



Very Long Fall Onto Ledge – Ropes Cut by Rockfall

Mexico, Nuevo León, El Potrero Chico

In December my two best friends and I were in the multi-pitch sport climbing paradise that is El Potrero Chico. It was our fourth visit to this crazy place, and we had our eyes on a 15-pitch climb called Devotion (5.11), which is notorious for being a bit run-out, hard for the grade, and chossy. We very well might have been the only people to attempt it since we'd bailed on the 10th pitch about a year earlier.

We climbed with the leader using two single ropes, being belayed on only one rope but clipping both to the bolts to avoid confusion, since the ropes looked very similar. Cruising and climbing at a steady pace, we passed the lower crux and made it to the 3rd-class seventh pitch. We had experienced some rope drag on the way up due to the system we were using, but it didn't seem too bad.

At this point I tried to link pitches eight (5.11a) and nine (5.11c), as had been recommended. So far, I hadn't taken a fall. After the first few bolts, I found myself climbing a really thin and technical slab—way too difficult for 5.11a—and inevitably I fell. I quickly realized the correct beta was to climb through a dirty, cactus-filled crack system about five feet to the right of the bolt line. I finished up pitch eight and was a couple of bolts up on pitch nine when I ran into the same problem, on an impossible slab, except this time I had a crazy amount of rope drag. There was a dihedral with plenty of holds around a corner and about five feet to the right of the bolt line. I wasn't stoked to climb with my ropes around a sharp corner, and to be extra safe, I asked my partners to belay me with both ropes.

Two bolts higher, I took a fall. It was a clean fall, and everything felt fine. I started to climb back up the dihedral and grabbed a hold that looked very solid but turned out to be part of a loose boulder that was the size of a small car. It immediately went flying down the wall. I didn't weight it, kick it, or even tug on it. It was so loose that it probably would have fallen in the next rainfall. I yelled "ROCK, ROCK, ROCK!" as loud as I ever had and watched in horror as this death block approached my best friends. Luckily, the rock bounced off the wall and crashed into the 3rd-class terrain about a foot behind my friends. I started to panic, hyperventilating and tearing up. I had been certain my friends were going to die.

We all were yelling back and forth, and in between some of my deep breaths I heard, "We're OK" and "Go in direct!" I was trying to calm myself down, but all I wanted was to *not* be on the rock. I start to downclimb to the previous bolt, and when I was level with it, I loosely grabbed the quickdraw, swung out, and yelled for a "take," assuming I was on belay. In my panic, I never thought about the possibility of the boulder cutting the ropes, a tragic error. I started to plummet.

I was yelling for my life. I knew I was dead. I fell for a little while, struck a ledge, and continued to fall until I smashed into a small tree and some cactus on the 3rd-class ledges a few feet from my friends, having fallen or slid 35 to 40 meters. I was conscious for every bit of the fall, even the landing. I didn't know what to think. I was glad I survived the fall, but assumed I wasn't feeling anything because I was in shock, and that I was probably bleeding internally or and had terrible fractures. A few minutes passed, and I felt like I was semi-okay. So, with the help of my friends, I stood up. We began calling everyone we thought might help. I ended up being flown off by a helicopter that hovered over the ledge and lowered a line with a harness attached. My partners then rappelled the route.

I was in the hospital for four nights and walked out on my own two feet, with only two small fractures (one on the back of my skull, where my head hit the rock below my helmet, and also a rib), some abrasions, and bruises. I should be dead, but I'm not.

ANALYSIS

Looking back, I should have tried to calm down more after the rockfall and before I tried to move. I obviously wasn't thinking clearly, and if I'd slowed down I might have heard my partners say the ropes had been cut or I might have checked myself. It's hard to calm down in panic situations. (Source: Foster Denney.)

Images

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