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## OLIVE OIL'S BACK SIDE

*Lucas Marshall*

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*Olive Oil is one of the best Red Rocks moderates with its excellent, varied climbing on great rock. The long awesome crack on the second and third pitches, some route finding on easier terrain, and a final huge stemming dihedral all add up to a great day. The first pitch is the serious section, with 5.7 face climbing without great protection to the left of a polished chimney. The fourth pitch goes up a crack system, then heads to the right to gain the top of a pillar -- this unlikely traverse to the right is where people get off route. The final dihedral is runout on easy terrain down low, then better protected through a steep chimney section.*

*- Red Rocks Climbing [Nevada] Greg Barnes  
Supertopo Guide Series*

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TWO HUNDRED feet off the ground, hands rough and knuckles bleeding. Cuticles cracked and fingernails embedded with dirt and white powder, skin feels like bad beef jerky. I reach into my pocket and pull out a small handful of almonds, the fabric grabs at my torn skin like Velcro. I hang and enjoy the view.

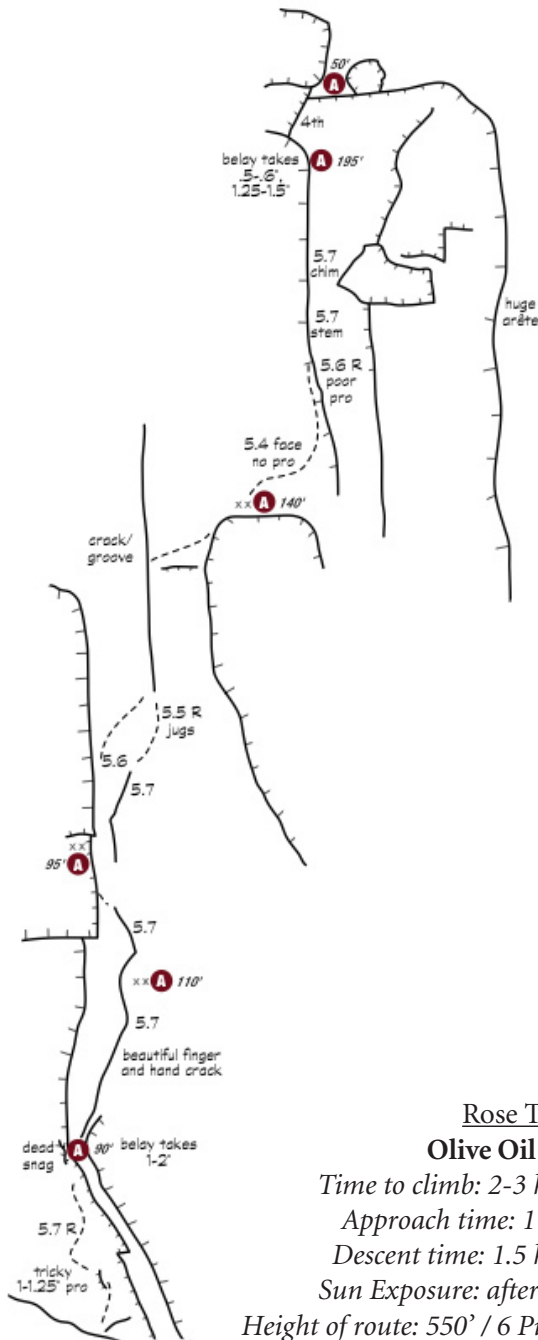
The radio in my napoleon breast pocket spits the broken voice of a Spanish-speaking boy heavily laced with static. It sounds like an old answering machine, the first ones without tapes in them. I decide to search for a clearer station.

"Hey Pat," I speak into the radio. "I don't want this interference getting in the way of our romantic conversations, I am switching to channel 5 Honey Lips." "Copy that," he replies.

I switch the radio to channel 5 and shove the radio back into my pocket. Through the material of my jacket I press the TALK button, "Where is that

golden voice I long to hear?" "Right here, good sir," Pat replies. "Very well," I return.

Through the spastically ferocious wind, the sound of air slamming back together thuds rhythmically on my eardrum, sound waves pulse within my chest. I scan the valley of the Red Rock Canyon, and to the east, as I suspected, a helicopter flies through dimming the sky. I smile, thinking, *I'm higher than a helicopter*. Slowing from cruising speed, it's Red and white strobes stain my retinas. It descends, almost vertically in the middle of the flat valley and comes to a rest near the Oak Creek parking area. Its landing sends dust spiraling off the sandy floor, blasting sagebrush and cacti and making kangaroo mice shit their pants. The dust cloud extends outwards like a curled mustache then disperses into the air. From 500 feet above and a mile and a half away, the parking lot where all the action is taking place, I cannot see what is going on.



Rose Tower

Olive Oil 5.7R

Time to climb: 2-3 hours

Approach time: 1 hour

Descent time: 1.5 hours

Sun Exposure: afternoon

Height of route: 550' / 6 Pitches

I HANG, anchored by three pieces of gear to the wall, feeding rope out while belaying Sarah. She is 35 meters above me climbing a sandstone crack. Patrick has ran the next pitch out to almost a full 60 meters. At the time, this didn't seem unordinary.

Turbines whirring, the helicopter dusts off and ascends into a canyon finger further south, quickly gaining altitude, it disappears behind a rock tower.

Above me, Sarah is no longer in view. I pull out another handful of almonds from my pocket and munch away the time. I lose myself in the striped bands of stone and endless cracks and features surrounding me. I look behind me at Crimson Crystals, it's prominent peak still in the sun. Staring, vertigo seeps into my head and the vast landscape overwhelms me. Rudely a sharp blast of Nevada winter air hits me. The gust knocks me off balance and viciously pulls me from my daydream.

Again, I hear the familiar chopping of a helicopter. It's same one. The bird retraces its path and touches down, then once again it rises and goes back into the canyon. Puzzled at the situation, my mind wonders what could be going on.

A voice emits from my pocket. "Alright, Sarah is anchored in up here and you are on belay." Patrick informs, "but we might have a bit of a problem, not a big deal, but we can discuss it when you get your fat ass up here."

"Sounds good, dick mitten." I exclaim as I remove my gloves and pull myself higher to get a leg up to balance myself, leaving one of my hands free.

I break down the anchor and tie the cordlette in a knot and store it on my harness. I organize the three locking carabineers Pat uses for his anchors and pull the three cams out of the crack.

I chalk my hands and press the TALK button through the fabric of my jacket. "Alright, climbing," I say, releasing the radio, leaving chalky fingerprints on my jacket.

"Roger that," Pat returns, "See you in a few." I sink my hand into the crack to my right up high and jam my left foot in and step on it, beginning the third pitch.

CLEANING THE pitch, I climb with ease and enjoyment despite the nasty conditions. Wind once again puts me in check, and I imagine falling hundreds of feet to my death, pin-balling down the sandpaper-like rock. *Perhaps I should concentrate a bit more.* I take sharp breath, stem out with my left foot and reach high with my right arm and find an inset ledge inside the knee-wide crack. I pull the plunger on a #3 Camelot, retracting its aluminum lobes, and remove the runner it is clipped to and attach the cam to one of my harnesses' gear loops.



ECHOING OFF the rock, I once again see the helicopter set down and take off from the valley floor, it catches my attention only for a second as I climb on.

Coming to a large dihedral I can see the tops of Pat and Sarah's heads poking out at its apex like a pair of gophers. They are forty feet above me. Little wheels spin inside my head, causing a crank to turn, making a hammer ding a small bell. An idea is formed. I twist around to see the helicopter's flashing lights and realize that this helicopter has been stalking my moves is a rescue chopper. The voices I had heard earlier on the radio were distress calls and I had been watching a multi-trip rescue, pulling people off of a rock somewhere.

*b I hope they are alright, I think. Must have really been in a lot of trouble to get plucked off by a helicopter.*

I continue climbing, glad to not be in such a situation. With my eyes beginning to play tricks on me, I click on my headlamp and reach upwards, behind my head to the outside of the dihedral. With the blind move, I find a welcoming hueco and pull up on it while bringing my right foot up higher then stemming to the outside ridge of the dihedral with my left foot. I finish up the pitch with my heels in the wind, totally exposed and oblivious to the dropping temperature and absence of natural light.

"We are definitely off route," Patrick says as I unclip pieces of pro and give them to him to organize on his harness. He continues, "I missed the traverse back there and are left of where we are supposed to be. Damn! I didn't think I'd miss the traverse."

"I didn't see anything that looked like a to traverse either," added Sarah.

THE THREE of us sit: Sarah and I squeezed into a slot wide as a beach ball with the dihedral to her back and a large lodged stone to mine that drops straight down on the other side of it. Patrick sits with his legs dangling above us on top of a small column: to his left a few feet of rock then a flake that shoots up 60 feet to another red and white striped sandstone formation similar to what we are sitting on. Below the flake floats about 300 feet of nothing until the tops of the trees below and smooth rock sits defiantly above. We discuss our options, which, all stink

like a gym sock filled with Gorgonzola cheese.

"We can either lead down climb the dihedral and try to find the traverse and finish the route or take our chances and see where this flake leads us." He pauses taking a long pull from his Camel Back, then continues, "We may be far enough over to be on One Armed Bandit, but it's hard to tell. I can't really get my bearings from this lousy guidebook. Damn you SuperTopo."

"It would take a long time to go down and find the traverse and finish the route," I add.

The howling wind troubles our minds, and whips us with chills against our bodies. It is hard to think. Sarah speaks up, "Well there is no harm in checking out that next spot up there, it has the potential of having a line leading up or a way to rap down."

We agree on it and I put Pat on belay. He makes it across the flake and up to the next small peak, only placing 3 pieces into the stone along the way. I belay Pat from the spot he was sitting on earlier and I have Sarah move as close as she can to me to stay out of the wind in the beach ball gap. She is shivering and drained.

"Ok, I have built an anchor and think we can definitely get out of here from this spot, so go ahead and come up." We simul-climb by headlamp as Pat belays us both at the same time with his Reverso, Sarah climbing about 15 feet above of me.

At the new anchor, there is more room and the wind coverage is nominally better, but the scene is still dismal: Lost, hundreds of feet off the ground. Imagine being lost in a forest, take away the ability to wonder to try and find your way. Then put yourself on stone ledges hundreds of feet above the trees and ground. Making a wrong move in the woods, and you are still lost in the woods, make a wrong move up here and you are stranded or dead. Hope perhaps can be found on a ledge below us. I belay Patrick down within the gap to the wider platform that drops off about 20 feet from the crest where the anchor is. He walks to the edge and peers through the darkness with his headlamp, there is no other light besides the near full moon. The wind and black air swallow his light.

Patrick returns to the anchor, his words broke by chattering teeth. "From where we are, I don't see any



good lines leading up the rock, and the ground can't be more than 300 feet down. We can rappel all the way down the rope, then build another anchor in a good spot, pull the ropes and rappel again to the deck. It's our best bet."

"Oh god," Sarah says as her face goes pale in the glow of our lamps, she shivers uncontrollably as the cold penetrates her clothing. The idea makes her sick. She starts to break down inside, panic taking over. We do our best to comfort her.

**W**E DECIDE to move down to the larger space near the edge, but Sarah is locked in fear, trembling and unable to move, we coax her to follow. I help her down, pointing out footholds and hand holds on the rock. Her sobs fill the air and her tears roll down her face and moisten the stone. She makes it down and curls up into a ball in the corner. Though we are in a fairly safe location, we build another anchor to reassure her. I scoot the edge of the ledge and peek into the darkness.

I look down the sheer face toward where the ground should be, but I only see black past where my light hits the rock. I slide myself away from the ledge and sit. The ledge curves at the sides and points like a dull arrowhead with an upward curl pointing past the black night to the other side of the ravine, the moon illuminates the banded sandstone, colors muted.

Staring at the edge, "Hey, we could horn this ledge and rap down from it. It will give us more rope to work with and we don't have to leave any gear." Patrick checks out my idea and thinks we should go for it. Sarah, still shivering, has her head between her legs and her arms wrapped around her knees. I can hear her sobs beneath the wind. I go over to her and wrap my arms around her to try and ease her and get her together.

Behind us Pat flakes both ropes into two separate piles. With his plump purple digits he then ties the ropes together with a double fisherman and the

loose ends together with a figure 8 knot and comes over to us.

With a soft voice, "Hey I need your help so we can go get to a Vegas buffet." Pat says to Sarah, "Work the knots out of the cordlette and stow it on this biner,

we will need it once we get to the end of the rope."

He taps me to follow him. I kiss Sarah on the cheek and give her zurburt and a Clif bar to help settle her unease. Patrick and I set up the rappel. I hold the ropes in place on the rock as he picks them up and throws them over the edge.

Instinctively he shouts, "ROPE!!"

The weight of the ropes hanging compresses itself into the rock and holds it fast on the stone. Patrick pulls up enough rope for all of us to put ourselves on rappel. Once the rope is weighted, it is impossible to add anything to it. The three of us work under our own lights diligently setting up our devices and wrapping our auto-locks around the rope. Finished, our eyes meet and we begin to move into position.

I hold the rope in place as Patrick lowers himself over the edge of the rock, sliding 12 feet down, leaving me and Sarah enough room to also get down on the rope. Sarah is in the middle. The rope is now held fast by our weight and all trust now lies on our gear. With black air beneath our feet, Patrick waves good-bye as he sends down the rope.

"See you in 60 meters," he shouts through the darkness.

I sit crouching, unable to move on the rope, like a baseball catcher. Swaying side to side as my legs burn and fall asleep, I want to chop them off. Time drips by, and we sit in silence unable to see Patrick below. *Wish I had some more almonds.* I stare at the illuminated stone, rubbing my hands against the compressed layers, colored bands of sandstone. I try to lose myself in them, but the pain of my sitting position holds me in reality.

Patrick radios in, the anchor is built and he's off rappel.

Sarah gives a little smile and sends down the line, being swallowed by the darkness. I am alone, hanging off the back side of Rose Tower with 300 feet to the floor below: hanging off Rose's ass. I decide that I should try calling Chris who is patiently waiting for us back at the car. I pull out Patrick's phone and turn it on.

"Hey Lucas." Statics in Patrick's voice, "Sarah is down here with me and is off rappel, and you are free to ride."

"Alright, I'll be down in a few," I reply, "I'm going



to give Chris a call.”

I have one bar for signal strength as I punch in the numbers. The phone rings and he answers.

“Hello.” Answers Chris in his monotone voice. His unhappiness cannot be hidden.

“Hey, sorry we aren’t there, we ran into a bit of trouble, but are rapping down right now so we should be down back to the car in just over an hour.”

“Alright,” he replies, “See you then.”

The phone call ends and I cringe feeling sorry for him having to sit and wait for us in the parking lot. I press the red power button and tuck away the phone. A deep breath beings the descend into the darkness below. *I hope the ropes don’t roll off*, making it my last. I stare intently at their position above; the weight of my gaze will keep them from slipping.

**B**URNING PLASTIC. It is not exactly a pleasant smell, but it is synonymous with rappelling. It does not symbolize danger, but reminds me to take my time through the darkness. The moon is overhead now, casting a long shadow down the rock face as I lower. The glows of the other’s lamps grow nearer and I direct myself toward them. They sit in a diedral with a decent crack in its center. I clip into the anchor and survey our new surroundings.

We are stacked on top of one another in the crack with a sheer face to our left that goes up to where the ropes still are and a bulge to our right that hides its secrets with its outcrops and girth. Below our stance, there is a shrub tree growing in the crack. It is fairly large and about 40 feet below. Beyond that is more darkness and then the tree tops in the ravine, just visible. In guessing, we think about eighty feet more until we are down. Patrick has already chosen the pieces of gear he is willing to part with in order to get down. So now all we need to do is pull the ropes and rappel again.

I grab one of the loose ends of rope, the one we remembered we would pull on when we were above, and I wrap my wrist in it then pull with both my hands as hard as I can. They stretch, but do not move. I try again. Nothing. Pat and I both pull on them. Nothing. We tie prussics around them to give us some leverage and we hang and stand on our friction knots, even taking turns weighting it while the other takes slack out of the rope. The rope begins

to pull our body weight back up with its elasticity. *Shit*. We are losing. I scale over and retrieve the other rope end and pull the bejesus out of it with no avail. *Fucking beans!*

**W**E AGAIN brainstorm for our next move, at least out of the wind. With no rope, and our height still well within the death zone our options are slim and ugly. Our trio is tired, but still focused. The wear showed on Patrick’s face and sand and dust had stuck where Sarah’s tears have dried. My tummy wanted to eat. *Almonds sure would be nice, or a damn steak dinner.*

The only real option is to down climb. But without ropes we have to get inventive. Using the nylon and spectra runners from the pro, we girth hitch them together, end to end, and also used one of the cordelette anchors. This gave about 50 feet to work with. The ‘rope’ would take a fall, but it would be painful because it would transfer all shock straight to you and would only stop you once you got to the end of the length. With nothing to lose I remove my gloves and clip into the makeshift rope then unclip myself from the anchor.

**D**OWN CLIMBING is not apples to oranges compared to going up. It’s more like comparing apples to pizza. *Mmm... pizza*. They are not even in the same damn food isle! *Pizza being in the awesome isle, and apples being with the other fruit*. You do not get to use your muscles to pull yourself up and you have to look down the length of your body to see where you are going instead of what is usually almost eye level. Not to mention the loss of depth perception at night. I make my way down slowly, finding good foot holds and slowly weighting them and moving down to the next, approaching the shrub below. With my lamp, I can almost see what lies below the tree, but the shadows play with my mind. I step down on to a small ledge, wide as a stick of gum, and peer below, careening my head like an owl to put together an idea of what awaits me when the hold my left foot is on blows out putting me in free fall for a brief second.

**A**SHOCK sends through my body, adrenaline filling my blood stream. I turn back up and claw at the wall as I start to fall. I catch a small ledge with my hand and my right foot jams into the crack.

*Phew that wa.. POP!*



The ledge my hand rescued myself on explodes sending my body arching backwards from the force I had been exerting on it, the foot jam I have holds my lower body near the rock sending my torso down first before the jam pops out and follows my hellacious lead. I look up the crack where I see two white dots peering down at me. *Son of a bitch, I'm gonna die hungry.*

Falling transitions into free fall.

Like a drunken eagle returning to a roost I smash into the shrub below, it's branches jabbing into my spin and cutting into my skin. Pain shoots through my body, and I wince, slamming my eyes closed. All goes quiet.

WITH NO white light or harps ensuing tranquil music or gates of gold or fire and seeing no sign of 72 virgins awaiting me, I open my eyes and blink them a few times. I still see the crack with the two white lights above me. Green leaves line my peripheral. I hear voices from above but rustling leaves and a ringing in my ears muffles them. There is a small pile of webbing sitting on my chest: I could still fall farther. *This can't be good.* I am on thin ice.

With the speed of Chuck Norris, I simultaneously I sit up and grab the webbing twisting it around my wrist until it is taught then pull myself up out of my makeshift nest, back on to the rock. I suck in some air and judge that I must have fallen about 10 feet onto my new best friend, the shrub. I can tell because my shoe is still stuck where my foot was jammed. Consequently, friendship comes at the price of scars, an ass full of toothpicks, and only having one shoe. Wiping blood and pulling twigs out of my jacket I figure it was worth the consequences.

I retrieve my shoe. Looking up, "That was fucking crazy, I don't even have anything clever to say. Holy fuck beans, can we go home yet?!" I yell with an awkward smile. Laughs echo through the small canyon.

Now that the shrub is deemed friendly, I walk around on its large branches and find safe passage to a large ledge. I build the last anchor and send up the good news. We can walk down from here. The stress of the night lifted, Sarah starts to down climb, but instead of clipping into the end, she clips the individual segments as she moves and unclips the last above her after she clips the next one below her,

making her safety redundant. This way made a lot more sense.

"Sure wish we would have thought about that about 20 feet ago." I grumble. Patrick breaks down the anchor and climbs down carefully, not interested in any arboreal friendships this evening.

Now on flat ground we look up, our ropes dance in the wind like spaghetti dangling from a fork.

"Well at least we know what we are doing tomorrow," Pat says.

"I'll leave you two to that." Responds Sarah, "I will find something else to climb, or just go shopping. I am done with this one. I think my jar of luck is damn near empty."

We scramble down the ravine to our bags. I catch the reflective piping on my shoulder straps in my lamp and a final feeling of relief sweeps through my body. We don warmer clothing and change shoes. Leaving the ravine, we see the lights of Vegas, the Luxor spotlight shooting straight into the sky, aircraft lights hovering above the city. You can practically smell the tourists, prostitutes and slot machines.

The world expands as we become tiny specks and our lives wander away from near death experiences. At least for the night. We high tail it down through the desert, it's buffet time.

*Lucas Marshall is a climber, artist, writer and photographer living in Omaha, Nebraska.*

*This story is factual until the author falls into the tree. The three descended safely. Pat and Lucas climbed the route again the next day, retrieved the ropes and finished the route. Thanks to Jon Cannon for the use of "Old Blue," a very worn in rope. Lucas highly recommends Makino Sushi Buffet in Las Vegas. Try to eat your body weight in Sashimi like Patrick did.*

~ [www.lucasmrshall.com](http://www.lucasmrshall.com)