

The Great and Secret Show

Thirty-nine days in the vertical realm

by WARREN HOLLINGER

Clive Barker's novel *The Great and Secret Show* asserts that there is a hallowed place of intense existence so pure and euphoric it can only be reached three times in your life: at birth, the first moments you truly experience love, and at death. Once attained, the profound memory lingers in our subconscious, but we can only endure until our demise before we are one last time graced by its presence. For every climber there exists one experience that stands out as the most intensely absorbed moment of his or her life—a moment so sharp that the rest of the world blurs into trivial extinction. Though the climber may try over and over to duplicate the formula, he never quite manages to revisit this lost ground.

In 1995, Mark Synnott and I, with Jerry Gore, traveled to Baffin Island's northeastern fjords and climbed the Great Cross Pillar, letting the monolith of the Polar Sun Spire stare us down for the 13 days of our ascent. We realized that wall had captured a piece of our soul, and we needed to retrieve it. Though none of us could truly conceive of the depths we would have to dig to pull off such an ascent, nor even understand our own motives for enduring a stay on a wall three times longer than any of us had previously experienced, our belief in the mission was unshakable. In the frigid days of May, 1996, Mark, Jeff Chapman and I approached The Polar Sun Spire another time. For three men ready to step foot on the north face, the show was about to begin.

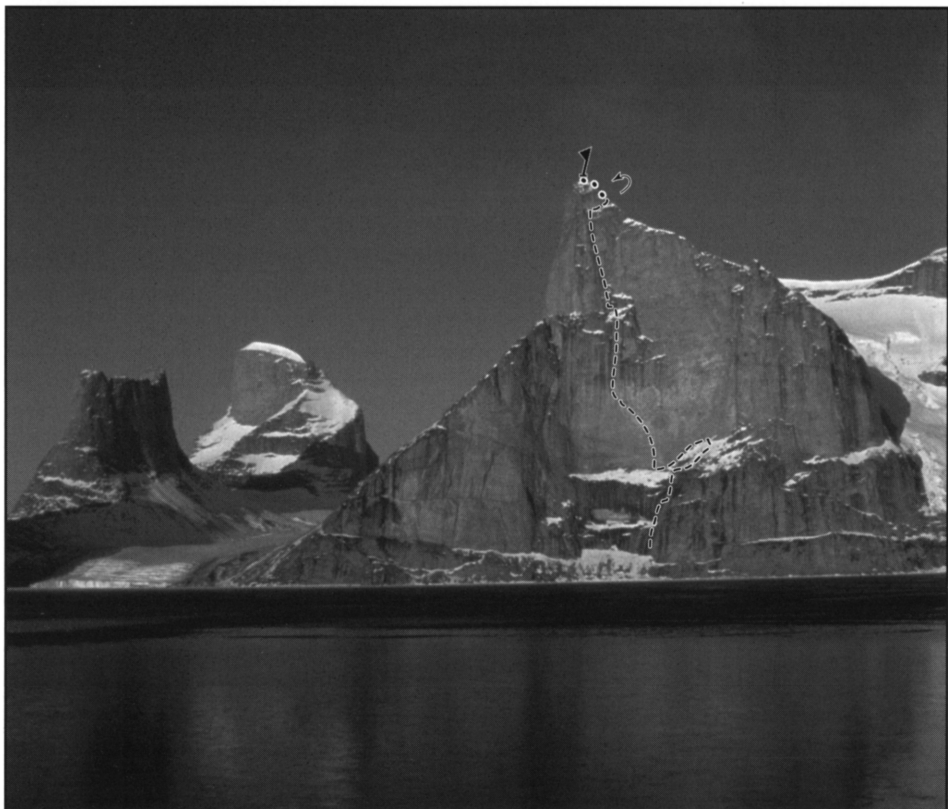
MAY 21, 1996

I have absolutely no idea what day it is today, or even whether it is morning or evening. But that's how it is out here. We work day and night to establish a position from which we can mount an all-out effort on this face. Twenty-four hour light affords us strategies rarely contemplated in a more southern latitude. Climbing sessions of 20 to 30 hours become the norm; our clocks now run on a 36-hour day. After three days of fixing and 1,000 feet of rope, all that is left is to rise into the abyss and search out our own meaning to this adventure. And become lost in the show.

JUNE 8, 1996 (Day: 15; On Wall: 12; Last Push: 3)

First hanging bivy above the snow ledge. We have five haul bags, three bullet bags, one bucket, two portaledges and the ability, we believe, to stay on the wall for 30 days. We're 1600 feet up the route, 600 feet above the ledge, and just beginning the arduous task of navigating a way through the 2,000-foot overhanging sea of seams and ripples.

Two men work to advance our position, while the other whiles away his day reading and ignoring the roar of his stomach. We've spent 12 nights on the wall. Went down for more food and fuel on June 4 after 18 gallons of water froze solid and we determined that three and a half gallons of fuel was not enough. A radio call was made; family and friends were informed that the wall required four more weeks of climbing, our airline tickets needed to be changed, and the odds of being stranded during ice break-up were high. Once resupplied, we spent 26 hours repacking our gear and headed back up the wall June 6. . . .



Polar Sun Spire, Sam Ford Fjord, Baffin Island. The Great and Secret Show is marked. Mark Synnott

The wall is steeply overhanging for the last 600 feet. No way to get into the anchors. We are totally committed now! There is a relief in the finality, and our new concern is focused upon our water supply. The next ledge is a steep and intricate 1,300 feet away.

JUNE 12, 1996 (Day: 19; On Wall: 15; Last Push: 7)

We're all a bit edgy and probably have one lightly heated argument every day or two. Everything gets resolved and we always go back to our usual routine. Generally food (lack of food, that is) seems to be the source of our disagreements. . . . We've upped our rations to have more snacking food. I hope this is a good strategy.

It sounds like a war zone around here: missiles fly by, crashing into ledges below us. It's pretty wild, but it's becoming routine. . . .

Today has turned out quite nice. It's Mark's lead and I have a day off. I cleaned up the rock dust and shrapnel chunks out of the ledge, straightened things up a bit and repaired a burn hole in Jeff's sleeping bag (he's been smoking three to five cigarettes a day. He's definitely not a practiced smoker). We've been working well as a team like that, drying out each other's bags, repairing each other's shit. . . .

I sometimes, secretly, wish we could stay up here longer. On the mellow days there seems to be no other place in the world I would rather be (except with Erika, my beautiful wife, in some exotic country). The living is hard but comfortable. The quiet is so fantastic—not another human being for 80 miles. No sound except the air in your ears (and those rock missiles). People think we're crazy, but they have no idea the world they are missing....

We're moving like slugs, but still trying to remember to enjoy the process, not the goal.

JUNE 17, 1996 (Day: 24; On Wall: 21; Last Push: 11)

I's my day off again. It's also the day we were to be picked up and brought back to Clyde River. That is definitely not to be! We are 2,600 feet up the wall and have no intentions of returning until we reach the top. Sorry, Erika.

We moved our bivy a couple of shifts ago. After Mark's 14-hour pitch (a real scrappy one), Jeff led for 10 hours. It snowed on me for six hours, a wet one, almost rain (we've been hoping it doesn't rain, that would really screw us up), that kept me huddled in my belay bag, wishing I were somewhere else.

The wall has been wearing on us. I heard Mark say the other day, "It feels like we've been on this wall for a year." Twenty-four days, actually, but who's counting? Most days I actually forget what day it is, what time it is, or how long we've been on the wall. And I never know the day of the week....



Chapman juggling through the overhangs. Mark Synnott

The actual climbing on this route is proving similar to the sunny Yosemite walls we trained on, but the adventure is a whole world apart. The placements, though familiar in technique and difficulty, always appear more awkward on a first ascent in double boots, gloves and four layers of clothing. Though we have all done hard aid in these conditions, 13-hour leads become common ground. Serious A2 could take eight to 10 hours and the face never eases off during the overhanging 2,000-foot section. The steepness combined with the incipient nature of this part of the wall has everyone digging for their absolute mental, physical and emotional best. Actually, it's easy to find your best when the consequences for anything less are, well, unthinkable.

At the end of Jeff's pitch the angle finally kicks back to vertical. After 10 long pitches of overhanging climbing with the shortest pitches taking nine or 10 hours, we are happy to see continuous cracks and vertical to less-than-vertical climbing. With one gallon of water to spare, we hit our first snow ledge. Three quarts per person per day for 12 days has just sufficed. With snow every few hundred feet, water will never again be a concern. Now if only the food, fuel and weather would hold.

JUNE 22, 1996 (Day: 29; On Wall: 26; Last Push: 16)

*I*t is a bit unnerving listening to the avalanches hitting all around the ledge every 30 to 60 seconds. I hear the missiles coming and for an eternity I can't decide whether it will be a direct hit or a near miss. The sun wreaks havoc up here. It stormed for the last five days and my altimeter dropped 500 feet yesterday, signifying high pressure and a good spell of weather. Great for climbing, bad for the bivy. The guys headed out at 5 p.m. on Pitch 22; by 10 p.m. the sun hit us, and by 12 a.m. the bigger slides started sloughing off.

Our bivy is on the middle snowledge above the overhangs. We reached this ledge about three days ago (hard to think in days—two pushes ago). It's the psychological turning point for the team. With the most demanding part (technically and mentally) behind us, summiting is inevitable. The only question now is when. I approximate the height on the wall right now to be around 3,000 feet....

...I look out at a view I will never experience again, and am dumbfounded by its beauty. There will be other walls in the future, yet this one is now and its majestic panorama is like no other in the world. The frozen ocean, cracked in a couple of dozen places for miles across the fjord, splits twenty 2,000-foot-plus walls. The snow has almost entirely left the ice. The reflections and shadows are staggering.

As to the tidbits around camp: My toes are fuzzy-feeling, and sometimes numb, yet they are functioning fine. My double boot welt is trashed; no crampon will ever see this boot again. I've been sewing up a storm, trying to add some extra life to our glove liners. Thinking about my beautiful wife as usual. Hoping a large pile of snow doesn't blow through the portaledge while I'm writing this down. Basically having a great time! I know one day this will all be over and I'll long to be back up here again, so I'm definitely going to make the most of it.

Upper snow is now melting away, granting passage on bare, featured rock. Our only real concern at this point is the sea ice: Will it stay long enough to get us home—or is it perhaps already too late?

JUNE 28, 1996 (Day: 35; On Wall: 32; Last Push: 22)

*W*ell, we're all feeling pretty good right now. Spent, but good. From Camp V, 600 feet

above the snowledge, we made one 24-hour push and set the anchors for Camp VI, 600 feet at the top of the pillar. We established this camp (Camp V) four days ago with a 5.9 A1 loose lead by me and Mark with a scrappy iced chimney that he was able to get into the back of and ice climb (WI3), which gave us a water ice rating. He brought us to a ledge that is the most incredible perch I've ever seen. The view is phenomenal. The portaledge sits at the edge of the pillar 3,500 feet up the route. We're over the Great Cross Pillar. Substantially!

It really gives us a sense that this is almost over when we start seeing everything from this height. Being almost over is a relief. It's been a long time up here. We really would like to finish this climb and get on with our lives. At least, I know I do.

Since we got what we thought might take three days done in one push, we celebrated by getting an extra piece of cheese and an extra can of tuna in our combined dinner pot. Doesn't sound like much, but it is unfortunately splurging for us. We'll haul today sometime but we need to get some sleep now. I've been asleep for only six hours, but I woke up with my stomach growling. It's feeding time and I don't get fed. My body screams for more nourishment, but all it gets is scraps, and then only at the appointed times. I'll figure out a way to sleep—or I won't sleep at all. Them's the breaks.

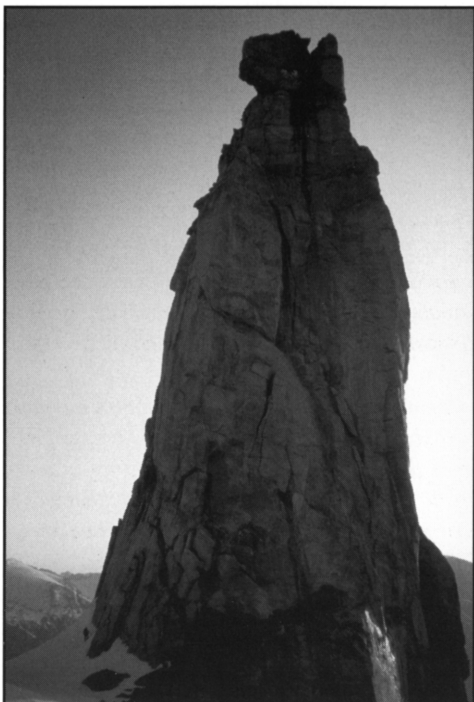
We think we can traverse a snow ledge from Camp VI to the ridge and summit on our next push. That would be fantastic. I hope we find the climbing easy and get there in just a few hours, but there looks to be some steep rock on the top of the ridge. The picture shows tons of snow along the way, but I think (I hope) we'll have mostly dry rock. If this window of weather holds for a couple more days we may get a perfectly clear summit. Then it's rapping the wall and back



Synnott on the snowledge before the summit. The Turret lies to the left; Broad Peak is in the background.
Warren Hollinger

to Base Camp to call the outfitters and let everyone know we're OK.

Whew, it's almost over. Unless of course we can't get back because of the ocean ice conditions. Then it will be another four to six weeks. Shit! I guess we'll go climbing (that's if the outfitters left us the extra food). We'll see. Well, I'm going to try to sleep. Big day of hauling today. Maybe that will shut my stomach up. Oh yeah—I love, love, love my Erika.



It ain't over 'til you've stood on top: the summit of Polar Sun Spire. Warren Hollinger

To find a set of inobvious features from the ground, believing they will ultimately create a passage that will keep you alive and carry you to the top, has always appeared to me as one of the greatest challenges of rock climbing. When the plan unfolds and the pieces of the puzzle fall into perfect place, you recognize at that moment that you are truly at one with your environment. Speak not of conquering, for those who believe they can impose their will on such a shrine to nature will be sadly mistaken—if they are lucky enough to escape alive.

I recognize in hindsight there was much more to our success than tenacity and know-how. To live on a wall for so long teaches you an unsurpassed respect for the omnipotence of your environment and a realization that if it's your time to go, any one of a thousand things can readily take you there. Our goal, therefore, as in all the disciplines of climbing, was not to

focus on what could go wrong, but just on the next move. And after that, the next. The scope of the project was much too large for our puny minds to grasp in one sitting.

And so on July 1, 1996, 25 days after leaving the ground for the final time, we found ourselves embraced in a group hug on the top of our dream. The feeling was not necessarily elation; we all knew somehow deep within that we would ultimately make it. No, it was more like relief, happiness, sadness. Finality. That's it: finality. We had lost ourselves in this adventure as if in a riveting book that couldn't be put down and now that the show was complete, the last page turned, we realized we could never again revisit this ground. No matter how hard we might try, "The Great and Secret Show" would be no more.

Summary of Statistics

AREA: Sam Ford Fjord, Baffin Island, Canada

NEW ROUTE: *The Great and Secret Show* (4,400 feet, VII 5.11 A4 WI3) on Polar Sun Spire, May 25-July 1, 1996 (Mark Synnott*, Jeff Chapman*, Warren Hollinger)

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