



# THE LIFE BETWEEN CRACKS

BY MICHAEL LEVY

**LIMING, YUNNAN PROVINCE, CHINA, 2014.  
DAYS BEFORE THE NEW YEAR.**

My hands are raw in the pockets of my coffee-stained blue puffy. Scabs cover my knuckles and the backs of my wrists like bark. “We don’t need to tape up,” Juan had said. “We’ll build up calluses.”

The learning curve of sandstone splitters feels as steep as the walls we’ve been climbing here in Liming, China, over the past two weeks. Dueling with these black chasms each day is taking its toll. More than once already I’ve scared myself shitless, desperately thrown caution to the wind, and double gasted the crack in front of my nose, trying to pry the beast apart.

I stand in an empty dirt road, looking up at the stars. The 750-person village has one main drag, and this is it. Crops spread out on either side in the little farmable land there is before the Earth takes a turn to the vertical. I look over at the Dinner Wall crag, a magnificent orange face scowling on the most prominent hill above town, so named because the first climbers to visit the area would gaze upon it each evening as they ate their meals, minds pregnant with dreams that they would need to carry just a little bit longer. I shiver. The

Hontashan-brand Chinese cigarette warms my lips and throat and nothing else.

I’ve been living in China nearly a year, guiding international students to the country’s least-known corners, and climbing blue-white limestone tufas at my home in Yangshuo, Guangxi Province. And now what? No future plans. I’m restless. I’ve begun working on an article about my experiences that I want to submit to some magazines, but—now nothing. Writer’s block? A dearth of creative inspiration? Whatever the reason, I can’t summon the words I want. Back at the Faraway Inn, my notebook remains mostly full of blank white pages.

Even if I could write what I felt, getting published feels like a pipe dream; as large and unlikely as a splitter newbie like myself leading the yawning offwidth up at the Pillars Wall that a bunch of Spaniards supposedly protected with sawed-off logs. The cracks hellbent on destroying my hands seem to herald inauspicious things to come. *What will next year bring? Where should I go?*

I walk into the dim, dingy restaurant that is no warmer than the street outside despite a wood-burning stove in the corner. My buddies Juan and Devin and Nick are already seated

**FACING PAGE:** Ashley Cracroft in a tight spot on the third pitch of *Elephant Riders* (5.12b/c), one of the more recent five-star additions to Liming, China. The author spent his time learning to crack climb in Liming—and falling on virtually every size cam in the process—on area classics such as *Screaming at the Moon* (5.9), *Soul’s Awakening* (5.10) and *Faraway Corner* (5.11).

around a table with a lazy susan nearly its full diameter. With them are two other people I've never met. Even in Liming—a town forgotten by time; guarded by red ramparts and a permanently azure dome overhead; only a handful of non-resident visitors there at any given moment—people come out of the woodwork. How we've never met or crossed paths in the preceding two weeks is a mystery.

His name I forget. Hers is Rahel. She has deep brown eyes and her dark brown hair falls up in a bun. There is a classical, biblical beauty to her. In the Bible Rachel is infertile, barren. Unable to create. But this woman has a beautiful smile full of hope, and her laugh warms the dark wood-beamed restaurant.

I watch his hands. Or rather, his fingers. I've never seen anything I coveted more given the place I was in. Those digits could be good for nothing but wedging into .5-sized cracks and twisting. His knuckles bulge like burls from his bark-textured skin.

The two of them are from Switzerland, I learn. He is a professional mountain guide and adventure photographer, modest and quiet. She is a school teacher, talkative and inquisitive. Together, she says, they travel to far-flung places to climb during breaks in the school calendar, so long as he's not off on an expedition to Antarctica climbing Ulvetanna (three years ago) or capturing on film the first-ever wingsuit jump off the summit of Everest (last year). *What will next year hold for Rahel and him?* I wonder.

Over oil-drenched lotus root, sauteed cabbage and fried pork ribs, Juan cracks off-color jokes; Devin philosophizes on how civilized chopsticks are; Nick sits happily stoned, pushing around single grains of rice clinging to the side of his bowl. Our Swiss friends regale us with tales of the 5.12 multipitch they've been establishing on a virgin wall high northeast of town. Animated

chatter and the stray giggle brighten the room, and the restaurant's toothy owner, a native Lisu man with yellow flip flops and a gray parka straight out of the 1980s, joins us for a beer.

I sit back. The cracks trying to spit me out and the cold and uncertainty outside are no longer concerns with company like this, if only for tonight.

Tomorrow morning it will be cold again. But no matter. We'll go climbing. I'll try to get up some routes, and create with words—something, anything.

**INDIAN CREEK, UTAH, 2017.** The new year approaches.

Matt, a pal from Denver, is contending with the cicatrix of *Anmunaki*, a classic route dog-legging up a leaning pillar at the Optimator Wall, Indian Creek. He's sitting in his harness looking up at the business where the crack narrows to .75s for a brief stretch. I climbed the route minutes ago by the skin of my teeth—sandstone-splitter neophyte no longer.

Our other friends, Mac and Bradi, are around the corner, working on some unnamed crack. Grunts occasionally peppered with salty language waft down the wall, giving us a degree of pleasure: At least we're not the only ones having to work hard to get up these climbs.

Then I hear a sound that's distinctly not Mac or Bradi: a baby's cry. Matt bails two-thirds of the way up *Anmunaki* and we go to investigate. A makeshift bassinet, several feet to the left of a belayer, dangles from a beefy anchor built at the base of the cliff.

The belayer turns around and greets us. She looks familiar, but I can't place her. We make idle chatter and watch her partner on the other end of the rope, running it out 10, 15, 20 feet at a time on an arcing 5.11. We peek at the baby swaddled in his blankets and make exaggerated faces.

**COLD FEET?  
FROZEN WATER?**



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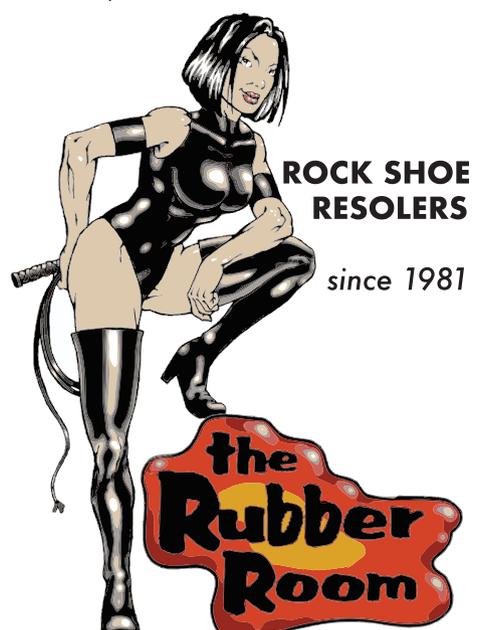
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The author's friends in Indian Creek: (left to right) Matt Misquez, Bradi Covert and Mac Praetorius.

As the lead climber lowers to the ground, Matt and Bradi join us from the other end of Optimator Wall. The climber's bangs whisper along his lashes and his bulbous nose as he unties—his face triggering within me the same feeling of a forgotten dream as did his partner's. I'm so close to placing them, but it's like trying to hold water in cupped hands.

And then I see his fingers, gnarled and swollen, rolling his figure-8 knot powerfully to loosen it up. Instantly, scenes of Liming flood back: Jerry, the Faraway Inn's resident rancid-breathed golden retriever who followed us up from town to the crags each day; *Staircase of the Elves*, the first 5.9

PHOTO: MICHAEL LEVY

handcrack I laybacked my way up without throwing a single jam; and, of course, the dinner with Rahel and her husband—whose name I suddenly know to be Thomas, clear as day.

In the years since that night in China much has changed for all of us. I am now a writer, stringing for climbing and adventure magazines, chronicling stories of people like Thomas in the hidden corners of the globe. Cracks no longer look like dreadful dark scars, but secrets to be plumbed. Rahel and Thomas are parents to several-month-old Ben—again I'm reminded of scripture and the Bible and the once-barren Rachel's miracle second infant. I think: We've traveled distances of all sorts, real and imagined, and on the opposite side of the world we once again find ourselves brought together in a deserted valley of sandstone walls.

We laugh at the randomness of this reunion of old strangers, before going our separate ways. Rahel and Thomas and Ben return to my thoughts throughout the day, as we visit Supercrack Buttress (empty, for the first and last time in my experience). What to make of it all: those fingers, these walls, her smile, the passage of time, new life. Need it be more than that?

In camp, Matt and I chop onions and tomatoes, while Bradi and Mac fire up two camp stoves, heat corn tortillas and fry sliced sweet potatoes. The shadowy Bridger Jacks keep watch above us. The oil cracks. The stars twinkle. Then I hear Ben, Rahel and Thomas's child, cooing in a tent. I smile, and conceive a story in my head about the cracks that divide the walls, yet draw us—wiser, more grown, hopeful—together.

*Michael Levy is associate senior editor of Climbing and Ascent.*

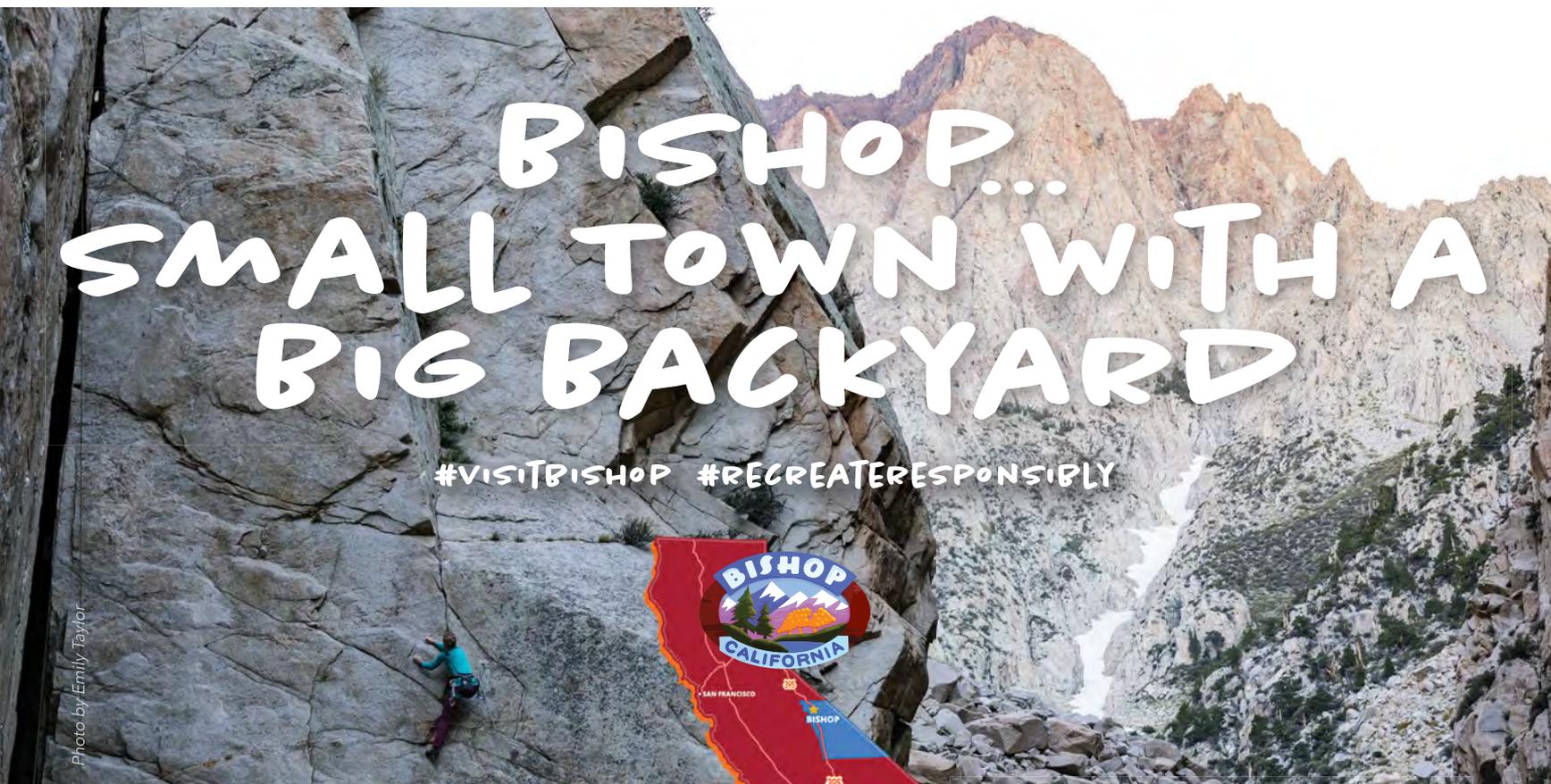


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