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Party Time

By Mac Mckechnie

The golden sun dipped toward the horizon, casting long shadows across the rugged landscape of the Peak District National Park. The majestic granite walls, towering above the valley floor, seemed to glow in the fading light, turning from grey to a warm, honeyed amber. Far up on one of these towering monoliths, a group of rock climbers were preparing for a party unlike any other.

Suspended way above the ground, the climbers had established a vertical campsite on a broad ledge nestled in the rock face. Their gear - a colourful array of ropes, harnesses, and carabiners - dangled like festive streamers against the cliff. Each climber was securely anchored, their bodies hanging in mid-air or perched on the secured picnic table they had hoisted up for the purpose. It was a sight that would make any passerby gasp in disbelief. But for these climbers, this was the perfect setting for a celebration.

The idea for the party had been born during a gruelling ascent weeks earlier. After a day of battling with the unforgiving rock, the group had found themselves on a narrow ledge, exhausted but exhilarated. It was there, while sipping on a shared canteen of water and munching on energy rations, that someone jokingly suggested they throw a party the next time they climbed together. The suggestion had been met with laughter, but as the days passed, the idea took root.

Tonight was the night.

Mike, the de facto leader of the group, was the first to arrive at the party site. An experienced climber with a calm, collected demeanour, he was the one who had meticulously planned the evening. He had chosen this ledge specifically for its width, ensuring that everyone would have enough space to hang out - literally.

“Alright, everyone, let’s get this set up!” Mike called out, his voice carrying over the open air.

The others followed his lead, securing the table and their anchor points to the rock. Once set up, they provided a stable surface for sitting down, despite the terrifying drop below. Using the “Buddy” system, they checked each other making sure they were properly secured.

Next to arrive was Anna, a petite woman with a seemingly endless supply of energy. She had brought the music—a portable speaker that she clipped to her harness. As she connected it to her phone, the sound of upbeat tunes began to fill the air, echoing off the rock walls. Anna had also taken it upon herself to bring the food. From her backpack, she produced a variety of snacks: energy bars, dried fruit, and a few precious chocolate bars that she had stored away for the purpose.

Jake, the quietest of the group, showed up last. He was the team’s technical expert, always focused on the details. Tonight, however, he had a different role. With a shy smile, he revealed a small, insulated bag from his pack. Inside were a few cans of craft beer—each carefully chosen and packed with care. He passed them around, and soon, the climbers were toasting to their adventure.

As the sun sank lower, painting the sky in hues of orange and pink, the party kicked into full swing. The climbers lounged at the table, laughing and chatting, their voices mingling with the music. They talked about past climbs, the challenges they had faced, and the breathtaking views they had witnessed from the tops of the world. Each story was accompanied by a chorus of cheers and clinking of beer cans.

Max, always looking for a thrill, suggested a game. He pulled out a deck of cards, and soon they were playing a high-stakes version of poker. The stakes? The loser had to perform a handstand on their table. The idea was absurd, but that was the point. Laughter erupted as Max lost the first round and, with

exaggerated caution, maneuvered himself into a handstand, his legs wobbly but triumphant.

The night wore on, and the climbers found themselves bathed in the soft glow of moonlight. The sky above was a blanket of stars, the Milky Way clearly visible against the dark canvas. Anna dimmed the music, allowing the sounds of the night to take over. Crickets chirped from far below, and the wind whispered through the trees, creating a serene backdrop for their gathering.

It was then that Mike proposed something special. He suggested they take a moment to reflect on why they climbed. One by one, each climber shared their thoughts. For Mike, climbing was about finding peace in nature, a way to escape the noise of the world below. For Max, it was the thrill of the challenge, pushing his limits and feeling truly alive. Anna spoke of the camaraderie, the deep bonds forged with others who understood the passion for the sport. Jake, in his quiet way, mentioned how climbing allowed him to conquer his fears, to face the unknown with courage.

As they spoke, a sense of unity settled over the group. Here they were, suspended between earth and sky, sharing a moment that few others would ever experience. The world below seemed distant and insignificant, the stresses of everyday life nothing more than a faint memory. Up here, among the stars and the rocks, they were free.

The conversation faded into a comfortable silence; each climber lost in their own thoughts. The night air was cool, but not cold, and the gentle sway of the picnic table was almost soothing. Eventually, the group began to doze off, one by one, lulled by the tranquillity of their surroundings, slumped over the table.

As the first light of dawn began to creep over the horizon, the climbers stirred awake. The sky was a masterpiece of purples and blues, the sun yet to make its grand appearance. They packed up their gear in quiet efficiency, the camaraderie of the night still hanging in the air like a warm embrace.

With everything secured, Mike was the first to begin the descent. One by one, the others followed, the ropes whispering as they first lowered the picnic table, and then rappelled down the cliff face. The party was over, but the memories would stay with them forever - a testament to their shared love for the mountains and high places, and the unbreakable bond that had formed between them.

As they touched down on solid ground, the climbers looked up at the cliff they had just descended. It was more than just a rock face; it was a place where they had celebrated life, friendship, and the simple joy of being alive. With a final wave to the towering monolith, they reset the picnic table where they had borrowed it from, turned and made their way back to the valley, already planning their next adventure.