

Glenn Dwiggins

Us in Yosemite

My friend, Andrew, is talking to me. He is telling me how beautiful the view is from on top of Half Dome, when the sky clears in the winter, even if only for a little while; he is saying how cold the wind blows now and then, and how hot the sun can be when the wind is not blowing. He is wanting to show me once more how high one can get just by breathing in the thin, cold air, real deep, and is sorry he can't. He is really only telling me how he died.

I already know about Half Dome, the half smooth, half jagged, half yellow-white, half orange-gray beast of a stone set awkwardly on a stony mountain, and about the wind, which comes rushing up either side, or up both at the same time. I have been on top and looked out over the countryside at the whites on dark greens on browns below the tree line and, the whites on angry yellows, peaches and oranges, like a fire burning, above it. When all was still and the sun shone above me, I sweated under layers of clothing, but then they quickly became insufficient when the icy wind blew up under my down parka, and the sweat felt like it was going to freeze solid on my back. I also know about the temptation to jump from that height, which seems so close to heaven, and expecting to land safely on one of the lower clouds. I figure it to be the lack of oxygen that gets to the head and makes one feel that way. The temptation is never very strong, and is easy to keep under control. You just look down for a second. Fear takes over. Everybody who has been up here knows about that.

I know a lot about my friend, too, although I thought I knew more than I really do. What I have always known about him I see now as clearly as I do the wispy, twisted center of an old marble, somewhat obscured by discolored, chipped glass, clouded by what I know about him now. I remember him to have been the first to say, "You and I are going climbing in Yosemite."

And we went.

At the time I was between jobs, between academic stages, between certainty and uncertainty about what I was going to do with myself, between girlfriends...between a lot of things. Andrew always seemed to be between beers. By that I don't mean to say he was a heavy drinker or anything; I just mean that what concerned him most was where he was to get his next high, chemically or otherwise, and the best (meaning most convenient and cheapest) way for the both of us was found at the nearest pub. I guess it may be better to say that he was always between highs, but then, maybe not. Anyway, the truest, best high, for him and me both, came from actual physical height, although at this moment, I don't feel it. I feel only the wind's chill paralyzing parts of my face; I see only the rocky cliffs, mountains, and waterfalls surrounding my oddly-shaped pedestal; I hear only the wind's howl, like an old Indian woman's singing, and I hear Andrew, talking to me.

After that trip, I went to college, and he went to work in construction. I dated some of the girls in my classes, with some luck, and he tried dating both sexes, "with equal luck," he wrote me, "but the women were better to deal with in the morning, for the most part...maybe that's a sign that I was meant to be straight."

That part, about being "meant to be straight," was a joke we shared. I knew how Andrew felt about destiny, and that in no way would he accept his being "meant" for anything, like to be straight. He was more like the center of that marble: twisted and obscure, and to get at the core, it seemed like you had to break a fragile surrounding field around it, which was easily done. You just got him high, one way or another. Then he was your friend, like it or not.

I have a snapshot of us, standing together on top of Half Dome. I took it with one of those cameras that has a timer built in. I brought the camera. It was my job to think ahead. In the picture, we are standing buck naked with our backsides to the camera. We are looking over our left shoulders at something in the distance. In the background are the surrounding rocks, covered with snow, and the orange light of the sunset makes it look like it's on fire. I had placed a piece of white labeling tape over our butts and scribbled the words

“Us in Yosemite” on it. I brought it with me when I visited Andrew one weekend and showed it to him when we both were rolling drunk off of Lucky Lager and couldn’t figure out the picture-puzzles on the underside of the bottle caps. We were already laughing about our stupidity, when I showed him the photo. We rolled around some more, making “butt-cold” jokes and laughing about if we had died there and been found like that, until his face became very dim and serious, and he said, “Do you ever wonder what it’s really like to freeze to death?”

I know about climbing, too, the constant scratch, scrape, squeak, grunt, creak, the breaking grips, the sliding boots, the falling gravel, the tight rope. We never much went climbing for the climbing, though. For us it was the being at the top that made the trip worthwhile. We climbed up Half Dome as quickly as we could, Andrew in the lead, taking all the risks, and me, close behind, pretending to take the same ones. When we reached the top, the sun was overhead, and everything was bright. I had to squint at the snowy glare as I reached for my sunglasses. Andrew didn’t bring his, so he just squinted. I swear that that day on top of Half Dome deformed his face for the rest of his life. I may be wrong. At any rate, something up there changed him, and maybe me, too. Maybe it was the combination of the beer and thin, cold, dry air that made my lips, nose, and ears hurt. Whatever it was, the expression on his face made him look like he was making the last steps towards a major discovery. Except when he laughed, which he did quite often after the third nearly-frozen Lucky Lager he pulled out of his pack. I smiled and sipped the gin ‘n tonic out of my bota sack. Our trips were always BYOB, and I figured gin ‘n tonic would be more appropriate. As we sat there, I wished that I had brought beer. My drink was flat.

I got out my camera, and began to adjust it for light, distance, lens angle. I looked through the aperture at the mountains around me. I focused on El Capitan, with its flat, snow-covered plateau, as smooth as it was jagged. Andrew’s hand blocked the lens. “You can get that picture at a souvenir shop...probably a better one,” he said. “I have a better idea. Take off your clothes.”

I said, “And freeze to death?”

He said, “Not quite,” and started to strip.

There’s something about standing naked on top of Half Dome,

skin turning pale and bluish in the cold air, us shivering, but not wanting to get dressed. I imagined someone watching us with those twenty-five cent telescopes set up at an observation point. Some old businessman saying, c'mere, Madge, look at these fools, wasting his whole quarter's time, trying to figure us out. Were we drunk, or maybe half insane. Whatever we were, we were ruining his vacation, and then his time runs out, and all goes black.

"You know you are freezing to death when you start to feel real warm and comfortable," said Andrew. I didn't feel at all warm yet, and my feet hurt. We got dressed.

It was then, as my skin was warming under my clothes, that I first felt that high, and everything seemed so near. I felt as if I could reach out and touch El Capitan, and scoop some of the whipped cream snow off the top and eat it. The ground below was only a few feet down, and there was a soft, white cushion besides.

Andrew yodeled. The yodel echoed back.

Shadows are quickly running up the sides of Half Dome, silently climbing up where I so noisily struggled some hours ago. The sun has gone from a bright yellow-white to a deeper orange color, and is headed west. It is also getting much colder, even when the air is still. I should head back down if I want to get home before dark. I am out of beer anyway.

On the face of Half Dome is a narrow ledge, about five feet down from the top, where people had climbed down and stood on it and scrawled their names with a small stone. I climb down it now. Under the words, "Tarzan and Jane did it on top of Half Dome, 8/5/'79," is what Andrew wrote there. It says, "And Andrew and Rod cleaned up afterwards, 8/9/'79." I remember us laughing about that for two minutes. Under that is some writing that I hadn't seen before. It says, "I am drunk and I feel warm. Andrew again, 8/9/85." I pick up the much-used rock and write, "I am going home. Rod, 8/10/'86."

As I read this now and think of him and what happened, I remember when his family called to tell me the when, the how, the where, and to ask me if I knew the why. I told them I didn't know. I don't know, even now, if he did it on purpose. Somehow I don't believe it. I think what convinces me was in the way he looked at me when he talked about death.

I wonder if anyone had been watching him then, or if every-

thing went black too soon, as the time ran out.

The sky was turning a deeper blue, and our shadows were getting longer, when I said, "Let's go home," and squeezed the last drops of my gin 'n tonic into my mouth. It was bitter.

"That's fine by me," he said, and started gathering together the empty Lucky Lager bottles and caps and stuffing them into his pack. He moved slowly, like a child, not wanting to leave, taking his time, delaying the inevitable. "I'm out of beer anyway," he said.

The slip, grab, slide, step, shudder of the climb down was sometimes easier, sometimes more difficult than the trip up. Andrew led the way, as usual, and sometimes fine gravel, loosened by my boots, would fall on his head.

"I have an idea. Why don't we just jump from here?" he said. We laughed. I held on tighter.

Andrew is telling me all these things. I am looking one last time from the very peak of Half Dome, at Yosemite. I look down, and a sharp shock of fear runs through me, and I have to step back. I kick some gravel loose, and it falls silently over the edge. I am suddenly very cold. I have to move to get warm. I climb down, moving nervously and quickly, kicking loose lots of gravel and rocks, that rattle and slide roughly down the mountainside.

Andrew is joking with me. He is saying, why don't we jump from here. Or maybe we should stay here and freeze to death. You get real warm and comfortable.

I am not listening. I am climbing down, scraping against the rocky mountainside. A breeze blows up the face of it, up and under my jacket. I shiver.

A picture comes into my head. It is the picture, "Us in Yosemite." Andrew, naked, is pointing out over the edge of Half Dome, and looks very happy about something. I, also naked, am following his finger with my eyes, but look like I am confused about the same thing. We look like we are surrounded by a huge fire.

Our flesh is pale in the sunlight, but our butts' whiteness still stands out, as if they were lit from within.

As my boot dislodges a rock from the side of Half Dome, I try my best to suppress a laugh.