

Unfettered

I first watched *The Alpinist* a little over a year ago. Since then, I've sat through all ninety-three minutes about a dozen times, and I still can't make it to the end without tearing up. I'm not entirely sure why the documentary has such a grip on me. Sure, I love alpinism – the art of climbing massive, technical mountains – and the film captures some of the most outstanding feats ever recorded set amongst a backdrop of legendary peaks. But I don't come back time and time again for the scenery. I come back for Marc-André.

An infectious smile with crooked teeth – presumably from the many falls off large rock faces – and an unruly halo of curly hair frame his face. His deep-set brown eyes seem never to meet the camera, as if always focused on something far beyond it. This pensive and severe look is offset by his otherwise rather goofy demeanor. My first impression of Marc-André was him performing his signature “sky hump into a front flip” on a trampoline while a joint is passed among friends and the camera pans to a makeshift shower hung from a tree with a sign that reads “Outdoor Shower Sex?” Only after that spirited introduction does Marc sit down for an interview. Wired and visibly anxious under the lights, he describes himself as simply “a climber, generally speaking.” This would be the equivalent of MJ or LeBron calling themselves “just a basketball player.”

But there's something charismatic about his understatement. At twenty-three, Marc-André was quietly pushing the boundaries of what anyone deemed possible in the mountains. Over the past century, alpinism has evolved from massive, gear-heavy expeditions into a test of how far one person can go alone with just what's on their back and harness. Another pioneer of the art, Barry Blanchard, refers to the on-sight solo as the “gold standard of alpinism:” approach a mountain

you've never been on, without safety equipment, without rehearsal, without a team, and summit it. That was Marc-André's specialty.

In his off-the-radar blog, he recounts one of his more ground-breaking ascents: it's April 2016, and Marc finds himself sleeping alone at the base of Mount Robson's fabled Emperor Face. The wall rises 8,000 feet above him – a daunting puzzle of ice and snow plastered on top of crumbling dolomite, loose shale, and soft limestone. Unlike most who attempt this sort of climb, he carries no phone, no GPS, no radio beacon, and no way to tell time – just his MP3 player and headphones. His bag is stuffed with only the essentials: a bivy sack, which he describes as “essentially a garbage bag with a reflective liner,” along with a stove for boiling water, a rope for descending, and any other lightweight necessities. Strapped to the outside of the pack are his loyal ice axes and crampons. Before long, he awakens with the sun and begins kicking steps up the steep, snowy base – as he tunnels through the chimneys, scales pillars of frozen water, and claws his way up couloirs packed by ice mushrooms, time itself seems to stop; each of his movements are slow and deliberate, meticulously scraping away the loose snow, looking for the safest edge to trust as he marches his way up hour after hour after hour, the snow flurries down into his jacket soaking his base layers and amplifying the freezing temps... but seemingly immune to cold and defying gravity, Marc continues to wrench his weight up the wall with just centimeters of his tools clinging to the face, until, eventually, what seemed such a distant objective from the ground is just a few solid swings of the ice axe away. And as the sun begins to sink over the horizon, Marc-André powers his way through the last of the snow onto the summit – emerging alone and the first person in history to solo the Emperor Face. It is said no one died that day because Death himself had stopped to watch the spectacle unfold.

This minimalist climbing style was inseparable from the way Marc-André lived. Where others might see deprivation, Marc-André saw freedom. He had stripped life down to the essentials: eat, climb, sleep, and do it again. One climbing partner recalls the time Marc spent a few years living in the bottom of a friend's stairwell. (What was even more surprising was when Marc managed to find a girlfriend to live in the stairwell with him.) Another friend recalls hearing about him for the first time while Marc was sleeping in a snow cave off the highway, spending his days free-climbing frozen waterfalls from sunrise to sundown. By the time the filmmakers document his life, Marc and his girlfriend Brette are living in a small tent tucked away in the temperate rainforests of Squamish, British Columbia.

Marc's brilliance wasn't boisterous. Unlike most modern professional climbers whose lives play out in Red Bull ads and whose ascents are hailed on the covers of magazines, Marc-André had no interest in publicity. He didn't even own a phone. He did once, but recalls leaving it in a bag with smoked salmon, only to have a fox steal it away, adding, "I feel like maybe I'm just better off without one." Even when a film crew started following him, he seemed uninterested in the attention; partway through *The Alpinist*, he disappears completely, off-grid for months, while the directors scramble to find him. He was too busy climbing to share his life.

That simplicity and devotion, more than his supernatural ability, define him to me. In an age when everyone wants to be an influencer – or have their cat or pet turtle become one – Marc-André seemed immune to the gravitational pull of recognition. Everyone else seems to be chasing something: more followers, bigger houses, faster cars. Even climbing – which was once exclusively for rebels and outcasts and vagabonds – has become a stage for competition and celebrity. Alex Honnold of *Free Solo* fame has found himself on the red carpet, my Instagram page is full of others trying to do the same, and more people than ever flock to the sport since it

has gone Olympic. But somewhere far from any of that noise, halfway up a frozen wall of stone, Marc-André Leclerc was doing something entirely different. He was simply being.

I'm drawn to that purity of his motivation. He didn't climb for recognition or to prove a point. He climbed because it made him feel small, and in that smallness, connected. "One of the coolest feelings a human can experience," he once said, "is to feel so small in a world that's so big." That humility seems to pulse through every move he makes on a mountain face.

While Marc did all he could to live his everyday life to the fullest, he never seemed content away from the mountains – his eyes always set on the next towering objective. Just months after completing his ascent of the Emperor Face – as if making one of the boldest climbs in North American history wasn't enough – Marc set his sights on Patagonia, traveling there in the depths of the austral winter to attempt the first-ever winter solo ascent of Torre Egger – a spire of ice and granite many consider the hardest peak in the Americas. To do this in the winter, when the weather turns to unpredictable, violent tempests and avalanche risk is abundant, was something no alpinist had ever dreamed of. Even after a first failed attempt where Marc was caught in a blizzard and forced to descend in whipping winds and pitch black, rather than giving up on the dream, he returned and succeeded, cementing his place in the history of alpinism. But again, it wasn't about the record. It was about the experience – the "casual, fun adventure," as he put it in a characteristic understatement.

Though the difficult truth is that alpinism is a complicated art form; the line between mastery and mortality is razor-thin, particularly in the world of soloing. Marc-André knew this – he didn't delude himself about the risks. While some might call what he did stupid, irresponsible, or selfish, I believe he accepted the possibilities as part of the cost of communion with something greater than himself. Watching him move over the mountains, I see someone who achieved what

most of us only dream of: the ability to live with pure purpose, unbound and unfettered by what the world wants.

But the cruel irony of life is that Marc-André didn't die during one of his grand solo attempts. On March 5, 2018, while Marc was descending the Mendenhall Towers in Alaska with a rope and with a partner – Ryan Johnson – an avalanche swept the pair away and buried them in the glacier where they rest today. At his memorial service, a sign covered in photos from his many adventures read: “Live like Marc-André.”