

# Stone Age

Tribal warfare among rock-climbing cults

By Alan Rifkin

**T**he thing to remember had to do with sanity, and focus, and the elements, and a reality more lasting than what seemed real in the city. But in the city it was easy to forget.

In two years Herm had been in the city just once; he slept in some bushes by an on-ramp. He'd hitched from Yosemite to L.A. and needed to get from there to Joshua Tree, out in the desert. He was with another nomad rock climber, a German named Stefan, in flight from high-school Latin, which he'd failed to learn. After three or four short rides east that ought to have changed the scenery at least a little bit, Stefan gave up picturing a world outside L.A. ("I saw Los Angeles," he told people later. "I could not get out!") But it was a matter of pride to Herm that he himself could remember the desert beyond, could make himself "invisible" to the traffic, could notice things, like the bushes by the freeway—not just notice them but believe in them, take them seriously enough to sleep in them. Which required looking at an on-ramp not as an on-ramp, and the city as a kind of distraction.

When he reached Joshua Tree he sat down and played with a flattened magnum bullet he'd found by the on-ramp, and looked off at the rocks, freestanding and silent, like silos. If you stared long enough they stared back. At which point you felt silly and liberated at once.

Even more wonderful to Herm was this: a rock was "unsymbolic." In an age that loved symbols more than the real things they stood for—money for worth, flags for freedom—a climb, with all its demands of focus, symbolized nothing but itself. As a kid, John Bachar, a Yosemite legend, used to climb with a classmate on weekends; Monday in the hallway they'd see it in each other's eyes—the rock—and break out laughing. Herm worked the same trick from the on-ramp in L.A.; he saw, in his words, "the Rock That Has Ever Been the Rock." It was so close and ever-present you might have missed it, or confused it with



**Rock Heads:** When the snow comes, the tribe migrates from Yosemite to Joshua Tree (left). Their religion is the Rock That Has Ever Been the Rock.

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