
Climbs



Andy Parkin *Cerro Torre*
Pastel
Winter solo trip 2000

NICK BULLOCK

Silent Scream

~ A year in the life of ...

Wind whipped snow against the thin metal skin of the Leschaux Hut. I lay fully clothed and covered in thick woollen blankets. A shaky forecast and New Year celebrations had no-doubt kept other climbers away. Tim Neill and I had climbed *L'Oeil au Beurre Noir* on the Petites Jorasses, a wave of water-ice leading to a steep silver pencil compressed by overhanging granite, and as 2006 slipped into 2007 I thought it fitting that my most prolific and successful year of climbing had finished with a great route.

The rock and ice up high had been generous in 2006, and the crumbling, vegetated sea cliffs of Gogarth forgiving. Experiences were racked, ready to be pulled from a crammed memory. Images, people and moves flitted in and out of my head. Pulling the blankets around me, flushed on success, warm for a while, until the thought of what I had lost in 2006, and that question I was so frequently asked, quelled my fire.

'Good to see you're still alive, when are you next going to try and commit suicide?'

Why was it that people appeared to think me reckless? Holding down a relationship appeared impossible; who wants to be with someone who is going to die sooner rather than later? But I couldn't live nervous of the 'what ifs'; I couldn't live life with longing.

2006 started with a fierce struggle on a little dark crag in North Wales. Snow swirled around the heavily hoared crag and butted up to the base. Libby Peter and I wallowed our way through deep powder armed with a rock-climbing guidebook and open minds. *Travesty*, a summer E1 5b, was judged worth a look.

Swinging, pumped, hanging from picks slotted behind flakes, I looked around the arête and knew the corner I had to pull into and traverse was going to be difficult. Llyn Idwal, white and frozen, looked a thousand miles away. The arête was overhanging and undercut with exposure like a big alpine face. Teetering, pressing front points onto tiny rugosities, quivering, sideways, slow and delicate. Axe picks placed on edges held me in balance. The wind blew snow up the face, stinging. Expecting to slip and fall, a creeping, calculated journey ended with me in the corner system waiting for Libby. The first winter ascent of *Travesty* was nearing completion.

On a roll, both in climbing and with life, Libby and I returned to Clogwyn Du two days later. *The Crack*, an overhanging off-width, another summer rock climb, was the obvious prize. Two hours of battling resulted in a big



3. Nick Bullock on the crux pitch of the first winter ascent of *Travesty*.
(Libby Peter)

fall, exhaustion, and time running out before picking up Libby's girls from the childminder.

Adam Wainright, Noel Crain, Graham Desroy, Mayers, Helliker... I called all the usual suspects later that evening, the list like a *Who's Who* of climbing. And one by one they rang or sent text messages declining the offer. I was desperate, knowing that Ian Parnell and Rich Cross were in the area and on the hunt.

Finally, James McHaffie returned my text and agreed to come out the following day so long as he was back by four to start work.

'No problem, how long can a two pitch climb take?'

Large wet flakes of snow swirled around the cwm. Caff sat in the snow beneath Clogwyn Du, removed his round, wire-framed glasses, cleaned them of snow and replaced them. Pulling a thick sandwich from his rucksack he devoured with vigour. Duct tape covered his salopettes and his cotton hoody was more suited to the base of a boulder. I was interested to see how Caff, one of the best trad' rock climbers in the country, went on.

'Good to see you're still alive, when are you next going to try and commit suicide?'

Arms straight, gripping axe shafts harder than ever, I struggled, body taugt, shaking with effort. Two falls already and after each a return to the ground. Again I was at the point where a slip of the axe from the rounded edge, or feet from the smooth wall, would result in a big fall.

'Go on Nick!' Caff's scream from below mingled with the wind whistling.

The thought of success drove me on. Failure threatened. Failure had dogged me in 2005. Driven to the point of destruction, I was on a mission of success in 2006. Fifteen years of working with some of the worst individuals in Britain had given me this chance for a 'dream' existence. Failure will occur, but acceptance is never easy.

Reaching right, an edge for the point of a crampon, slipping, moving, sliding...

The sun sets, a bright-red glowing blaze, dipping into the sea. Snow falls, fresh and deep. Racing from the top of the crag, covered in powder, laughing, joking, red hues reflect from the surface of the shimmering sea. Waves pound and lap against the snow-covered sand dunes. Caff has already missed one climbing lesson he was due to instruct.

Success. I felt justified in my decision to give up work. Focusing and acting on my decisions has always been my way. Grey is not a part of my life. Maybe that was the problem in relationships. Partners saw this in me and knew that my living to the full was something I would find difficult to change.

Success was more to me than seeing my name in a magazine or writing an article. I had set out to climb. The climbing and the experience were the important factors. I hadn't given up work and a wage for an extended



4. Nick Bullock on the crux of *Slanting Gully* on Lliwedd, North Wales.
(Libby Peter)

holiday. This was a chance I had made for myself and I was determined. The freedom allowed me to be in the right place at the right time. It allowed me to travel, meet up with the right partners, be persistent and wait for the right conditions.

Leaning into the deep stone surround, looking through the rain streaked glass; a wet Llanberis Pass had put a stop to the climbing. Obsession whispers continually. Obsession drives me on in times of tension, pain and hunger. Obsession takes me to summits and plunges me into despair. Throwing kit into the van, I drove to Scotland.

Scotland gave three routes in four days, including a new line on the Ben. Returning to North Wales, the situation had improved. A simul-solo in the crisp cold afternoon on Snowdon, side-by-side, firm névé and smiles. Taking Libby's girls to ballet on a Saturday morning, racing along wet winter pavements. Bangor pier, laughter and weak winter sun. Lying on damp wood, spying through the gaps watching the sea lapping corroded iron. The last routes of a fickle Welsh winter were some of the best, *East Gully* and *Slanting Gully* on Lliwedd, a feeling of closeness. A feeling of belonging.

'You're still alive then?'

The prospect of Peru in July forced me now to reach a level of fitness high enough to attempt the Welsh rock climbs I coveted. Going to Peru in the middle of summer had always seriously affected my rock climbing. Pushing to my limit in the mountains set rock climbing back a long way, but the mountains call.

Obsession is a curse.

Pushing hard, slapping, fighting, running it out. *Me* on Yellow Wall at Gogarth, overhanging rubble, big air-time, flying, hanging, wrecked and rain soaked, I closed my eyes, imagining what could be if only I could ease up, if only partners were not scared of committing to someone who was going to die early. Spinning. Crumbling rock, clouds, lonely late nights, waves pummelling the cliffs, conversations pummelling my mind. Reflections. I needed to hurt. I did hurt. Tim Neill and I had another adventure racked and it felt good, but was it worth it?

The flight, the taxis and the eight-hour bus journey to Hauraz in Peru felt long and arduous. Snow, battering wind, rain and thick cloud caused frustration in our little camp tucked away from everyone. Matt Helliker and I had travelled around the range to the east side of the Cordillera Blanca, walked six hours to the head of the valley, stashed kit and prepared. Our chosen route, a splitter couloir between Huantsán main summit and Huantsan Oeste was not going to happen. No way after four days of snow would either of us contemplate entering a 1000-metre couloir topped by a loaded sérac. A line spotted on the third of Huantsán's three peaks offered hope. At the first opportunity we would try it.



5. Matt Helliker traversing beneath an ice umbrella on *Death or Glory*, Peru. (Nick Bullock)



6. Nick Bullock on the summit of Huantsán Sur after making the first ascent of *Death or Glory*. (Matt Helliker)

'Good to see you're still alive, when are you next going to try and commit suicide?'

The snow stopped on the morning of day five. Helliker, young and keen, bounded ahead as we walked towards Huantsán Sur. More talented than most, he lacked the selfish drive that affected me, but there was a lot of grey and anguish in Helliker's life because of this. Was being focused to the point of obsession wrong? Probably, if someone else was involved.

We began on rock, soloing, staying close; loose blocks teetered and swayed. Crashing, tiles flew. Helliker moved with a flowing ease that I always found difficult. The afternoon sun shone as we aimed for creaking, towering séracs, wilting like flowers starved of water.

At the top of the rock section we donned crampons and roped up. This middle section of the climb proved the most testing as we sneaked and sprinted, passing beneath, on top of, and around the countless séracs. Climbing runnels of deep snow we moved together towards massive umbrellas of wind-blown ice overhangs. The dipping sun began to turn a deep red. Nearing the biggest of the overhangs, we found a ledge and arranged a bivvi. Brooding in the dark, shuffling on a cold stone ledge, the night was tense. A sérac high on the face calved and we cowered as the first lumps hit us.

'You're still alive then?'

For once, starting early was not a problem. Helliker traversed the length of an umbrella of ice so big an articulated lorry could have parked beneath it. The climbing was pitched as we were in fear of being hit by debris. We crossed a furrow, freshly cut by the newly calved sérac, with blocks of pure blue ice embedded deep into the snow. Questioning and thinking were not an option. I did not look up once.

The climbing became more technical but more safe as height was gained. Route-finding was the key now, and as Matt climbed out of the runnel above I knew by his shout we had made it and it would only be a matter of time before the summit was reached.

'This is going to be very serious!'

When we started on the *Maze*, a girdle traverse of Right-Hand Red Wall at Gogarth, we both knew the easy pitch, the last pitch, would be the crux. The guidebook description of 'impending and loose', told us everything. 'Impending and loose' on Red Wall is serious, no matter what the grade.

I left Toby Keep attached to five pieces of gear, cams in clay, wires sunk deep into moving blocks. Toby wanted a pleasant day, a warm up. The sea crashed into the zawn a hundred feet below adding to the exposure, and we both knew this was no warm up.

My return from Peru had been fraught and after a day another relationship was over.

'Don't fall off Nick.'

Inching along a small ledge with no gear between Toby and myself, I had no intention of falling off; unfortunately the quality of the rock had other ideas. Inching, knocking, carefully weighting. Slow. The ledge broke, crumbling rock, dust, spiders and fear. The block detached from the cliff. Twisting in a slow, mesmerising dance, the block turned, end-over-end, plummeting, crashing into the rocks at the base of the zawn and rousing the seagulls, shocked, a frenzy of white wings, screaming, circling. The crowd on the promontory overlooking Red Wall murmured in anticipation. A handhold ripped. I reversed, gasping.

'This is very serious Toby.'

I was scared. The wall overhung and I was going to have to pull at some point. Obsession doesn't allow backing off.

'Good to see you're still alive, when are you next going to try and commit suicide?'

It was ludicrous. I was about to rip both Toby and myself off the wall and all I could think about was the end of the relationship. Was it my fault? Did my lifestyle have to lead to loneliness?

Edging once more along the gangplank, a large plinth like a traffic cone poked up. I wanted to stand on the point to reach some handholds, but I couldn't commit. The thought of balancing on the top of the cone was sickening. My stomach churned, twisted guts, tight, almost as tight as the night I left her house for the last time in the dark and the pouring rain.

I kicked the plinth and it swayed – swayed like I had when I let her go from that last fierce embrace. Walking from the door in the dark, stinging eyes, the rain washing away the tears pouring down my face. I kicked for a second time and the rock separated and fell. Inching higher, I placed a wire behind a creaking flake and lunged for a jug. Catching the hold, gripping hard, fighting for the relationship, the fear coursing through me subsided for a second until the foothold broke, my body turned, spinning on an axis. I saw Toby pulling ropes and bracing himself. Hanging from one hand, I pulled and lunged again. The rock held as I pulled and flailed, squeezing, hoping for strength, pleading for a change. I saw myself walking in the dark and the rain. The crowd had long gone by the time I pulled over the lip of Red Wall.

Orange, red and white; dust, laughter and light. Jostling. Tourists in baggy ethnic clothing. Bumping shoulders with locals, skin weathered and creased with the intense sun. Kathmandu had always felt good, but now it felt safe, a million miles from my failed relationship. Mountaineering gave an escape and time for recovery. Yes, I would get over this, time would heal, but memories of passion, tenderness, touching and tears, still tortured. Failure felt as sad as a wilting bouquet of flowers wrapped in cracked cellophane at the site of a car crash.

Bracey and I had spotted the gully on the walk to Gokyo village in the Khumbu, Nepal. Originally we had intended to climb on Phari Lapcha's north face but an unclimbed gully between its main summit and west peak stood out and demanded attention. Perfect ice plastered to the back of a deep cleft leading to a knife-edge ridge and an unclimbed summit.

'It's always good to see you as it may be for the last time.'

Stumbling over another ice-covered boulder, forcing myself on, trepidation, excitement and fear. The steel grey of the early morning, the eerie light and solitude, brought back the 40-watt illumination of the 'long-leg' landing of a high security gaol. Imagination ran riot. The smell of sweat, shit, and wasted life filled my mind. Maybe witnessing that waste had fuelled my drive and made me unwilling to compromise. Bracey was in front picking his way toward the next challenge, that perfect gully. Everest was behind, a massive dark bulk, intimidating like some of the inmates from my previous life. Or maybe not. With its fixed rope, vanity, litter and oxygen, the street-fighting days of Everest were over long ago.

Crash...steel penetrated bubbled overhanging ice. The rucksack on my back pulled. Thin air burned. The steep, chandeliered entrance to the gully pulled the mind's eye.

Crash...ice splintered. I had boasted how light my rucksack was as we started walking, but already it weighed heavy, like the memories. Lungs sucked, wanting more.

Crash...another placement.

Crash...I imagined my axe as a wooden stave breaking bone in the prison.

Crash...one hit is self-defence, the second is assault. Stalking the landing one New Year's Eve, I was convinced at any moment a 15-stone drugged psychopath would break through steel; I held my stave aloft ready to strike.

Crash...kick kick, nose, ice, shoulder, ice, skull, brittle, swing, show no fear...crash.

Safe...

Bracey continued, following a shallow corner until he stood belayed beneath a sheer wall. Icicle draped, the wall surged upwards like a knife driven into the massive blue sky. I revelled in my nomadic life. I had escaped from the Prison Service to space, light, freedom and fresh air. It must be difficult for another to contend with that, knowing I have no ties, knowing I could leave at any time.

'Someone else has taken your place, someone who may live to old age.'

'It should go but it looks hard.'

Bracey's shout floated from his hidden position. This was the crunch pitch, the part of the climb we could not see from the valley. I followed with excitement and anticipation. Was it easy after all? His 'It should go,' sounded good, but I wondered what the Bracey version of 'hard' would entail. He and I had not been on a climb together since I broke my ankle, falling from *Omega* on the Petites Jorasses in 2003. Since then Bracey had honed his skills to become one of the best. We shared a lengthy history, brought together for the first time by our late and close mutual friend Jules Cartwright. Bracey had grown up, once the homeless climbing and skiing bum, now he was living in Chamonix with his girlfriend and working as a mountain guide. I was a climbing hobo, homeless, poor, but rich in experience.

Panting, I peered up. Bracey stood, hidden, belayed in a cave beneath a flowing cascade of icicles. To the left, fluted ice led to a steep, mixed corner. Relieved, I grabbed the gear and pushed on. Squeezing into the back of the corner-crack, pressing down with the palm of a gloved hand, bridging. The corner was vertical and strenuous but my axe picks stuck like chewing gum. The debilitating rucksack had been hung from an ice-screw at the beginning of the corner, to be pulled as Bracey seconded. At least I wasn't aiding. Aid climbing on an alpine-style route really gave me a feeling of not being good enough.



7. Jon Bracey below the north face of Phari Lapcha, Nepal. (*Nick Bullock*)

Bracey disappeared, traversing right and down-climbing over thin, ice-covered slabs, cunning in his esoteric protection – a thread, a stubby screw and faith. At the foot of a vertical off-width, a hex was persuaded into the crack before venturing into the corner. Fortunately, good hooks, torques and technique helped with upward momentum.

At the top of the snowfield and about to enter the couloir we thought it prudent to consider our options. Floundering and digging a bivvi in the dark, confined and covered with spindrift belching from above did not appeal. An early finish seemed best, even if a feeling of being useless and slacking ran through both our heads. A bucket seat was cut and the long night endured.

‘Ten metres left, Jon.’

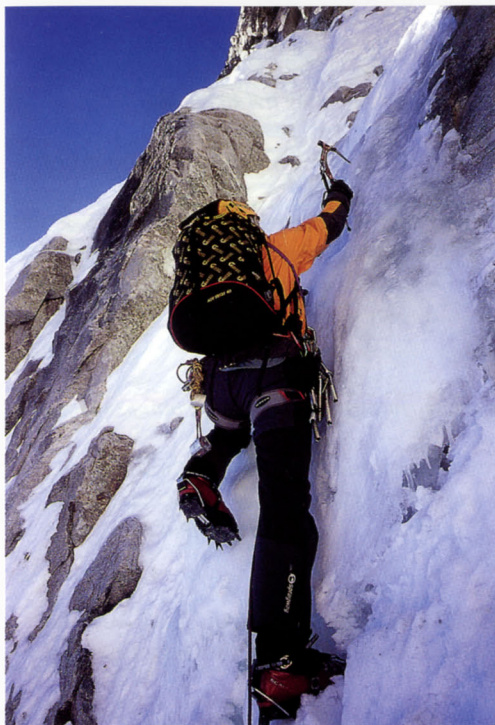
The rope moved up until there was no more to give.

‘Strip the belay and move up, I’m on some pretty steep ground,’ called a perturbed voice.

Sick of waiting, we had started to climb early, Bracey entering into the icy-confiner of the deep cleft. It was magnificent, a meandering river, iron hard, rippled, vertical. A search for slightly more forgiving ice, with calves and shoulders fatigued with the constant bash and crash, proved fruitless. Swelling finger-joints filled with fluid from the pounding ached like my heart with the memories.



8. *Snotty's Gully*, Phari Lapcha (Machermo Peak), Nepal. (*Nick Bullock*)
Nick Bullock and Jon Bracey made the first ascent of the west peak of Phari Lapcha via the prominent gully, naming the route *Snotty's Gully* (M5 WI5 1000m) in memory of the American Sue Nott who perished with Karen McNeill (New Zealand) on Mount Foraker in June 2006.



Left

9. Jon Bracey entering *Snotty's Gully* on day 2. The first pitch from the bivvi.

(Nick Bullock)



10. Jon Bracey on the last steep pitch of *Snotty's Gully* before the final headwall pitch leading to the ridge before the summit. *(Nick Bullock)*

'Someone else has taken your place, someone who may live to old age.'

Shutting my eyes to escape the surroundings for a second, I thought of what could be if only I slowed.

Reaching the end of the gully, deep unconsolidated snow, loose blocks, crumbling rocks, all led to the crest running between Phari Lapcha's main and west summits. The views were spectacular, Everest white and shining, a snow plume reaching high into a cold clear sky. The belay bringing Jon to the ridge was non-existent.

'Good to see you're still alive, when are you next going to try and commit suicide?'

At midday Bracey and I stand on the pointed, rocky west summit trying hard not to overbalance and fall. The release is tremendous, I feel justified. The loss and loneliness is worth this feeling if only for the few minutes it lasts. Anti-climax sets in as we turn.

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