STRUCTURED CHAOS

THE UNUSUAL LIFE OF A CLIMBER

VICTOR SAUNDERS

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Front cover: On Spantik in 1987, where Victor Saunders and Mick Fowler (pictured) made the first ascent of the Golden Pillar. © Victor Saunders.
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FOREWORD

BY MICK FOWLER

Victor Saunders is a remarkable man. Over his seventy years he must have accumulated the potential for a near-unlimited number of riveting real-life short stories. 'Structured chaos' is the way he describes his life so far – but it has been a wonderfully productive kind of chaos. Whether it be on extreme mountain adventures or in social situations, Victor's writing brings out that he invariably leaves a deep impression on those that meet him. After our first meeting, in Chamonix high street, I was so bowled over by his irrepressible questioning about a route I had just climbed that I cheekily wrote that I found him an 'irritating little squirt'. He responded by writing that he found me 'insufferably arrogant'. And so started a deep friendship that has endured for over forty years. That ever-questioning side of his personality is still there, of course – and it resonates strongly throughout this book. He moves in an ever-inquisitive manner from one adventure to the next; the reader will soon appreciate that he is a man of many talents and a master at self-deprecation. That chaos he refers to should not mask the intelligence and focus that has led to award-winning books, six ascents of Everest, the longest sea-cliff traverse in Britain, and a host of adventurous first ascents on rock, on ice and in the Himalaya.

But this book is not so much about achievements. It is about friendships, personalities, experiences and a journey through life. Whether

it be harsh bullying at school, sweatshop labour in ships, saving lives, traversing mud cliffs or pushing boundaries in the Himalaya, his sharp prose weaves the different facets of his varied life into a vivid and immensely enjoyable read. Read on and be prepared to be left reeling at the breadth and number of intense experiences that he has squeezed in so far. And he is still going strong.

Mick Fowler
September 2020

PRELUDE

Mountains have given structure to my adult life. I suppose they have also given me purpose, though I still can't guess what that purpose might be. And although I have glimpsed the view from the mountaintop and I still have some memory of what direction life is meant to be going in, I usually lose sight of the wood for the trees. In other words, I, like most of us, have lived a life of structured chaos.

A mountaineer's life is not without risk. Although that's rather obvious, isn't it? And anyway, all lives contain risk. As for managing those risks, we like to think that's all about making good decisions, in day-to-day life as well as in the mountains. Even though good decisions are based on experience, which in turn is gathered from the consequences of bad ones. Well, perhaps. We tell ourselves, this way lies truth and that way lies … well, just that: lies. We try to look ahead, to envision the destination, as we stagger, sometimes knowingly, more often blindly, through the dark forest of decision trees that make up our existence.

On this confusing journey, this wandering through the woods, my best guides have been my unspeakable friends with their incomprehensible ideas and impossible beliefs. Decisions are made difficult because I believe, like most of my friends, in many contradictory things.

Here's an example: the Sybarite's Creed and the Climber's Creed.

> *Sybarite's Creed: Never bivouac if you can camp. Never camp if there is a hut. Never sleep in a hut if you can book a hotel.*

> *Climber's Creed: If you were not cold, you had too many clothes. If you were not hungry, you carried too much food. If you were not frightened, you had too much equipment. If you got up the climb, well, it was too easy.*

I believe in both creeds, wholeheartedly and without reservation.

I got to be this way not through design or planning, but through Brownian motion, following an erratic path, knocked this way and that by people, mostly those self-same unspeakable friends.

It has taken me a lifetime to realise that, all the while, it was people and not places I valued most. I have now been on more than ninety expeditions, accumulating seven years under canvas. I have climbed on all continents, many of the trips involving big adventures and occasional first ascents. And yet it is not the mountains that remain with me but the friendships. In 1940 Colin Kirkus said: 'going to the right place, at the right time, with the right people is all that really matters. What one does is purely incidental.'

This book is about what really matters.

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PEKAN

(1954–1961)

Each time I'd woken during the journey, as the night bus from Singapore lurched from one pothole to the next, I'd seen a strange, obsessed look on the driver's face. Sometimes he would gun the engine until the bus was taking corners on two wheels. I managed several times to get back to sleep, but dreamt only of news headlines:

BUS PLUNGE IN PAHANG!
Sixteen killed, including lone foreigner! The Kuantan News Agency reports that bodies were difficult to identify after the high-speed crash, probably the result of driver error. The Kuantan News Agency …

'Kuantan! Wake UP! This Kuantan. KUANTAN!'

I rubbed my eyes and staggered off the bus. The driver really had been in a hurry; it was 4.30 a.m. and we weren't due in for another two hours. Yet here we were: safe, alive and early in Kuantan, the main city on the east coast of Peninsular Malaysia. My next bus, to the small town of Pekan, left in an hour. At the station cafe, a group of road people, Malaysians and Thais and Cambodians, were having an early morning breakfast. I joined them. *Roti chenai* and tea made with condensed milk. The *roti* was a particularly skilful effort, the cook spinning out the dough into crêpe-thin pancakes before folding them

over into small buns, and serving them with coconut curry sauce. But I was still half asleep when the local bus arrived, the slow coach to Pekan, slow because it stopped every few minutes for schoolchildren and agricultural workers along the way. I began to think that reaching Pekan was analogous to a mountain climb, not least for the persistence in goal-seeking.

I had come here in the year 2000 looking for a connection with my childhood. Pekan is where I spent the first decade of my life, running around half naked in the tropical rain and sun with my younger brother, Christopher. We did not know it then, but in hindsight it was paradise. After growing up in the Elysian jungles of Malaysia, we returned to the British Isles, where Christopher and I were incarcerated in a miserable Scottish boarding school.

By then our parents had separated completely. Our father, George, ran a small import business in Gloucester. Our mother, Raiza, scraped together a pauper's living in London. I remember how she had once visited us at school, taking the train to Aberdeen, missing the connection and, in order not to give up spending a few hours with us, taking a taxi to the school. This was in 1963, when a cab ride of that length was more than a week's wages for most people; it must have taken my mother months to save for the journey. But her visit was the best gift of my childhood. This obsession with seeing journeys through, I inherited from her.

I had arrived in Singapore fresh from the Himalaya, although 'fresh' isn't perhaps the right word. You don't arrive anywhere fresh from a Himalayan climb. I had arrived worn out from a spell of exploration and the first ascent of Khoz Sar, a 6,000-metre mountain near the Pakistan–China border, climbing with Phil Bowker, a software engineer from Belfast. In Singapore, I had been the guest of the Singapore Mountaineering Association, which like its hometown was in the ascendance. In the 1990s its members had organised a series of bold expeditions with near-Teutonic planning, culminating in an ascent of Everest. My lecture was done, and now I had three days spare.

Three days in which to rediscover my childhood home on the edge of the Malayan jungle. After that I would go home.

'Pekan! Wake up! Pekan!' Damn. Sleeping once more, I had missed the procession of *kampongs* (villages) and jungle clearings, the new bridge and the fast new road from Kuantan to the royal town of Pekan. When I was last here there was at least one river to ford and, just before Pekan, a long wire-drawn car ferry. The journey used to take all day. It was now only late morning and the tropical sun was still taking hold. I stepped out into it, hardly able to believe what I was seeing. After forty years, I was back in my childhood home.

My old guidebook described Pekan as a sleepy town: that much was still correct. The rest of the book was horribly out of date. It had mixed up the mosques and the guesthouses; it said there was nothing to detain the visitor and that the food was uninspiring. The book was wrong on each of those counts, though to enjoy food it does help if you're prepared to eat what the locals do. The ancient Malays called themselves *Orang Laut*, 'the Sea People', and of course Pekan is a coastal village, so the traditional sustenance is fish and rice. If you eat fish and rice, you will eat well here.

The Pekan Guest House was incorrectly identified in the guidebook as the Government Rest House; it had not been called that for some time. The book was also out of date in recommending it as the best place to stay in town. Most of the buildings on the estuary front were rickety timber-frame shops with shuttered windows, their fading paint once green and blue. The houses seemed to be leaning sideways against each other. It was a timeless terrace, straight out of illustrations from the 1800s, a scene Joseph Conrad would have recognised. The guesthouse buttressed the end of the terrace but came from a different era, built with earthquake-resistant concrete columns and beams, the painted panels peeling and the entrance door slightly askew and open. This building looked even more unkempt than the timeless terrace.

I spent an hour in the threadbare sitting room, banging about a bit on the concierge's rickety desk, ringing the hand bell, then wandering

round the deserted kitchen, where last night's dishes were still waiting to be washed up. Eventually, I heard a giggle and a girl's sleepy-eyed face peeped round the door. Another young woman soon joined her, both of them dressed in loose silk pyjamas. They didn't speak English and I couldn't manage more than '*Tidak cakap Malayu.*' Later, I don't know how much later, another guest appeared, a man in T-shirt and sarong who, to judge by the sounds behind him, was with his children and wife.

'You can' check ou' too?'

'No, I can't check in!'

'Oh. Sin' las' nigh' is bin li'e this. I wan' check ou' too. But no one to atten' to us!'

I gave up at this point and went back into the sun. A one-street town with *kampong* architecture it might be, but Pekan boasts no less than three cybercafes. Two were filled with kids screaming as they played video games. The third was quieter, and run by a pair of shawl-headed girls who said the Chief's Rest House was quite good. I decided to try it, in spite of the guide's hostile review.

The guesthouse lay at the northern end of town, where a pair of giant concrete elephant tusks marked the entrance to the royal quarter, the palace and the polo grounds. Huge acacias and towering *kampong* mango trees lined the road, offering shade. The Chief's was a beautifully restored colonial stilt-house, with clean rooms and high ceilings. At ten dollars a night, it was expensive by Malaysian village standards, but very clean, with newly varnished wooden floors and rattan furniture. Outside, tropical fruit trees decorated the garden. There were bananas, of course, but also lengkuas, tapioca and guava. I took a shower and wandered back to town.

My reintroduction to Pekan food was at Mohammed Latif's restaurant, set back from the main street, and run by Musul, a sixty-four-year-old chef who had lived in Pekan all his life. He would have lived here when I grew up. I asked if he remembered a small white house on stilts, near a football field. He said there had only ever been one football field, the one by the Pekan Guest House.

Musul made very sweet tea with condensed milk and put on the table before me a banana leaf plate loaded with *nasi puteh* and *ikan kampong*. Here at last were the flavours of my childhood. The visual memories of Pekan might need to be rationalised, but the smells and tastes evoked my earliest memories without the need for any further interpretation. As I soaked up the aromas of my first years, I began to feel them less as memories and more as the overwhelming emotions of a relived childhood. These are the memories that get laid down before you have a name for them, the memories that prove there is no inevitable link between name and concept; with these memories, you know that this taste fully recalls that emotion. There is no name for it; you just know. My taste buds had taken me directly to a place my intellect could never reach.

The tropical air was heavy with the threat of rain as I went to look for our old house. Following Musul's advice, I headed to the football pitch first. At the far end of the ground, roughly where I remembered looking out at the football, were the stilts of what must have been a substantial house.

The house was gone. Timber houses don't last very long here; termites and the jungle see to that. The site had become overrun with ground vines and morning glory, tapioca and guava and plants that I could not recognise. It was a bit like stumbling on one of those lost jungle temples. There were some huge old mango trees at the back of what must have once been a garden. I couldn't be certain, but it seemed likely this was all that was left of our family home. I'd been halfway across the world to find our old house. And now, after thirty seconds, the quest seemed over. Perhaps it was like so many things in life: you dream and struggle for the goal, and when you reach it, the moment turns out to be ephemeral.

I took two snapshots and wondered what to do next. The sky was growing black, and the air ever more humid. Across the pitch was a vaguely municipal-looking building, which on closer inspection proved to be the town council offices. With perfect timing, it began to

rain warmly as I walked in. Here I met the most helpful bureaucrats I had met in years, though possibly this was because I provided some kind of diversion. I don't suppose Pekan's local authority is often troubled by lost foreigners.

When I explained my quest and asked if they had any old plans or documents, they said there was one house that might have been ours; it had been called the Magistrate's House, the same one whose remains I'd just seen. The archives had some old plans and a photograph. Looking at the plans, it all came back: there was my bedroom, and there was the dining room, connected by a walkway to the kitchen. Here were the stilts our house sat on that allowed chickens to shelter from the sun and rain under the floor. This had been our house. It was gone, overgrown, but still remembered. Now I could go. *Nunc Dimittis*.

The rain had stopped and the sky was clearing; the sun returned and was soon busy driving away the last wispy clouds. I splashed across the football pitch, remembering that in the monsoon people used to cross it by boat, and in the dry season there were sometimes shadow puppet plays on white sheets hung between the goalposts.

There was one more place I wanted to revisit. A little south of Pekan is the vast beach of Enam Belas. The name means 'sixteen', indicating the mile marker from Pekan, or perhaps the extent of the sands. It must be one of the most isolated stretches of palm-fringed silver sands anywhere: miles and miles of curving beach, and no one else in sight. There used to be turtles here. According to one guidebook, there were 10,155 marine turtles on the east coast north of Kuantan in 1956, but by 1997 just twenty-seven were left. Pekan is south of Kuantan, but presumably the marine turtle figures for this coastline will be similar.

A gentle surf was rolling in from the impeccably regular lines of waves. The water was warm, but cooler than the sun, so, stripping off my T-shirt, I ran into the South China Sea, diving through the wave crests. I spent the next hour bodysurfing before I began having doubts. There used to be a strong tidal rip here, I recalled. And then

I asked myself, what if a shoal of jellyfish or a hungry shark turned up? I was quite alone and began imagining headlines again:

LONE SWIMMER DISAPPEARS!
Kuantan News Agency reports body of foreign swimmer found nibbled by fish, missing body parts.

Suddenly I found myself pounding the water hard on my way back to shore.

I had asked the taxi driver to pick me up in two hours, so I spent my second hour under a coconut palm and read a bit. It was a strangely lonely experience on that desolate beach with only memories of water fights with my brother for company. Also, I realised I just don't feel as confident in the ocean as I do on mountains. When avalanches or crevasses threaten, I feel comfortable with my assessment of the risk. Not at the ocean. And there was one other thing: without the protection of my T-shirt, my back had turned red. Soon it was going to feel as if it had been flayed. But I didn't mind any of this; I was at Enam Belas again.

In the Chief's Rest House, my room had an air conditioner as well as a fan, but Pekan didn't seem to be oppressively hot, and a quick tepid shower soon did wonders for my blood temperature. The fan chopped the air above the bed; I lay stretched out on the freshly pressed cotton sheets and soon fell asleep to dream of water fights, cascading monsoon rains, paddling village boats across the football pitch, lightning and rolling thunder.

Thunder? No, that wasn't thunder; the noise was a knocking on the door. The door opened slightly to reveal a round face with a big gap-toothed smile. He said he was called Hamidi and had been out of his office when I visited the municipal building earlier that day.

'I want to hear your story too.'

I explained about the football pitch, the remains of the Magistrate's House, and the beach at Enam Belas. 'Come with me,' Hamidi said

and pointed at his motorbike. Then he took me on a bumpy tour of the town. He showed me the school, the old timber classrooms replaced with concrete blocks. Hamidi was eight years younger than me, so we must have had the same teachers. The main thing I remember about that school was playing truant.

Hamidi then showed me the hospital, the two mosques, the several ancient palaces (one was now a museum, another a library) and so on. Pekan is the traditional home to the sultans of Pahang, each incumbent apparently erecting his own palace rather than moving into a second-hand home. Then there was the Royal Pahang Polo Club. I had to have a photograph of that; and then, teetering on the back of Hamidi's machine, we went down to the stables. One of the older grooms asked my father's name. Ah, yes, he remembered something about that. And there was also Li Saunders; did we know him? No? The groom directed us to a small *kampong* on the southern outskirts of the town. Pekan is slowly absorbing these outlying villages into its suburbs. Li Saunders? That was a coincidence. Hamidi thought it would be a good idea to find him. After all, how many people called Saunders can there have been in Pekan?

The house we were looking for was overhung by tall jungly trees and had been built like most of the *kampong* houses here: timber frame, shiplapped panels and high wooden stilts to protect them from monsoon floods. Chickens were clucking and scraping under the house as Hamidi's spluttering motorbike bumped to a halt by the wooden steps.

Inside, there were cool airy rooms, ageing rattan furniture and frames with fading family photographs. A sixty-year-old woman, Aziza, the widow of Razali, welcomed us and yes, she knew the Saunders family, because Razali had been my father's driver, and the only grown-up who used to play with us.

A big man, Razali would twirl us with his arms, and throw us in the air. We were inordinately fond of him and called him Rosy-Lee. Aziza asked which of the two children I had been; she used our