

Chapter Three

Refusal: Feel the Fear – but don't do anything, not yet

'Fear is essential for courage.'

John F. Murray

'I will face my fear. I will permit it to pass over me and through me. And when it has gone I will turn the inner eye to see its path.'

Frank Herbert

'Risk! Risk anything! Care no more for the opinions of others, for those voices. Do the hardest thing on earth for you. Act for yourself. Face the truth.' Katherine Mansfield

My heart is beating and my hands are sweating. I am waiting in the car outside the post office in Ponsanooth. *Go along and then turn left after the post office – we will be along about 6 – we will take you to Bob's barn – show you the ropes.* After a few weeks of swapping texts, I'm finally meeting up with the two climbing chicks – finally going climbing, even if it is only inside.

We met three week ago, at Miss Peapods – an eco-bar in Penryn topped by wind turbines and surrounded by damp estuary sand at low tide. It was a night of world beats and my non-climbing friends, David, Tim and Joe were performing in Penrhythm, a Samba band. By a happy coincidence, two of the women in the band were climbers and Joe, knowing that I was keen - well desperate - to meet climbers, had offered to introduce us.

There was a mishmash of people – a lot of pierced lips, white boys and girls with dreadlocks, tattoos, mingling with the trendy types in straw trilby hats and drainpipe jeans. There were children running rampage, fire dancers, and drinking to be had, despite the glacially slow bar staff.

Joe introduced us and I remember babbling about my first outdoor climbing experience in Spain and the trip I had just made at Easter with Sophie and Kai to the Peak, climbing on gritstone. I had an impression of a smiling, freckled face framed by curly ginger hair – she turned out to be Cat - and a lithe, long-limbed Canadian who turned out to be Safa. Ten minutes

later they were gone; we'd swapped numbers and talked about climbing the following week.

It was a beautiful night, cold but bright with stars. We were standing on the decking outside the bar, the dark sand stretching out around us, dotted with naked boats resting on their sides. There is something indecent about a boat out of water, like an elegant woman has slipped and is lying with her skirts up, knickers on display. The cold air nipped at our checks and ankles.

A few people commented on the smell as the evening rolled by. Well I thought to myself, these more alternative types don't have such an attachment to squeaky cleanliness as the 'fabreezed' masses. And good on them. It's more environmentally friendly not to wash your clothes quite as much. At one point, there was a particularly strong waft.

'Phew,' said Liam.

'Yeah,' said the scruffy woman we were talking to, 'That estuary can stink it up from time to time. It gets pretty bad in the summer.' We were leaning against a wooden post that supported a balcony. There were people leaning on the railing above, people standing around in circles, people moving about, people dancing.

Whooshhhhhhhhh.....BANG!

The bottle smashed hard onto the top of Liam's head; his legs crumpled and he collapsed to the floor, quite literally hitting the deck. I looked at my feet; a sturdy 660 ml beer bottle rolled away and came to rest in the groove of the decking. In a flash the vision was gone and Liam was standing looking at me, twizzling his glass of wine in his hand.

'Phew, that was close,' he said. We looked up and saw a row of bottles a few meters above our heads. Any one of the throng on the balcony could kick something off to smash down onto the heads of the people below. I think about how much a bottle landing on someone's head would hurt. I wonder about the force it would exert.

Calculating the force of a falling bottle is complicated because it

depends on what it collides with. If the landing is soft, the force exerted is much less than if it is solid and rigid. Rigid like a skull arching over a grey spongy brain. To work out the impact I'd need to know the distance the bottle travelled on its journey. I'd also need to know the bottle's weight. But the thing is, the bottle didn't land on Liam's head. I don't need to work out the force exerted, I don't need to ponder the mass of a large beer bottle, or try and work out its velocity just before impact.



It didn't smash, and shards of glass didn't fly out and embed themselves into calves and thighs. It was knocked, it fell, it landed and rolled harmlessly away. *And if one green bottle should accidentally fall....*

I used to see accidents everywhere. Better than seeing dead people, much better than hearing voices, but still. These flashes of 'terrible happenings' are sometimes known as 'daymares' and are not uncommon if you have experienced trauma as a child or a teenager. Something that went terribly wrong and stayed wrong is bound to have an effect. It is like living inside one of those pictures of a '*dangerous home*' we were given as homework in Home Economics; pans boiling over, babies crawling towards gas fires, frayed electric cords. *Circle everything in this picture that might cause a hazard.* I hardly get daymares any more, only if something bad nearly does actually happen, like a bottle falling on someone's head. I was unaware that this lone daymare was like the first raindrop in a storm, the panting scout of a pack of daymares waiting to come crashing onto my head a few weeks later.

People sometimes say to me, Oh I could never climb, it's too dangerous. Sometimes they say this as an admonishment – *how can you be so stupid* - sometimes they say this with admiration – *you must be brave*. Sometimes they say this with a cigarette in their hands. Professional climber

and all round risk-taker, Steph Davis says in *High Infatuation*, 'It always surprises me to hear people talk about climbing being dangerous. I have always felt safest on the side of a hard to reach mountain. The thought of getting hit by an ice fall or falling from a rock face are totally acceptable possibilities. The idea of getting hurt by a person is not.'

A little reported fact - 100% of us will die in the end. Every minute you are alive, you are closer to death. The idea of this makes some people sad but it makes me burst with impatience. I want to do the things I want to NOW - not waste a moment. As long as I think the risk is acceptable, I want to ride my bike, climb, surf and even walk home on my own at night in Hackney plugged into Orbital on my MP3 player rather than listening nervously for potential attack. This is my life and I am not going to live it in fear.

But the thing is I do. I am - to be honest - a fearful person. Perhaps I climb and do these other 'dangerous' activities to smother a big fear, of things out of my control – fear of the future, fear of failure, fear of madness - with a sharper, smaller fear. Like an inoculation – a small amount of danger from climbing protects me temporarily from the bigger dangers of life.

Later that night at Peapods, Penrhythm performed. It was magical. The tribal feeling, drums and rhythm. We were all crowded around the band in the middle of the dance floor. At three or four points in the performance the band paused, for four delicious beats, with the whole room holding its breath. Then, they started again, all in time, on the first beat of the next bar. The crowd went nuts, stamping and clapping.

'Hey babes,' I said to Kai.

'Hello my Jen. You alright?'

'Good, drunken. Sorry to call so late.'

'Are you having a good time? How was the band? Did you meet the climbers?'

'Yeah, brilliant hopefully going climbing soon. They're really nice. Really really nice. Well I didn't talk to them for that long. That's not why I'm calling. I've just thought of something. The samba band, they are like us.'

'They are?'

'Yeah, because, when we see each other, it's like when the band is playing, fun and exciting. When we are apart and you're in London and I'm in Cornwall it is like the pause, filled with anticipation. And then when it starts again it's so exciting, better because of the pause. Do you see?'

'So we're like Samba?'

'Yes.'

'How many beers have you had?'

Outside the post office, a little green car pulls up next to mine. Follow me, say the windscreen wipers. Cat and Safa wave and we're off, weaving through back lanes. The thick green hedges push closer and closer together as we get further and further away from the A393. My tyres crunch over patches of sandy gravel and we make one last right into a beautiful farm, with stone buildings, a stream and stables - all surrounded by lush green trees. Nothing remotely resembling the promised plane hanger. I peer in a window and see a collection of tools, soldering iron lying on the workbench surrounded by a



collection of hammers and greasy screw drivers; upturned jaws of the vice frozen, clamp a jagged piece of metal. They couldn't have meant a plane - as in the tool - could they?

Safa leads the way into a small stone building, high and narrow. Inside, the walls and ceilings are covered with climbing holds and the floor by a collection of dingy mattresses. There is a gap of about a foot between the edge of the wall and the edge of the mattresses. Safa flips a switch and the radio comes on. We sit and pull on our tight, uncomfortable climbing shoes.

I flashback to an accident at the Mile End Climbing Wall. This was one of the first times I'd ever been climbing with Aussie Kate and it has since gone on to inspire a whole series of daymares. A girl was climbing up a slab. This is a sloping wall that is usually easier to climb because gravity is on your side; the opposite of an overhang.

She lost her footing and slithered down the wall, falling over on the crash mat. The downward force of her fall jammed her foot in the tight gap

between the bottom of the wall and the shiny blue crash mat. Her foot was firmly held in the upright position as she headed towards the horizontal. This was not good news for her ankle. The crack was more of a crunch.

But that accident could never happen here, I reassure myself. The gap between the wall and mattresses is much too wide. Plenty of other accidents could happen here. But not that one. You could miss the mattress and land on the concrete floor below, cracking your ankle or knee. You could land on one thin mattress from fairly high up and feel the force of the ground beneath it, injuring your back. One of the people climbing above could fall and land on you, giving you concussion. You could even get a splinter from the rough, wooden walls, which could get infected and gangrenous. Plenty of danger.

The routes in the barn are numbered and you climb in sequence, hold one to hold two and so on, using any holds for your feet. There is a warm up sequence that I struggle around. The numbers have faded and it's hard to see where to go next.

One of the main climbs travels up one wall along the edge of an overhang and back again. Safa and Cat range all over the route, climbing strongly. Safa is graceful, climbing with long, strong arms and legs. Cat, unlike her animal namesake, is not so graceful, but her slight clumsiness hides real grit and determination.

'So how long have you been climbing?' I ask Safa as she rests in-between climbs. 'About nine months. You?'

'A couple of years – but mainly indoors top roping. Not like this. I never seem to get any better than I am now. I've sort of reached a plateau.'

'Oh. When Bob, comes in, try not to ask him too many questions.' They both laugh and Safa is off again, trying a climb that hugs the bottom around the edge of the overhang. A few minutes later, Bob does come in. He's in his mid sixties, brown Cornish complexion, wiry and strong, with thin grey hair around the edges of his head and watery blue eyes. He's wearing a plain sweater and his beige trousers nestle over tartan Wallace and Grommet slippers. The sleeves of his sweater are pushed up and I spot two faded tattoos on each hand, below his thumbs. Some say that once sailor has travelled his first 5,000 miles at sea, he'd ink a swallow on his chest, and then another after the next 5,000. Others say, bird tattoos represent prison time -

doing bird. Bob's tattoos are a very light blue against his thick brown skin. I can imagine them rippling as a younger Bob grips a metal handrail covered with sea spray or heaving up an anchor.

'Ah a new one,' he says and looks at me. I hear a boat engine throbbing, faint shouts and heavy boots clattering down steel staircases. Cat tries the overhang, gets to the mid twenties and jumps off. Right deep breath; let's give it a go. I get to six, hanging almost horizontal before I let go. I am awkward and my legs feel like they are in the wrong place.

'It won't work if you have your legs so high. Just won't work,' says Bob, 'try and make your legs like a triangle, with you in the middle. And you will probably be more comfortable if you take your jumper off.' Cat glances at me and looks away quickly. My jumper stays on. We all take turns, trying and falling. The next time I get to the seventh hold.

'Now that's better,' says Bob, 'look you're a beginner, so don't worry.'

'Well actually –'

'I bet your arms are pumped, that's what happens to beginners,' he says and squeezes my forearm, leaving his hand on my arm. I take a step back and get some water.

My arms actually are pumped. When gripping hard, blood rushes to your forearms making them hard and veiny. Most of the power for gripping comes from the muscles and tendons in your forearms, not your hands. The more relaxed you are when you climb the less pump. But eventually, however hard you relax, your arms will get pumped at some point. Big Wall climbers who climb for days, sleeping on tents known as porta ledges dangling like Christmas tree decorations on the sheer rock face work hard to avoid getting pumped. My arms were pumped after twenty minutes clinging to friendly holds inside Bob's barn.

'No mister wonderful tonight then?' Bob says to Safa. She smiles and nods, before dusting her hands with chalk and springing onto another climb.

'Are there usually more people than this then?' I ask. I am having a rest after my last attempt had got me, again, no further than hold eight.

'Yes, yes, usually lots of lads. You are lucky to have it to yourselves.'

Look this is a good exercise, over here.'

I take two bouncing steps over the mattresses toward him at the back of the overhang.

'Put your hands here, and legs there.' He taps some holds and I grab them and end up hanging off my arms, almost horizontal about two feet above the mattress. My legs are spread wide, pushing on two holds. My jumper has ridden up, revealing my stomach. Bob's next to me about level with my hips. He looks at me and smiles.

'This is a great one to build up core strength. Now you just tense your back, around here.' He reaches towards me, hands homing in on my bare waist and I jump off the wall. 'I'm knackered,' I say and start doing the warm up route to warm down. I wonder how Safa and Cat cope with Bob, and I look at them chatting as they rest between climbs. Ah, they've got each other.

'bin climbin w samba 2 - owe u pint?' I text Joe. Later in the pub, I tell Joe and Liam about Bob.

'But his heart is in the right place,' I say.

'Shame you can't say the same about his hands,' says Liam.

'But what about the girls?' says Joe laughing.

'No, they were great, fine really.'

'Fine?'

'Well they were friendly enough.'

One May weekend, Kai is down from London. It stops raining for about 5 minutes, so we head up to boulder at Carn Brea Castle, a spot recommended by Safa. Bouldering is all about climbing small routes, known as problems, without a rope. It used to be something people did to practise moves for 'proper' climbing, but is now a separate discipline, with rules and competitions of its own.

Carn (rock pile) Brea (hill) is near Redruth, inland from Falmouth. A

ridge runs across the top of the hill. A tall monument sits on the western end and with the eastern end topped by a castle surrounded by stacks of granite boulders. Local legend talks of a fight between some saints and the Devil. The saints were winning, so the devil, a cowardly cove, rolled away down the hill. As you do. The saints, behaving more like football hooligans than heavenly beings, threw boulders after him to see him on his way, and these are the boulders that supposedly swarm with climbers on warm sunny evenings.



Carn Brea Castle

The original inhabitants settled at Carn Brea around the 1370s, but the building now perched 816 ft above the A30 looks more like a Victorian folly than a bona fide castle. It is now a Middle Eastern restaurant, run by the uncle of Julia and Nadia Sawahla of *Absolutely Fabulous* and *Eastenders* fame.

After parking down in Carn Brea village, we troop up the hill heading for the Castle and the saintly stacks of rock. At the top we find a car park.

'Ah well, at least we've warmed up,' says Kai. There is such a thing as too positive.

We roam around the boulders trying to find somewhere that doesn't look totally impossible. We can see chalky patches on some ledges and holds. We find one 'problem' that is at a friendly angle, not too steep and it has a relatively soft, grassy landing. Kai has a go and makes it. I get about a metre off the floor but can't commit to the final hold. If I go for it and don't make it, well then I'll fall.

'You can do it Jen,' say Kai as I cling to horizontal ridge. But my guts are filled with fear; in fact, my whole body is filled with fear. I am only a short jump from a soft grassy landing. But I not frightened of that, I am frightened of what might happen if I go up, out of my comfort zone. No, No. It's not going to work. I jump back down to the springy grass below. Kai has another go.

'I'm going to look for - ' I say. But he is not listening, totally focused on the climb. So I go for a wander to see if I can find something easier. I stamp

along the paths between the boulders, trying a few problems. No, too steep, No, bad landing, No, can't see any holds. Back with Kai I glower until he finishes his climb.

'Where have you been? I shouted for you,' he says not looking at me.

'Just looking at other boulders. Couldn't find any to do. I've got this big scratch from some brambles' I show him my leg. That is the truth, but not the whole truth. I was also annoyed with him and his focus on his climb, and to be totally honest, his focus away from me. We don't get to see each other very much and really he should give me a bit more attention. Shouldn't he?

'I don't think we should boulder on our own. I shouted and you didn't hear me did you?'

'Well I can't do it anyway, so it doesn't matter.'

He is silent and starts to look through the bag for a bottle of water. We often have little spats like this when we climb, it actually one of the most likely cause of arguments between us. Though we nearly always make up by the time we get home, it makes me sad as I love Kai and love climbing (well most of the time anyway) and I want to be able to combine the two. But we just clash. Maybe it is just my frustration. I know I have the ability to solve some of the problems we faced today, but my fear stops me. Kai climbs and he thinks, 'I'm sure there will be a hold just up there'. I climb and I think, 'No holds, nothing, if I go higher, I'll have further to fall.' When I have days like this I wonder why I climb at all.

Chapter 3 - Glossary

World beats: A type of music or event that features artists from all over the world. Sometimes associated with hippies, hippy festivals and hippy weed smoking.

Orbital: A trancey, chill out, techno group made up of Phil and Paul Hartnoll - a big feature of my university days. Not to be confused with the Orb.

Route: A certain path up a rock, mountain or indoor climbing wall.