

## Mountain writing competition 2020

### Prose 1st prize

# The Cove

By Steve Ashton

**Steve Ashton is the author of several books on climbing, and was a regular contributor to *High* magazine.**

The Yorkshire Dales. A crisp Sunday afternoon. As shadows lengthen, a grubby white van pulls into Malham car park. From the rear doors, Mick Ramone drags out a pile of climbing gear. Working methodically, he untangles karabiners, wires and garishly coloured slings. From time to time, he draws on a roll-up hanging from the corner of his mouth, or combs tobacco-stained fingers through strands of lank ginger hair.

Nearby, a family group begins the long process of preparing dogs and children for the drive home. There are muddy paws to towel dry, boots to pull from weary feet. An exercise in restrained exasperation.

Mick glances at them with detached curiosity. Consumed by climbing, he never considered marriage until middle age. Now in his sixties, he has no ambition in either regard.

A boy of five or six pulls away from his mother's hand and wanders over to stare. "Are you a rock climber?"

Mick scratches the stubble on his cheek. "After a fashion."

The boy points to a contraption that looks like a mechanical lobster. "What's that?"

"It's called a Friend."

"I've got a friend called Simon."

"Ah, but this friend can save your life." He hooks his fingers over the bar and rotates the cams. "If you fall off, it'll dig its claws into the crack and stop you hitting the ground."

The boy stamps his foot. "If you hit the ground you go splat and your head bursts open and your brains... bleurgh!"

"Quite. Wanna help? See if you can put all that stuff in my rucksack."

While the boy happily stows climbing gear, Mick constructs a cigarette with fetishistic care. It is perhaps the half-millionth time he has done so since that fateful first roll-up. And should he ever forget the consequences of that act, the pale scars of rope burns on his hands will remind him.

A woman in a waxed jacket approaches. "Josh, what the hell are you doing?" She wrenches the boy to his feet. "Sorry, he's a real busy-body."

Mick dangles the Friend toward the sulking boy. "Here, this is for helping."

The boy's mother intercepts the gift and hands it straight back. "Please don't encourage him," she says. "Besides, you might need it."

Mick settles the rucksack on his shoulders and begins the short, solitary walk to Cove. He wonders if her words will be the last he ever hears.

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A gentle stroll over sheep pastures does not prepare you for the sudden appearance of Malham Cove – a limestone amphitheatre wedged into the head of the valley like a concrete dam, 260ft high at its apex. Such is the overhang, a stone dropped from its rim would land one-a, two-a, three-a, four-a, five seconds later several metres out from the base of the cliff.

A narrow grass terrace extends across the upper part of the Cove, above which rises a vertical wall of rock. Though barely 60ft high, the routes here are phenomenally exposed. Imagine clambering out onto the windowsill of your 16th floor apartment. See those Dinky-sized cars on the road far below, the confetti of upturned faces? Now imagine stepping from that windowsill onto the brickwork and climbing another four floors to the roof. This is what it feels like to climb the Terrace Wall.

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A middle-aged couple sit holding hands near the lip of the Cove. Behind them, the valley curves towards Malham village, misty now in the lowering sun. The woman smiles at Mick as he skips across the limestone blocks with the agility of a child playing hopscotch.

"Watch your step," the man saying, pointing. "Big drop."

Mick conceals a smile. "Thanks for the heads-up."

He clammers down broken rocks then follows a faint path along the grass tongue of the Terrace. Where it fizzles out, he continues across a line of footholds set above the gut-wrenching drop to a ledge occupied by a sapling. Gripping a branch with one hand, he peers down to where the last few sightseers are heading back along the riverside path some 200ft below.

The base of the Cove now lies in shade and a sudden updraught makes him shiver. He moves away from the edge and sits, eyes closed, with his back to the warm rock. Soon even this wall will be in shadow. Then the cold will come. And the darkness. And then where will he be?

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Mick last sat here in 1975. A pushy teenager, he was thrilled to be partnering 'King' Billy Fenwick – referred to by the Yorkshire cognoscenti simply as The King – on such a prestigious route.

John Syrett made the first ascent of Midnight Cowboy back in '72, albeit resorting to a point of aid. The King thought it might go free. With his usual partner away in the Dolomites, he accepted Mick's offer to belay.

The King was renowned for taking fag breaks halfway up routes. "Smoking will be the death of me," he famously said while hanging from one hand and rolling a ciggie with the other. Once they reached the Terrace, the first thing he did was open his Golden Virginia tin. "Watch and learn," he said to Mick as he expertly rolled a cigarette, thin as a knitting needle.

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Even in his prime, Mick found Midnight Cowboy a tough challenge. Today, he estimates the odds of success at fifty-fifty. Like the spin of a roulette wheel. Red to live, black to die. It seemed the only way to end the guilt. Kill or cure.

He lays out the rope in loose hanks on the ledge and ties on. "My lead this time," he mumbles.

Modern climbers wear sculpted slippers; Mick's old-school rock boots are more reminiscent of a boxer's lace-ups. He rubs spit into the soles then, as if stepping from that windowsill set above the void, begins to climb.

The first objective is a slanting slab. He grips a nubbin of rock with his left hand, nudges the toe of his right foot into a shallow pocket, and then wriggles his right middle and index fingers into a shallow crack. With this support, he lurches left and grabs what he assumes will be a sharp-edged hold but which, now that he is committed, proves to be uselessly rounded. His fingers crab left and right, a blind piano player searching for key combinations, until his fingertips settle on a tiny flake. Ignoring the stab of pain, he pulls hard, feet pawing for friction on the smooth limestone until he can stretch to a hold fully two centimetres wide – a sanctuary in this world of meagre holds and slender hopes.

The slab succumbs to a series of delicate moves. Mick feels more in control on this gentler terrain, where poise and guile count more than brute force.

At the apex of the slab, he steadies himself on a broad foothold and tries to breathe calm into his pounding heart.

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This is where The King also paused all those years ago. Mick remembers looking up at him with apprehension. "How's it going?"

"You'll love it, kid. Like walking in space."

"Is that the crux above you? Will it go free?"

"Maybe. Need to rest first." The King rummaged inside his shirt. "Shit, left my baccy on the ledge."

Mick glanced around the belay ledge and found the battered Golden Virginia tin. "I'll bring it up with me."

These were the days before belay brakes were common. Mick had passed the rope behind his back and taken the customary twist around his left arm. Safe enough provided you never let go.

While The King rested, he flipped the lid from the tin, teased a Rizla from the slim pack, and scraped dry strands of tobacco into the paper trough. He glanced up. The King was still shaking muscle aches from his arms. It would only take a second. He relaxed his grip on the rope, licked the gummed edge of the paper, and began to roll the cigarette between fingers and thumbs.

That was when he heard the rush of air.

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Above wedged fingers, a wide crack promises protection. Mick sifts through the fringe of wires and tape loops hanging from his harness and selects the Friend he tried to give away back at the car park. Hanging from one hand, he can feel a numbness spreading through his biceps. With increasing urgency, he settles the cams with a tug of the sling. Then he reaches between his knees, pulls up a hank of the trailing rope, and clips it into the dangling karabiner. It is an exercise in futility – there is no belayer to arrest his fall – yet he feels the tension ease in his muscles, the anxiety lift.

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Few attended the funeral. King Billy had no close family and most of his mates were still in the Alps. Mick recognised some of the mourners from bouldering sessions at Caley Crag, or from action pictures in the climbing magazines. Pointedly, none interrogated Mick about the fall.

Later, during the wake, Mick offered a booze-addled explanation to anyone who would listen. He was still lacing up his rock boots, he said, when the The King set off unbelayed up the first moves. It was getting late. Must have lost patience. Next thing he knew, The King was falling past the ledge. Mick showed the suppurating wounds on his palms from where he tried to grab the snaking rope. "I did everything I could," he said.

"Not like The King to take a chance like that," they would say, or say nothing at all and simply raise an eyebrow.

No one in Yorkshire would climb with Mick after the accident. He moved to North Wales, got a job in Llanberis labouring on the hydroelectric scheme. He would climb with anyone who showed up at the crag. Or solo if no one was around. He didn't care.

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Mick switches hands, shakes out the tension. "OK, watch the rope," he says, through force of habit.

Why didn't The King say that? "Watch the rope"? That's all it needed. Watch the rope.

Mick steps up, bunched like a monkey on a palm tree, then uncoils to reach high. He duplicates these movements again and again. And as he climbs, the rope on the ledge below lifts a loop at a time to hang in a lazy, unfettered arc above the void.

He can now see the grass-fringed ledge at the top of the Cove. Almost there. Strength fading, he settles his fingers one more time and pulls. But the spring has gone from his body, as if the sinews in his arms have atrophied into perished rubber. He lunges in desperation, feet scrabbling on smooth rock, left hand clawing forlornly. Exhausted, he slumps down and hangs like a sack from two hooked fingers. The roulette wheel is spinning, the silver ball popping and dancing, sometimes red, sometimes black.

When eventually those fingers uncurl, his feet briefly retain their grip, so that he peels outward like a high diver arching into a back flip.

As he falls, forgiven at last, he sees not the sickening grey and black overhangs of the Cove, but the trickling stream and its spindly trees, the rippled carpet of sheep pastures, and a sprinkling of lights as villagers close their curtains against the crimson, darkening sky.