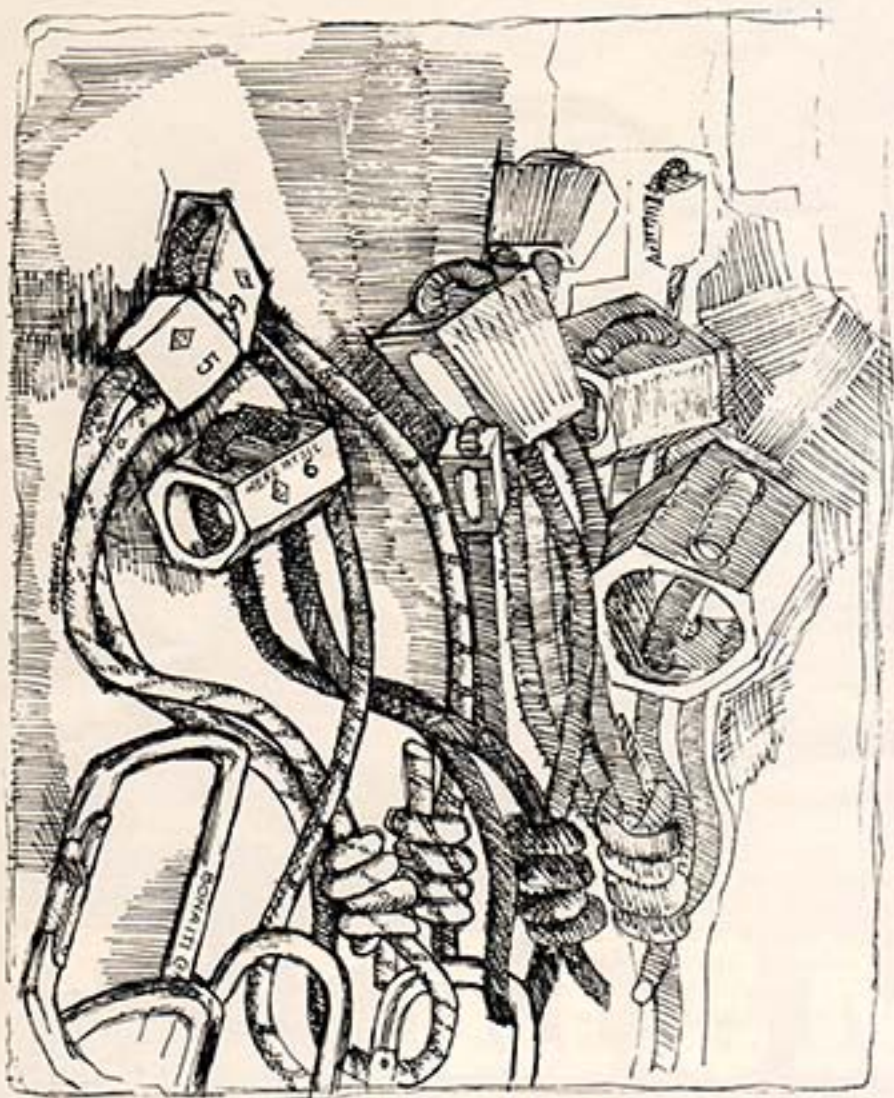


Old #5

A Love Story



Illustrations: Judy Parenio.

by Kurt Krueger

I started out belonging to a young, romantic, white liberal (read that idealistic) college guy. His boots told me he had been climbing four times. They weren't too impressive, well broken in from walking, but the edges were rounded from feet flying off small footholds. The guy obviously used a lot of arms.

Perhaps I should introduce myself. I am a number five Chouinard Stopper.

No, not the small one. The *old* number five, the best size ever made. I don't know why Yvon renumbered everything; didn't he hear of tradition? But let me tell you one thing, there ain't a climb, make that pitch, that you can't get a number five in. We may be a dying breed, but we own the glory spot of any rack we grace. We have stopped some of the greatest falls in climbing history and we have a failure rate of .0237 fmf (failing per fall per foot of

flying), lowest of any Stopper or Hex.

I came home in a package with Heidi, a number six Chouinard Hex and another Stopper, Sally, a number six Stopper. There was also a gorgeous hunk of 5mm perlon; boy, the times I had with him. He was the first. There were also a couple of Bonati blue gates. This boy hadn't heard about climbers so gassed on some hard lead that they couldn't open that tight gate.

Modesty prevents me from going into the details of the first gear slinging, the twisting and turning, but I ended up doubling on a 'biner with Sally.

Want to hear about my first-lead? Sure you do. I'd been climbing for about six months, having done a whole bunch of setups for top ropes. Sally, Heidi and I, plus a couple of newcomers, were put on a piece of rolled up sling (a gear sling, I found out later) with a bunch of strange looking wired stuff and some bigger Hexes and Stoppers. There must have been eight of us. We were thrown in a pack with this used rope he bought (\$20.00) and the lights were turned off. This was as usual. I could tell we were headed for Devil's Lake. I could never find it, having never been out for the drive up, but you can kind of tell with the curves and stops. After the trip up the trail we ended up under Cleo's Needle and these dummies were uncoiling the rope in the rain.

There is nothing worse than sitting in a wet slimy crack waiting for the second to get up to you and pull you out; nothing worse, other than the nightmares. Most climbing nuts have the same dream: you're up in a remote mountain range, it's cold, and you're left behind. The story may change a little, but you are always left behind in the end, to decompose slowly until you just slip out of the crack and fall to your death.

Anyway, I was sweating the first lead. I went in fairly early, the second piece. As luck would have it, I was protecting the first crux. I had a pretty good anchoring position, but I was still worried. Sally and Heidi were calling down encouragement. "Don't fail now or we all go." I replied that if they fell I would catch everyone. Climbing nuts often joke among each other. It kind of relieves the pressure of the moment.

The kid made it, and I was a pretty happy nut when the partner came by. I almost jumped out of the crack. Sally was beaming when we picked her up.

We were laughing and singing together as we traveled to the top. All the nuts were excited. I stopped short, when I saw Heidi still on the kid's gear sling. Her mouth was hanging but Sally and I tried to cheer her up. We told her there would be plenty of chances in the future for her, plus since there wasn't even a fall we really hadn't done anything. She was quite worried the kid hadn't used her because he knew that she would fail. We joked around some more with her, telling her she would catch the first fall like it was a feather.

Boy, were we young and innocent back then. Joking about falling, like catching a fall was the easiest thing in the world. But things were good back then. Mostly good weather, easy setups with good placements, and when all the new gear came on the rack they would be looking up to you. The rookies would be scared about almost everything, but a few words of comfort and they usually came around.

Anyway, Heidi did become a great nut, one of the best. They still talk about her on the racks. She died. It was a long time ago, back in '66 or '67. She was one of the first nuts to hold a long fall in the U.S., not to mention dying in the line of duty. The kid and his partner were climbing high in Rocky Mountain National Park. The partner took a 30 footer right onto Heidi. He was injured, his back I believe. I was two pieces down and saw the whole thing. She just took it. Didn't utter a word or anything but I could see the pain in her eyes. Well, with the injury they just lowered off Heidi, cleaned the rest of the pitch, and started rappelling off. Sally started crying. I yelled up to Heidi that we would be back tomorrow, the next day at the latest. Heidi was brave, no other words needed. She said, "Sure, no problem, I'll be waiting for you." She probably still is, too. Most likely she is dead though, frozen to death. Nuts can usually only survive five years up in the high country. That was one terrible day. We lost three carabiners, five slings, and three nuts including Heidi. There were a lot of long faces when we started back down the climb.

Back on the ground Sally couldn't take it anymore. She told everyone, "Snap out of it, everybody knew the story when they signed on. Heidi and the rest of the gear are probably talking to each other, singing and joking

around. She always said she'd rather die up in the mountains than die of old age in some closet because the master got too old to climb. Even though she was afraid she would blow it, when it came her turn, I think she did fine. That was no easy catch and she had to deal with the fear of being first. Nobody else here ever caught a fall, nobody knew what it was like. Now we know because Heidi showed us the way, and showed us how to do our jobs. She is a bloody hero." And with that she broke into the Climbing Nut Song:

*Oh, say can you see
that placement ahead,
In the crack filled with snow,
to let our master go-O-o.
Ever on duty,
We will stay forever.
No freedom again,
Just a damn her-er-ro's end,
For a job damn well done,
Goodbye to mom and dad,*



We were all a little embarrassed, but one by one we all joined in. I looked back and felt a little wetness in my eyes but I kept on singing. I'm sure Heidi heard us.

We came into camp, silent but with our heads held high. We were dirty, wet, but proud. We had a rough time, but most of us came back and we knew we would climb again. We were no

longer a rookie rack. The older racks nodded in respect as we passed and the younger racks gathered together and whispered.

John Keller's rack came over and asked how many we lost. As senior piece on the rack I reported in. I told him about the fall Heidi held. He said he remembered her and she was a credit to climbing. He told us the first loss is always the roughest and we had done a "job." Then we were left alone with our loss.

We eventually got replacements for those lost in action. The losses made us a stronger rack and we went onto harder climbs and first ascents. The rookies learned of their predecessors and the traditions they were expected to fulfill. My big test came a few years later.

I had put together a good rack and everybody was fitting in with everyone else. I had protected cruxes from here to Yosemite and back. There had been times when the metal filings were standing straight up on my neck and I was praying that there wouldn't be a fall. I had to keep quiet though, everyone would be watching and I was the leader. It's a lonely job.

Anyway, this fall was back home and quite unexpected. I never even saw it coming. It was on Briton's Crack, a climb done dozens of times so there wasn't much protection in. I was watching a turkey vulture soaring by when the kid came soaring by himself. I barely had time to set myself before I became loaded. Bam! I couldn't believe the force. I thought the sling was going to rip me in half. I saw my life flash before my eyes. The kid could not believe it either. He started laughing as he was swinging there. I more or less told him to get his weight the hell off of me. What did he think I was, an aid piece? With that bit of swearing the rest of the guys let out a cheer. I was a true leader now that I had won my spurs.

Well, the kid finished the lead and after the second brought me up (more cheers) the kid gave me a little kiss. The second heartbreak of my life happened next. The sling had been quiet, a little more than usual. He was cut. There was nothing else the kid could do except put him out of his misery, the sling would die anyway. He pulled out his buck knife and sliced the cut the rest of the way through. I couldn't bear to watch, but I felt the quiver in the sling as life passed out of its fibers.

My next mate was okay. Nothing special, but a solid performer. I was back on the rack by the next weekend. The group had a little party, congratulating me on the other catch and told me it was too bad about Jay. Some of the girls kidded me about being tied to a pretty nice looking stud. I told them for a runner he wasn't too bad.

The next major event in my life was the loss of Sally. It was in Eldorado Canyon. We had only lost about three nuts since the massacre and had found five times that many. One young second was having trouble getting Sally out. I was up above and had watched the placement. It was strictly routine — easy in, easy out. I just tossed out the usual goodbye to Sally, "see you on top," and took off. The second just left her, didn't even tell the kid for a pitch. I knew right away, of course. I tried to yell down to her, but that damn stream was making too much noise. I couldn't believe it. It's a good thing the kid didn't use me the rest of the day. I couldn't have even held body weight. The rack was silent, waiting to see how I would take it. Just like Sally told everyone after we lost Heidi, I said, "Snap out of it, she knew what she was getting into. We have a job to do so let's get on with it."

Climbing wasn't quite the same after that. I had seen too much death and had lost my two best friends, the ones I started climbing with. Five years later I left the kid's rack. No, I wasn't replaced. There hasn't been a nut made yet that can replace a number five. Just after the kid and his longtime partner started climbing they delivered his partner's wife's baby in a snow cave up in the Bugaboos. The baby was a girl (opposite of a son) but was a beauty, strong and tough. With good fingers, too.

The girl was now eight and beginning to climb. The kid was an uncle figure and decided he should start the youngster's rack. The little girl knew the importance of a good rack and her Dad had told her the value of a number five, an old number five. "Baby, you cannot even get these anymore."

Jenna's (the little girl's) eyes were as big as pumpkins when the kid took me off the rack. The kid had told me what was going on earlier, "you take care of that little lady." I hadn't told the rack, didn't want a going away party or anything. This way the good-byes were quick. There were a few tears and a couple of "a pleasure serv-

ing under you, madam." The kid told the little girl, "This nut's been with your Dad and me as long as we've been climbing; it never let us down and I reckon it won't ever let you down. If you are ever in trouble and need a sure anchor, this is the one to use."

It was hard to put together another rack at my age, but I looked at it as kind of a challenge. It was a different rack in this modern age. Before it was just Chouinard Stoppers and Hexes, maybe a few pins. Now it was Friends, Rocks and Campbell nuts. I'd seen all this fancy gear on their racks but hadn't ever seen it in action. It was all new stuff and so to hide their uneasiness they were loud. Called me an old war horse. But they were good kids and I whipped them into shape eventually. I guess since all the new stuff goes in almost anywhere the long falls were quite rare. They were scared shitless when I told them my stories about the 30 footers I had caught.

Jenna turned into quite a climber and quite a good looking woman. The males were flocking around her all the time, but I knew the good from the bad and warned the bad racks off. Until she met her love swimming in a geyser near the Tetons (and he was nude). He did seem really nice, a little bit of a bum but all in all pretty nice. And he turned out to be a climber, so I gave her my blessing.

I was somewhat nervous getting ready for the first climb together (what would his rack be like?); I wanted my rack to be in tip-top shape. So when the ritual of selecting gear began my rack was shining.

"Don't fail now or we both go." What? Who? Out of the guy's pack came Sally. The guy had picked her out of the crack two days after we left. Well, we both got picked to go on the climb and into the pack we went, talking a mile a minute, covering all that had happened since we had separated.

Sally had been back up the climb Heidi had died on. She could see the scar marks Heidi's body made as it finally slid out of the crack. We talked all the way up to the climb, every belay stance when we got together, and all the way down. It was the most fun I had had on a climb in a long time.

It was settled. Sally and I had to stay together and so these two had to get married. Well, the kids hit it off so well we didn't even have to arrange a marriage; they just went off and did it. At the wedding, my little girl took her

Dad and the kid up Briton's. Did a good job, too. What a great time to be a climbing nut and alive.

I have had a good life. Seen cracks from the inside that other nuts only dream of ever seeing. Had a bunch of good friends. I could tell you I died a natural death, in my sleep, in the back of a closet. It's not true.

I'm kind of jammed in this crack. Snow all over me. Sally is one pitch down. There are a bunch of us further down, I guess. I told her not to climb today. But she loved to climb and wanted to climb in each month of pregnancy. This was a case of getting off quick and never mind the gear. Her husband grabbed me and started setting up a rappel. She mumbled something like, "not that one." But I told her that was okay. Sally and I looked into each other's eyes for a minute and then everyone was gone.

I heard Sally offer to stay on the next ledge. With Sally holding them I knew they would get down. I didn't feel quite as alone with Sally down just a hundred feet. I could see everyone down on the ground starting out. Then I heard a Campbell Number Six (not a bad nut at all) say, "Snap out of it, everybody knew the story when they signed on. Sally, the rest of the gear, and old Number Five are probably talking to each other, singing and joking around. The old lady always said she'd rather die up in the mountains than die of old age in some closet because the master got too old to climb. I'd bet if we sing loud they would be able to hear us."

*Oh, say can you see
that placement ahead.
In the crack filled with snow,
to let our master...*

As the rack was carried away I could hear the song drift up to me and I heard Sally joining in. The rest of the pro, anchor by anchor, was joining in. I mouthed a goodbye and felt one of those tears in my eye again.

I won't keep your hopes up by letting you think someone else may come by and pick us up. The climb was closed shortly afterwards because of an endangered species nearby. So my fate is sealed. I don't mind. I'm old and I've had a good life. But I do regret that my little girl's junior and all the rest of the new generation of climbers will never know how good an old number five can be.