

Old Men Playing in the Garden

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Two gray-haired men stand at the base of a dead-vertical cliff. At their feet lies a heap of climbing gear.

Climbing gear?

Yes, these men are climbers. *Old* climbers. They've been at this game since ... when? The 1940s? And they're still at it, way up on the rocks when many people their age are beginning to have trouble just climbing stairs.

It would take a great many stairs to reach the top of the cliff here; it's the tallest in the Garden of the Gods, a nest of sandstone fins sticking up among the foothills of the Rockies at Colorado Springs.

Approaching the men, I recognize one of them. Fred Aschert is sixty years old. He's a legend among the local climbers; everybody admires him. No one should be so old and yet so good as Fred. Retired, he climbs nearly every day. The last two days he's been climbing with me.

"Hey, Fred!"

Fred looks at me sideways through his dusty bifocals. The frames are black and heavy, vintage 1970, secured with a cord round the back of his head.

He smiles. His voice is soft. "Back for another whack at it?"

Fred speaks in yesterday's colloquialisms, in the language of the people who taught me climbing twenty-five years ago.

"Last day before I have to head home, Fred. Yeah, one more route would be nice."

The other man glances in my direction, but he says nothing. Under his baseball cap there's hardly any hair, gray or otherwise. Why does he seem so familiar?

At this point Fred's usual partner shows up. I'm out, I guess. But Fred has a suggestion.

"You know, Harvey," he says to the man in the baseball cap, "Ben, here, told me yesterday he wants to do West Point Crack. And that's your route in the first place."

His route ...? I finally realize who this "Harvey" is. He's the guy who made dozens of first ascents around Colorado Springs in the 40s, the 50s, the 60s, even into the 70s. He's Harvey T. Carter, the grand old man of the Garden of the Gods.

We're introduced. "I'd be honored to do West Point Crack with you," I offer.

"Um ... maybe," says Harvey. A look of doubt. But we chat a while longer and the climb is on. It will take only an hour or two. It's not a difficult climb, 5.7 or so, an early classic. And truly, I *would* be honored to do it with its inventor.

As we're walking over to South Gateway Rock I look Harvey over. He's stocky, a bit fat. Tatty western-style shirt, buttoned at the sleeves. Powerful hands: short fingers, thick and muscular, with skin like old cowhide. Works with those hands, most likely. The nails are broken and tobacco stained; he must roll his own. In sum, Harvey looks to be poor as a church mouse.

"So this route must be one of your favorites," I suggest. We're at the base of the climb, uncoiling the rope.

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“Oh, yes. Did it in 1946.”

The year I was born!

Harvey is starting to talk—and talk, and talk.

“Now the guidebook says it was first climbed by the army. But, hell, I was in the army at the time. I’ve got routes all over the Garden I’ve never been credited with. Thirty, forty routes nobody even knows about but me.”

This may be true, although Harvey is famous for marking his climbs, originally by driving a gold-painted piton near the start, later on by spray-painting a red dot on the rock.

Harvey continues. “Course, in those days we’d of just *climbed* it, you know. Never mind all this stuff about who can climb in the Garden and who can’t. For a while there the Park Department got really *concerned* about that, but then some of us got together and ...”

His commentary fades as he ties himself onto the rope. No climbing harness for Harvey T. Carter; just one loop around his middle and a bowline knot.

“Want to lead the first pitch?” I ask, slipping on my harness and tying in.

“Nope, you go ahead. I’ve led it plenty before,” says Harvey. “Just watch it above the first pin. It’s pretty far to the next. One guy hit the ground.”

He takes the rope and runs it casually around his back, a method of belaying found to be dangerous and since replaced with a technique that relies more on hardware than human strength.

“Uh—you want a plate to belay me on?”

“Nah. Don’t like those much. Not *dynamic* enough.”

I’ll have to chance it with Harvey; he’s still climbing in the 60s. But looking again at those hands, I quit worrying. Harvey could probably hold a runaway locomotive with them.

So I’m off, moving over a mild overhang on large holds and getting the first clip. It’s an old ring angle. Harvey might have hammered it in himself forty years ago.

A pigeon flies by, one of hundreds roosting among the pothole-dotted slabs. A peregrine falcon also lives here, doing its best to keep the pigeon population under control.

I look down, admiring the scenery in the Garden of the Gods. Grain by grain, the eroding spires have created their own skirts of pink sand. Thickets of scrub oak press against the moist, shady bases of the cliffs; pinyon jays scuttle through the leaves. Between the rocks, dry meadows of yellowish grass hold their own in the sun. Junipers and pines stand here and there like the perfect little trees of a model railway layout. I could spend days here, immersed in the natural history of this place.

But right now it’s time to concentrate on what lies in front of my face. Looks like an awkward move around a big flake—the spot that Harvey warned me about. Yup; it’s run out. Must take care.

I reach up to the edge of the flake and grab it. I lean way back, the rope hanging free from the wall as I throw a leg up and over the flake. The rest of my body follows, and I get a tingle of adrenalin.

Soon I’m 60 feet up, standing on a tiny ledge beside a couple of pitons drilled into the soft sandstone. End of the pitch. I tie myself in.

“On belay, Harvey!”

He starts slowly, grunting and grumbling. When his hands come over the lip of the ledge they’re scuffed, even a little bloody. Harvey can still climb, but he’s, well, rusty. And he’s not smiling.

“Never have liked that pitch much,” he admits.

“Want to lead the next one?”

“No.”

That’s okay by me; this is the part of the climb that looked good from the ground. It’s a vertical crack heading for the bright-blue Colorado sky. In a few minutes I’ll be up there. I’ll be way up there on one of the airier perches in the Garden of the Gods, and I’ll be there with the first climber to reach it.

Harvey is talking again as I start off. “Now, this thing’s a chimney higher up; kinda tricky. I’ve seen guys hang around in there for hours. Course, *you* prob’ly won’t have any trouble with it.”

I step off the ledge and twist a foot into the crack. Then my right hand goes in between the sandy edges, twisting, locking. Other foot in. Other hand. Move higher.

Heck, this isn’t hard. Not in my new climbing shoes, the latest and greatest.

“Ah, Harvey, in these things you can climb anything,” I shout, chalking up.

“I suppose so,” he says, looking down at his worn-out, obsolete footwear. Could he afford the latest sticky rubber? I doubt it. Would he even want better shoes? Harvey carries no chalk bag.

The crack widens and deepens. I move inside. There are potholes here, big ones that make huge holds. Not much of that classical back-and-knees stuff. Nuts. This is too easy ...

Suddenly a pigeon bursts out in front of me.

“Yow!”

Smell of bird. I feel the wings beat past, the little feet scratching across my head. Uh oh! I’m losing my balance!!

Somehow I don’t fall off. Harvey has seen this all before. He can’t help but laugh. “Man, you’re in the Garden now!”

I brush pigeon-poop from my hair. “Got a souvenir, too.”

And so to the top of West Point Crack. But the summit of the rock is a little higher yet. I take an intimidating step across empty space, work my way up the other side, and here’s the end of the climb. I tie in.

It’s okay now to release my eyes from the intense world at my fingertips. The vacationer in me takes over, searching the larger scene for something of interest.

Down below, someone unfolds a lawn chair and sits to watch us. It’s yet another old man. His white hair shifts in the breeze. He waves; I wave back. Climbers and spectators alike, we’re all playing in the Garden today.

Across the way I can see Fred Aschert—phenomenal Fred—on North Gateway Rock. Fred is moving smoothly up and up in a great vertical dish of sandstone. He’s enjoying his retirement up there, climbing a route much harder than the one Harvey and I have just finished. Fred climbs with people young enough to be his grandchildren.

The late-afternoon sun is shining over the top of Pikes Peak toward the big red rocks in the Garden of the Gods. The sandstone is warm against my back; the fragrance of pine and juniper drifts by. The pigeons are sailing out from their potholes, turning and flapping back in, heedless of the falcon. There it is, sitting quietly on a neighboring spire like a dozing thunderbolt.

And the one and only Harvey T. Carter is coming up the pitch, quicker and more confidently now, muttering contentedly to himself, engrossed in what still seems to be his favorite thing. As he sits down beside me, he sticks out his hand. Ah, the summit handshake, a tradition of his generation.

“Good job, Ben,” he offers.

“My pleasure to climb it with you, Harvey.”

Indeed it was. Many thanks to Harvey. And thanks also to you, Fred. Thanks for the

answer to a question I hadn't asked: how long will I be able to enjoy this sport?
