

HIRAETH for AHWAHNEE:

An ascent of the NW Face of Half Dome

By

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It was a dream that face.

Even in Ashveille it was golden, ethereal, surrealistic; more so, three thousand miles later when it faced us, yellow and alone, catching the very last to the sun's gift for the day.

The sun. That was the secret of it all.

The pinkness of dawn, the sombreness of even, the cock-crow regularity of its appearance, and the way its warmth cut through my cold, as its light pierced the cloud given gloom in the valley.

Then the two combined, on that third day; the dream and the sun-but only for a moment. For as the sun dissipated my cold there, on that Thank-God (thank God!) ledge, it also removed the dream; and showed me the reality (because it gave me hope), - of which dreams are the real impostor. It shook me out of that complacency of self-doubt, the moribundity that depression leads to, and by its warmth gave me light.

So we continued our climb, assured now of more, with a confidence and control that only half of us possessed before. The traverse passed competently, pausing only to revel in our position, so to the crux aid pitch, penduling from rurs, magnificently exposed, and then the top friction leading to the anti-climatic summit. The bald scrubby acidic plant top, emphasising starkly again, that it is not for the summit that we climb.

We drank stale water, smiled for a camera, hugged awkwardly, and exchanged platitudes. Then coiled, packed, and scampered down the hill-free. Released now from that umbilical which had bound us so unequally, for so long, in such verticality; it had accentuated our differences to extremes of parody, but with its removal came an honesty, so refreshing, so long desired.

We talked as we can on that trail as beings and equals, running perhaps to escape the division which the umbilical imposes, and needing too much the womb that lay below us. And as we talked, a bond grew stronger than the cord; its imposed awkwardness disappeared because we were no longer leader and follower, strength and weakness, calm and fear. We began to understand, hesitantly, that clam is sometimes fear, and a greater fear, - that of the womb; and that leading and following like strength and weakness flow into one, not absolutes, but states of mind.

So where had we been. On that upward trail, by that rainbow fall, and a sight of the hinterland that the valley did not give, and a yes, those girls. Perhaps this was the real Yosemite we thought, and wished to escape into it; but the lure of the vertical and the umbilical were too great, and we had not the strength to break them. So by lack of courage, we were drawn sheep like into that seemingly greater pen.

So up the rail, and the search for water; to the spur leading down to the bottom of the face, and our first look. So steep and certain itself with that chimney cleaving to the sky. Me in there (?), the fear intensified, and then solidified – he was as unperturbed as ever. So to the base, and the foiling of our plans. No longer could we push straight up, our places were taken, and we had to sleep horizontally that night.

Awakened by the ringing, piercing call of a hammer on pin, we started; free, then aid, and a mixed water dropping groove. Progress slowed, I looked for a cloud, finding none, suggested we could still retreat, pointing to the water bottle beneath us. But soon, after the first bolts, I realised we could not return, the pull was too great, - then the tension eased. Those four above us slowed our passage, and we slept uncomfortably, the bed sloping and the pins frighteningly insecure. Just the lights of the womb tauted us, but although they called, we had truly escaped at last – the vertical is another world. Again, that ringing noise intruded my peace; and after water and salami (a traditional breakfast), we moved across the face to the big swing, into that cleaving cleft of yesterday's fears.

Fly like I sat and saw two abstractions.

Across the wall, in the blank vertical distance, for the third time a man attempted to climb the princess's tears (were they too wet?) for like them, he fell downwards: only to return. But I was oblivious to him, and his fears had no contact with mine. Then down below a bear roamed over where we had slept, my heart warm to him: (a King in his Kingdom, he was right to be there. We were not ;) silly little men, pushing ourselves up out of place out of tune. My heart found his for a moment, I loved his unpretension.

So we graunched upwards; struggling in the chimney, frightened on the face, jumaring desperately in the groove, then flying over the void; praying that the metal in rock holding the elastic would stay. So up to the second night, and those other four; greedily their water and food was received, then manoeuvring them for places to rest, above that drop. Talk, sleep, music floating upwards from Ahwahnee; and wake, and ever that space below us. We start early; the pink cold burning into our black granite bitten hands, the zig zags, the fear, that jumar (no pride left now), me so lonely – then finally thankfully the Thank – God ledge and at last the sun.

It was soft that night the ground air the trees the fragrance of pine; and we ran faster obeying the call of the womb. Past those who had been with us, with a shout and a wave (empty promises of what was to come, but only a testimony

to what had been). We were happy in our release and revelled in our closeness, thinking of what we had learnt. Three days of self see, had displayed faithlessness in all aspects; yet growth and strength, and when the rope was removed euphoria at success.

And so we came to the trees.

The light was puzzling, a fine ray piercing greyness, and as we approached it took form. She was lost, afraid and needing help. Stumbling, she asked the way, we responding (bloated by our success, forgetting our weakness), answered glibly – and ran on.

As soon as it was done, we turned into ourselves and chastened; the womb's call was not that great, - our pride was, our honesty had not been that deep. The umbilical had failed, it had given too easily, its distinction was too precise. Had also the sun? Or, was it just that, that made our hearts sad, and helped us realise that face – lessons do not give real courage, nor indeed require it.

We reached the womb, and all it had to give, - but it was largely false as the euphoria had been.

It had taught us little, we realised separately and we both knew to ourselves, that the real lesson was still on that trail, which after our face we had found so easily, and with that sun which had so easily found us