The Free Salathé

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IN 1961, A GREAT EXPANSE of unclimbed granite lay on the southwest face of Yosemite's El Capitan. This wall was named for John Salathé, a pioneer in the development of Yosemite rock climbing and inventor of the hard-steel piton, which made possible the ascent of the big Yosemite walls.

Using Salathé's pitons, a bold generation of younger climbers easily repeated the hardest routes in Yosemite, including the first and, at that time, the only route on El Capitan, The Nose. Their apprenticeship proved that it was possible to climb fast and self-contained on the biggest of the walls.

After The Nose, a young team of Tom Frost, Chuck Pratt and Royal Robbins dreamed of a route up the center of the vast Salathé Wall. In September of 1961, they established what even today is called, "The Greatest Rock Climb in the World." At the time, the climb crossed all known frontiers and was state-of-the-art in technical difficulty. This supremely talented and bold team created pitches, both free and aid, that were as hard as anything that had previously been done. If they blew it, they would have to rely on themselves for a rescue. And in 1961, being 2000 feet up on a Yosemite Wall was a lot farther off the deck than it is today!

More than a generation later, the focus of the sport has changed. Even though more difficult modern aid climbs are being established, the goal is no longer merely to reach the top, but actually to climb to the summit. Todd Skinner and I aren't *aid* climbers—we are *free* climbers. We use rope and hardware, but only for safety, not to pull ourselves up. Unlike all previous ascents of the Salathé Wall, we climbed upward only by the strength in our hands and the will to hang on. Todd and I consider the Salathé to be the greatest free-climbing goal in the world. There are a few pitches here and there that may be tougher, but there is nothing even remotely as grand or sustained in difficulty.

For years we have traveled the globe, pushing ourselves to the limits of power and performance. All this traveling and climbing on different types of rock has been complemented by purposeful training and a focused determination to excel. From the most difficult climbs at the Devil's Tower, Vedauwoo, the Shawangunks, Tennessee and the best European crags, we have compiled an extremely valuable library of techniques which proved invaluable on problems we faced more than 2000 feet off the ground—on the Salathé. We knew that we wouldn't be able to fill a daypack with gear and be able to climb it free. It would

require an unheard-of amount of continuously difficult climbing and from Todd's reconnaissances in 1985 and 1987, as well as from others, it was obvious that the Salathé Wall couldn't be touched without a lot of preparation.

We decided that a series of "camping trips" would allow us to gain the necessary knowledge and to become accustomed to life so far off the ground. Our strategy was to spend six or seven days at a a time working on different sections of the wall. These trips were also used to cache water and the occasional can of beans at critical sites. After our work low on the route—that is up to Pitch 24—it became difficult to haul enough water and food to points higher. Our tactics changed and we carried an enormous amount of gear up the twelve miles of trail to the top of El Capitan. From a reconnaissance camp on the rim, we began the outrageous rappels which put us in position to work the upper sections of the climb. What had seemed like hideous exposure on Pitch 24 suddenly was no worse than the void experienced on short free climbs. We went down as far as Sous le Toit Ledge, leaving fixed ropes that were ultimately anchored to a big block just over the rim. We then climbed back out to a stance just at the lip of the Great Roof and began work on the crack in the Headwall. Several days were spent on these Headwall pitches as we top-roped or led them or figured out protection. We just got used to being in such an exposed place.

We marveled that at each impasse there was a sequence that worked, even if just barely. But we were appalled by the inhuman amount of difficult climbing that faced us. We were haunted by the specter of injury. Damage to a critical joint or tendon would finish our bid. A turn in the weather could be equally debilitating. Occasionally the mental strain of so many difficult sequences and unrelenting crux pitches became a burden that threatened to crush our dream.

When the time came for the final push from the ground up, we knew that we had a good chance of pulling it off if we could stay together physically and if the weather stayed cool and dry. Photographer Bill Hatcher and our "Wall Master," Scotsman John Christie, would climb just ahead of us. The plan was for John to lead, aiding the pitches as all previous parties had done, allowing Bill to lower back down to take photos of Todd and me. From a ledge high on the wall called The Block, John and Bill would continue aiding to the top. Then Bill would fix the ropes back down for photos, while John would go to the East Ledges, thus sparing precious rations.

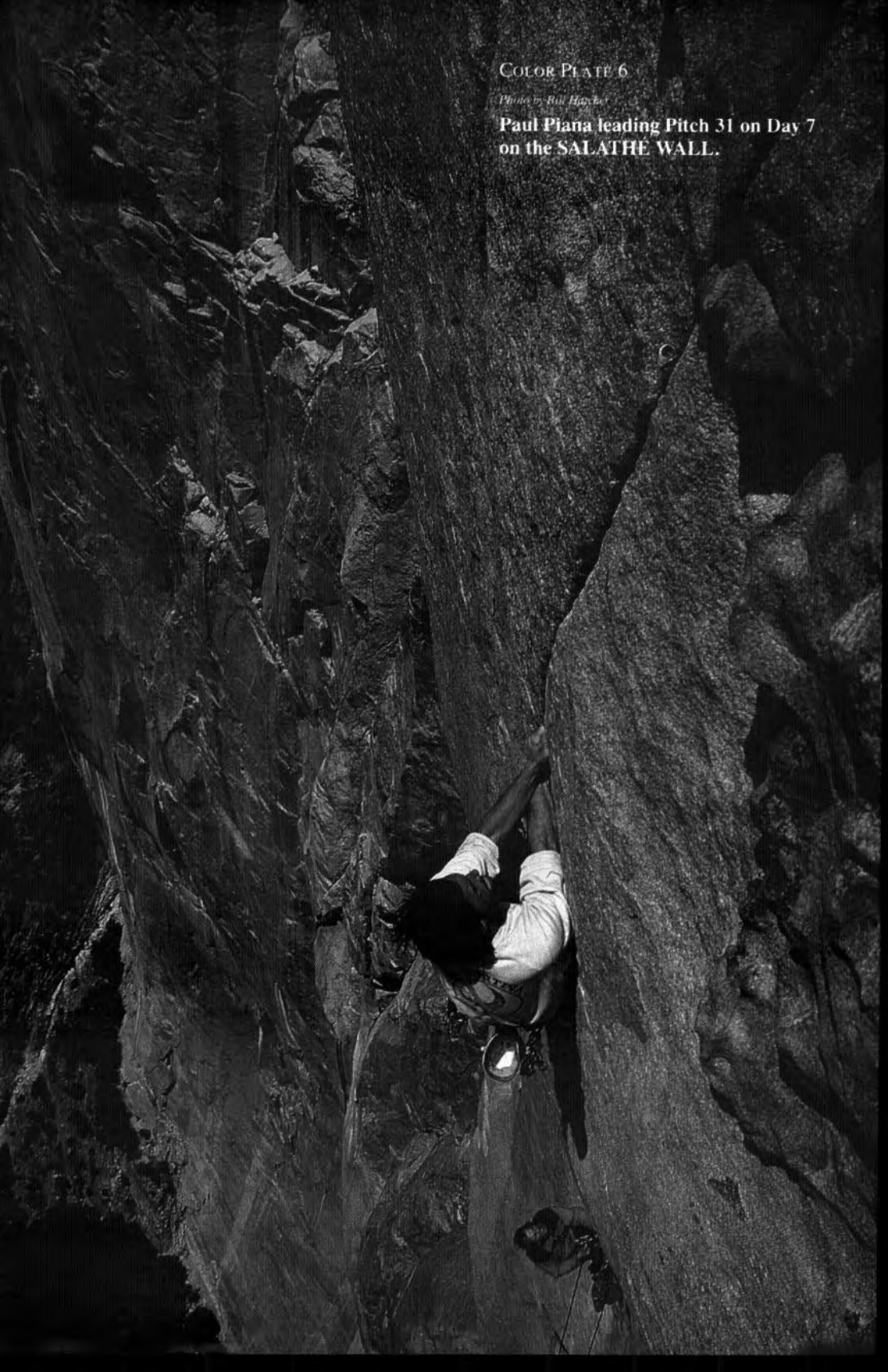
Armed with a month of recons, food, water and a super photo team, we were ready for our final push. The Salathé Wall begins with ten rope-lengths of climbing called The Free Blast. This section posed no difficulty and we soon found ourselves on Heart Ledges and on climbing that was getting steeper and increasingly spectacular.

About 700 feet above Heart Ledges, we encountered the first of the really difficult pitches. This 5.13b pitch turned out to be a beauty. Were it on the ground, this tight dihedral would be a much-tried classic, but the 1700-foot approach will deter many. This was the first crux and it required a wide variety of crack techniques. We found power flares, 5.12+ moves from them into pin scars and back out again, thuggish laybacking and then we found the hard part.

COLOR PLATE 3

Photo by Bill Hatcher

Piana and Skinner at Breakfast on their Portaledge on Day 6 on the SALATHE WALL.



COLOR PLATE 6

Photo by Bill Hatcher

Paul Piana leading Pitch 31 on Day 7 on the SALATHÉ WALL.

Searing fingertip pin scars, laser-precise edging and post-doctoral skills in body-English were the ingredients of the last twenty feet of this pitch.

Two rope-lengths above El Cap Spire, we found what at first seemed like an impasse—a desperately polished corner that was smoother than our moves. I was happy when on the final push, Todd won the 5.12d pitch with powerful stemming, several more than playful slaps and no falls.

Many leads above, pitches became harder and harder. The amazing Headwall loomed over us like a dark cloud. The pitch below the Great Roof was especially memorable. Powerful, open-handed laybacking and technically desperate stemming was protected by horribly frayed bashies and an unwillingness to fall. Our aching backs called this flaring dihedral 5.12b. The dihedral ended at a dangling stance below the Great Roof. This bold feature stair-steps over and out for twenty feet and with the walls of the corner below cocooned us from the wind. We hauled our bags and set up our portaledge camp.

The first night of several was spent here, lives and gear tangled across the hanging corner like some giant cobweb. Our little world was quite secure, but we could never truly relax. The position was too spectacular. Gear dropped a long, long way before we lost sight of it.

From the top floor of our camp, the route moved out right with lots of cool morning beneath our heels, an easy but spectacular traverse leading to an attention-getting series of dead-point surges to sloping buckets. From here it is possible to brachiate wildly to the right, feet swinging, and then to throw your leg up and over a huge horizontal spike. What a place! Halfway out a huge roof, a hundred miles off the deck, is this amazing saddle-like peninsula so flat and comfortable that we could have served coffee on it. From the saddle, it's all rounded buckets to the lip and a terrifying heel-toe above the head and crank to a shoulder scum, but if I fall, I'm going to scream. All the while, my heart was slugging away doing Mike Tyson imitations while I made the tenuous step up onto a hands-down rest. We decided to throw in a belay here since we had the stance.

The first 5.12+ flare moves, just above the belay, were harder than any I had ever experienced and were unprotected as well. How the jams felt meant nothing—they were so bad that Todd had to visually monitor his hand through each move. With his Megas 15 unprotected feet above the belay, he had to pull up slack to clip a tied-off peg. So flaring were the jams that it was impossible to down-climb and the slightest error, even a change in the blood pressure in his hand, would see the Salathé flick him off and send him screaming far below the roof, until the force of the fall crashed onto my belay anchors with Todd wild-eyed and spinning thousands of feet off the ground. We were both glad that he didn't fall. The flares ended with a thankfully short, but tremendously difficult, face sequence. Power, grace, tremendous skill and the essence of boldness were some of the practices Todd pulled from our cheat's repertoire. Even a bitter has-been would have cheered the brilliance of Todd's lead. We were ecstatic that the second 5.13 pitch was done, but sobered because two more were just above.

The two 5.13 pitches that split the beautifully overhanging orange wall were a joy to look at but could well have ended our free attempt. The Headwall must be the grandest climb in the Universe, a beautiful and inspiring crack system splitting the 100° sweep of golden wall at the top of El Capitan. The essence of the Salathé is distilled in this one incredible fissure. To be here whether free- or aid-climbing must be one of the most overwhelmingly good experiences a rock climber can have.

Todd and I feared the unrelenting pump of the pitch that rose above us, a crack that Todd called "the most beautiful pitch I've ever seen," in the most impressive location either of us could imagine. This pitch would require more than mere technique. To free it would necessitate not only the ability to make difficult moves but to give a marathon endurance effort. This was a 110-foot physical nightmare that demanded power and technique right to the bitter end. A mistake at the beginning of this long, overhanging pitch had a cumulative effect. The mistake might be fixed or powered through but this required a great deal of additional energy and robbed the arms of the control needed at the most difficult section of the crack, the last eight feet. In addition, the pitch was so strenuous that if success was to be had, one had to run it out rather than to waste energy placing protection. I thought Todd had it in the bag twice, but he failed just a move away from the anchor. A thirty-footer later, Todd hung a few moments, toes brushing the wall. Then I belayed him to his highest piece so that he could unclip and jump down far enough to be lowered to the belay. Against all hope, Todd went up again, but even ten feet off the belay, it was obvious he was too tired to succeed. Still, he gave more than his best. He fought upward with violent karate-chop jamming, frantic foot changes and missed clips. Then 90 feet up, a dejected murmur in the gloom and I was yanked upward and into the wall as Todd hit the end of the rope.

By this time, we were pretty shot physically and emotionally. We had invested so much time and effort in this climb and feared we could fail. After the long days spent on recons and our efforts on this final push, it would be no surpise that it could slip through our fingers. Our knuckles had swollen to a shocking size and they spread our fingers apart so that the tips didn't begin to touch and our hands no longer closed. Many cruel pin scars had brutally bludgeoned our critical forefingers. We were afraid that even if our stubborn resolve to free the Salathé didn't crumble, our wrecked fingers and inflamed joints would spell the end. We simply didn't have the rations to hang around and recover. Todd had completely toasted himself with his inspired efforts on the Headwall crack. The next morning he mumbled that he needed a rest day.

By this time, Wild Bill and Scottish John had topped out and Bill had fixed lines back down to take pictures. Rather than wasting a day resting, we decided to jümar Bill's ropes to the pitch that exited onto Long Ledge. I had been having better success on it than Todd, and so we figured I should work it some more and then Todd could still have the Headwall crack. We spent a frustrating day on this exit crack. I could almost do it but would fail a few feet short every time. I must have fallen a nautical mile that day, but we gained valuable knowledge about

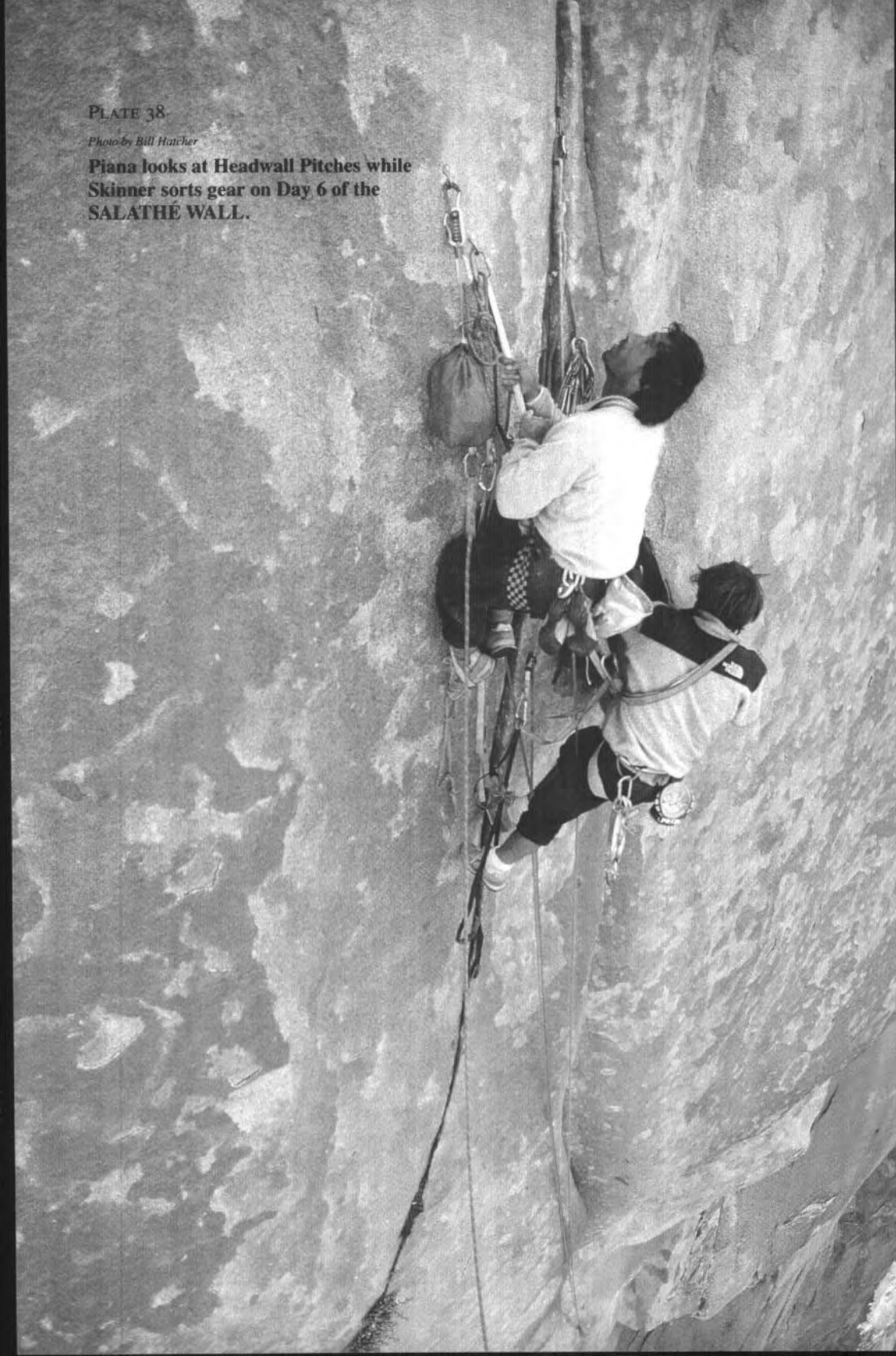


PLATE 38

Photo by Bill Hatcher

Piana looks at Headwall Pitches while Skinner sorts gear on Day 6 of the SALATHÉ WALL.

subtle foot placements, and Todd did get a little rest. Even so, I was afraid I wouldn't be able to do it at all. After hours of failure, my severely gobied fingers would ooze quickly through the superglue and tape. We retreated to our hanging camp and worked at repairing my fingers. It was my night to be depressed. I tried to relax and sleep but couldn't. I climbed that pitch a thousand times in my mind while the cool void tingled in the darkness below.

The morning brought one of the longest breakfasts I have ever known. After having put it off long enough, we started up the fixed lines to do battle with the Headwall. Todd felt a bit hesitant so early in the morning and needed to clear his mind. He climbed fifteen and then twenty feet above the piece he hung from and then dramatically hurled himself into the void. He repeated this six or seven times until it became fun and the reluctance to go for it was completely gone. Back at the belay, we looked down at the still dark valley floor. The sun hadn't hit the face and the winds on the Headwall were still. Todd flowed through the stillness and all the difficulties, slowing at the last few moves, taking care to make no mistakes. And then all was laughter as he clipped the belay and I started up to join him.

I was happy that the beauty had been won but was afraid of what was just above. Todd and I spent at least an hour cleaning my hands with alcohol, superglueing the rents in my fingers and then carefully applying a wrap of tape over the glue. Before starting, I torqued my fingers in the crack to numb the pain. The morning's lethargy became adrenalin as the thin jams were suddenly below and I found myself wedged into a pod-like slot. Exiting the slot seemed particularly rude to my tattered hands, its flared jams as painful as backhanding a wire brush. After clipping the highest piece, I lost my nerve and decided to down-climb into the pod to rest. I was afraid to fall again.

This wasn't the usual fear of falling—the gear was good and we had lived so long up here that the drop was not the rope-clenching horror it had been thirty days before. My phobia was failure. I couldn't bear the agony of another day without succeeding on this pitch. I fell while down-climbing. The next try was as solid as could be. The pitch flowed together until I found myself staring at the dyno target. Todd was screaming, "Hit it! Hit it!" Long seconds passed as I pondered failure, either from missing the dynamic move or from a lack of trying. A deliberate lunge and I pinched the knob so hard that Arnold Schwarzenegger would have been proud. I cranked to the belay, laughing and waving my arms like a lunatic. We had it in the bag now.

We rappelled down the Headwall and under the roof, packed our gear and slowly hauled it to Long Ledge. After the freight-hauling chore, we had a little daylight left and were hungry for the top. The pitch off Long Ledge is a gem. Actually this knobby pitch is a face-climbing continuation of the Headwall and rolls and bulges upward. Todd reveled in the delicate foot changes, long reaches between knobs and dead-points to crisp side pulls. After he had danced up this Huecoesque wonder, I enjoyed a superb 5.10 thin hand crack which put us only one pitch from the top. Todd made light work of the last bit of 5.11 and the *Free Salathé* was done.

The next morning was perfect. We breakfasted and started hauling freight to the rim. We joked about being extra careful, as most auto accidents occur within two miles of home. I was first over the rim and selected the best anchor I could find. We had already used this huge block, as had years of Salathé climbers. Off to one side were a couple of fixed pins that I anchored Todd's fixed line to. I plugged in a #1 Friend to make sure. While Todd jümared the pitch, I used the block as a hauling anchor and as my tie-in as well. When the bags reached the lip, I was unable to pull them over myself and waited for Todd to arrive.

While waiting, I felt I might as well be embarrassingly paranoid and clipped the fixed pins as well. Todd reached the rim and while he was pulling up the extra ropes, I began taking out the anchor. I removed the Friend and turned to lift the haul bags. A horrible noise grated and we turned back to see to our terror that the block had come loose.

I am not clear about exactly what happened next. Todd remembers my putting my hands out at the block and yelling, "No!" I do recall the two of us being battered together and the horror of seeing my best friend knocked wildly off the edge, and then felt a tremendous weight on my left leg as I was squeegied off the rim. There was a loud crack like a rifle shot, more pummeling and suddenly everything stopped spinning and I could just peek back over the edge.

Everything was in tatters, ropes pinched off and fused—it seemed as if they had all been cut. I was afraid to touch anything, and sick with the knowledge that Todd had probably just hit the talus. All of a sudden, a startling bass squeak sounded below me, followed by a desperate "Grab the rope!"

I hauled myself over the top and soon a bloody hand on a crushed ascender slid over the rim. I helped Todd up and we lay there for a long time. We were terrified because Todd was having trouble breathing and his pelvic area hurt very badly. My leg was in a really weird position and reaching a crescendo of pain.

I don't know how long we were there, afraid to move for fear of unraveling the braid of cut ropes that held us. When we did get up, we discovered that Todd's line appeared to be okay. He had been held by one of his CMI ascenders. Apparently, the rock had scraped over the ascender and miraculously that small, gouged and bent piece of metal had kept Todd's rope from being cut. I had been held by the loop I'd clipped to the fixed pin. The 11mm rope I had tied into the block had been cut as easily as a cotton shoe lace. Two other 9mm ropes were in eight or nine pieces and the haul bags were talus food. We coiled the remaining rope and slowly started down the East Ledges. A descent that usually took under two hours required almost seven. We arrived at the base of the Manure Pile Buttress looking much worse than the average wall climber who staggers down that trail.

We had dreamed, we had trained, and we had struggled. Even though the climb ended with a nightmare, we had triumphed. I'm sure that the ecstacy we feel now will live inside us forever.

Sometimes at night, as I am drifting off to sleep, I suddenly hear that big block move and see Todd tumble off the rim. I think how difficult it would have been for our families if we had been killed. I shudder at the remembrance of

being dragged off the summit of El Capitan, knowing that we were really going to die. For me, the definition of "horror" is now an emotion. Now that several months have passed, and Todd and I have almost healed, I am even more pleased with our climb. We worked harder than anyone else was willing to work, harder than we thought we could. We were willing to risk seeing our most shining goal become a tormenting failure. Yet we were prepared to fail and fail and fail until we could succeed.

Todd and I are still awed by the difficulty of the Free Salathé. The climbing is unrelenting in its severity and the logistics are staggering. We are confident that unless a team is willing to put in a comparable amount of work, the Salathé Wall will not be climbed again as a free route. We are very happy, very proud, and when we are no longer sore, you will see us back on the crags. I keep wondering what "The Shield" is like.