



AAC Publications

Inadequate Rappel Anchor, Fall On Rock, Falling Rock

California, Joshua Tree National Park

On February 25, my daughter Helen (16) and I (47) attempted to find an area where I'd climbed the previous week, but we couldn't find it so we decided to climb a little crag that looked like mostly class four or easy class five. My limited previous lead climbing experience had been about 5.3, so this seemed like a safe climb within my ability. Both of us were wearing helmets. I led a low-angle slab about 10 feet tall. I built a redundant anchor out of two cams and belayed my daughter while she came up, then belayed her while she downclimbed.

Not wanting to leave my gear, I removed the cams and built a rappel anchor by inserting a rap ring into a piece of webbing tied around a peanut-shaped boulder about three feet long, sitting on a horizontal ledge with other rocks wedged in above it. The peanut seemed solid and resisted any attempts to budge it. Halfway down my 10-foot rap, as the angle of the slab got steeper, I heard the peanut start to move above me. I fell and the rock immediately hit me in the shoulder. I called down to my daughter that I was hurt. She ran to a park ranger who happened to be nearby and got him to come over. I was in almost no pain, but was unable to raise my right arm and believed I had a dislocated shoulder. The ranger helped me find an easy downclimb so I could get the rest of the way down one-handed. I drove home and went to the ER, where I learned that my clavicle had been broken into four pieces.

Analysis

This was a cheap lesson in how to make better climbing decisions, and I'm very glad that my daughter wasn't hurt. I knew the SERENE acronym, which would have told me not to rap from this anchor, but I didn't use it. Instead I used a heuristic mode of decision-making: I had recently seconded a bunch of trad climbs where the routine was to climb, clean pro, and then rap off, so I simply followed what had become my habit. Downclimbing would have been safer than rappelling off this unreliable anchor. I am humbled and sobered by this accident and will hold myself to a more systematic, checklist-oriented approach in the future. (Source: Ben Crowell.)

Images

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