

Gardening on Los Banditos

I blame Brad.

Here's a suggestion: since you're obviously in a Pinnacles frame of mind, do the second ascent of Los Banditos on Machete (it's in the new routes sticky thread). To my knowledge this hasn't had a second ascent and I think it's really pretty good (and the aid is bomber A1).

So with the raptor closures looming and the valley a bit chilly for the tastes of the lovely lady Dixie, we show up at the West Side parking lot with a late 11:00 SF/LA start. Disaster is averted when Dixie asks if I brought my headlamp. I remembered it sitting in the tent at the campsite on the East Side and knew that we were destined to epic.

"I brought two!" Dixie held them up and smiled. I smiled back. Success was in the air.

We were here because of a phrase I'd recently begun to chant while I was solo aiding in Yosemite, "I do what other can't because I do what other's won't." An attempt to both pump myself up and humble myself. Part of the reason I find myself at the Pinnacles and Riverside Quarry these days. Crumbly ghosts of routes that can only be seen if you turn your head just right.

"If it's so good, why hasn't anyone done the second ascent yet?"

"No one wants to aid a ladder."

"Sounds more like a litmus test to the free climbing. Earn it."

"You want to lead the crux free pitch?" We are currently walking past a large collection of boulders towards the base of Machete Ridge. I notice chalk on the boulders and then notice pad people looking over problems down in the gully between the boulders."

"Can I look at the pitch first? Besides, shouldn't the one who passes the litmus test get the plum pitch?"

"Maybe." I make a note to tell her that I love her more often.

We get to the Base of West Face and make quick work of the bolt ladder. I end up moving too high on the wall and clipping to two bolts on the wall then making some badly protected and loose moves over a small chute to get to the base of Los Banditos. I had hoped to belay at the base of the ladder but the rock did not cooperate so I wandered around the meadow for a bit until I find a set of bolts on the slab below the face that will work. Later, as I am freaking out at the last moves of the first real pitch, I will think about this and gain a bit of comfort. With Dixie now at the belay, it's time to start the business. I tell her that I love her and set off. She calls up to me, "That's not the kind of 'I love you' you

say before not coming back from something is it?" As I reach up and clip the first bolt of the ladder, I hang from my daisy and twist around slowly until I'm facing her.

"If it wasn't then this one definitely is." I have enough time to see her smile before I twist back around, grab the ladder and pull myself up.

The bolts in the first pitch are spaced well, epoxy glued, and fun. Overhanging enough that I would clip my new ladder, unfifi and swing backwards until I would hang beneath the new bolt like a pendulum in a clock. Reach up, step high, fifi in and repeat. Half the bolts can be reached from your third step, the rest from the second step. I did not need to topstep to clip any of the bolts. I clock in at 5'8" while Dixie comes in at 5'4". She cleaned the route by reaiding and was able to reach the lower biner of each draw on the bolts. I would think that if the second was to jug this pitch, they would be able to practice the sort of hypervertical cleaning that is found on routes like West Face of Leaning Tower.

The highlight of the pitch came at the final bolt. "Intimidating free moves" in the description. At this time I realized that I would need my climbing shoes for this last section. Unclipping them from behind myself, I yelled down to Dixie that I was going to go free as soon as I got my shoes on. In front of me was a collection of holds sticking out of the wall, I pulled each of them in different directions to see which ones were suspect and which were timebombs like their brothers to the left right above and below of the bolt ladder below. I remembered Erik Bratton on the MudnCrud forums saying, "All holds are bomber." Moved myself forward enough to unhook my fifi from the bolt in front of me and started climbing.

I returned to my ladder after a few moves. In my head, "5.9" meant handholds that could support bad feet. What I found when I went up was great feet that would have to support flat and sloping handholds. Easy climbing but my body was still in the fog of an aid ladder.

I am an aid climber. I am a trad climber. I am a sport climber. I am a boulderer... well, when I have to be. What I tend not to be is more than one in a single pitch. Phrases like "boulder move into crux then gain the anchor", "Bring additional pro to protect the bolts", or "mandatory free" make me turn the page and find a new route. As much as I don't want to admit it, I want to turn off when I climb, not think, not be there. Get to the anchors and watch the analog gopro memory of what just did; figure out if I liked it after the climbing's done. This was real free climbing after 8 bolts of real bolt laddering. The fall would be perfect, mostly space with only enough scraping to make it worth it. Even if a bolt blew, there'd be another perfect bolt just feet below it; all crux free sections should be protected by more-than-vertical bolt ladders. I took another breath, released the fifi and went for it again. A few more moves this time and I found myself liebacking a triangle of rock with my right hand in order to step my right foot up. I could see the move: step over, stem left foot, reach through left hand for... for... I made a grunt that masked my desire to squeal and downclimbed back to the ladder.

Now I was doing the thing that I hate the most, looking down at Dixie and apologizing for not doing things right the first time. Apologize for the time she was sitting there. Apologize for making her feel like she needed to encourage me. She smiled at me and went back and forth between telling me she believed in me and yelling at me to stop whining. Yelling that she had me if I fell and that I should just know that she was judging my manhood silently in her head the longer I sat there being afraid of where I wanted to be. She could be the perfect woman.

A few more false starts and I decided that I wasn't going to find the easy way that I had envisioned in my head when I read "5.9" A phrase from sport climbing came back into my head, "You're in a gym. You're in a gym." These moves were similar, just not chalked, marked, taped, and bolted on. I thought of how nonchalantly I could walk up to a 12b in the gym and lead it to the top. Then I thought about how I've been tired and scared on the 5.9 of The Wet Kiss on the East Side.

I made my agreement with myself to try again to failure. If I was coming back down, it would be the fast way, no downclimbing. In the gym, my partners and I have "no take fill-in-the-day" days of climbing; looked at Dixie and yelled "No take Saturday!" She responded quickly.

"What?" I had already started to move.

Hug two pinched jugs to step my feet up, right hand up to the triangle shaped hold, lean left, right foot up, step over, stem left, reach left hand through to nothing, bring it back to hand match on the triangle hold, right hand up to a small edge, open hand turns to crimp, right hip in, step left higher, right foot out, knee bent, reach left for big juggy hold, realize it's not a juggy hold, reverse left hand back to face to palm the flat holds out there, right hand higher and more crimping, wishing I had chalked up, stem feet a bit more, reach left for another big hold and pull my self up with a arching back like I was doing the salutations to the sun. I'm on the ledge and staring at an orange biner on the redirect bolt, clip my rope and move to the anchor to the left.

Dixie is silent and waiting for my usual whoop. I instead lean against the wall with my hands flat and feel my legs shake. The last time I was scared this way was across the gulley on the Balconies. The Pinnacles has a way of bringing out this part of myself. Soon Dixie is on belay and knocking rocks out of the wall as she comes up the bolt ladder.

"This is bullshit." She sounds like me when I have fun. I look up at the next pitch and wonder how to convince Dixie that we should rap back to the ground and climb something less stressful. I did not know what to do about my feelings about the pitch I had just completed. I couldn't stop smiling because the quality of movement to get to the anchors was something I seldom found outdoors on routes below 5.11 at the same time, I felt like I had just climbed two separate pitches in one. A video game with a level of all jump and kick followed by a boss that was all duck and punch. What is a route supposed to be, continuous or good? And was good climbing that was easily distracted still good? My heartbeat worked

as a timekeeper, and by the time Dixie reached the belay, my leg had long since stopped shaking and I had reascended the sequence to the anchors at least 10 more times.

I offer Dixie the next pitch at the belay. She looks at me rather than the climbing above her. "This is your pitch" I nod and grab my quickdraws off of her and make the moves into the chute. What followed was consistently fun, technical, and solid. I was moving over the rock like water and never thought about the fact that I was on an early route with rock I should hold with more respect.

Everything was bolted perfectly with a bolt right before every section that might have given me pause. As I continued on I was overcome with the feeling that this was not just a way up the rock as much as a true climb, something of a collaboration between the rock and the first ascensionists. Simple and fun.

The first crux bulge came in at 5.10a on the topo and was fluid and fun, rewarding stemming and palming greatly. The final 5.10a bulge came and went with two handholds that I held onto until both hands were at my waist before reaching for a thank-god jug and finishing to the anchors.

This pitch was like moving through time and was over much faster than I wanted it to be. More than once I would yell down to Dixie "This pitch is amazing!" and "You're going to love these moves." Her eye rolling echoed off of the Flumes formation across the gully.

The next pitch was Dixie's and she set off with a determination that I study in the mirror at home so that I can try to exude it when others are watching. Easy 5.7 munge hiking I had described to her. Once she was out of reach, the cascading flow of leaves and dust rolling down the groove made me question the ease of the pitch.

From anchor bolts I am ten white pins at the end of a bowling alley. Dixie leads above me up a water streak of black moss, leaves, dirt, and breaking rock. 5.7 run out climbing with the optional knob slung here and there. I hold the printout of the route description in one hand, holding down the cam of the grigri with the same hand's wrist while I pay out more and more of the rapidly disappearing rope. "Ten feet!" I yell up at her. The printout in front of me says 195' for the third pitch. I am doing metric conversion to feet for 60 meters of rope when Dixie responds to my yell of the remaining rope.

"ROCK!" I hear the familiar helicopter whomp whomp of rocks coming from above me. This one has a deeper tone than I've been hearing. I have moments of inaction before my mind stops converting metric to standard and instead converts pitch to size. I flatten myself to the wall as a rock that was once the size of a grapefruit bounces to the right of me, shattering into smaller golf balls and continuing its crashing helicopter imitation towards the ground. Dixie yells again and I get comfortable as more rocks tumble past, these smaller and hitting me as dust by the time they reach me. I think of Ash Wednesday. Dixie yells again, "Did you say something?"

"Five feet!"

“I’m at the bolts!”

Once I begin to climb, I feel like a scuba diver. The rock is alive with pancaked fungus and blackened flakes that look like leaves. Orange piecrust that looks no different from the epoxy spilling out in a halo of security around all of the bolts. I am at odds as to whether the ease of flicking the orange mold off the rock affects my faith in glue reinforcement.

I am instituting a new style of climbing: windshield wipers of rubber with my feet. Every step slides back and forth to clear the step. Still they crinkle like the unwrapping of a present as I step on the holds. My hands are tentative with each new hold that flexes and cracks in my hand. I can no longer see the meadow below me and now must worry about who might be below us. I am in a minefield that’s more like a mine garden. I wish for a leaf blower.

At the belay Dixie asks me if I noticed a specific loose rock that she had to avoid. “I left it there because it wouldn’t fit in my pocket.” When I was at that point in the climb, I had counted six different protruding rocks that were standing on a ledge, threatening to jump at any time. I had made stemming moves far above the grade of the pitch to avoid weighting them, all the while converting the distance Dixie would have been above the last bolt when making the same moves then doubling the distance, as any lead fall would require. Forty feet.

“Good lead.”

“It was like climbing through a pile of leaves.” She was smiling and looking at the next pitch. “It reminded me of when we used to rake leaves up back in North Carolina and jump into the pile. People used to leave piles in front of their house for the county to pick up and we would jump into those too.

“That sounds a bit more fun than this pitch was.” She crinkled her nose when she smiled

“But then they had to stop putting their leaves like that because the piles would be partly in the road and someone would put cinder blocks under the leaves. Then, if a car drove through the pile, they would hit the cinder blocks.” Now my nose crinkled. “I think I may have missed a bolt.”

“There’s supposed to be knobs you can sling.” I thought of the various chicken heads, attached to the rock by piecrust epoxy.

“I didn’t even think of that. I guess there were some big breadboxed sized ones that would have worked.” She had instinctively taken out a sling and was practicing girth hitching it to her fist. “The bigger the block the better, right?”

“Solid as cinder blocks.”

The last pitch goes quickly and is more fun than I felt it would be after coming through pitch three. Dixie places a red C3 into a just wide enough slot and swims up the chute. I follow into the chute via 5.5 rated moves that do not take into account the disintegrating nature of the exposed by easy moves.

Once in the tube I begin to laugh out loud and giggle to myself as I hike up what amounts to a tunnel with a convertible top. This is a convertible of a pitch, the bad stuff over, all that's left is the floating down the highway until you turn a corner and there is the belay. I see Dixie and stop for a second. Between us is a slung knob, girth hitched and barely more than a beauty mark on the face of the chute I'm climbing. "You like my slung knob?" I take out my camera and take a picture. Dixie feigns exasperation as my giggling turns to full and loud laughter.

I reach the tree and sit down in the dirt, take off my excess gear, call off belay, point to the summit twenty or so more 4th class feet away. She takes me off belay and we leave the shade of the tree into the sunlight bathing the summit above.

We sit on the top of Machete Ridge, look across at the only other climbers on the entire West Side, a couple of the Flumes and a couple on Lava Falls. Dixie picks at a small rock poking out of the summit and holds it in her hands once it pops off without a fight into her hands.

"This whole place is bullshit." She sounds like me when I have fun. "Why are we here instead of on granite?"

"Anyone will climb granite."

"Smart people climb granite"

"There are lots of smart people."

"Never thought I'd be happy to be so stupid." She puts the rock back into the crater it came from.

I reach for her hand and we listen to the sound of falcons somewhere on the face of the ridge. She sits in silent next to me and clicks her helmet against mine as she rests her head on my shoulder.