

Rope

The rope slides through my hands, with easy, controlled familiarity. I know when to feed, when to hold and when to let it slide, it is an old comfortable ritual. Jan and I have climbed together since we were teenagers. We were dangerous, daring, stupid then. How we didn't kill ourselves during our early climbs I cannot imagine. I remember climbing rotten granite with a pair of slip slops on my feet, no rope and Jan leading. Now if Jan were my height or less all would be well, but Jan tall is slender with a purpose built mass to power ratio. In other words, he is tall and exceptionally skinny, which means he flows up the rock faces like a shadow, scarcely touching the rock, finding impossibly small crevices and dimples and seeming to balance all his weight for micro seconds on a single pinky finger. Me? I am short, solid and completely tractor like. My mass to power ratio is so badly skewed many people wonder how or why I climb. I don't flow up rock faces, I sort of chug menacingly upwards; defying gravity to do its worst. Problem is Jan forgets that I don't have his reach and he sometimes finds handholds way beyond my reach and that brings to mind the first time he did that. We were 15, climbing in slipslops up a fairly easy climb on rotting granite. Not the greatest of surfaces but we knew it well. I got to a narrow ledge, possibly 15 cm wide and about 30 m up the face. We were nearly at the top and I for one was feeling confident. Possibly a bit too confident which explains what happened then. I looked up at Jan, standing with his hands on the top of the climb.

I stretched up across a curving rock, searched with my fingers for the cleft Jan must have used. Nothing, just smooth rock.

"Where are the hand holds you used?" I asked

"About 10 cm above your hands."

A pause.

"Jump and grab the handholds."

"F*ck off."

"Seriously. You cannot go down, you gotta jump."

I scabbled, I scatched, I stretched. Nothing. I could not find a closer hand hold. So I jumped, my fingers found the cleft Jan had used, held and I swung out supported only by my fingers. Jan laughed and vaulted onto the top.

I hung for a while controlling my shakes then pulled myself up on to the rock, covered the last pitch in almost a sprint and ended up next Jan looking out over the drop. I glared at Jan.

"That was a f*cking stupid thing to do." I snarled.

Jan looked amused and was about to respond in kind when a voice from behind us said,

"Yes, he is right. It was a f*cking stupid thing to do. You could have killed your partner."

We snapped around to find ourselves looking at man with all the right attributes to be a climber. Tall slender, balanced, powerful. Everything that a climber ought to look like.

It turned out he was the instructor from the local climbing club and had seen us climbing and decided that he had to teach us the basics before we killed ourselves. Pat was his name and he taught us everything he knew, but he was always just that edge better than Jan and far better than I. But he taught us and taught us well. He must have, we are now in our late thirties and still climbing as we did when we were teenagers, but now with knowledge, skill and above all the right equipment. We owe a lot to Pat, do Jan and I.

A gentle tug on the rope brings me back to the current situation.

"You gonna sit there all day like a dassie sunning iteself?" Jan carefully braced and ready to belay for me.

I start climbing and as happens most times, I continue the thought I had while doing my stint as a belayer. I am back in the past Jan and I leave school, take different courses at the local university, join the climbing club and continue climbing together. We gain a reputation as trail blasers, as the leaders in new routes and as sticklers for safety. Pats training was good and it stuck.

Then women appeared in our lives. We jokingly notch up conquests, losses, dumpings and near misses. By this time we had graduated from university and were building careers. Jan in architecture me in civil engineering. Then Jan met Louise and things got serious and stayed serious till eventually they married. I never did get married. If I had had a choice, I would have chosen Louise, but Jan was her choice and so I wished them well and became more and more introspective, reclusive. The marriage didn't stop our climbing as Louise was a good climber and joined us in some our climbs but stayed away from the really serious stuff. I learnt to live with Louise being so close yet untouchable. It was on one the more dangerous climbs when Louise was not around that I learnt that things were not going well. Louise was threatening divorce, Jan didn't know why and became more and more morose, but worse he became careless on the rock and nearly fell a number of times. Then one day he fell, not far, but he fell, he was furious, he re-engaged with the rock climbed furiously, made it past the place where he had fallen, and then fell again. I refused to go on and we abseiled down to the ground. We had for the first time in our lives a blazing all or nothing row. He got in his car and drove away. We didn't talk or climb together again for nearly 18 months by which stage he and Louise were divorced. She disappeared completely, never even saying good bye to me. My heart ached for a while, then it recovered, or so I thought.

Suddenly I am next to Jan the last pitch almost a dream against my memories. We grin at each other. Another couple of pitches and we are on top. This is an old friend, well trodden path, we know it like the back of our hands. It is a sort of warm up. Problem is there is a quiet murmuring in the back of my mind, my memory running and rerunning a whispered conversation in the dark. I am uncomfortable with Jan on the rock. The huge blits when he fell twice still stains the space between us and it seems to me that he has become more dangerous, more angry, less considerate. He always was a bit inconsiderate on the rock, a bit reckless with my safety as if he might enjoy seeing me fall. It had been a sort of goad then but now it was more of a blanket that covered the rock made it hard to concentrate, to move smoothly and enjoy the challenge the rock presented. I was uncomfortable.

He set out again, scarce warning me he was going, I belayed automatically watching him gracefully dance up the rocks, admiring his skill and strength, but also realising that I had fooled myself. It was over between us, it could never be the same team, we were finished and I realised that a lot of the blame was mine. The things I had heard whispered by a woman, in my bed, in my arms, her arms around me, her tears on my shoulder had destroyed our friendship that spanned nearly thirty years. Gone. It could never again be the same.

It was a short pitch and I set out, as I always do tractor like thinking of other things. Things like the coincidence of first Jan phoning out of the blue, "How about a reunion climb?"

Climb and make up as he put it. I agreed, but my life was not simple and the first clear day for climbing was nearly a month in the future. We agreed on a time and a place and I was really excited to have Jan back in my life, and to have a climbing buddy I trusted. Then the phone rang a second time within a week. An unknown number. I answered cautiously. I don't trust unknown numbers, too many clever crooks out there, but the voice on the other end was one I recognised. Louise. Louise, hesitant, shy, uncertain. Not the Louise I knew, but a different one.

"Can we meet?" her voice familiar, tugging all sorts of stings in my heart. Her voice took my breath away. So much for forgetting her. So much for being free of her. Just the sound of her voice and I was lost and like a man in a desert offered a drink of water, I grabbed at the opportunity.

Once again I find myself sitting next to Jan, admiring the scenery as I catch my breath. The world stretches out before us like and huge patchwork quilt. The wind pulls gently at my hair and I am

comforted, but also sad because I know I can never climb with Jan again. He slaps me on the shoulder and heads on up, balletic, athletic, brilliant to watch. He is on the longest, highest and most technical pitches of the climb and he seems to be more hesitant but at the same time more aggressive and I brace myself carefully. As the rope runs out I remember. I remember Louise.

"My shrink said I should come talk to you."

"Oh, why?" Surprised she was going to a shrink. She always seemed so stable, well adjusted, comfortable.

"I want to put the past into the past, move on. I cannot do that till I have completed business of the past."

"Business?" I raise my eyebrows.

"Yes. You and Jan are close friends."

"Were. I haven't climbed with him since before you two divorced."

"I know. He blamed me for that too."

"What? You had nothing to do with our breakup. He was going mad at the end of your marriage. He was dangerous and unstable. I could not climb with him in that mood. That was his fault. Not yours."

"He was jealous you see."

"Jealous?" My mouth was now dry and I wanted to run or hide or cry.

"Yes. He could see that you fancied me. You wanted me. He said you loved me. Was he right?"

I looked around. I took a huge mouthfull of wine, nearly choked, swallowed and tried to find some firm ground in the slippery morass that had suddenly arisen around my feet and legs.

Louise laughed, that low tinkling laugh that mad me think very, very lewd thoughts.

"My God, he was right! All along, he was right."

Eventually I grabbed my courage in both hands, looked at her and nodded then mumbled, eyes downcast,

"I am not a good liar or hider am I? I am sorry. If I had known . . ."

"You would have walked away. Good. Honest. Decent Hans. And you would have broken my heart. And my marriage and we would be having this conversation much, much sooner. But you see it was very decency, ethics that that attracted me to you in the first place. When our relationship started to fall apart you were the only beacon of hope in my life. You provided the only bright moments in my life. I used to stagger from bright moment to bright moment. Then one night you got drunk and you went on a rant about a woman you knew who had been beaten. How she had blamed herself rather than him. How it was a vicious cycle. That women needed help to get out of that sort of trouble. How a man who beat women was no man, not even an animal. You kinda passed out at that stage."

I remembered the rant. I remembered the hangover too.

"You two climbed the next weekend. Jan fell twice. You refused to go on. You fought. You never knew why that happened did you?"

No, shook my head.

"He used to beat me you see. He thought I had told you and you were getting at him. He was angry when he hit that rock. He wanted to hurt you, but he hurt himself and his ego."

Suddenly the rope goes taut in my hand. I brace myself as Jan starts to peel off backwards. He falls gracefully passed me as I take up slack and prepare to absorb his fall. The jerk comes and I absorb the shock. He is swaying 8 metres below me. He seems to be stunned. I start to pull him toward me. Louise' voice comes back to me, "He used to beat me you see."

I looked down at his body swinging below me and I pause and wonder.