FREEDOM

The journey goes down, not up. It's as if the mountain pointed toward the centre of the earth instead of reaching into the sky. Instead of transcending the suffering of all creatures, we move toward the turbulence and doubt. We jump into it. We slide into it. We tiptoe into it. ... At our own pace, without speed or aggression, we move down and down and down. With us move millions of others, our companions in awakening from fear. At the bottom we discover water ... Right down there in the thick of things we discover the love that will not die.

– Pema Chödrön, When Things Fall Apart

When I was a child, my mother used to take me hillwalking, adventuring all over the United Kingdom. The Pennines surrounded our home on the moors, so I would explore them on a daily basis. Sometimes we went on longer trips, to the English Lake District or to Eryri (Snowdonia) in Wales. However, it was on the Isle of Arran in Scotland that I got my first real taste of how an inanimate object such as a mountain can be both a companion and a mentor.

My mother would have been about forty years old then. Younger than I am now as I sit at my desk recalling this, some might say, foolish adventure. I would have been around the age of eleven and in my first year at secondary school. This particular walking holiday was to be my first experience of the dedication that comes with fear. And, through this fear, brought about by my mother and me risking our lives, I felt free, truly free, for the first time in my life.

Back home in Bolton, a grimy, fast-becoming-ex-mill town on the Lancashire moors, I would pore over my mother's collection of hiking guidebooks, mostly Alfred Wainwright's famous pictorial fell-walking guides. My mother had a sizeable collection of this beloved son of Lancashire's books on her shelf, with their finely detailed, exquisite black-and-white ink drawings ... hundreds of them ... thousands of them.

I had seen a meticulous sketch of the dangerous 'Witch's Step' in Wainwright's then-new book, *Scottish Mountain Drawings Volume Six*. I was very much intrigued by the formation, Ceum na Caillich in Gaelic, a deep slash on the ridge of Caisteal Abhail at the head of Glen Sannox on the Isle of Arran. 'The Step' requires a certain level of adeptness at rock climbing to traverse it successfully. I became obsessed and begged my mother to take me there. Fortunately, Arran held fond memories for her, of a time when she and my father were happy together. Mum and Dad had gone to the island on their honeymoon and hiked up Goat Fell, its highest peak. So she agreed. Mum's blue Datsun was packed to the gunnels with gear for a week's hostelling.

Only now, writing this, do I realise just how brave she was.

The day before our adventure, I'd almost perished in a swan attack. In those days, I kept an egg collection, carefully arranged in an Airfix Lancaster Bomber box. I had them embedded in sawdust, in ranks, smallest to largest, from wren to chaffinch to mistle thrush and Canada goose. But I had yet to procure the smallest egg in Britain, the

goldcrest, and, as every schoolboy knew, the largest – a mute swan. Now I spied a magnificent mute swan on her nest at the head of an inlet on Loch Ranza.

My father had told me that Captain Webb lathered himself in Vaseline for his swim across the Channel. Since I didn't have any, I applied a liberal coating of Vicks VapoRub over my body instead. And then I swam – or did my best approximation of swimming, since there's little call for it on the Lancashire moors – out into the frigid waters of the loch. The single mother was off her nest as I approached. And although the VapoRub was doing a splendid job of wicking heat away from my body, I could hardly contain my excitement as I eyed a clutch of six of the fabled white eggs in the huge nest. Breathing hard and barely treading water, I then heard a fearful honking from behind and received a sharp blow to the back of my head. I turned to find the immense white mother had blotted out the sky. Half drowning, I thrashed my way back to shore, and that was the last time I ever attempted to purloin a wild bird's egg.

My mother and I arose early next morning and ate our soft-boiled hens' eggs in the deserted youth hostel kitchen. The mist was lying low to the sunlit fields and wrapping itself around the ruin of Lochranza Castle out on its spit. We parked the car at the entrance to Glen Sannox and started to walk. I behaved like an excited dog, belting ahead and then trotting back to tell 'me mum' about a grouse up ahead, or a colourful flower.

We made the summit in no time and once there wandered around the surreal granite tors in quickly congealing cloud. When we had started, the morning was hot and perfectly still with just a few wispy cirrus. Now the wind was driving grey water vapour through the summit castellations with some force. We huddled behind one of the granite blocks and ate a chewy muesli bar while the wind increased in strength. The fabled Witch's Step was only a short distance away. I could see the ridge abruptly cease and then continue again a little further on.

Removing the map from its clear plastic case, I began wrestling with it, to get the thing folded over to show our present position, but mid-fold a forceful gust of wind wrenched it from my grip. As soon as it escaped my hand, the map assumed a graceful quality. The map was now free. My mother and I could only watch, mouths agape, as it danced in the air like a great white bird carrying our route – a green dashed line – in its clutches. It hovered over the edge of the precipice for an eternal moment then plunged downwards, gannet-like, into the abyss. There was no use in searching; we both understood that. At that moment my mother and I both knew where we were, but not what we were doing there.

We discussed our options. Retracing our steps would take a very long time and in this driving fug there was a very real likelihood of us getting lost in the maze of towers. We knew where the Witch's Step was, and our previous study of the map had suggested that on the other side was a relatively easy walk down a broad ridge back to the Datsun. So, we slung our rucksacks on our backs, walked to the edge and peered over the precipice.

The step was funnelling the wind-driven cloud through itself as if it were an hourglass but with vapour instead of sand. The week before, I'd seen *The Black Hole* at the Palais

Cinema, with Maximilian Schell gazing awestruck into the void. 'A journey that begins where everything ends', ran the tagline.

Sitting on the edge, my mother gently lowered herself into a squeeze chimney with a grassy ledge about two body-lengths below. Beyond this was steep ground for about fifty body-lengths to the base of the notch. She slid down and I slid after her. Once I had joined my mother on this ledge, I began to feel a tightening nervousness in my chest. There was a problem that I couldn't yet fathom. Then I grasped it and the seriousness of our predicament dawned on me. That which we had so easily slid down we could not climb back up. My mother and I had inadvertently become committed to an unknown descent of a precipitous cliff. This was the first time in my life I had felt committed to something, anything, and it felt intensely real.

We continued our descent, clambering over ledges. I noticed peculiar scratches covering the rocks down our route. It didn't take too much insight to recognise these as crampon scratches. I was an avid reader of mountaineering books and had seen crampons in Chris Bonington's *Annapurna South Face*, borrowed from Bolton Library. I imagined what this place might look like in winter. Pictures of Don Whillans in an orange one-piece down suit scratching along a rocky outcrop amid a sea of vertical ice abstracted my view. Suddenly I was in the high Himalaya. The scratch marks provided useful markers to keep us on the line of descent. I had not seen a pair of crampons at this point in my life but somehow these scratches validated our adventure.

When we finally completed our descent into the chasm, my mother perched on a gabbro boulder, buried her face in her cupped hands and began to weep. What were we doing here? Mum was no climber, and neither was I. She had a second-hand clothes stall on Farnworth market and was used to working hard to support us when Dad's property repair business was struggling. Or when he had taken off to Benidorm again, to sing Tom Jones and Sinatra covers in the English hotels for a little money. Family life seemed to get on top of him sometimes. He would hear 'Guantanamera' in his head and leave us in his purple velvet suit for the Costa Blanca and hopes of adventure.

For a moment I didn't know what to do with myself. I always felt uncomfortable when Mum wept: she didn't do it very often.

The wind was now siphoning through the narrow cleft and buffeting us powerfully. After a sip of sweet tea from our tartan flask, I scouted the terrain on the other side of the split. I could make out more scratches leading up a crack that ran through a small overhang at head height. I beckoned my mother over. She had composed herself again. The two of us inspected the problem. I attempted to clamber around the overlap but my new Hawkins Helvellyn boots kept skidding out of the crack.

My mother, raising her voice above the wind, shouted, 'Why don't you stand on my shoulders, love?' So, I climbed on her in my big boots and stood uneasily on her shoulders. This feat of amateur acrobatics allowed me to grasp a small ledge and I scrabbled my feet up the crack to gain the top of the first step. A couple of years later I learnt this move was a favourite technique of Eastern European sandstone climbers; it was known as 'Czech tech' or 'combined tactics'.

Now it was my mother's turn to climb up to me. I could not safely reach down to her and neither was I strong or heavy enough to make it a safe option if I could. Her hand would either have slid out of mine or Mum would have pulled me off my perch. I glanced down to her, then at the swirling mist to left and right. She knew, and I knew, that she had to do this on her own if we were going to get out of there.

So, my mother shut her eyes and opened them again in a very slow blink. She placed her right hand in the crack and her left on a depression by her shoulder in the slab of rock. And then, wedging her right boot in the crack, she heaved. To my young mind she was the epitome of composure, graceful in her movements, like a real climber. I waited nearly forty years to talk with her about that day and she told me that she was terrified, while knowing she could not show her distress for fear of alarming me.

'I thought we were going to die and that I was to blame,' she told me.

But somehow she made it to me and we climbed the rest of the step with relative ease. The remainder of the descent off the broad ridge of Caisteal Abhail was straightforward enough and when we reached a lower altitude the ferocious gusts finally ceased. From the ridge I could see the solitary sanctuary of our blue Datsun and in a seeming instant we were transported to our car.

In her Lancashire sparrow's voice my mum said, 'Well, that's the last time I'll be doing the Witch's Step.' And it was.

At an early age, certainly on the Witch's Step, I had an uneasy feeling all was not as it seemed. I sensed the incredible freedom of The Mountain, but could not put my finger on what exactly that freedom entailed. As I grew up a little, I learnt what freedom is not. I learnt that freedom certainly does not come from doing whatever you want to do, good or bad. And trust me, when I was a youth I attacked both with equal vigour, whether it be planting my own garden or setting the moors alight to watch from the heather as the fire engines arrived.

As a hunt-sabbing teenager, I understood freedom to be liberation from oppressive governments, and definitely from the ever-present risk of confinement by the justice system. As a young adult, I considered freedom to be what I found in wild nature, living as I chose, my body unfettered, my spirit unobstructed by expectation. Over the years it has become apparent to me that true freedom is none of these things. It's proved a slippery eel, and its real meaning to me has developed ever since the 'map incident' on the Isle of Arran.

I did not learn how to stick to a course until I was fourteen years old. Very much affected by the disintegration of my parents' marriage, I became one of those infamously wayward boys – arson was my speciality. And then, just a few short years after the Witch's Step experience, I had the good fortune to meet Harold Woolley, my physics teacher at Smithills School. He was a gangly bespectacled mantis of a man. Judging by the pronounced bow of his legs he had suffered from polio as a child.

Mr Woolley, as we had to call him, took me under his wing after I jumped over the banister of the fourth-floor physics laboratory. To this day I have trouble understanding why I did it.

I fell down the stairwell, accelerating as I went, grabbing at the steps and banisters of the lower floors. It had something to do with Mum and Dad ... past the chemistry floor ... I think I wanted to prove to them I could survive it ... then mathematics ... or maybe it was just for the rush ... and finally geography. I landed hard on a radiator in the tiled basement of the swimming pool area, knocking myself un-conscious. An ambulance was called.

After I came out of hospital, 'Woolley', as we actually called him, urged me to join the climbing group he was setting up. He began taking eight reasonably troubled boys to Wilton Quarries above Bolton. No girls were invited to come with us. It was the early 1980s and they had to play netball.

Wilton and the other Lancashire gritstone quarries supplied the stone that lined the reservoirs that powered the Industrial Revolution. The birth of the 'dark satanic mills' took place only spitting distance from Wilton. I was born in a gritstone house on the very top of the quarry. My brother and I had spent an earlier part of our childhood wandering the moors with shotguns, learning how to make snares and night fishing in the 'lodges'.

We lived so close to the quarry that I used to push chunks of our garden wall over the edge to hear the stones crash to the bottom. I had spent long heady days scrambling about down there, setting fire to the moors and throwing petrol bombs at climbers, so I had fond memories of Wilton. It came from a time when my mother and father were still happy together. Since the divorce, I had lived with my mum and sister in a cramped flat above a hairdresser's.

We all piled out of the school minibus below a luminous green gap up on the moor. Grey canvas rucksacks were passed out between us and we marched in file up the track towards it. Then we each upended the bags behind the rifle range, where the Bolton Gun Club came to practise. Dad and I used to go to this very spot to collect spent bullets. Then we would melt the lead down in an old saucepan and sell it to the scrapper man in town.

Next, Mr Woolley gave us instruction in the mysterious art of rock climbing. First, he showed us how to buckle the nylon belt and, like a sergeant major inspecting his men, he made sure we had also doubled them back.

Judd uncoiled the stiff eleven-millimetre rope at the foot of the cliff. Reeve checked out the metal hexcentric shapes, from tiny nuggets to things as big as cowbells. I fumbled with a large aluminium number '8'.

'We're going to climb up there,' said Mr Woolley, grinning and pointing a bony tarsus up at a dirty quarry face. 'It's called "Rappel Wall". All the climbs have their own names and difficulty rating,' he added.

It had been raining and the water had brought a film of damp grey talc over the top. It mingled with the green coating of lichen. We each clipped a heavy steel screw gate karabiner to our waist belts. Each boy was instructed to clip into this when it was his turn to climb.

Woolley then 'led' us boys up 'Rappel Wall'. 'The figure 8 is used for safety. You're going to belay me.'

He threaded the rope through the 8, 'Like so,' and clipped it to my belt. 'You're going to pay out the rope like so,' he mimicked the action, 'making sure not to pull me off. Okay?'
'Okay.'

I remember gazing up at him, impressed at how nimble he was. I had only seen him pacing up and down between the benches of the physics lab, occasionally reprimanding a naughty youth. Now here he was, Mr Woolley, his praying mantis body moving slowly to and fro, as if he was stalking some insect or small vertebrate. Then quickly he would pounce, grabbing a ledge and swinging up on to it.

'Can you see how I'm always keeping my weight over my legs so as not to knacker my arms too much?' he called down instructions to us. 'And you can sling a spike ... like ... so.'

How could an old man – he must have been at least fifty – be so agile?

Russ climbed. Then it was Dixon's turn. Now it was mine. I stepped up to the face. The rock was almost dry.

I knew these quarries like the back of my hand. Growing up, I had scrambled all over them, and later realised I had done some graded rock climbs, though without ropes and all the other paraphernalia. Later I learnt this was called 'soloing'. But now I stepped up on to the first ledge in my unbranded black gym shoes and grasped a chalky hold with my hand. Immediately all thought, except for the next move, left my head. The rock was steeper and substantially more difficult than the scrambles I used to do, and I was glad of the rope above me. I pulled on to a narrow shelf, my cheek in contact with the dirty face. I could smell the rock.

Then we climbed another, and another, and another.

I found I could execute gymnastic moves, when I was almost but not quite falling off the rock, in the knowledge that if I were to fall I would not be in any danger.

For a lad whose idea of a good time was getting drunk in the daytime and setting stuff alight, this was a revelation. I loved this new feeling but couldn't quite put my finger on what that feeling was exactly. Not yet. But up until that point I had never stopped still long enough to put my finger on anything. All I knew is that I had found something special.