

Top of the Drops: Top Ten Most Haunting

You don't have to travel to the remotest South American mountains to 'almost die' climbing and then write a book about it. There's immeasurable potential here in the UK to do just that. Cheating death locally is far more economic, and it contributes to help look after the planet.

Seriously, who can forget those curious 'what in the hell just happened?' moments where if circumstances had chanced to be very slightly different – a second sooner or later, a centimetre nearer or closer – light would have turned to dark? Often they come and go, without drama, epic, or injury. Their mysterious allure is joyful rather than morbid, and they can even generate the biggest of ironic smiles. To embrace the close-shave phenomenon is to pinch yourself whenever tempted to whine about your 'first-world problems' and lack of luck. You *are* the luckiest person ever, so it is just to pay homage to fate's spirit in the sky.

A Coffin, Angel-made

1972; the era of capricious youth, and Dave Ford and I are off to Wintour's Leap for *Angel's Eye*; then graded VS. I'd become fairly competent at Avon, leading some extremes, so wonder-kid-me bags the first, hard pitch. The trouble with Avon is that it's no good for developing muscles (well, apart from leg muscles), and I was pretty feeble on slippery overhanging limestone. Give me footholds any day. Nonetheless, off I lead, placing a small corded hex in the thin layback crack, thinking no big deal. But I was struggling to commit, lacking the arm strength to place any more gear. Up, down, up, down; 'sod it, let's get on with this poxy VS, oh cruiser of *Preter* and *Last Gasp*'. I go for it but the holds in the break are not of the quality expected and no amount of foot pedalling is a match for gravity. Off I plummet, but the hex pings out as I bounce off a shale ledge and slot impeccably into a tailor-made coffin between two blocks at the cliff-base. 'Are you alright?' Dave asks, wondering no doubt what he'd tell my parents were I not. Next day we embark on *Motorboat to Mars* at Sand Point. Amazing how the rock can be so forgiving, at times.

Lost Souls

Dusk was descending as I gaze up at Sea Walls, deciding what to solo next. An innocent whistle in the wind accompanies a shadow that swoops down in the gloom. With a horrible tell-tale thud something grounds out just two metres to my left. The top of the cliff lies 75 metres above. It was the closest call, for me, of all the seven or so suicides I'd witnessed in Avon Gorge, a function of spending too much time here. Frustrating to think that I was not at the cliff-top, which may have made a difference – maybe even a step back. Yet you are left with little choice but to suppress the anger for your existence being ignored; and feel sorrow for a lost soul. Old friend Avon Gorge opens a door for many, and closes the door for others.

When Not to Trust a Tree

Winter 1990/1991 and Roy Thomas and I were busily engaged in developing Llanbradach for new climbs. Skimping to save time on our latest bad-weather visit I grab a tattered old 9mm rope and start abseiling down an unclimbed wall. However I fail to line up the rope with my project, so I wrap a sling around a substantial looking tree 30 feet down and clip it into a knot in my rope so I can be in the right place. Five metres below the tree, there's a jolt – like the rope is snapping. Looking up I can see that the tree I'd rebelayed on has bent over and – worse still – the whole of its massive root bowl including a half a ton of soil is slipping from the cliff and becoming suspended on my rope. Panic: 'this stupid shitty rope is bound to snap – no, don't panic!' Fortunately the edge of the root bowl had become poised on the lip of a ledge and brought to a temporary state of equilibrium by my thin rope creaking, stretched to its limit overhead. I daren't move. And if I were to try jumaring up, I might disturb the balance of forces and cause the entire weight of the root bowl to come onto the rope. Rationalise! Think! Roy was still within earshot, and I shout to him to throw a rope to me – 'make it quick!' I implore. Scarcely daring to breathe, five minutes becomes an eternity as my rope vents the occasional groan, but – thanks to Roy – I am able to transfer to his rope and safety. Back up or mess up.

When to Trust a Tree

In isolationist mode again, with Soloist in Meirionnydd, rushing around as usual. I'd spotted an unclimbed crag left of Craig y Mwn to investigate for the next day's sport. Surefooted as ever I scramble down from the cliff-top, bounding from ledge to ledge, eager to take a closer look. But then, what was happening!? Suddenly I am falling head first, diving towards a grisly end. In micro-moments, out of the corner of my eye, I notice a slender rowan tree, and manage to grab the top of it. As I continue earthwards it begins to bend over as it takes my weight and slowly returns me to an upright position, landing me on my feet on the last ledge before the void. 'Wow!' I yelled: 'perfectly executed, Martin'. The physics of the manoeuvre would have been interesting to calculate. What a tree!

For Whom Not the Swell Tolls

Tough times at work – have to get away. With low humidity and a high spring tide, some deep water soloing on Portland should prove just the tonic. So, burn rubber southwards to the east coast and a few ‘easyish’ things I haven’t done. ‘Hmmm.... the sea seems rougher than expected’ I muse as waves begin crashing under *This is the Life* (F6b), my target. Twenty minutes later I commit. But by the time I am half way up the route, strong easterlies pick up, and the chop becomes a salvo of breakers threatening to outrun my progress. They charge, onslaught after onslaught, each larger than the preceding. Noise, so much noise, overloading the senses – the oceanic orchestra in full swing now. Suddenly the cacophony transposes to a tenser key, and from the crescendo an explosion of compressed air envelopes me in spray. It soaks my rockshoes, my trousers; and mists my glasses. In an instant the chances of becoming subsumed in the broil triple. The way back is cut off and, amongst last rites, I erupt *Tilikum*-like from the cauldron, just before the sea breaks over the cliff top. ‘Idiot, bloody idiot.’ I’d got it so wrong, knowingly perhaps.

The Damn Pélerins Again

As a youth I was a lousy Alpinist; I mean *really* bad. I couldn’t stand prolonged cold, couldn’t find my feet on the bloody snow because it wouldn’t keep still; and I always got rained off after starting too late in numpty British style. Well, apart from on the Matterhorn that is, which I enjoyed with an equally green mate but no ice axe, when I had just turned 16. The poisoning of my Alpine aspirations was down to our fixture on the damn Aiguille de Pélerins, stalked by failure whatever route we tried. Approaching the summit on a now-or-never dénouement, along comes the white out and the snow. We are well-rehearsed in failing however, so a regimented about-turn follows, Rob Illingworth in the lead, descending. The snow turns to rain; mild weather has arrived. Why in the hell didn’t we get a weather forecast? Rob takes his first step onto the snowy couloir and the whole world starts to move as a big windslab breaks away, Rob attached, surfing. But for this season I’d brought along an ice axe and slam it down, stopping Rob before the windslab sweeps into an avalanche runnel and trundles off into the bergschrund 200 metres below. ‘For f...’s sake, this whole snowfield is melting, we’re going to have to be so careful’ we scold each other. Slip by slide we progress down, bricking it. Every so often there is a roar above, like a soccer crowd in the stalls of a stadium, letting rip an avalanche that shoots down the funnel past us. Unfortunately we have to cross the blessed thing, which is about 8 metres wide; and timing would be entirely down to luck. Below, that shark’s gob of a bergschrund, visibly a bottomless chasm now, still looked hungry. I teeter across first, hoping for the best; it is the finest performance on snow I’d ever made, and I reach the other side. But we know that Rob has to follow straight away as any avalanche would hit the connecting rope and pluck us into the bowel of the glacier. Off he goes: ‘Get a move on’, I shout, unhelpfully. And, of course, then it comes, the avalanche – bloody boring probability forcing an express train of snow down the funnel onto Rob, half way across. He shoves his axe home, and with me braced to the side, the snow piles up on and around him. In twenty seconds he disappears. As the avalanche subsides, the big pile of snow in the funnel that was Rob begins to quiver, and we escape unscathed. I decide I prefer my creature comforts.

Bomb from Guernica

It was on my hit list during my early-90s romance with splendid Carn Gowla in North Cornwall, where it was *de rigueur* to scare oneself silly but never forget the pleasure of doing so. In those days it was hard to resist the hype of great routes projected into history and climbers’ psyche by impassioned protagonists and press-loved peers: *Guernica*! Think of the painting’s lawless imagery and the terrible event, and you develop a sense of *Guernica*, the route. To gain it you must abseil in to its left, which I did before partner Francis Ramsey. There were perched blocks everywhere, so an Army-style descent was to be avoided. Nearing the end of the abseil I make contact with the slab 40 metres below, and just happen to look up, thanks to that saviour of a sixth sense. Above, a missile is heading straight for me, turning slowly in deadly accurate rotation. Instinct engages and, still on the ab’ rope, my feet push me up off the slab and out of the path of the jagged rectangular block as it crashes where I stood and passes between my feet. The image will never leave me; I could draw the block accurately even now. We proceed with the route, sufficiently introduced; second free ascent.

Pushing Gear beyond the Limit

Limited time means corners get cut. That's not a problem in itself so long as you remember which corners. Before all this Cheddar Gorge summer season nonsense I used to sling a long rope down some of my 80s hard routes for winter training shunts. Thus I did on the Madrugada Wall, for *Kephalonia* and neighbours. On the abseil it all goes wrong, kind of, 90 metres above the road. The rope and abseil plate jam up into a Christmas cracker puzzle, so I stand in a foot loop from a jumar to sort it out. At that very moment something distracts me, maybe the backfire of a Harley sweeping around Horseshoe Bend below. It disrupts the timeline, my train of thought, my focus. Sensing I'd completed the task, I begin to sit back on the rope only to notice that the screwgate carrying the abseil plate and rope has become disconnected from my harness, and separated from my body. In slow motion I begin to fall back into the void, airborne, but my foot still in the loop. My right hand lunges for the rope, grasps it; and I rock up into the foot loop and connect back into the rope. Then it's back to the climbing.

Shimmering on The Hidden Edge

I'm a migraine-sufferer, but unlike many such afflicted folk, I have the luxury of knowing exactly the set of conditions that brings the demon on: dark/light contrasts. Upon being laid flat after *Barriers in Time* on The Roaches in 1991, I decide to take precautions; hence the baseball cap and tinted glasses. So, later in the 1990s I'd become engrossed in exploring the Exmoor coast with its climbing guru Terry Cheek. Today was a session on The Yellowstone, Valley of Rocks. Our new E5-to-be would forge a first pitch out of the cave and a second onto a serious friable wall. Anti-migraine measures are in place, but the trouble is I can't seem to resist eye contact with the sun emerging onto the wall. All seems well as I start the top pitch, pulling through overhangs out of sight of Terry below. But then I sense something's not quite right; you can always tell. Oh God, the shimmers have begun: the faintest dancing fog in the distance, like a twinkling constellation – coming in and out of focus, creating a gut-swell of rhythms, pulsing and billowing, a knife skewering into my brain; and the nausea sets in as the ribbons of fog fill 50 per cent of my vision. I'm hanging on E5 shale crimps and fast losing my sight, squinting to exclude as much light as I dare, yearning for a darkened room. 'Just shut your eyes, go on, shut your eyes.' Yet the tide is coming in, and I can't communicate with Terry because of its rowdiness. It will swamp the belay ledge, and the only way is up, and out. 'Mind control; apply everything you are in life. Don't do your best, just do it.' With every move the knife skewers deeper, a bass drum hammering in my ears, the convulsions shivering this way and that between head and gut. A wreck pulls out onto the oh-so-steep-and-slippery grass, broken from within.

Sword Fall on You

Lionheart, High Rock. 1994 and I still haven't climbed it, but Ian Parnell has, after a major recleaning effort. Time to act before it turns to ivy once again; and Ian kindly agrees to repeat the experience. I lead pitch 1, and Ian embarks on pitch 2. You must keep alert you know. To achieve a long climbing life, it's not only important to acquire wisdom, but also to adapt it, especially at a place like Cheddar where in those days loose rock had to be left in place on the route. No more so than now, lashed tight into gear on that tiny stance with Ian climbing directly overhead and no room to move should some substantial object, including Ian, come flying down. So, I loosen the tie-ins to the nuts and pegs, which gives me about a metre's slack in any direction – just in case – and I fix my eye on Ian. 'Look out', he screams as he comes off along with a flake that had the exact same spec as *Madame Guillotine*. But I see it and throw myself to the left a nanosecond before the shard rakes the air next to my skin on its way to its final resting place – a perfect headstone in the earth bund. 'Here lies Lucky.' Nothing more is said of it.

Nah, that's quite enough