-climbing past two rappel points and rappelling from a third. The white granite in the steep gully caught and trapped the last light of the sun, making the descent relatively safe and easy. As we reached the relatively flat forest floor, I pulled out my headlamp for the final 100 yards. We had made it. Five minutes later we were back at the car, which was still sitting untowed at the side of the road. I drank a liter and a half of grapefruit juice, then opened a beer. Two men were parked in front of us in an RV. They wandered over to talk to us and ask if we had seen anyone else on the descent (we hadn't). They had been expecting their friends back from a climb much earlier, and were getting worried. They also said that they had seen us on the Kat Walk and had shouted up at us (with a bullhorn, I think). One mystery solved. They complimented us on the speed of our descent, and I said, "Well, we were pretty thirsty." We packed up and headed back to the lodge to lick our wounds and bandage our egos. For me, our Valley warm-up had contained the most exhausting climbing day of my life.

We had been thinking about the DNB as a warm-up for Half Dome, and the more I thought about it, the more appropriate it seemed. I, at least, needed the stuffing knocked of me. I needed to climb a lot of pitches that were difficult, and I needed to find how the rock in the Valley would treat me. When would I stick, when would I fall, what would it be like to go up and up and up and up? I can't say that I would recommend the DNB to anyone. The good climbing consisted of probably four pitches out of the seventeen or so that we climbed, and the route finding was difficult, but I was very glad that we had climbed it because of the lessons it taught us. Rick and I discussed the DNB with other climbers and collected an interesting

series of comments, but didn't speak to one other person who had attempted it.

"I heard that's the biggest sandbag in the whole Valley."

"I heard a whole pitch fell off of that climb."

"I heard that it wasn't even possible to free that climb."

"I heard it was great. Was it?"

"I heard that John Long pulled on the bolt at the 10b<sup>2</sup>."

"Wow, I heard that was a classic," (two guys from Sweden who had just spent a night on a wall.)

For one to get deeply into climbing, one must possess a series of odd traits, not the least of which is a powerful selective memory. By early the next day, both Rick and I were feeling reasonably cocky again. We hadn't spent the night on Middle Cathedral, we had gotten down and slept in our beds, neither of us had required hospitalization, and we **would** climb Half Dome. We would, however, take a lot more water, and we wouldn't screw around with route finding and trying to free anything that looked like it might be faster to aid. We would know as best we could where the route went, and not take anything for granted ("Oh, it's just a 5.6 pitch, probably take 20 minutes to lead and follow"). Both of us had to think seriously about our medical conditions as well. Rick had brushed trouble with his blood sugar on the DNB, and I was still unsure of what my limits were, given that less than a week before, I had been in the hospital. We'd be a hell of a long way from assistance if anything went wrong. If Half Dome was more of a physical drain than the DNB, then could we

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<sup>2</sup> John Long is a famous Yosemite Valley climber. During the early seventies he established many long, hard routes in Yosemite.



really do it? It was a serious and unanswerable question. What we could do was prepare better and take more water. Both of us believed that an extra quart of water on the DNB would have shaved considerable time off, and that dehydration had been our single biggest problem on the route, causing weakness and lethargy. It was a serious miscalculation not to have understood how much time we were going to spend in direct sun. As for avoiding medical complications, there wasn't much we could do except wait and see.

We'd had enough of warm-up climbs, and on Monday, rest was our only option. We moved out of the cabin at the Evergreen Lodge and checked in at Curry Village, the large collection of tent cabins directly beneath the Glacier Point Apron. From our cabin, we could see where blocks of stone had detached high on the apron, crushing a climber two weeks before. We wandered around the Village, then took a tour bus around the Valley, stopped at the visitor's center, and inquired about wilderness permits for Half Dome. The ranger was friendly, but deliberately and irritatingly vague about requirements for back country permits. He obviously didn't want to issue us one even though permits were available. He finally told us point blank that we wouldn't be checked for permits at the base of Half Dome: rangers weren't going to walk around that far. We took him at his word and wandered off to do more exploring. The bus took us up to the Mirror Lake, and we disembarked to take the one mile walk to the lake and get our first good view of the face of Half Dome.

The Mirror Lake road is two lanes and is closed to traffic. It takes one almost directly to the base of the slabs leading up to Half Dome, negating the need for any route finding on the approach. After the DNB, Half Dome looked big. And steep. Vertical, or possibly overhanging. I felt tempered with a touch of unease. The Regular North West Face route has three hundred feet of continuous

chimneys rated 5.9. None of the chimneys on the DNB were rated 5.9. Were we going to spend the night in a chimney on Half Dome, hanging like flies trussed up in webbing, waiting for gangrene to start up our legs? What would happen if we ran out of water again? It was 1:00, and the sun was just hitting the face, which was good. Half Dome is also several thousand feet higher than the DNB, which would mean we would be cooler, requiring less water.

The next few days would tell. We went back to Curry Village and ordered a large pizza, and each ate half. That night, we wandered over to the small amphitheater in the village. A climber named Mike Corbett was giving a presentation on climbing El Capitan. He and a paraplegic friend had climbed El Capitan over many days. It was inspiring to see his pictures and hear his speech, and the obvious message to his predominantly non-climbing audience was, "If my paraplegic friend can climb El Cap, you, with two good legs, can do amazing things too." However, at the end of his presentation, he said that they had gone up the Regular North West Face route as well and had spent thirteen days on the wall. Thirteen days. And these guys were professionals.

We started hiking early the next morning, made it to Mirror Lake by 8:30, and started up the slabs. We'd heard them called the "death slabs" multiple times, but the trail seemed well developed and easy to follow. At three or four different places, it passed over pure rock, and some kind soul had put up fixed ropes, allowing us to hand over hand our way over the exposed sections with relative ease. One would not want to fall, particularly with a full pack on, but we were careful and had no problems.

We exited the slabs near the right side of the face and looked around. There was a party huddled off to the right. On the left side, over towards our route, we could see people grouped at the bottom

of the climb, possibly four of them. Four more people were starting up the climb. I started to feel like a cow in a chute. I very badly wanted the difficulty on this adventure to come from the climbing, not from having to deal with other people, and it was beginning to look like we were in for a siege. Rick was somewhat behind me, and I made my way slowly along the base towards the teeming hoards.

Just before the start of the climb, a young man hailed me, "Hey, dude! Welcome! You going to do the North West Face?" I said yes, and he said, "Well, these dudes are coming down, and you'll have a clear shot at it!" He and his partner were preparing to attempt the Direct Route, a line to the right of the North West Face route, and two parties were coming off of the wall at that moment. That left one party aiming for the bivy ledge on pitch six, but one party in front of us instead of three meant that we would still be able to attempt the climb ourselves. I was feeling strange about the whole thing, because I'd never seen so many people wanting to do one climb. I guess that's one hallmark of Yosemite: anything worth climbing has a queue in front of it. I dislike crowds, and for me, climbing is best as a partnership, and crowds can ruin the whole experience. But I knew that if this many people were going up the route, that getting lost on the rock wouldn't be a problem. All we would need to do would be follow the scuff marks made by hundreds of feet paddling up the rock. I chatted with the parties at the base and waited for Rick. The two parties that were coming down had both been afflicted with what Rick calls "Big Wall Sickness." When I asked one fellow why they were retreating, he said, "too damn big." I'm certainly not making judgements, because I could feel a twinge of the sickness myself. To stand at the base of Half Dome and look 1800 feet straight up at the Visor and say to oneself, "I'm going to be up there tomorrow" is an act of considerable hubris. I realized, looking

at these retreating parties, that the same thing could happen to me under the right circumstances, but I also realized that Rick and I had considered as many of the factors as we could as carefully as we could, and that we were fully capable of doing what we intended. We were also doing something different than all the other people waiting at the base. All three of the parties either on the wall or coming down had intended to do the climb in three days, the standard ascent time. They would spend the night on pitch 6, another night on pitch 18, then top out on the third day. We were planning on doing the entire thing in one day, which meant that we'd be covering distance a lot more quickly because we wouldn't be hauling any gear. Still, it was a bit intimidating to see that many people bouted by the route.

Rick and I laid out our stuff and claimed our place first in line just in case anyone else showed up. We chatted some more with the party preparing to start up the Direct, and waited for the last of the people to clear from our route. Our plan was to fix a line on the first pitch, get up at 4:00 the next morning and jug the first pitch. Putting a line up the day before would also assure that no one else would start up in front of us with a lot of haul bags, necessitating a time-consuming pass on the wall. I lead the first pitch, which is rated 5.10c. I was much relieved to discover that it resembled the 5.10 pitch on the DNB only in that both climbs were on rock. It seemed easy and very clean. Hundreds and hundreds of climbers passing over the same rock had knocked the pain and grit out of it, making finger locks with pin scars and scraping off any loose rocks. I'm sure the first assentionists would have barely recognized the pitch.

With our rope up, we settled back with the binoculars to look the route over carefully. We spotted another party at the base of the chimneys, nearly a thousand feet up on the wall. They were moving very slowly and hauling a large bag. We'd need to pass the party on

pitch six, but most likely the upper party would be off the wall long before we got near the top. We could see most of the route, including the famous Robbins Traverse (a bolt ladder and pendulum), the chimneys, and the start of the infamous Zig Zag pitches. The Zig Zag pitches were what worried us most and would either make us or break us. The three Zig Zags can be climbed free at 5.11d, 5.10d, and 5.11d, but we had no pretensions that we'd be in any shape to lead them free. We were planning to do what ever we could to get through them as quickly as possible, including using aiders, pulling on gear, and even levitating, should we figure out a way to do that. Our plan was to get to Big Sandy ledge at the bottom of the Zig Zags by 1:00, then spend the rest of the day getting to the top.

The party that was going to start up the Direct Route came over to chat. One was American, the other South African, and they bolstered us with cheer and confidence. The American was in collage studying English and criticism. He was loquacious and articulate, talking about every subject under the sun. He was far more confident of our success than we were, "Oh, this'll be easy after the DNB. I know you guys will do it. Grade VI on-site in a day, that's way too cool." I appreciated his vote of confidence, but was having difficulty being so sanguine. The Zig Zags were worrying me more and more, as was the scope of the climb. We were both competent and in good shape, but in truth, much can happen on a wall in the space of a day.

As we sat there watching, another party came walking up the hill and set their bags down at the base of the climb. I went over to introduce myself and to tell them that we intended to go up at first light. The older of the two was probably in his early twenties. He was surly and uncommunicative, blond and overweight with a small goatee and two large hoop earrings. His partner was younger and projected a good-natured naiveté. They hadn't climbed much together, but had

managed to divide up tasks. Brandon, the surly blond, said, "I smoke on aid, and my buddy can climb really fast on gear." They planned to make it to Big Sandy ledge at the top of pitch 17 the first day, then summit the second day. I found Brandon's attitude offensive and went back to the shade to lie down. Rick went to talk to them some more and make sure that they knew we were going to start first. We were attempting a speed ascent and had gotten to the base before they had, two good reasons. Brandon said that we could go first, "if you get up early enough," then talked for a while about the 20 shots of Jim Beam he'd drunk the night before.

He and his partner jugged our rope, left a rope, then put another rope up to the top of pitch 3. That suited Rick and me just fine, since we would be able to gain a height of 370 feet before starting to actually climb the next morning.

We made some dinner and watched the climbers on the wall. The party climbing low had finally reached pitch six and were setting up for the night. The party in the chimneys had run into difficulties. The leader had exited the chimneys and was belaying from an upper ledge. He was set to pull up their haul bag from outside the chimneys, but couldn't communicate with his partner. It was very educational for us on the ground, because we could hear both of them, but neither of them could really hear the other.

"Ready to haul!"  
"The haul bag is stuck!"  
"What did you say?"  
"What?"  
"The haul bag is stuck!"  
"What did you say?"  
"What?"

Rick and I took the interplay as an opportunity to discuss communication strategies. We decided to keep our back and forth to a minimum and to not attempt any complex commands or sentences when we were at opposite

ends of the rope. By dark, the two climbers had managed to exit the chimneys, but were still three full pitches short of Big Sandy ledge, which had to have been their goal for the night. As it grew dark, we watched their headlamps moving around on the wall. Lower down, all was quiet on pitch six.

We had decided to get up at 4:00am and begin climbing as soon as we could see. I slept terribly, partly because my sleeping pad was too short, partly because mice kept creeping up to nibble on our hair, food, and bags, and partly because I was nervous about oversleeping while Brandon and company stole a march on us. As a result, I woke up at two, and lay in my bag for an hour and forty five minutes waiting for my alarm to go off.

Rick and I got up, made coffee and oatmeal, drank as much water as we could, and started jugging the fixed lines. Brandon and Co. were also up, but we exchanged few words with them. Rick juggled the second and third pitches together, and I tied into the rope and followed as quickly as I could. In about 45 minutes, we were nearly 400 feet off the ground. I looked down and saw another, different party starting up the climb while Brandon and Co. stood off to the side. Something interesting was going on. I could see that the leader was already half way up the first pitch.

Rick lead out on what would traditionally be the fourth pitch. He did some aid climbing, then began climbing a 5.9 hand crack. By the time he was halfway up, the lead climber below had reached my belay stance. I was very impressed with how fast they were going, and hoped it would be quick and painless to let them go by. Rick and I are skilled, but neither of us are experienced speed climbers, and it would be better for all if these fellows went on ahead.

Rick reached the belay and tied the rope off. We had decided that the fastest way to do the climb would be for each

of us to lead in multi-pitch blocks and have the second jug a fixed line. Rick would lead the first four pitches while I juggled, then I would lead for a while. I struggled into the unfamiliar jugging set-up while sharing a small belay stance with the other two climbers. It was uncomfortable and difficult getting started. I tried to refrain from kicking anyone in the head, and I wished I were alone. Struggling with slings and elbowing my way around other climbers was not how I wanted this climb to begin. Soon, however, I was on my way, and I juggled the pitch, cleaning the gear Rick had left. Rick lead another pitch, then we waited while they passed us. It turned out that one was from Salt Lake and the other from Moab. Allowing them to pass delayed us for twenty minutes or so, but it seemed a blessing, in that it let Rick and I collect our gear and our wits.

In our rush to get going and get ahead and out of the way, we had gotten out of our rhythm. I was also feeling groggy from lack of sleep. On the first real lead pitch, Rick had dropped a cam somehow, and then I had dropped a carabiner when I followed the pitch. We couldn't afford to make mistakes like that, particularly so low in the route, but it was difficult to obtain the necessary focus with so much activity going on around us. Rick started up the fifth pitch, and people started rappelling down. The two men who had spent the night on pitch six had also come down with a severe case of big wall sickness and were headed for the ground. I was relieved, actually, since it meant that there was no one above us to pass with the possible exception of the party that had spent the night at the top of the chimneys.

In spite of the interruptions, I was pleased with our progress. Rick was climbing very well and feeling good. He had taken the first difficult pitches and dispatched them efficiently. We were moving well and the tone of the climb was turning more positive after the

initial traffic jam broke up. It was also obvious that we were not in for a repeat of our experience on the DNB. The grading on this route was much more in line with what we were accustomed to, and the protection and route finding were essentially trivial.

Rick lead another 5.9 pitch, and then I took over. The first half of the route ascends a secondary wall to the left of the main face, then traverses out onto the main face. The first pitch on the main face is called the Robbins Traverse after its pioneer, Royal Robbins. I was excited that it fell into my block of leads. The pitch is mostly aid and consists of climbing fifteen bolts on aiders. I had not used aiders on a bolt ladder before, but found it to be obvious, easy, and fast. Hopping from bolt to bolt so far off the ground was thrilling, like climbing stairs to Heaven. At the top of the ladder are two pitons and a ratty nest of slings. The leader makes the dynamic part of the traverse by lowering down off of the high point, and then executing a pendulum to the right. We had read descriptions of the pendulum that made it sound horrific, with multiple swings and a wild churning of legs required to gain the necessary velocity to swing right to grab a ledge. I had Rick lower me a ways, pushed myself backwards, then lunged for the ledge. After the big buildup, the pendulum seemed very anticlimactic. I tried to envision what it must have been like for Royal Robbins to whom this was completely uncharted territory, and I couldn't do it. For me, with modern gear and after the passage of thousands of others, the pitch was merely interesting. For Robbins, it must have been an incredible, irreversible swing into the unknown. From beyond the pendulum, retreat would be very difficult.

From the large ledge above the Robbins Traverse, we could look down and out. The sun was up in Yosemite Valley below, and we could see El Capitan off in the distance. The air was cool, and we were hundreds and hundreds of feet

of the ground. It was magnificent. Rick was obviously having a wonderful time being up on a wall again, and I felt like we were in for a very good climb.

The next pitch off of the ledge involves about 40 feet of aid. Rick has more experience on aid than I do (my experience consisted of the Robbins Traverse and some theory), so we decided that he would go faster and should take the pitch. Aid is slow, so I had time to look around and enjoy the view. We were directly beneath the chimneys, and I could look up and examine them at leisure. Superficially, they didn't appear to have the consumptive hunger for flesh evinced by the chimneys on the DNB, but I couldn't really tell from where I was. After the communication epic we had witnessed the night before, I wouldn't be too surprised to find six or seven haul bags stuck in the crevices. Soon we would know.

Below, Brandon and Co. were moving slowly, dragging their haul bag up with a second rope. I could see Brandon leading out around a bulge on a 4<sup>th</sup> class pitch, wandering far from his last piece of protection. The line he was climbing was well above where Rick and I had joined the main wall, and I felt sure that he was off route slightly. His partner was visible to me far around the corner. Brandon was taking a long time with the pitch, and we could hear a plaintive voice calling, "Brandon...what are you doing?" Then, five minutes later, "Brandon, hey...what are you doing?" Brandon kept his silence, and I was grateful for the maturity and competence of my own partner. They would make it and learn from the experience, but I was certain that the summit would come at the cost of flared tempers, shouting, and emotional stress.

Above me, Rick pulled into the belay and tied me off. I juggled the line and looked up into the chimneys, preparing to lead off again. Rick had said that his life had contained more 5.9 chimneys

than he wanted already, and that he would be happy for me to lead them. I was happy at the chance. They looked like the best kind of chimneys to climb, with protection in the back and parallel walls on either side. Nothing like the DNB. I scooted up, occasionally stopping to put in gear or clip a fixed piton or nut and enjoying myself thoroughly. I climbed three pitches to the ledge above the chimneys, we regrouped, and headed on to look for Big Sandy ledge. We had long ago lost sight of the party from Utah. They had simul-climbed much of the chimneys and we assumed they were topping out.

The traverse from the top of the chimneys to the ledge seemed much longer than it looked on the topo, and both Rick and I were growing tired by the time we pulled onto Big Sandy ledge. It was already nearly 3:00, and we felt we were behind schedule. We found two quarts of water someone had left on the ledge, so we drank that and ate some lunch. We looked up at the Zig Zag pitches directly ahead of us. They didn't look as dire as they had been pronounced, but I wondered. The party that had been nearly there this morning was just finishing the third pitch a mere two hundred feet above us, and the radical hard men from Utah were also just finishing the last pitch. Did it really take those two four hours to climb the Zig Zags? If so, what would be our fate? Would we spend the night in the tiny alcove half way up? I couldn't believe it would take us that long, but the party that was hauling had taken at least eight hours to climb the same three pitches. Where was the danger? Surely five hours would be enough time for us to climb the Zig Zags and get to the top.

No matter what happened, we had to get off of the ledge. People carry their solid refuse off of the wall, but they aren't nearly so good about urine, and the whole place stunk. We were also getting hot, because full sun had come onto the face, and I was having flashbacks to the DNB. I was also

feeling a bit discouraged because I had wanted to be higher by that time of day. Rick must have been feeling some of the same things, because he said, "I sure miss my wife."

Rick took the first pitch of the Zig Zags and climbed most of it on aid, stepping from one aider to the other until he could do some free moves near the top of the pitch. He set a belay and I jugged up. We decided that I would take the next 5.10 pitch and see if I could free it as much as possible for greater speed. Aid is steady, but it is quite slow. I went out as fast as I could, pulling on my gear, having Rick take my weight on the rope when it seemed convenient. I felt like a climbing bandit, since I wasn't aiding and I wasn't freeing the pitch. I was amused by the thought of stealing altitude from the wall, and when I got to the top, I felt as if I were coming fully alive for the first time all day. Two nights of poor sleep had sabotaged my frame of mind, and it had taken that effort to burn the last of the cobwebs out. I was standing on a tiny ledge 1600 feet up with the ground almost directly beneath my feet. The top of Half Dome looked as if I could reach out and touch it, and I felt as if I were ready to fly. The sun was headed towards the horizon, but we still had three hours of daylight left and we were through most of the Zig Zags. I felt like the last pitch would be trivial, and I asked Rick if he minded if I lead it.

I pulled the same tactics as I had with the 5.10 pitch on this one, which is rated 5.11+. Under other circumstances, I might have been able to free climb it, but that thought didn't cross my mind. I made as many free moves as I could, then clipped an aider into a piece of gear, climbed up, made a few more moves, aided a move, and pulled over onto a ledge. A few more mixed aid and free moves brought me to the ledge at the top of the Zig Zags. The ledge, called Thank God Ledge, is about forty feet long and twelve inches wide and very

well named. I thanked God and called off belay.

Rick juggled up grinning, infected with the same mania. He took the rack and started off over Thank God Ledge. He walked carefully for a short ways, then got down on his hands and knees as the ledge grew narrower, then flopped down completely and inched along on his stomach, dragging one leg behind him. Occasionally he stuck a cam behind the back of the ledge to protect me when I followed him. When he reached the next belay, he yelled at me that we'd need to wait a little while. The party that had taken so long to climb the Zig Zags was still working on the upper two pitches. I was a little worried about the encroaching evening, but felt fairly sure we'd be on top before dark. We waited about half an hour, and then I went across and up. It was an amazing pitch of wallowing. I inched along on my stomach, extracting the cams Rick had placed, glad that he'd been thinking of me. Near the end of the pitch, I looked behind the flake that forms Thank God Ledge and saw a whole farm of irretrievable hexes in the dark crack. They looked as if they were growing in rows, like angular aluminum mushrooms, lost forever behind a piece of Half Dome.

When I reached the belay, Rick quickly lead off, only to be stopped again by the party in front of us. We waited a while, and then climbed to the final belay. The last pitches were nothing spectacular, and it was frustrating not to be able to climb through them quickly. Finally, Rick got a chance and blasted ahead to the top. From near the Visor, three Germans had been watching our progress. Rick stepped onto the top of Half Dome just as the last sliver of sun disappeared, and the woman called to him, "You are a HERO!"

I followed as fast as I could, and we were both standing on top as the horizon turned to fire. Rick said, "you know, I always hate it when people go,

'woo hoo!' at the top of a climb, but boy do I feel like going, 'woo hoo!'" The sunset was quickly fading, and we needed to find the trail down before full dark. We said goodbye to the Germans and headed for the cables descent. As we neared the edge of Half Dome, Rick shouted, "woo hoo!"

### **Denouement**

Our objective was achieved, and everything else was basically details. We hurried down the cables route, amazed that eighty year old tourists make that trek every day. When we reached the trees, we turned left and headed back around the face. In 45 minutes we were back in camp. We hadn't even needed our headlamps for the descent. We ended the day with macaroni and cheese and a can of tuna each, just a nod towards our protein debt. It had been an incredible day and an incredible adventure, and I don't think I've ever done another single climb that was as outstanding. I was fully satisfied and happy.

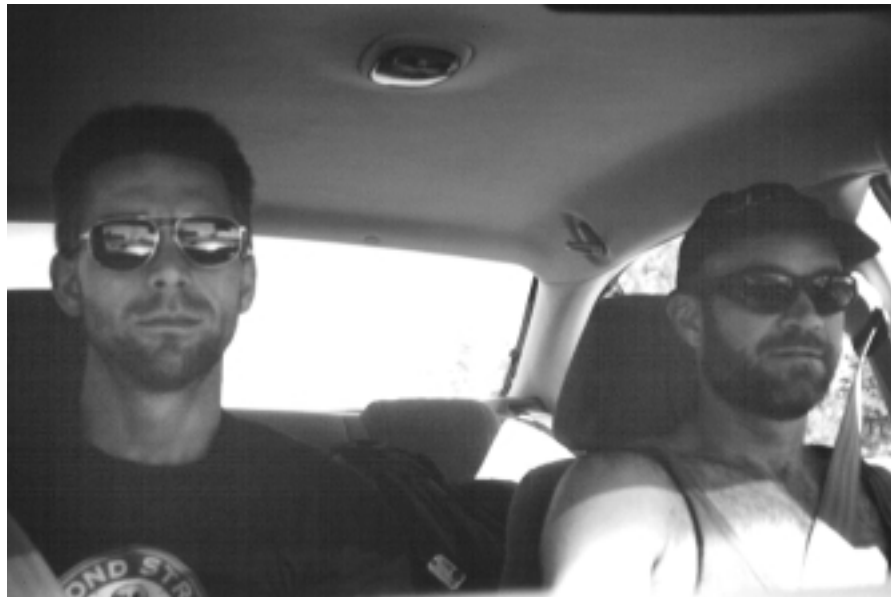
In the morning, we hiked out. On the way Rick shouted up at the party on the Direct route. They asked how our climb went, then the loquacious American called out, "Way to go! I knew you guys would do it!" Back in the Valley we wound up our trip with another large pizza, then headed out to spend a couple of days in Bishop sport climbing at Owen's River Gorge.

### **Philosophical digression**

How does one characterize the significance of an accomplishment such as climbing Half Dome? I ask myself, am I changed from it? Was it significant? Was it difficult? What was the point of the training and the striving and the ultimate success? I really don't know. In terms of a climbing achievement, we had accomplished our goal, but it hadn't been particularly grueling. Climbing the DNB had been harder physically. We were not the only

ones working towards that goal that particular day, nor were we even the fastest on the route. In some ways I think that was good, because it removed extraneous ego considerations and allowed us to concentrate on the experience. In the end, it is the experience that matters.

I think that adventures have their own power. Human beings are anti-entropic. We work towards order. We build systems of belief and then attempt to live within them, striving and struggling to mark our paths through time with arbitrary symbols of success. I am most happy when I am in motion, and my greatest joy is in the striving rather than in the summit--I am living the fullest from within the heart of an ordered challenge. The soul of the experience for me was in standing at the top of the Zig Zags, looking down through the void below to the tiny dots of our packs, the slabs below that, the river below that, and El Capitan off in the distance, all glowing in the light of the setting sun. "Look where we are and look what we're doing!"





## Vocabulary

This vocabulary list is intended to help a little in understanding parts of the story when the jargon gets a bit thick. Climbing is rife with jargon, partly because it is a specialized sport with specialized tools, and partly for well-understood psychological reasons. I didn't want to weed the vocabulary from the story because I think it is important in keeping the story true to the climb. This list is not intended to be a complete primer: it's just supposed to give you a boost.

**Aid climbing:** Using gear for upward progress. Used in contrast to "aid."

**Aiders:** Rope ladders clipped into pieces of protection. Used for aid climbing.

**Bivy:** To sleep on outside, often on a wall, though not always.

**Cam:** Mechanical device used to wedge in cracks and protect against falls.

**Crux:** the most difficult part of a climb or a pitch.

**Free climbing:** Climbing a route without using ropes or gear for upward progress. Used in contrast to "free."

**Grade VI.** Climbs are rated by how long they take. Grades I-IV take from a few minutes up to a whole day. A Grade V climb takes more than a day, a Grade VI takes two or more days to complete. The NW Face is called a Grade VI because that is how it was first done, but the definition seems a bit shaky to me. For us, it was a Grade IV, since we got off in one day.

**Haul bag/hauling:** Bag dragged up on a rope behind climbers. Used on multi-day ascents. Hauling makes a climb very slow.

**Hexes:** hexagonal chocks wedged in a crack to protect against a fall.

**Jugs/Jugging:** Jugs are mechanical ascenders that attach directly to a rope. Using them, one can go straight up the rope without using the rock for upward progress.

**Pitch:** The length of one lead/follow segment of a climb. Varies from 70 to 200 feet of climbing depending upon the terrain. The rope we used was 200 feet. Some are shorter.

**Quick draw:** Two carabiners joined by webbing. Used to clip into gear or belays.

**Trad (traditional) climbing:** Climbing with gear rather than placing bolts. The accepted way of doing long climbs in the mountains.

**5.8 (Yosemite Decimal Scale, YDS).** Method of grading the difficulty of climbs. The scale goes from walking (1<sup>st</sup> class) up to technical, roped climbing (5<sup>th</sup> class). Roped climbing is graded from 4<sup>th</sup> class through 5.14. It's not really a decimal system, since what comes after the decimal is a whole number. Go figure. 4<sup>th</sup> class means that hands are required for balance, but you probably don't need a rope. Obviously, the line between 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> class depends upon intangible factors.