

Flying

by Chris Rowland

I am a climber, and I know that what I do is not special to anyone but myself, and other climbers who know. I climb because it puts me on the mountain, close to the sky, looking down upon the earth below — I become a part of the mountain and the mountains around it. I hang from the damp, cold granite feeling as large as the rock itself. Sometimes I look down upon the treetops in the valley between the mountains and can imagine flying. Sometimes my hand's hold loosens, but always my stomach wrenches, and I pull myself quickly back against the rock. Breathing heavily, cheek against the cold granite, my body knows it cannot fly. I know others who have flown though.

-The Acolyte-

I came to the mountains five years ago with my family. We drove out in the old white station wagon carrying the coolers, the kids, and Rex, the dog. I miss Rex. My wife did not leave him, though, when she left me.

It happened one day when I went with my partner, Luke, to climb a 5.9 called "Back-breaker" and came back to an empty campsite. I did not blame her for leaving, she and the kids had hung on as long as they could, but it was the end of summer and school was starting soon, so they had to leave.

I stayed and moved in with Luke. He had an extra sleeping bag and enough room in his tent to accommodate me. Neither of us had much money so we would collect aluminum cans and work odd jobs to buy food or replace any worn out equipment. We were the typical climbing bums, which is what people who had jobs, and liked to climb, called us — because they could not do it as often as they liked.

We lived fairly comfortably. If we had any extra cash left after buying food and gear we would invite all the other climbers over for a beer. We would all sit around the campfire and tell climbing stories or laugh at the tourists driving by in their white station wagons. I usually stayed pretty quiet in the beginning, listening, unless someone asked me a question. I was still an acolyte to climbing from everyone else's perspective. The new guys are always treated as if they are going to muck-up (that's my euphemism for "fuck-up") at the cost of their partner's life. Luke knew what he was doing, though; he kept me in line and did not make me do anything he did not think I could do. He had already lost one partner.

Earlier that summer, before I came to the mountains with my family, Luke's first partner had begun soloing, climbing without a partner or protection. It

always happens that way when someone gets really good, and Luke's partner, Matthew, was one of the best. They had done almost all of the most difficult climbs. When there was nothing left Matthew began soloing. He was on "The Crux," a climb he had done a thousand times, when he fell.

The story of Matthew is always the last story of the night at the campfire gatherings. Luke always tells it. He stares into the fire as if it is to be something to be studied, and slowly remembers.

"Matthew didn't fall," says Luke, "He flew off the rock face, arms spread like an eagle's wings, catching the air. His eyes were glazed and distant as if he were staring into another world, and there was a simple smile holding his lips closed. When his body hit the ground it was empty and limp — and I'll never know why." So now we call it flying whenever one of the best falls while soloing.

-Climbing-

Luke and I have been climbing now for five years. We know each others' moves as well as two experienced lovers. I no longer have to tell Luke what I want. When I move away from my protection he gives me slack on the rope and when I get stuck he coaxes me through. Our climbing conversation is succinct.

"Ready to climb?"

Harness, rope, rack — check. "Ready."

"On belay."

"Thanks, love," I say in my fake British accent.

I lead most of the time now, especially on the harder routes. Luke is a fantastic teacher but he seems to stop progressing after a certain point. He reaches his peak at 5.11, after that I lead. At first he was reluctant to let me, but I threatened to find another partner and he gave in.

We climb everything, migrating across the country as the weather changes. We split up and meet each other at the designated location at the designated time. Sometimes I go directly to it and others I take my time, maybe getting a job for a while to pay bus fare if I do not feel like hitchhiking. Always we meet happy to see each other and anxious to begin climbing. Once on one of those trips I went to where I used to live.

-Bare and Empty-

The house was empty. I broke into it and looked for any sign that I had once lived there with my children and wife. I walk through it wondering why they had left. In the boy's room there was nothing, not a scrap of assurance that they had ever been there, not even stray hangers in the closet. Their room no longer held the pungent, juxtaposed smells of youth and clean linen. In the room where my family had sat and watched TV together a window was busted, and the room smelled of urine. There was nothing in this house to remind me of my family. The kitchen had lost all the smells so familiar to family kitchens, and the garage no longer smelled of Rex, the dog. The hall echoed with my footsteps as I walked

from room to room searching for a memory.

I left the house and walked to the backyard, to the oaks where my hammock, also gone, had once hung. There I found a mound of earth with a cross next to it, on which the letters R-E-X in small, infantile script were written. I slid on my back, down an oak to the grass, where I sat staring at the only thing left of my family. An onslaught of memories kept me there for a long time. I returned to the house and wept on the floor of what used to be the bedroom I shared with my wife. It was as bare and empty as the rest of the house.

-Joshua Tree-

The next day I met with Luke in Joshua Tree. I had wanted to reach out and touch him for reassurance but he was anxious to begin climbing.

"Hey, Luke, haven't you ever been close to marriage?"

I cut in on the explanation he always gave before each climb. It was his warm-up. He would, in detail, explain the moves that were used most often on sections of each pitch. "There's a 5.13 move halfway up the second pitch, but if you move to the right a little you can reach a bomber hold and wedge up with your feet, but don't forget to attach to the bolt right before, underneath the overhang. If you don't mind I'll let you lead on the second pitch; I don't know if I can handle it." I usually never listen to his warm-ups, but I never told him to shut up either. They helped him gain confidence for the climb.

"No. Before you came along, though, I climbed with a girl I met in Boulder. She was pretty good, cute too."

"What happened to her?" I stopped walking, and was looking at a couple of climbers, husband and wife, I assumed, who had started up a moderately difficult 5.10 climb called "Widow-maker." I wondered if they knew what they were doing.

"She was a teacher; she had to go back to teaching." He has never known anything but the climb. There was no need to go into detail about my ex-family with him though, he had already heard it, and I had made a decision. He knew I had decided to leave them because of the boredom. I had much more to grow into than my family could offer.

-The Best-

No matter where we climbed the rest of the year we always come back to Eldorado Canyon in August. It was where Luke and I first met, and where Luke lost his first partner. We come back for more reasons than these though. We come back to Eldorado to meet with all the climbers we had known for the past five years. Some of the guys have families now, and do not climb anymore but they still return to see the gang and talk about old times. We all complain about the commercialization of the climbing world, and the sell-out of Chounaird — even though he still makes the best damned climbing equipment in the world.

We talk about the new type of climber that can best be described as punk rock

skate-boarders, or new wave surfers, who walked into a climbing shop by mistake — they were so impressed by the equipment they saw they had to find out how to use it. They are damn good too. These kids are climbing 5.11's by the end of the summer they begin to climb. Climbs have names like "The Radical Wave," or "Skate-Rat." We all get depressed and hence more drunk as we talk about it. It is the changing of the guard that we knew would happen. Yet, we always feel that we do it better than any of the new kids, and I know that I am one of the best.

There is not a new face around that does not know my name. I receive all my equipment free because the climbing companies know the kids watch me. I even had my picture in Outside Magazine with an article about my climbing career. I have climbed everything up to 5.13. There is no such thing as a 5.14.

Around the campfire everyone eventually passed out except Luke and me. We stayed up talking. Luke got a real concerned look on his face. I had never seen him look so matronly before so I figured it must be serious. "What's up partner?"

"I'm worried about you, Paul. You're beginning to act like Matthew before he flew." You never hear Luke say Matthew fell. "I'm getting some serious flashbacks, man, and they are not pleasant."

"Well, you know what they say, acid's the gift that keeps on giving."

"Jesus Christ, Paul! If I hadn't stopped you today you would have done that whole pitch without putting in any protection."

He was talking with his hands moving in a flurry. I could still see the chalk on them which he used to get a better grip. "What good is the damn rope if there isn't anything to hold it?"

"Maybe I don't need a rope anymore." The anger in his eyes caused me to look away.

"If you don't need a rope then you don't need a partner. I'll be damned if I'm going to watch another partner...." His voice trailed off. He got up and walked away.

-The Flight-

The next morning was the beginning of a beautiful, clear day. Walking to the first climb I planned I could hear the familiar sound of other campsites waking up; the muffled talk of people in their tents, and the hiss of camp-stoves heating water for oatmeal and coffee. Occasionally a squirrel would chatter at me as it hid in its tree. Luke was nowhere to be seen this morning so I left camp without him. This was a climb he and I had done a thousand times anyway. I knew it like I knew the back of my hand.

I got to the base of the rock and craned my neck to look at the familiar route up its face. I placed one hand against it. The granite was still cold and damp from the night before. I placed my fingers in the crack, pulled myself toward the rock and began. I had named this rock myself many years ago. It was called "The 13th Disciple." I knew if I ever soloed this would be the first of my climbs.

It was a 5.13 with many variations, but I move up it as if I am merely crawling on the floor. It is so easy. I can not find a new, more difficult route than the ones

I had already done.

I reach the crux of the climb which is an overhang that goes about fifteen feet from the face. I place a fist in the large fissure which I will use to get to the edge of the overhang. Fist over fist into the crack I move along the fissure to the edge. Now all I have to do is reach around the edge to the hand-hold with which I can pull myself up. I hesitate, hanging there, knowing I can do no further climbing without coming across what is already known. I look down into the valley below me. I know this time my stomach will not wrench on me; my fist loosens.

Everyone would like to believe that what they do is special, more so than anything anyone else will do. A long-distance runner wants to believe that only he knows the pleasure of operating at the same frequency the earth emits. Any thief will think he is the only one who will never get caught. Everyone wants to believe in his own immortality.

As I flew I saw Luke below. He was holding out his arms as if he could catch me. On his cheek was the glint of something wet. He would never know.