

## Chapter One

### Ordinary World: From the Castle to Cornwall

'*This is true.*' First line in Tim O' Brian's fictional short story *How to Tell a True War Story*

'*This is a true story.*' First line in Jon Ronson's non-fiction book *Men who Stare at Goats*

'*This is a true story.*' Opening of the Coen Brothers' 1996 fictional film *Fargo*

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'This is what happened. I'd managed to get the edge of my shoe onto a tiny ledge and I was just about to clip in. My left hand was holding the quickdraw, my right jammed into a crack. I was way above the last piece of protection. That means if I had fallen I would have practically hit the ground. I felt the ledge crack beneath my foot, my calf pushed down on nothing and then I fell. My hand in the crack took my weight but it hurt like hell. I instinctually started to unclench my hand to relieve the pressure but I knew if I did that I would fall so I fought to keep it clenched. I'd forgotten about my left hand you see, as it was holding the quickdraw.'

'God, that sounds so scary. What's a quickdraw?'

I'm in the cafe of the north London climbing centre, The Castle, sitting near a couple on the baggy beige sofa. He is broad shouldered, be-t-shirted, with large hands and an earnest face. She is slight, Asian with black shoulder length hair. I can see her hire shoes resting on the floor next to her socked feet. They are both sipping cups of tea. He has probably climbed a fair amount, but slightly less than he is prepared to admit. I am willing to bet this is her first climb. Oh, and a quickdraw is a piece of climbing kit used to attach the climber to the rock face, giving them protection from a long and dangerous fall.

'I'll show you in a minute, but then, just in time, I remembered my left hand, clipped the quickdraw into my harness and grabbed hold of a ledge above my head. It was close. But you've got to face your fears.'

The girl gives a nervous giggle. The Castle has been an indoor climbing centre for the last eleven years. In its previous life it was a Victorian pumping station, built to distribute water syphoned from the nearby New River. The Victorian engineers who built it disguised it with turrets, narrow windows and crenellations.

*Right ho, next job, the pumping station, lets make it look a bit different, any ideas Baxter, Carroll?*

*Well, Sir, I was in Windsor this weekend...*

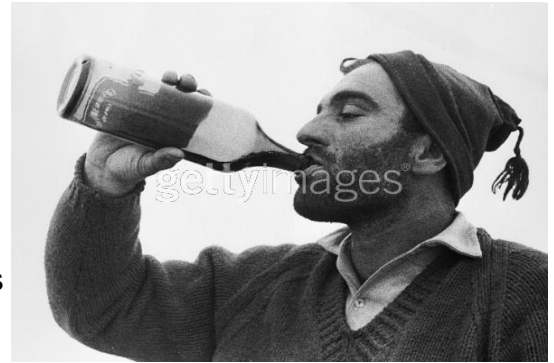
So, in 1899, they built a pretend castle, or faucastle if you will. As you walk up to it along Green Lanes, an ancient thoroughfare used to drive cattle from Hertfordshire to Smithfield's meat market, it looms over you from the top of a grass covered mound. There are hints of a filled-in moat around the edge of the huge brick building and the clever climbers who run it have even put a flag up on one of the turrets.

They built the pumping station to look like something it was not; something grander, something better. It is a harmless fib of a building and it's most fitting that the building is now a centre for climbing, a sport filled with exaggeration and careful fact selection. Most people exaggerate a bit when they tell stories, it is normal and harmless. As Aldous Huxley said, 'An unexciting truth may be eclipsed by a thrilling lie.' Climbers are, after all just people.

The story about the quickdraw may well have happened as the climber described it, but bearing in mind climbers' tendency to exaggerate, especially to newbies, I'm willing to bet money that he dropped the quickdraw rather than calmly clipping it back into his harness. But what is more important, truth or a thrilling tale? A friend of mine once said she sees the truth like an angle, you can bend it a bit, but bend it too far and it will break. The question is how far can you go?

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Climbing is dangerous; death is a real possibility for the hardcore and so as a sport it tends to attract extreme personalities, prone to extreme exaggeration. One of the more controversial stories in climbing history concerns Cesare Maestri's did-he-didn't-he ascent of Cerro Torre in the Southern Patagonian Ice Field.



**Maestri stopping for a drink on his way up 'Death Peak' in Northern Italy, 1963**

In 1959, Maestri, Cesarino Fava and Austrian guide Toni Egger attempted the north-east ridge of the previously unclimbed Cerro Torre. Fava was on board to provide climbing support, and he left his companions to return to base when they struck out for the summit. Fava waited six days in base camp before venturing out, to find Maestri face down in the snow. Maestri claimed that they had made the summit and that Egger had been engulfed by an avalanche as they descended. Maestri's description of the ascent is accurate to a point. After that, it is vague and difficult to follow. Subsequent climbing teams have found the route sprinkled with abandoned gear, which eventually peters out. The gear and accurate description run out at the same point.

Maestri is famous in Italy for his climbing skills but infamous worldwide as the man who probably lied about his ascent of Cerro Torre - and got away with it because his climbing partner was killed. The international climbing community is built on trust. Trust between partners securing each other's safety at either end of a rope and trust on a larger scale. There was, and still is, a code of honour among climbers because so many climbing achievements are not witnessed. If someone says they climbed something, then they did.

'I followed a rigorous diet, went to bed at 8pm and exercised the whole time, whatever I was doing. Even when I made love to a girl I did it in the press up position to strengthen my arms.' Maestri says in, *Meeting with Mountains*. The whole time? Really? He's trying to prove he was capable of conquering Cerro Torre, desperately shouting at us between the lines, 'see,

look what lengths I go to, look at my dedication.' But it says more than that to me, how he is prone to exaggeration and how he puts his own needs above others.

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The Castle is ten minutes walk from my flat, down Lordship Park and then a left onto Green Lanes. Before I met Kai, I was introduced to climbing by my wonderful Aussie friend Kate. I started to climb there at least once a week to experience - for the first time in a long while - the thrill of something new and the satisfaction of getting better and better as the weeks passed. Through the Castle I went on my first outdoor climbing experience - in Catalonia, and then, with the friends I made on that trip, Sophie, Lizzie and Pete my first tentative explorations climbing outdoors in the UK. My first and only attempt at leading outdoors occurred on the Spanish trip, hot and dusty half way down a wide, wooden valley, an hour and a half away from Barcelona. My only outside attempted at leading. So far Jen, so far.

On the third day of our holiday we walk to the crag along a flat path that winds along, halfway up the west flank of the valley. To our left, vertical accommodating rock, to our right, scrubby steep slope that drops down to a river below. The path's compact and narrow, following the contours of the valley. Plenty of shade, today, not like the first day when I'd pushed myself under a prickly bush to get out of the noon sun to ease my throbbing head and burning cheeks.

The face of the rock glints with bolts, running down the valley as far as the eye can see, a long cliff filled with climb after climb. It's quiet, misty and warm. Pete and Doctor Ed eye the routes. We're the only people in the valley.

'God you could come here every day for a year and climb a different route.'

'Five years,' says Gee our climbing guru. Yogafied, calm and assured. He continues on with his rolling loose-limbed walk, natural right of very relaxed, very tall people.

'Here's good,' says Gee a few minutes later and bags are dumped,

water bottled extracted.

'Lizzie and Jen – we'll be around the corner.'

Lizzie and I exchange looks. Sophie grins.

'Good luck you two.'

We follow the path around a corner, so we are out of sight of the rest of the group. We can hear an occasional laugh and clink of gear. The rock faces southwest and once out of the shelter of the trees, we will be in full sun. The face slopes away from us.

'Right. Who's first?'

Lizzie and I look at each other again.

'I guess I don't mind,' I lie. Next thing I know I'm standing facing the rock with a rope tied onto my harness in the familiar, safe figure-of-eight knot. It loops down and through Gee's belay device and coils on the floor by his feet. The thing is the rope isn't tied to anything. First I have to climb up to the first bolt, hold on with one hand, reach for a quick draw, clip it into the bolt, reach for the rope dangling between my legs and clip it into the other end of the quick draw. Only then am I 'safe'. That is until I climb above this bolt to reach the next one.

I have a harness full of quick draws and a belly full of knots. I put my hand on the wall and leave a damp handprint, fiddle with my helmet and look up.

'Right,' I say.

'Right,' says Gee.

The breeze gently lifts the leaves as it passes down the valley and cools the back of my neck. A million leaves on a thousand branches undulate in a gentle green wave.

'Go on Jen,' Lizzie says. Gee is standing relaxed and calm. There is no rush. He is in the place he loves, with his partner Eva, and their dog. The Spanish autumn is warm and he has a whole day coaching ahead of him. He might even get some climbing in later.

'Right,' I say again and mean it this time.

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I climb up, the rope dangling from my harness and down between my legs. The rock is smooth and hard, with many small lips and cracks, no good big holds but many small ones. It is all about footwork on rock like this, Gee had said earlier. Just keep moving your feet up a bit and then a bit more.

About 10 cms up I can reach the first bolt - just. I am barely off the ground and my heart is pounding. I lean against the wall, turn to catch a quickdraw from my harness and stretch full to clip it into the bolt. I swing my arm down and grab the rope and clip it into the quickdraw. I hear a cheer from below. Well to the side if I'm being honest. This really is a good route for beginners.

But up I go. Clip, reach, climb. Clip, reach, climb. I climb up out of the shadow of the trees - the sun warms my back and the rock warms my front.

'Is that right?' Gee calls as I clip into the fourth bolt. Clearly not, as he hasn't said this before. I check the rope and re-clip.

Clipping the rope in the wrong way around is a common mistake for beginners. If you attach it the wrong way, it can get twisted and if you were to fall it could unclip itself from the quickdraw rendering the whole thing about as useful as an unused seat belt. I spend another strength sapping seconds at each bolt staring at the rope. *Is this right or will it spring from the clip if I fall (nodon'tthinkaboutthatnow?*

At the top I face the final challenge – known as threading the belay. A chain attached to two bolts faces me. It is the hardest bit of ropery business. You are at the top of the climb, the highest point. You are tired. You are also above the last bolt. Why is it all the hard stuff all comes at the same time? We practised this bit over and over on the ground. It all made a lot of sense dangling from the back of the Land Rover, but now high up on the jutting rock, I'm struggling to remember what I need to do first.

'That's it Jen, nearly there,' calls Gee.

I reach for the knot at my waist. A long and hideous screech fills the valley. It is a gut wrenching scream full of fright, despair and the promise of pain. A wood pigeon minding its own business in a nearby tree springs into the air with a clap of wings and disappears down the valley. I freeze gripping a handful of rope.

Is that me screaming? Have I fallen? Is my frozen brain struggling to catch up as I plummet groundwards. No. No here I am at the top. Warm rock, two good foot holds, leaning in. It was one of the others, around the corner. One of the other women I think? So I'm safe, but that sounded nasty. Gee is going to have to go and sort it out. It is his responsibility. He will have to leave me here at the top. I'll just have to wait.

I look down and see Gee's grim face turned up towards me.

'What that fuck was that?'

'Don't worry about it Jen, stay focused. What do you need to do now?'

Of course he wasn't going to leave. No way. In slow methodical sequence, I rethread the rope. The valley is silent. Ready I call. Ready. I hear a burst of strained laughter from the others as Gee lowers me to the path. It turns out that one of the other climbers, Rita, was also trying a lead, being belayed by Sophie. She got into a difficult point, couldn't climb up and could climb down.

Sophie says that instead of shouting take as she fell, Rita just let go and peeled backwards, falling head first, straight down. Luckily Sophie is an experienced climber and braced Rita's fall. Sophie however couldn't climb the rest of the day, the scream and the open mouthed ghoulish face racing towards her temporarily removing her usual calm capability. It seems that learning to lead involves learning to fall properly. Letting go and falling down backwards isn't the way to go, one of the things I learnt on this trip. The other was not to look down when peeing at night with a head torch on.

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I love climbing indoors but it is like a trip to the gym. In Australia they actually call indoor climbing centres, climbing gyms. Though it frightens me, climbing outdoors is more intense and therefore more enjoyable; the heat radiating out from the rock and the clinking gear, the sweat and the aching limbs, the exertion and the effort, the bite of fear and tingle of adrenalin, but most of all hanging out with a group of like-minded people, urging each other on, shouting encouragement. Oh and the first beer after a day on the rock is hard to beat.

But living in London, the few weekend trips a year were getting me nowhere. Now, I'm no Cesare Maestri - I don't see sex as an opportunity to strengthen my upper arms - but I do want to get to the point at which I can climb outside, confident in my own ability.

So I want to live somewhere I can climb outside regularly, but there is more to my desire to leave than that. On top of the having to fight through dirty streets and crowded roads, we have the misfortune of living near one of London's cheap red light districts. In the summer of 2006 a few of these sad women discovered our stairwell, just outside our front door. They now have a quiet spot, for a smoke, a rest, and occasionally a bit of work. We know this from the twists of cling film, ripped up rizzla packets, fag butts, sweet rappers and empty square condom packets. We also know this, as we occasionally have to make our way through them to get in or out of our flat. More often we hear them in the middle of the night when we are tucked into bed.

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She's sitting motionless at the bottom of the stairs. She has her back to us, fur-lined hood up over her head; not moving.

'Love, you alright?' I ask.

It is 10.30 am on Sunday morning and Kai and I are off, as planned, to the climbing wall. She's not moving, sitting on the bottom step, just outside our front door. It is Sunday morning and I can see the lacy pink T of a g-string on the pale skin above her jeans. It's twisted off centre.

'Eh?' She leans uncertainly to the side and twists around to look at us standing in our doorway. I see her blotchy face. Her eyes are flat and dead. She's a prostitute, a druggie. In all senses of the word, a human wreck. Have you seen Shawn of the Dead? Like that but without the laughs.

'You can't sleep here, this is our home. You've got to leave.' I'm firm, assertive. It worked last time.

'I wasn't sleeping, I just fell asleep,' she says with a hazy smile on her face. But she stays where she is. I am angry and a bit frightened. I don't want to leave my flat and find a prostitute not moving, outside my door. How long had she been there? All night? She doesn't get up. She picks up her

handbag and starts to scuffle around in it. My heart is pounding. Then I notice the pigeon. It must have flown up the stairwell. It is flapping against the glass, trapped. It rests on the window sill just in front of the woman.

'You CANT stay here. Get OUT!' My voice has changed; shaky, shouty, but still assertive. She looks inside her handbag. There are three things inside it. They rattle as she sticks her hand in. I see a comb but no keys. She is sitting with a very straight back, every few seconds she sways ever so slightly from side to side. She is off her head and she is not getting up.

'YOU HAVE GOT TO GO.' I say.

'I'm just getting my things together.' She is holding something inside her handbag.

'You're not checking out of a FUCKING hotel. You haven't GOT any stuff to get together. GET OUT.'

She still doesn't move.

'Go away. Go away.' I shout. I am ashamed to be treating another human being like this. She looks at me and does a small laugh. My stomach twists.

'Go away, go away,' she says softly under her breath.

'I'm calling the police.'

She says 'so what?' with her shoulders. 9 9 9.

'Sorry, all our operators are busy.' That actually HAPPENS? Shit. Kai looking at me with raised eyebrows. She continues to sit and continues to rearrange the three items in her handbag. Eventually I get through.

'Police please. There is a woman outside our house and she WON'T GO AWAY.' I shout down the phone at the operator, who murmurs reassuringly at me. This is getting me nowhere. 'She is being threatening towards me,' I say.

She stands up.

'How am I being threatening?'

I give our address to the operator.

'I'm not being threatening.' She sways slightly where she is standing. I tell the operator that she is one of the prostitutes that works on Lordship Rd. The ragged, dirty, skinny woman laughs again.

'No I'm not.' The operator tells me she will pass my message to our

community safety officer. My message? The bedraggled woman walks down the stairs. I can hear her mumble, 'Wasn't being threatening.'

So we go to the climbing wall.

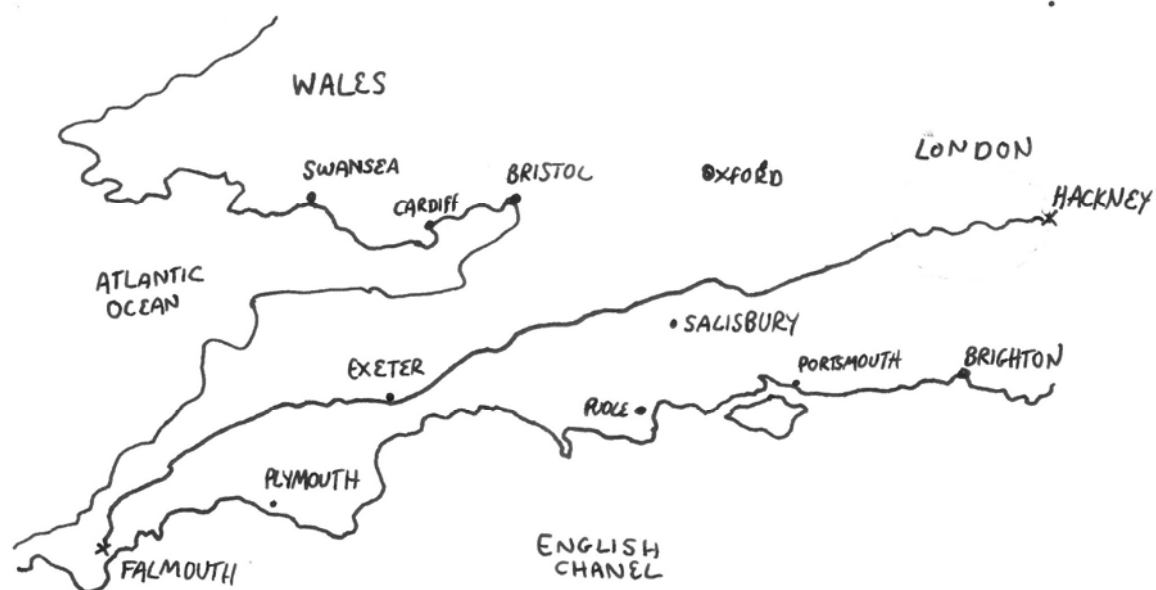
'Do you think I lied to the police?' I ask Kai on the way, 'she wasn't REALLY threatening me. Us.'

'We didn't know what she was going to do. It is our home. She could've had a knife in her bag, and she was off her head.'

And they say climbing is dangerous.

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So, at the age of 31, I pack up my car with clothes, books, notepads, mugs, an egg timer, a duvet, my bicycle, my climbing harness, helmet, shoes and chalk bag and drive the 282 miles from Hackney to Falmouth - moving diagonally across the South West, like a bishop on a chess board.



I also carefully pack another item into the car for the trip - Kai, my other half, my rock. I take him to Cornwall with me, for a temporary stay. Seven days later I drop him at the train station for his trip back to London, and that evening find myself on my own in my rented room in Falmouth. I don't know a soul. It would be true to say I had a bit of a cry.

The next day, my first on my own in Cornwall, I go for a walk around my new town, wandering along the road by Gyllyngvase beach, up towards Pendennis point, the headland dominated by Pendennis Castle. Pendennis is a real castle built by Henry VIII in 1540 to protect English shores from invasion. From Pendennis point you can see across the mouth of the river Fal to St Mawes Castle. These two real castles are part of a string of defences built around the Cornish coast. I look across the expanse of water, dotted with sail boats. I think about the task ahead, the real separation from Kai that I have created and the difficult climbing I have ahead of me. The words of one of my oldest friends echoes through my head.

'What? Why are you leaving Kai? You've spent years trying to find a guy like him. You must be mad.'

And this is what happened next. It is a true story.

Honest.

## **Chapter One – Glossary**

**Protection:** Equipment placed in the rock to protect the climber against hitting the ground if they fall off. Includes nuts, micros slings, bolts, pegs\*

**Quickdraw:** Piece of gear used to clip into bolts to provide protection.

**Newbies:** Inexperienced newcomers

**Cerro Torre:** Spectacular mountain in Patagonia in a region claimed by Argentina and Chile.

**Hackney:** Inner London borough well known for its high crime and excellent Turkish restaurants. Voted as one of the worst places to live in the UK by Channel Four.

**Falmouth:** Picturesque seaside town on the south coast of Cornwall. To be found at the mouth of the river Fal.

\*Thanks to the Marylebone Climbing Club