# Tedtalk

Hello. I'd like to show you guys 30 seconds of the best day of my life. Today I'd like to talk about howI was able to feel so comfortable and how I overcame my fear.

I'll start with a very brief version of how I became a climber, and then tell the story of my two most significant free solos. They were both successful, which is why I'm here.

So that was El Capitan in California's Yosemite National Park, and in case you couldn't tell, I was climbing by myself without a rope, a style of a climbing known as free soloing.

That was the culmination of a nearly decade-long dream, and in the video I'm over 2,500 feet off the ground. Seems scary? Yeah, it is, which is why I spent so many years dreaming about soloing El Cap and not actually doing it. But on the day that that video was taken, it didn't feel scary at all. It felt as comfortable and natural as a walk in the park, which is what most folks were doing in Yosemite that day.

But the first felt largely unsatisfying, whereas the second, El Cap, was by far the most fulfilling day of my life. Through these two climbs, you'll see my process for managing fear. So I started climbing in a gym when I was around 10 years old, which means that my life has been centered on climbing for more than 20 years. After nearly a decade of climbing mostly indoors, I made the transition to the outdoors and gradually started free soloing. I built up my comfort over time and slowly took on bigger and more challenging walls. And there have been many free soloists before me, so I had plenty of inspiration to draw from.

But by 2008, I'd repeated most of their previous solos in Yosemite and was starting to imagine breaking into new terrain. The obvious first choice was Half Dome, an iconic 2,000-foot wall that lords over the east end of the valley.

The problem, though also the allure, was that it was too big. I didn't really know how to prepare for a potential free solo. So I decided to skip the preparations and just go up there and have an adventure.

I figured I would rise to the occasion, which, unsurprisingly, was not the best strategy. I did at least climb the route roped up with a friend two days before just to make sure that I knew roughly where to go and that I could physically do it. But when I came back by myself two days later, I decided that I didn't want to go that way. I knew that there was a 300-foot variation that circled around one of the hardest parts of the climb. I suddenly decided to skip the hard part and take the variation, even though I'd never climbed it before, but I immediately began to doubt myself. Imagine being by yourself in the dead center of a 2,000-foot face, wondering if you're lost.

Thankfully, it was pretty much the right way and I circled back to the route. I was slightly rattled, I was pretty rattled, but I tried not to let it bother me too much because I knew that all the hardest climbing was up at the top. I needed to stay composed. It was a beautiful September morning, and as I climbed higher, I could hear the sounds of tourists chatting and laughing on the summit. They'd all hiked up the normal trail on the back, which I was planning on using for my descent. But between me and the summit lay a blank slab of granite. There were no cracks or edges to hold on to, just small ripples of texture up a slightly less than vertical wall. I had to trust my life to the friction between my climbing shoes and the smooth granite. I carefully balanced my way upward, shifting my weight back and forth between the small smears. But then I reached a foothold that I didn't quite trust. Two days ago, I'd have just stepped right up on it, but that would have been with a rope on. Now it felt too small and too slippery. I doubted that my foot would stay on if I weighted it. I considered a foot further to the side, which seemed worse. I switched my feet and tried a foot further out. It seemed even worse. I started to panic. I could hear people laughing on the summit just above me. I wanted to be anywhere but on that slab. My mind was racing in every direction. I knew what I had to do, but I was too afraid to do it. I just had to stand up on my right foot. And so after what felt like an eternity, I accepted what I had to do and I stood up on the right foot, and it didn't slip, and so I didn't die, and that move marked the end of the hardest climbing. And so I charged from there towards the summit. And so normally when you summit Half Dome, you have a rope and a bunch of climbing gear on you, and tourists gasp and they flock around you for photos. This time I popped over the edge shirtless, panting, jacked. I was amped, but nobody batted an eye.

I looked like a lost hiker that was too close to the edge. I was surrounded by people talking on cell phones and having picnics. I felt like I was in a mall.  took off my tight climbing shoes and started hiking back down, and that's when people stopped me. "You're hiking barefoot? That's so hard-core." I didn't bother to explain, but that night in my climbing journal, I duly noted my free solo of Half Dome, but I included a frowny face and a comment, "Do better?"

I'd succeeded in the solo and it was celebrated as a big first in climbing. Some friends later made a film about it. But I was unsatisfied. I was disappointed in my performance, because I knew that I had gotten away with something. I didn't want to be a lucky climber. I wanted to be a great climber. I actually took the next year or so off from free soloing, because I knew that I shouldn't make a habit of relying on luck. But even though I wasn't soloing very much, I'd already started to think about El Cap. It was always in the back of my mind as the obvious crown jewel of solos. It's the most striking wall in the world. Each year, for the next seven years, I'd think, "This is the year that I'm going to solo El Cap." And then I would drive into Yosemite, look up at the wall, and think, "No frickin' way." It's too big and too scary. But eventually I came to accept that I wanted to test myself against El Cap. It represented true mastery, but I needed it to feel different. I didn't want to get away with anything or barely squeak by. This time I wanted to do it right.

The thing that makes El Cap so intimidating is the sheer scale of the wall. Most climbers take three to five days to ascend the 3,000 feet of vertical granite.

The idea of setting out up a wall of that size with nothing but shoes and a chalk bag seemed impossible. 3,000 feet of climbing represents thousands of distinct hand and foot movements, which is a lot to remember.

Many of the moves I knew through sheer repetition. I'd climbed El Cap maybe 50 times over the previous decade with a rope. But this photo shows my preferred method of rehearsing the moves. I'm on the summit, about to rappel down the face with over a thousand feet of rope to spend the day practicing. Once I found sequences that felt secure and repeatable, I had to memorize them. I had to make sure that they were so deeply ingrained within me that there was no possibility of error. I didn't want to be wondering if I was going the right way or using the best holds. I needed everything to feel automatic.

Climbing with a rope is a largely physical effort. You just have to be strong enough to hold on and make the movements upward. But free soloing plays out more in the mind. The physical effort is largely the same. Your body is still climbing the same wall. But staying calm and performing at your best when you know that any mistake could mean death requires a certain kind of mindset. That's not supposed to be funny, but if it is, it is.

I worked to cultivate that mindset through visualization, which basically just means imagining the entire experience of soloing the wall. Partially, that was to help me remember all the holds, but mostly visualization was about feeling the texture of each hold in my hand and imagining the sensation of my leg reaching out and placing my foot just so. I'd imagine it all like a choreographed dance thousands of feet up.

The most difficult part of the whole route was called the Boulder Problem. It was about 2,000 feet off the ground and consisted of the hardest physical moves on the whole route: long pulls between poor handholds with very small, slippery feet. This is what I mean by a poor handhold: an edge smaller than the width of a pencil but facing downward that I had to press up into with my thumb. But that wasn't even the hardest part. The crux culminated in a karate kick with my left foot over to the inside of an adjacent corner, a maneuver that required a high degree of precision and flexibility, enough so that I'd been doing a nightly stretching routine for a full year ahead of time to make sure that I could comfortably make the reach with my leg. As I practiced the moves, my visualization turned to the emotional component of a potential solo. Basically, what if I got up there and it was too scary? What if I was too tired? What if I couldn't quite make the kick? I had to consider every possibility while I was safely on the ground, so that when the time came and I was actually making the moves without a rope, there was no room for doubt to creep in. Doubt is the precursor to fear, and I knew that I couldn't experience my perfect moment if I was afraid. I had to visualize and rehearse enough to remove all doubt. But beyond that, I also visualized how it would feel if it never seemed doable. What if, after so much work, I was afraid to try? What if I was wasting my time and I would never feel comfortable in such an exposed position? There were no easy answers, but El Cap meant enough to me that I would put in the work and find out.

Some of my preparations were more mundane. This is a photo of my friend Conrad Anker climbing up the bottom of El Cap with an empty backpack. We spent the day climbing together to a specific crack in the middle of the wall that was choked with loose rocks that made that section difficult and potentially dangerous, because any missed step might knock a rock to the ground and kill a passing climber or hiker. So we carefully removed the rocks, loaded them into the pack and rappelled back down. Take a second to imagine how ridiculous it feels to climb 1,500 feet up a wall just to fill a backpack full of rocks.

It's never that easy to carry a pack full of rocks around. It's even harder on the side of a cliff. It may have felt silly, but it still had to get done. I needed everything to feel perfect if I was ever going to climb the route without a rope. After two seasons of working specifically toward a potential free solo of El Cap, I finally finished all my preparations. I knew every handhold and foothold on the whole route, and I knew exactly what to do. Basically, I was ready. It was time to solo El Cap.

On June 3, 2017, I woke up early, ate my usual breakfast of muesli and fruit and made it to the base of the wall before sunrise. I felt confident as I looked up the wall. I felt even better as I started climbing. About 500 feet up, I reached a slab very similar to the one that had given me so much trouble on Half Dome, but this time was different. I'd scouted every option, including hundreds of feet of wall to either side. I knew exactly what to do and how to do it. I had no doubts. I just climbed right through. Even the difficult and strenuous sections passed by with ease. I was perfectly executing my routine. I rested for a moment below the Boulder Problem and then climbed it just as I had practiced so many times with the rope on. My foot shot across to the wall on the left without hesitation, and I knew that I had done it.

Climbing Half Dome had been a big goal and I did it, but I didn't get what I really wanted. I didn't achieve mastery. I was hesitant and afraid, and it wasn't the experience that I wanted. But El Cap was different. With 600 feet to go, I felt like the mountain was offering me a victory lap. I climbed with a smooth precision and enjoyed the sounds of the birds swooping around the cliff. It all felt like a celebration. And then I reached the summit after three hours and 56 minutes of glorious climbing. It was the climb that I wanted, and it felt like mastery.

# Alone on the Wall

I started up the climb shortly after dawn. I wasn’t even sure I’d found the right start, since I hadn’t been on these lower pitches for two or three years. The beginning of the route is kind of scruffy and ambiguous—ramps, traverses, and hand cracks angling up to the right—but it’s not as difficult as the upper two-thirds of the wall. Still, I was nervous, even a little giddy. It had rained pretty much nonstop the day before, and now the rock was sandy, slabby, and a lot damper than I’d hoped. I probably should have waited another day before heading up the route. But I was overpsyched. I couldn’t bear the thought of sitting in my van another whole day, thinking the same thoughts I had recycled for the past forty-eight hours. I had to strike while the iron was hot. Moonlight Buttress is a 1,200-foot-high, nearly vertical sandstone cliff in Utah’s Zion National Park. It may be the finest—the purest and most classic—route among Zion’s thousands of lines. It’s also one of the most continuously difficult crack climbs in the world. The first ascent of Moonlight Buttress came in October 1971, when Jeff Lowe and Mike Weis, two legends of American climbing, pioneered the route. It took them a day and a half, with an overnight bivouac on a ledge in the middle of the wall. They used a lot of aid, pulling or hanging on expansion bolts and pitons.

Nearly twenty-one years later, in April 1992, Peter Croft and Johnny Woodward made the first free ascent, as they took all the aid out of the route by finding sequences of moves they could climb without hanging on gear. They solved the route in nine pitches (rope lengths), but rated the climb a really stiff 5.13a (since downgraded to 5.12d). In 1992, that was near the upper limit of free-climbing difficulty anywhere in the world, and Croft and Woodward’s feat was a brilliant one. Peter Croft was already one of my heroes, because in the 1980s and ’90s he had pushed free soloing—climbing without a rope or gear at all—to unprecedented extremes. Many of the routes he’d free soloed back then had never been repeated in that style during the decades since. But as far as I knew, no one had even thought of free soloing Moonlight Buttress. That’s what I was hoping to pull off on April 1, 2008.

In the back of my mind was a nagging worry about the feature called the Rocker Blocker. It’s an ample ledge, about half the size of a queen-size bed, at the top of the third pitch. Because it’s loose, somebody has chained it in place with a two-bolt anchor, but it actually makes for a good stance about 400 feet off the ground. It wasn’t the ledge itself that fueled my angst. From the Rocker Blocker, stretching on tiptoe, you can just reach a key hold above. Essentially you face a 5.12c boulder problem right off the ledge. You don’t actually have to jump to make the move, but it’s more like an upward lurch to a small edge. As I climbed the easy pitches down low, that move loomed over me. I was pretty sure I could stick the ledge if I fell off, but I’d sure hate to find out. The day before, sitting in my van in the rain, I had deliberately visualized everything that might happen on the climb. Including breaking a hold, or just losing it and falling off. I saw myself bouncing off the ledge below and going all the way to the ground, fracturing most of my bones as I rag-dolled down the mountain. I’d probably bleed out at the base.

I hadn’t slept very well the previous night. So I got the early start in the morning that I’d planned, hoping to beat the sun to the wall and get cool conditions on the route. To reach the base of Moonlight Buttress, you have to wade the Virgin River, which in early April was freezing-ass cold. I forded the stream barefoot. The rushing water came up above my knees. My feet quickly went numb, and my whole body went into mild shock. Plus I had to pay attention to my balance as I placed my feet carefully in the gaps between polished river cobbles. At what I thought was the start of Moonlight Buttress, I cached my approach shoes and my daypack. I’d decided to carry nothing—neither food, nor water, nor spare clothes—up the route. I clipped on my chalk bag and laced up my rock shoes. My feet were still cold, but they weren’t truly numb—I could feel my toes all right. I was wearing only shorts and a T-shirt. At the last minute, I put on headphones and turned up my iPod. I was shuffling through my own Top 25 playlist of tunes—mostly punk and modern rock. It may sound lame, but I didn’t have a watch, and I was pretty sure I was going to set the speed record for Moonlight Buttress. I could use the iPod to measure the exact number of minutes the climb would take. Music also has a way of helping you focus, although nowadays I prefer to climb without my iPod, because I consider it a bit of a crutch.

"For me, free soloing a big wall is all about preparation. In a real sense, I had performed the hard work on Moonlight Buttress during the days leading up to the climb. Once I was on the route, it was just a matter of executing. Yes, I’d climbed the whole route only once before, with a philosophy professor named Bill Ramsey. In his midforties, he was still climbing really well, and he’d been working on freeing Moonlight. He recruited me to climb it with him for his free attempt, and we swung leads up the whole route. It was a great day as we both climbed the route clean with no falls. But that was two or three years earlier. In the days before my free solo attempt, I’d focused on the upper 800 feet of the route. It’s a mellow hike along a paved trail to the top of Moonlight Buttress, so I hauled up 600 feet of rope, rappelled down it, and practiced the moves on toprope. To self-belay, I used a device called a Mini Traxion, which grips the rope on a downward pull but slides effortlessly up the rope as you climb. If I fell or even rested, the Mini Traxion would hold me tight. With my toprope, I climbed the upper 600 feet of Moonlight Buttress twice. The crux of the whole route—the hardest single passage, which is the make-or-break stretch of an ascent—is an amazing clean inside corner, 180 feet long. It’s the fourth of nine pitches on the route, and it’s what gives the climb its 5.12d rating. It’s continuous and really strenuous, so your arms get pretty pumped by the time you reach the top of it. Each toproped rehearsal of those upper 600 feet had taken me only about an hour. I felt super-solid. At no point did I fall off or even feel sketchy. But then I realized that the 600-foot rope didn’t reach down to a crucial 5.11c rightward traverse on the third pitch. So the next day I went back up to the top with 800 feet of rope, rapped down again, and rehearsed the traverse moves until I had them dialed too.

I ran into a few other climbers on my practice runs. I even rescued an aid-climbing chick who didn’t quite know what she was doing and had gotten stuck on her lead. I yelled, “Hey, grab this rope!” as I swung the tail of my fixed rope to her, so she could liberate herself from her trap. She was pretty grateful. It’s not every day that somebody comes rapping out of the sky on a route like that. Then came two days of rain. I sat in my van in a movie theater parking lot in Springdale, stared out the windshield, and thought. I’d gone to a movie to pass the time, but the rest of the day, into the evening, and through most of the second day I sat in the van, just thinking. It’s not like I had work to do. I didn’t have anything to do except think. About the climb. Sitting and thinking, hour after hour. Visualizing every single move, everything that could possibly happen. That’s what it takes to wrap your mind around a challenge such as the one I was about to attempt. That’s what I mean by preparation. Now I’d find out if I’d prepared adequately—if I could simply execute what I’d visualized, every handhold and foothold on the long way to the top of the wall.

Free soloing, then, is the most sporting—the purest—form of rock climbing ever devised. It’s the ultimate adventure on rock—with the ultimate stakes if you make the slightest mistake. People ask me all the time how I got into free soloing. But I don’t think they quite believe me when I give an honest answer. The truth is that when I started climbing outdoors, I was too shy to go up to strangers at a crag and ask if they’d like to rope up with me. I first started climbing at age ten at an indoor gym in my hometown of Sacramento, California, but I did very little outdoors before the age of nineteen. I was so antisocial and tweaky that I was actually afraid to talk to strangers. Though I was already climbing 5.13, I would never have gotten up the nerve to approach other guys at a crag like Lover’s Leap near Lake Tahoe and ask if I could rope up with them. So I just started soloing. The first route I did was a low-angle 5.5 slab called Knapsack Crack at Lover’s Leap. Then I tackled a much steeper three-pitch route called Corrugation Corner, rated 5.7. I overgripped the shit out of it, because I was really scared and climbing badly. But I quickly got better. I’ve always been a compulsive ticker. From the very start, I kept a bound notebook in which I recorded every climb I did, each one with a brief note. My “climbing bible,” as I called it, was my most precious possession. In 2005 and 2006, I did tons of routes at Joshua Tree, on the granite boulders and pinnacles in the desert east of Los Angeles. I developed a voracious appetite for soloing. I’d do as many as fifty pitches in a day, mostly on short routes up to 5.10.

I soon got so that I felt pretty comfortable soloing. I discovered that if I had any particular gift, it was a mental one—the ability to keep it together in what might otherwise have been a stressful situation. By 2007, I had soloed a few pitches up to 5.12a in difficulty. I felt like I was ready for a big next step. Still, back then I had no thought of becoming a professional climber, or even of attracting any attention for what I did. In September 2007, I went to Yosemite. I had my eye on two legendary routes—the north face of the Rostrum, a beautiful 800-foot granite pillar, rated 5.11c, and Astroman on Washington Column, a touchstone 1,100-foot route, also rated 5.11c. Way back in 1987, Peter Croft had stunned the climbing world by free soloing both routes in a single day. No one had repeated that feat in twenty years. Of the two climbs, Astroman is significantly harder and more serious—more physically taxing and more insecure. Only one other guy had free soloed Astroman—Dean Potter in 2000. Still climbing hard at age forty-three, Potter has recently specialized in combining hard routes with wingsuit BASE jumping. He was another influential free soloist I looked up to as a role model. On September 19, I free soloed both Astroman and the Rostrum. I’d climbed both routes before roped up with partners, but I couldn’t say that I had either route dialed. I was glad that day to find no one else on either climb. I didn’t tell anybody beforehand what I was going to try. I just showed up and did them. They went really well—I felt in control the whole way on both climbs. That evening I called a friend (it might have been Chris Weidner) and told him about my day. That’s how the word got out. I’ll admit that the double solo stirred up a certain buzz in the Valley (as climbers call Yosemite), but only among the hardcore locals. In my mind, the fact that I did both routes in one day, just as Peter Croft had, wasn’t particularly significant. What was significant was committing to doing them at all. And succeeding gave me the confidence to start imagining even bigger free solos.

Five months later, in February 2008, I drove to Indian Creek in southern Utah. The Creek is a mecca of short, beautiful cracks on solid Wingate sandstone. I was in terrific form there, climbing roped up with various partners. I onsighted the hardest routes, getting up them on my first try without falling. Routes up to 5.13b or c. But I’d been climbing so much, I’d developed a bad case of tendinitis in my left elbow. At first I didn’t even know what was wrong—I thought I’d hurt my biceps from sheer overuse. But at the Creek, after only two or three pitches, the pain was so intense I’d have to shut it down. One day on, then two days off. I’d go mountain biking with my friend Cedar Wright, just trying to mix it up. But it drove me crazy not to be able to climb more. Weirdly enough, by contributing to my general angst, the tendinitis was good for Moonlight Buttress. It takes a certain hunger to be motivated to go do something big. At the Creek, I was so fit and climbing so well, but I was also hungry to do more, because I had to limit my days on rock to a lot fewer than I wanted.

And Moonlight Buttress was a project I’d been dreaming of for years, ever since Bill Ramsey and I had climbed it a few years before. Which is why I found myself in Zion, sitting in my van all day in the rain on March 30 and 31, 2008, visualizing everything that could possibly happen on that amazing route the next day. All the soloing I had done during the previous several years had taught me the value of preparation. But I’d never prepared for a free solo as diligently as I did for Moonlight. Rehearsing the moves on toprope for two days until I had every sequence lodged in my memory was crucial, but so were those days of just sitting and thinking. Imagining every placement of each hand and foot all the way up the huge route. Visualizing everything that could happen. . . . In a real sense, I performed the hard work of that free solo during the days leading up to it. Once I was on the climb, it was just a matter of executing. The dampness and sandiness of the lower part of the wall had addled me somewhat. And at first, I was confused as to whether I was actually on-route. I wasn’t truly scared—just hesitant and uncertain. In retrospect, I think I projected my anxiety about the whole project, as I’d sat in my van visualizing it for two days, onto the start of the climb. Now I was driven upward by pure excitement, which always has an edge of anxiety about it.

The second pitch is a clean splitter crack, and once I got onto that, I knew I was on-route. There’s really only one line to the summit. And after that second pitch, the rock dried out and the sandiness pretty much disappeared. As I climbed higher, I steadily gained confidence. The 5.11c rightward traverse on the third pitch went like clockwork. By the time I got to the Rocker Blocker ledge, it was “Game on!” I was making the moves with what felt like perfect execution. As I started off the Rocker Blocker toward the tricky boulder problem, the scenario of coming off and trying to stick the ledge was in the back of my mind. But I was moving efficiently, and as soon as I made the little upward lurch and seized the crucial handhold, I knew I wouldn’t come off. My confidence surged even higher. Above the Rocker Blocker, I started up the 180-foot 5.12d inside corner that’s the crux of the whole route. That stern rating doesn’t derive from any single particularly hard move, but from the strenuous continuity of the whole thing. And here’s where my preparation paid off. I started up the corner stemming—placing the edges of my feet carefully on tiny wrinkles of sandstone on either side of the central crack, then moving smoothly upward from one hold to the next. The wall here is dead vertical, so you have to gauge those holds precisely. But I remembered every one from my toprope rehearsal. Also, as I had expected, the wall here, which is protected from the rain by a small roof far above, was totally dry. I was able to rest here and there on small holds as I stemmed up the first eighty feet of the corner. But then I had to shift from stemming to liebacking. Now I grabbed the edge of the crack with both hands, leaned back to the left, and walked my feet up the opposite wall till the soles of my shoes were only two feet below my lower hand. Liebacking feels somewhat unnatural. The whole key to moving upward is the stability provided by the pull with your hands counterbalancing the push with your feet. The position you’re in is almost like sitting in a rowing shell and pulling hard on the oars. You methodically alternate feet and hand movements as you inch up the crack. Yes, it’s strenuous, but a clean lieback feels solid and secure. If the edges of the crack aren’t sharp or are flared outward, though, or the wall you place your feet on is too slick, liebacking is pretty scary. You feel like you could pop loose and plunge toward the void in an involuntary backflip. But if you don’t get your feet high enough, they can slip off and your hands holding the crack become worthless. Either way, you’re headed down.

The trick of that last hundred feet in the corner is not to let the overall pump get to you. You can’t lieback forever, because the strain on your arms keeps mounting. That’s what “pump” is all about. If you get too pumped, you simply can’t hold on any longer. If I’d been climbing with a rope, or even with a harness and some gear, I could always have clipped in to something, hung for a while, and regained the strength in my arms. Bad style, of course, but better than coming off. But free soloing, I had no choice. I needed to get to the top of the corner before the pump took over. By now I was in full game-on mode, so I scurried up the corner as well as I had on toprope rehearsal. Didn’t even come close to losing it. My only concession to the airiness of being up there without a rope or gear was that I cranked my feet a little higher than I had on my two toprope rehearsals. That meant more arm-pump, but it felt a bit more secure. The three pitches above the crux are rated 5.12a, 5.12a, and 5.12b—pretty darned hard, but well within my abilities. In fact, those pitches follow a perfect finger crack. It was here that the true glory of free soloing came home to me. Sticking my first digits into the crack, I turned them slightly into perfect fingerlocks, and I felt bomber. At any given moment, I had only a tiny amount of skin inside the crack—like half of two fingers—and my toes weren’t on holds, but just pasted to the wall. So little of my body was actually touching the rock. There was air all around me. I felt like I was stepping into the void, and yet it was an amazing sensation. I was one hundred percent certain I wouldn’t fall off, and that certainty was what kept me from falling off. And here, though I didn’t pause to look around and take in the view, the beauty of Zion came home. The whole world of the canyon is all red and green—red for the rocks, green for the forest. There’s the Virgin River winding so far below. No traffic sounds, that far up. Just peace and quiet. A final 5.10d pitch leads to the summit, tough enough in its own right. But I climbed it as smoothly as the pitches just before. All the feelings of vague doubt I had on starting up the route had vanished. Almost before I knew it, I stood on top of the cliff. I checked my time against the iPod. One hour and twenty-three minutes. It was the speed record, as well as the first free solo ascent. Standing there, as I unlaced my shoes, I was superpsyched. Though I still had to hike down barefoot (rock shoes are so tight that it’s excruciating to hike in them), then circle back around and wade the river again to get my approach shoes and pack (it’s never smooth sailing off into the rainbow), I was totally jazzed. During that hour and twenty-three minutes, I’d climbed as well as I ever had in my life.

"Once I told Chris Weidner about Moonlight Buttress, I should have known the word would get out fast. He lives in Boulder, after all, right in the thick of the climbing scene. I didn’t anticipate, though, the explosion of postings on the Internet about the climb. I went online to check them out. My first reaction was surprise. Oh, wow, I’m in print! That’s cool. Somebody had even dug up a photo of me climbing. That’s my photo! I bragged to myself. There was also, of course, the undercurrent of posters who wondered whether the free solo of Moonlight Buttress was an April Fools’ joke. But one thing I’ve always appreciated about the climbing community, after so many of my climbs by now have gone undocumented by film or photos or unverified by witnesses, is that people have taken me at my word. In April 2008, no one on the Internet was accusing me of perpetrating a hoax. If the free solo of Moonlight Buttress was bogus, it was some poster who was lying about it—goofing on the credulity of the Supertopo audience, maybe. I still could not have imagined ever becoming a sponsored professional climber. If I got a little notoriety, I just hoped that maybe some gear company would give me a free pair of rock shoes. The tendinitis in my left elbow hadn’t gotten any better. If anything, all the work I’d done rehearsing the moves on Moonlight Buttress and then free soloing it had probably made the condition worse. I finally realized I had to knock off climbing for a while to let my elbow heal. That’s how I ended up spending the summer in the Sierra Nevada, doing long hikes and loops on big mountains like the Evolution Traverse. It involved a lot of scrambling, but as long as I could do it in tennies, I figured it didn’t count as real climbing. Meanwhile, I was getting into great shape. Recently a journalist asked me if I could stop climbing for stretches at a time. “Sure,” I answered. “You mean you could go for, say, a month without climbing?” he asked. “Hell, no!” I blurted out. “Not a month! I thought you meant three days.” That’s just the way it is with me. No matter what else I’ve turned my attention to over the years, nothing seems as interesting as climbing. I can’t do without it, even though by now I’ve been climbing in one way or another for almost twenty years straight.

That whole summer in the High Sierra, the idea of free soloing the Regular Northwest Face of Half Dome floated around inside my head. It’s such an iconic formation, one of the most striking thrusts of sheer granite anywhere in North America, and I’d always loved the way it dominates the whole east end of the Valley. By 2008, Yosemite had become my favorite climbing area in the world. Some climbers are drawn to towers and pinnacles, others to complex ridges. What I love is big, clean faces, and they don’t get any better than the ones in Yosemite—especially El Capitan and Half Dome. You stand at the base of El Cap and look up its 2,700-foot precipice, and you just say, “Wow!” Granite is also my favorite kind of rock. And that’s what Yosemite is made of—more clean, sweeping walls of granite than anywhere else in North America. The Regular Northwest Face route takes a pure line up the left-hand side of the nearly vertical wall. That summer as I got in shape making loops and traverses in the High Sierra, Half Dome became my muse, a random source of motivation that drifted through my thoughts while I strolled along one ridge after another.

The notion of trying to free solo the route was intimidating, yet irresistible at the same time. In terms of sheer grandness, it would be a big step up for me—an even greater challenge than Moonlight Buttress.

That September, my elbow seemed healed, and I was in top shape from all that cruising around the High Sierra.

Dwelling on Half Dome for months had put me in a mental state where I felt I had to do it. Maybe I’d just spent so much time thinking about it that now I had to clear it from my mind. I’d climbed the route five or six times before with different partners, but I’d freed all the moves, roped up and clipping pro in case I fell, only twice—most recently two days before my solo attempt, when I’d gone up there with Brad Barlage. There are three completely blank sections on the route that Robbins’s team solved by going on aid as they drilled bolt ladders through the impasses. Almost everybody climbs the bolt ladders today—they’re secure, and relatively easy for aid. But free variations have been worked out that bypass those blank sections. That’s why it’s possible to climb the whole route free, as Higbee and Erickson (almost) did, though they were roped up and using pro. After Brad and I climbed the route on September 4, I spent the whole next day resting, sitting by myself in my van, thinking about the route. I was still somewhat conflicted about going up there alone: Do I really want to do this? I’d already made plans with different friends to climb a few days later in the Valley, so I felt some pressure to get my soloing done before any of them showed up. Ultimately I decided to go back up to the base of Half Dome the next day. I told myself that I could just hike back down if I wasn’t psyched. I’ve done that a few times, or even started a route and then backed off. In 2006, on Royal Arches Terrace, a long climb in the Valley but technically a pretty easy one, I climbed a pitch and a half up the friction slab at the start of the route, then realized I just wasn’t into it. I downclimbed, hiked back to the road, and hitchhiked out of Yosemite. I was done for the season. This time, though, I knew that once I got up to the base of Half Dome, there was no way I was going to bail. I didn’t want to make a big fuss about my project, so I told only two people about it, Brad and Chris Weidner. Brad said, “What the fuck?” But then, “Okay, be safe. Text me when you’re done.” He was being a bro. Chris tried to talk me out of it. “Dude, that’s crazy,” he said. “You should rehearse the hell out of it on a toprope before you try to solo it.” “Nah,” I answered. “I want to keep it sporting.” “Are you crazy?” When I look back on those exchanges, it sounds as though I was being flippant or arrogant. That’s not what was going on. I just didn’t want to make too big a deal about the attempt—especially in case I backed off low on the route. It’s bad form to brag about a climb before you do it. And I didn’t want my good buddies to get too alarmed—then I might start worrying about them worrying about me! I guess I was just trying to reassure them: Hey, guys, I think I can handle this. I’ll be safe.

There was something else going on as well.

Despite my emphasis on methodical preparation, I’d begun to think that maybe I’d rehearsed the moves on Moonlight Buttress so thoroughly that I actually took some of the challenge out of the climb. Half Dome was so much bigger than Moonlight that it would take forever to get all the moves dialed. I decided to head up the wall with a little less preparation—that’s what I meant by “keeping it sporting.” As it would turn out, maybe too sporting. . . .In September it’s still pretty hot in the Valley. That meant there weren’t likely to be many other climbers on the face, which is what I was hoping for. But because the wall faces northwest, in September it stays in shade the whole day, which meant I could climb without getting too sweaty or dehydrated. Sweaty hands make smooth climbing pretty dicey, no matter how much you chalk up, and dehydration not only saps your strength but also can interfere with your judgment. So on September 6, I found myself at the base of the route again. With a much lighter load than I’d carried with Brad two days before, the approach hike had taken far less time, but the whole way I felt the face looming over me. I tried not to think about it too much. It was a bluebird day, a perfect, clear morning. Resting at the base, I felt completely detached from the rest of the Valley glowing in the morning sun below me. As I had hoped, I had the whole wall entirely to myself. For the next few hours I would be alone in a unique way, locked in a high-stakes game of solitude.

It’s not much trouble to climb through a roped party when you’re soloing — I’d done it before, and I’d do it again. But encountering others on the wall, especially if they express their incredulity that you’re climbing without a rope, can make you self-conscious. And that can interfere with the absolute concentration you need to pull off a big free solo. Before such a climb, I have to get really psyched up. And once I’m off the ground, I’m totally fixated. I’m going to do this. It’s the most important thing in life right now. That’s not the kind of mental state I can share with random strangers. I was wearing only shorts and a long-sleeved T-shirt. I had my Miura rock shoes on my feet, and my chalk bag dangling at my back, but no harness, and not even a single carabiner. In one pocket I put a few Clif Kid Zbars, my favorite multi-pitch snack, and I filled a collapsible flask with about a third of a liter of water. I put that in my other pocket, though it pulled my shorts down a little. But I knew it would take me a few hours to climb the route, and I didn’t want to be parched by the time I reached the hard pitches up high. A pack was out of the question, partly because of all the chimneys in the middle of the route (it’s almost impossible to chimney wearing a pack), but mainly because the climbing was hard enough that I didn’t want any extra weight on my body. Finally, there was nothing else for me to do but quit procrastinating and climb. I started up the first pitch.

For years, the great Yosemite pioneers had been heroes of a sort to me. The guys from the “golden age” of the 1960s—Royal Robbins, Warren Harding, Yvon Chouinard, Tom Frost, Chuck Pratt, and the like—were almost too remote in history for me to appreciate, even though I’d read stories about their memorable antics. It was the self-described Stonemasters of the next generation, in the 1970s and ’80s, that I most admired. John Long, Jim Bridwell, Billy Westbay, Tobin Sorenson, and their buddies. . . . But especially John Bachar and Peter Croft, because of their soloing and free climbing at the highest level. And Lynn Hill, the first person, male or female, to climb the Nose route on El Capitan completely free, in 1993. A year later, she freed the route in a single day. Those are still two of the greatest feats ever pulled off in the Valley. I was also fascinated by John “Yabo” Yablonski, to whom so many wild and crazy stories clung—about him falling off a free solo and saving himself by catching a tree branch, about his nude ascent of North Overhang, about his infamous “screamers” when he fell (roped) as far as a hundred feet, only to be caught by miracle belays. Yabo was evidently a tortured soul, for he committed suicide in the early 1990s.

A lot of the Stonemasters, though, were into drugs. Some of them even bragged about doing serious climbs in Yosemite while they were tripping their brains out on LSD. Their style was part of the counterculture movement of the day, but I just couldn’t relate to it. I’ve never done drugs, and though I’ve tasted alcohol, I’ve never had a whole drink. I don’t even drink coffee. I had a small cup once—it was like drinking battery acid. I had to poop all morning. I once had a sniff of Scotch. I thought, I should be cleaning my sink with this stuff. It’s not some moral objection—drugs and booze and caffeine just have no appeal to me.

I grew up in Sacramento, California. Both my parents taught English as a Second Language (ESL) at a series of institutions in the United States and abroad. Eventually they landed more permanent jobs at American River College in Sacramento. My mom, Dierdre Wolownick, taught ESL, Spanish, and French at the college. Today she constitutes the entire French department for the school. She’s a gifted linguist, fluent in three foreign languages (French, Spanish, and Italian) and competent in German, Polish, Japanese, and a bit of American Sign Language.

My dad, Charles Honnold, got a full-time job teaching ESL at American River College before my mom did. So I grew up in an intellectual, academic climate—for whatever good that did me.

Mom likes to tell people that on the day I was born, August 17, 1985, I could stand up, holding onto her fingers. Like a lot of her stories about me as a kid, I tend to think she made that up—or at least stretched the truth pretty far. She’s told journalists that from the time I was two years old, she knew I’d become a climber. She also relates a story about taking me to a climbing gym when I was only five. According to Mom, she was talking to the supervisor, turned around, and found me thirty feet up in only a minute or two. She says she was scared to death I’d kill myself.

My sister, Stasia, was born two years before me. From our infancy on, Mom spoke only French to us. Her idea was to make us bilingual. She still speaks only French to us when we visit. But Stasia and I rebelled from the start—we’d answer her in English. Even so, I’ll have to give Mom the credit for making me pretty fluent in French. My grasp of the language has come in handy on many trips to France and three to North Africa.

Mom may be right about me being an uncontrollable, hyper little monster.

At age five or six, I broke my arm for the first time. I’d decided it would be fun to run down the slide at Carl’s Jr.—my favorite restaurant. I went over the edge. The docs called it a green twig radius fracture, whatever that is."

"I broke my arm a second time at age seven or eight. This was a really pitiful accident—in fact, it’s hard to describe how I fucked up. There was a big rope that was part of a play structure in our backyard. It was meant be a rope swing, but I rigged it as a tightrope, then lay down on it as if it were a hammock. Fell off and broke my arm.

Dad took me to the local climbing gym when I was ten. It was just a random stab at another kind of recreation, but it “took” from the first day. For years thereafter, he would drive me to the gym and spend the whole afternoon belaying me—he wasn’t interested in climbing himself. Later he even drove me to other gyms around California where I’d enter competitions.

He was a man of very few words. We’d drive for hours with almost no conversation. He wasn’t comfortable expressing his emotions, but belaying me tirelessly and driving me all over the state was his own way of showing love.

From childhood on, there was an elephant in the room. It was that my parents weren’t happily married. They didn’t fight openly — it was more just a kind of chilly silence that filled the house. For Stasia’s and my sake, they waited till after I graduated from high school to get a divorce. But we knew they were going to split up, because we occasionally read Mom’s e-mails. The real bummer for them was that they were so much happier after they got divorced, and they stayed friends.

I’m sure a shrink would have a field day with the fact that, to this day, I have a hard time remembering the details of my childhood.

In 2011, when Alex Lowther interviewed me for a profile for Alpinist, he started quizzing me about the early years. I told him that my memories were fuzzy and unreliable. “Ask Ben about this stuff,” I said. Ben Smalley and I had been best friends since first grade."

"The Regular Northwest Face route on Half Dome begins with a 5.10c finger crack that happens to be one of my favorite pitches on the whole climb. The next two pitches are only 5.9 and 5.8. It was a good warm-up for the two thousand feet of climbing above me.

But then, on what’s normally the fourth pitch, I ran into the first bolt ladder. There are two variations that bypass that blank section on either side. I’d climbed first one, then the other, on my two roped free climbs of the route. On the left is the two-pitch Higbee ’Hedral, rated a stern 5.12a, first freed by Art Higbee on his 1976 ascent with Jim Erickson. On the right is the Huber ’Hedral, named after the German climber Alex Huber, full-on 5.11d. (’Hedral is slang for “dihedral,” a vertical inside corner in the rock. Thanks to Art and Alex for the handy alliteration of their last names!)

Even though the Huber variation is one grade easier, it’s less secure. You have to traverse across a wall that’s so smooth it’s like polished glass. I thought about what it would take, then told myself, Screw that, and chose the Higbee ’Hedral instead.

The crux 5.12a sequence comes in a short boulder problem off a big, comfortable ledge. It made, I thought, for secure soloing, since if I couldn’t connect the moves I thought I could jump off and land on the ledge. But those are some of the hardest moves on the whole route, and I had to shift my mentality from cruising up fun cracks to actually cranking on small holds. I laced my shoes up extra tight, then powered through the six-move boulder problem without hesitating.

The rest of the pitch was quite dirty. Half Dome is so much higher in altitude than the other walls in the Valley that it has some of the feel of an alpine mountain. And with mountains, you get loose holds that you have to test before pulling on them. (Pulling loose a single hold, obviously, can spell the difference between life and death when you’re free soloing.) You also get dirt and even vegetation in the cracks. Because the free variations are tackled so seldom, they don’t get “gardened” by climbers the way the regular pitches do. It’s a scary business to be on rock that ought to be reasonable to climb, only to have your fingers scraping through wet dirt or your toes jammed on clumps of moss or scrawny little shrubs. But I followed the faint trail of chalk marks that Brad and I had left two days earlier, and managed to avoid most of the vegetation and dirt. As I rejoined the normal route, I relaxed and mentally shifted gears back into cruise mode. I had about a thousand feet of climbing above me until I got to the next hard pitch. I wanted to go slow and steady, so as not to get tired. A slow jog, rather than a sprint.

I had my iPod with headband ear buds so I could listen to tunes while I climbed. When the going got harder, I’d knock one earbud out. If it was really serious, both buds, so I wouldn’t be distracted. The headband then would just dangle from my neck. That day I was cycling through some songs by Eminem, especially “Lose Yourself.”

The beautiful day was holding steady, but I had no time to look around and admire the scenery. Scenery is what you get to enjoy when you’re belaying your partner on a conventional roped climb. When I’m free soloing, even on the easier pitches, I’m totally focused on what’s in front of me. The universe shrinks down to me and the rock. You don’t take a single hold for granted.

The sheer magnitude of the wall came home to me as I climbed. I realized that this project was way more serious than Moonlight Buttress, even though both routes are rated 5.12.

Pretty soon I was halfway up the route, a thousand feet off the deck. Here the line, as first climbed in 1957, suddenly traverses to the right to access an enormous chimney system. The final section of blank rock before the chimney is normally tackled by a fifty-foot bolt ladder. The previous time I’d free climbed the route, I circumvented the bolt ladder via a 5.12c pitch, using the bolts for protection but not aid. But now as I was approaching the ladder, I got cold feet about soloing it. The pitch is extremely insecure: slopers and scoops, shallow indentations you can barely hold with flattened fingers, and which you have to “smear” with your feet, straining your ankles so that you can get as much friction as possible on the holds with the soles of your shoes. Then those moves are followed by a down mantle. It’s a tricky move, like lowering yourself off a table with your hands extended downward, palms gripping the edge of the ledge. Balance is everything, and it’s hard to look down to see where to place your feet. And the feet have to find a narrow ridge of granite on which you step before you can let go of the mantle and move on.

The free variation Higbee and Erickson worked out in 1976 breaks off to the left a pitch before the bolt ladder and circles around this whole section of the wall, rejoining the route another pitch above. I’d never climbed it, and I’d heard that it was loose and dirty, but suddenly adventurous 5.10 seemed a lot more fun than insecure 5.12c. The variation is a pretty devious line, as you climb a long 5.9 gully straight up, followed by a meandering 5.10b scuttle toward the right, after which you have to downclimb a hundred feet of 5.10 to get into the chimney system.

I broke off the normal route at a random point and started wandering upward, trying to find the 5.10 variation. But as I moved, I started to get confused about the line. The bushes I was climbing through gave me pause. There were no real signs of human presence here—no chalk marks from previous climbers, no fixed pitons, or even scars where they might have once been driven and removed. I started to worry that I was completely dropping the ball. I was literally in the center of Half Dome, a thousand feet off the ground, possibly off-route, on dirt.

I said to myself, Holy shit! This is hardcore. I hope I can find my way back. It wasn’t true panic that I felt—just an uncomfortable anxiety. It would have helped

Fear. It’s the most primal element in cutting-edge climbing, or indeed, in adventure of any kind. Even nonclimbers can recognize that fact, when they watch footage of me free soloing. That’s why the first question out of their mouths is usually, “Aren’t you afraid . . . ?” (They don’t have to finish the sentence—“that you’re going to die?”)

I’ve done a lot of thinking about fear. For me, the crucial question is not how to climb without fear—that’s impossible—but how to deal with it when it creeps into your nerve endings.

Interviewed later by Sender Films, my Valley buddy Nick Martino claimed, “Honnold’s on another level than anyone else out there. It’s like he doesn’t feel fear or any of the normal emotions that anybody else feels. He has this ability to just shut his brain off and do the sickest climbs that have ever been done.”

Thanks, Nick, but that just isn’t true. I feel fear just like the next guy. If there was an alligator nearby that was about to eat me, I’d feel pretty uncomfortable. In fact, the two worst doses of fear I’ve experienced in my life so far—both the result of heinous misadventures that sprang from seemingly minor mistakes—didn’t come when I was free soloing. If I learned anything from those two screwups, it’s never to take for granted even a casual outing in the backcountry.

It was the day after Christmas, 2004. I was nineteen. My dad had died five months before, so I decided to hike up an easy peak that had been a favorite destination for both of us—Mount Tallac near Lake Tahoe. It’s all of 9,739 feet above sea level, but it rises a respectable 3,250 feet from its base. I’d climbed it a ton of times, but never in winter. We had actually scattered some of Dad’s ashes on the summit the previous summer, shortly after he died.

In Dad’s closet, I found an old pair of snowshoes. I’d never snowshoed before—never even done much of anything in the snow. As it turned out, they weren’t very good snowshoes for this sort of outing—they didn’t have crampons attached to the webbing. But I didn’t know any better.

As it also turns out, the snow had fallen about a month before, and it had been dry ever since. So the snow had turned to a hard, icy crust.

I didn’t want to take the slower, circuitous normal trail, with its ups and downs, so I just headed up one of the couloirs. I was tramping along, but the surface underfoot really sucked. And there was a crazy wind that day. I got most of the way up the couloir before I said to myself, This is bad. I tried to turn around to descend, and I just slipped.

I remember sliding down the hill, whipping out of control. I went at least several hundred feet. I had time to think, Oh my God, I’m going to die!

I came to in the rocks. I’d been knocked out cold, whether for mere seconds or for longer, I couldn’t tell. I think I must have hit the rocks with my feet, then rag-dolled over and crushed my face. I had a broken hand. I thought my leg was broken, but it turned out it was just badly bruised. I had a punctured sinus cavity in my face and several chipped teeth. I’d been wearing gloves, but the thumbs had torn off—I must have been trying to self-arrest with my hands. The skin on my thumbs was like raw meat, as if they’d been sliced with a carrot peeler.

My mom had given me a cell phone for Christmas. I got it out and managed to call her. I don’t remember this, but Mom later claimed my first words were, “Who am I? Where am I? What am I doing?” Mom called 911.

The normal rescue helicopter couldn’t get in to where I had fallen, so they brought in a California Highway Patrol chopper. It took a while. Pretty soon I was lucid again. I could see lakes in the distance that I recognized. But I was still asking myself, “Why am I here?”

I must have been in shock. All the fear had occupied those few seconds of whipping down the icy slope, in the form of sheer terror and the conviction that I was about to die, but now I felt a deeper sort of dread: How badly am I hurt? Am I going to get out of here all right?

There was an Indian family out snowshoeing who came along from below. Two strapping twenty-five-year-old lads and their parents. They helped load me into the chopper. Within minutes I was in an emergency room in Reno. It would take months for me to fully recover, especially because I kept climbing while my broken hand was healing. I still have scar tissue on my right thumb where the skin was scraped off.

This is still the only real accident I’ve suffered. And what a complete debacle it was, thanks to my ignorance of snow and snowshoes. If this happened today, I’d be mortified. But I’d also self-assess, then hike out under my own steam. It’s embarrassing to have to be rescued by helicopter. When I tell the story today, now that I’ve done so much serious climbing, the only way to treat it is as comedy. Maybe farce.

I’d started keeping my climbing “bible” the previous month. That day, writing left-handed because I’d broken my right hand, I recorded: Tallac, Fell, broke hand . . . airlifted.

Should have stayed more calm and walked off.

The most scared I’ve ever gotten while climbing came when I was twenty-one, a couple of years after my snowshoe fiasco. I was with my second serious girlfriend, Mandi (short for Amanda) Finger. She was a solid 5.13 climber I’d met at Jailhouse Rock, a sport-climbing crag near Sonora. She was five or six years older than me, but we hit it off. We climbed together at Joshua Tree and Red Rocks near Las Vegas. We even talked about going to Europe.

Anyway, on this particular day we decided to climb a three-pitch 5.12 route called the Nautilus, in the Needles, a range of granite spires near the Kern River. The routes are trad climbs with the occasional bolt anchor. The Needles as a whole have a well-earned reputation for being intimidating.

The Nautilus is actually on the east face of a formation called the Witch. It takes a long and tricky approach, winding between and around other towers, then scrambling up to the base, just to get to the start of the route.

I led the whole way. The first pitch is a classic 5.12b. I climbed it in style, thinking, “Ah, sweet!” According to the topo, or route diagram, that I had with me, the next pitch was 11+, followed by a 5.10 finish. I didn’t have any major trouble with the second pitch, but at the top I saw that the bolt anchors were way out in space, on the blank wall to the right, away from the crack system I’d climbed. It looked like a 5.11 traverse just to get to the anchors to clip in and belay.

So I said, Screw that. I’ll just keep going. Combine the third pitch with the second in one long lead. I had a seventy-meter rope, so I figured it would reach.

What I didn’t know was that the last pitch was loaded with loose, refrigerator-size stones that you had to lieback past—“death blocks,” as climbers call them. We were in shade, it was cold, and by now I’d developed serious rope drag from all the bends in the rope as it linked the pieces of pro I’d placed on the previous pitch. There I was, doing strenuous liebacking, trying not to dislodge any of the death blocks, and the rope drag was making it really hard to pull up any slack. On top of that, I couldn’t get in any protection, as I’d used up most of my rack on the third pitch. All I had left was a Black Alien—the smallest cam anybody manufactures—a few nuts, and three carabiners.

The climbing just felt too hard. No way it was 5.10. Later I found another topo that rated the last pitch at 11+. Basically, I was getting gripped—grasping the holds too hard out of fear and uncertainty.

Mandi had been stuck in her belay way below me for about an hour. Now she yelled up encouraging comments, like, "I’m cold! I’m scared! Can we go down?"

If I could have gotten in an anchor to rappel off, I probably would have gone down. Instead, I kept fighting my way upward. I placed no pro in the last forty or fifty feet. If I came off there, I’d take a really long, bad fall, with all those big blocks to worry about pulling loose or cutting the rope. The dread was mounting. I was seriously scared.

The last pitch ends in a little roof that caps the whole route. I got to just below the roof, but here the rock turned all licheny and dirty. The rope drag was horrible. There was a last mantle move to get over the roof, but I couldn’t figure out which way to do it. At last I found a crack to get the Black Alien in, and I just busted for the top. I did a really hard move, a full-on iron cross, crimping on tiny holds.

It was so fucked.

As I sat on top, belaying Mandi, I had only one meter of rope left. I’d used up the other sixty-nine linking the last two pitches. And I could barely pull up the rope, the drag was so bad.

That’s the most frightened I’ve ever been climbing, and it came not on a free solo but on a conventional roped climb. All because of an impulsive decision to skip the bolt anchor and an ignorance of just how difficult the top pitch was.

Today, I would have handled the whole thing better. I’ve got more tools in my tool kit now. Maybe I could have downclimbed, or placed less pro on the second pitch so I had more left for the finish.

But as I sat there, emotionally exhausted, hauling the heavy rope that was tied to Mandi, I thought I was ready to give up climbing for good. Maybe I should go back to college, I said to myself, and finish my education.

Of course, by the very next day, everything seemed different. I wasn’t about to give up climbing. I’d just make sure to avoid getting stuck in cul-de-sacs like that last pitch on the Nautilus.

Easier said than done.

On September 6, 2008, a thousand feet up the Regular Northwest Face of Half Dome, as I pushed through dirty cracks and vegetation, wondering if I’d gotten off route on the Higbee-Erickson free variation, I sensed the threat of another cul-de-sac. My anxiety wasn’t ratcheted up to the level of genuine fear, but it got my attention. So I focused hard, took a deep breath, and sorted out my options.

I told myself it wasn’t a do-or-die situation. Climbing down is almost always harder than climbing up, but I still felt that I could have downclimbed the whole route so far, all thousand feet of it, if I had to. For that matter, if I got into a truly nasty predicament, I could always sit and wait, even for a day or two, until some other climbers came along, ask to tie in with them, and finish the climb as their probably unwelcome guest. “Hitchhiking,” I call it. Other climbers in Yosemite have chosen that means of escape, or even have had to be rescued by helicopter, but I’ve never had to resort to either gambit, thank God—except for my ignominious chopper rescue on Mount Tallac, but that wasn’t climbing. On Half Dome, “hitchhiking” would have really sucked, and a helicopter rescue would have been even worse.

As I later realized, I had climbed too high before traversing right. For all I know, on that traverse I was inventing a new variation to the Higbee-Erickson free variation, charting new waters. The variation is supposed to end with a hundred-foot downclimb of a 5.10 finger crack. I actually had to downclimb 150 feet. Eventually, though, I found some old nylon slings hanging from pitons, and that bolstered my confidence. But then I found it hard to get my fat fingers into the 5.10 crack. I could only lodge the first knuckle in a crack where other climbers—Lynn Hill, for example—could have sunk all three knuckles on each finger. So the downclimb felt distressingly “thin,” harder than 5.10, and the pitch took me a long time. In all, the variation cost me a ton of time—in actuality, maybe fifteen minutes, though it seemed an eternity—and a lot of stress, and I was relieved to finally get back onto the clean, well-traveled path.

I put on my headband iPod again and switched back into autopilot mode for the next five hundred feet of chimney climbing. It felt great to be in a clean, secure chimney. A pleasant routine of squirming my back, stemming my feet, palming, and repeating for hundreds of feet. I took it slow and steady, enjoying the climbing. And that brought me to Big Sandy, an enormous ledge system 1,600 feet up the wall.

So far, I’d eaten none of my food and drunk none of my water. Big Sandy isn’t the only place on the route where you can sit down, but it’s such a spacious ledge you could have a barbecue there with friends (if you could get them up there in the first place). I spent a few minutes taking off my shoes and relaxing. It had taken me about two hours of climbing to get here, and now I needed a breather. I ate my bars and drank the water, so I wouldn’t have to carry the weight through the next hard pitches. Some climbers might have tossed the plastic flask once it was empty, but I’ve always believed in packing out your trash, so I stuck it back in my pocket. Soon enough, I retightened my shoes, set my iPod to repeat Eminem, and started climbing again.

The day was getting warmer, even though I was still in shadow. At some point I took off my shirt and wrapped it around my waist, cinching it with an over-and-under tuck of the sleeves. My short rest stop hadn’t really felt like relief, because I knew the hardest part of the climb was still above me. That final challenge hung over me the whole time I sat on Big Sandy, ramping up my concentration and intensity for the crux to come.

Resting can be a double-edged sword. When you’re free soloing, the pain in your feet and your fatigue just seem to vanish. When you rest, those annoyances come back. You have to snap out of it and get serious again.

The next three pitches above Big Sandy are called the Zig-Zags, presumably for the single, zigzagging crack/corner system they follow. Rated 5.11d, 5.10b, and 5.11c, they’ve always seemed harder to me. Maybe it’s because I happen to have huge fingers, but the thin crack set in a steep, polished corner has always felt more like 5.12. Aesthetically, the Zig-Zags represent the best Yosemite has to offer, perfect clean corners with staggering exposure. But I wasn’t thinking about the amazing view of the Valley as I carefully liebacked my way up the first tenuous pitch.

I climbed almost in a daze. I knew what to do; I just tried not to think about it too much. I didn’t think about the next hard pitches above. I didn’t think about the 5.11+ slab on top, a pitch above the Zig-Zags. I just moved steadily between small fingerlocks up the steep dihedral. The crux of the first Zig-Zag felt much easier than it had two days before, probably because now I had the sequence dialed. Every hold felt crisp and perfect, and I pulled really hard.

The second pitch of the Zig-Zags flew by in a frenzy of hand jams and hero liebacking. The climbing was secure enough that I could relax and enjoy it. With every zag of the crack, I found myself handjamming over big protruding blocks, the base of the wall almost 2,000 feet below me, the Valley floor itself 4,000 feet below. The pitch was a delight, compared to the thin liebacks above and below.

Handjamming is another essential technique for the rock climber, and it’s surprising that it took many decades to invent. If a vertical crack is between about two and five inches wide, but there are no edges inside it to grasp with the fingers, you can still use it for a hold, by inserting the whole hand, then flexing it to fit the crack, either by making a fist or by arching the back of the hand against the straightened fingers. Your hand acts like a wedge that you can put your whole weight on. Jamming is tough on the knuckles, and guys bent on a hard day of crack climbing will tape their hands to minimize the damage. I’ve never been into tape myself, though, mainly because my skin is so naturally resilient—I don’t tend to suffer from the little cuts and scrapes that other climbers do.

I stopped again for a minute below the last Zig-Zag. I felt good but wanted to be sure I didn’t get pumped. On a rope, you’re forced to rest at least fifteen minutes per pitch while you belay. But when you solo, you never have to stop, so I force myself to pause at stances and relax, just to make sure I don’t get ahead of myself. After a two-minute breather, I set out up the undercling lieback feature, a slight variation on the original aid line. The undercling is somewhat pumpy but only 5.11c, not terribly difficult compared to the original corner, which is supposedly 5.12+ (though I’ve never tried it). The real crux of the variation is making blind gear placements in the flaring crack. But since I wasn’t placing gear, I was doing the pitch the “easy way.”

Still, it was another pitch of insecure liebacking, with both feet pasted against a smooth granite wall and flared jams for my fingers. Again, as on the whole rest of the route, the crux of the pitch was an extra-thin section. I knew exactly what to do and hurried through it. The nearly two thousand feet of climbing below me were beginning to take their toll. I was finding it harder and harder to give the climbing my complete attention. Part of me just wanted to get the climb over with.

With the last Zig-Zag below me, I was soon walking across Thank God Ledge, the amazing sliver of rock that traverses out from beneath the Visor, only about 200 feet shy of the summit. I could hear noises from above and knew lots of people would be up top on this perfect late summer morning. The easy Cable route up the other side of Half Dome is one of the most popular hikes in the Valley, culminating in a fifty-five-degree slab on which the National Park Service has installed a pair of metal cords to use like handrails. On a warm sunny day like this one, there’s a nonstop procession of hikers lined up on the cables like airport travelers in a taxi queue.

I could hear the chatter of the tourists on top, but no heads peered over the edge. I was glad no one was watching.

I walked across Thank God Ledge as a matter of pride. I had walked its thirty-five-foot length before, but I’d also crawled or hand-traversed it. It’s less than a foot wide at its narrowest, with the wall above bulging ever so slightly at one point. But I didn’t want to taint my solo ascent—I had to do this correctly. (Incidentally, walking Thank God Ledge is another of those things that’s quite a bit easier with no harness, rope, gear, or pack hanging off you. The balance is more natural.) The first few steps were completely normal, as if I was walking on a narrow sidewalk in the sky. But once it narrowed, I found myself inching along, facing out with my body glued to the wall, shuffling my feet and maintaining perfect posture. I could have looked down and seen my pack sitting at the base of the route 1,800 feet below, but it would have pitched me headfirst off the wall. The ledge ends at a short squeeze chimney that guards the beginning of the final slab to the summit.

I paused for a moment beneath the ninety-foot slab, looked up to see if anyone was watching (still no one), and started up. The first few moves are easy enough, on somewhat positive holds with good feet. As you get higher, the holds disappear and the feet shrink. Two days earlier, I’d considered two sections “cruxy.” The first involved a step-through onto a miserly smear, while the second, thirty feet higher, involved a few moves of shitty hands and feet before reaching a “jug”—a big, positive edge I could wrap my fingers around that marked the end of the hard climbing, sixty feet up the pitch.

I also knew that it was this slab that had thwarted Higbee and Erickson’s attempt to climb the whole route free. So close to the summit, they’d had to use aid to surmount the last obstacle. Perhaps that should have given me pause.

I hardly noticed the first crux. I cruised right through it, feeling pretty good about myself. Twenty feet of thin cord hung from one of the bolts. I very briefly considered running the cord under my thumb—not weighting it but having it there just in case. But that felt suspiciously like cheating.

I climbed into the upper crux, feeling good about doing things legit. And then I ground to a halt. I’d expected to find some sort of different hold or sequence from the one I’d used two days earlier, which had felt pretty desperate, but perhaps I’d done it wrong. This time, in the same position on the same holds, I realized there were no better options. I had a moment of doubt . . . or maybe panic. It was hard to tell which. Although I’d freed the pitch maybe two other times the year before, I could remember nothing of the sequence or holds, perhaps because there aren’t any.

A gigantic old oval carabiner hung from a bolt about two inches above the pathetic ripple that was my right handhold. I alternated back and forth, chalking up my right hand and then my left, switching feet on marginal smears to shake out my calves. I couldn’t make myself commit to the last terrible right-foot smear I needed to snag the jug. I’d stalled out in perhaps the most precarious position of the whole route. I considered grabbing the biner. With one pull, I’d be up and off.

Tourists’ oblivious laughter spilled over the lip. Tons of people were up top. I was in a very private hell.

Stacey was in Dallas, but her nursing contract had been terminated early, so she was planning to move to Los Angeles. We hadn’t actually broken up, but I suspected she was getting into this other dude in Dallas. In Yosemite, I’d been hoping to climb something rad, but the weather was shitty, raining every day, everything wet. Meanwhile, I knew the weather was perfect in Las Vegas. So I thought I could try my luck at Red Rocks, the great massif of sandstone cliffs just a few miles west of the city.

Stacey and I had made vague plans to meet in Tucson, as she drove from Dallas to L.A. So for me, heading down to Vegas was a kind of move toward our rendezvous in Tucson and, I hoped, toward saving our relationship.

Because of the weather, I hadn’t been able to climb anything super-exciting in the Valley, so I’d done nothing but boulder. And if you boulder too much, the skin on your fingers gets raw and tender—worthless for sustained climbing. So I was in an angst-driven mood anyway, on top of the angst about Stacey.

I grew up reading climbing stories by Mark Twight, aka Doctor Doom. He was famous for dwelling on pain and heartbreak and existential suffering as the spurs that drove him to tackle more and more out-there routes. It’s not that he was suicidal—in fact, he called climbing “a tool to forestall suicide.” A whole generation of young climbers, myself included, was inspired by the essays in his collection, Kiss or Kill: Confessions of a Serial Climber. (If I reread it today, I suspect I’d see the affectation behind the carefully constructed persona of Doctor Doom.) But Twight also wrote Extreme Alpinism, the manifesto that pretty much defined the new style of light, fast, go-for-broke ascents.

Still, there’s a rich vein in mountaineering literature of climbers using dark thoughts and stormy moods to precipitate cutting-edge climbs, especially solos. Angst as a motivator. I think an old issue of Climbing magazine ran a long piece detailing how romantic breakups had prompted rad solo climbs. Nerve-racking tales about emotionally wrecked men risking it all in an effort to sort out their feelings.

It’s not necessarily suicidal. It’s about a guy suddenly losing the love of his life, caring a little less about danger, and so finally doing something that he’s always kept tucked in the back of his mind.

I’ve never felt suicidal myself. But trying to save my relationship with Stacey that April was stressing me out. I was definitely in a dark spell in my life.

Anyway, at first I envisioned a quick stop at Red Rocks for some mellow soloing in dry, warm conditions, then on to Tucson for the mission that was the real point of my trip. But I was also thinking about a great classic line, the Original Route on Rainbow Wall. In fact, it’s been called the finest of all the thousands of routes at Red Rocks. At the head of Juniper Canyon, the Original Route is fourteen pitches of sustained climbing up this massive, concave, amphitheaterlike face, lots of it on tiny holds, up to 5.12b in difficulty. And the crux comes high, on the tenth pitch.

The route was first climbed in 1973 with a fair amount of aid, and rated at 5.9 A2. (Traditional aid grades in the YDS system range from A0—easiest—to A5.) The first free ascent came in 1997 by Leo Henson and Dan McQuade. I’d onsighted the route three or four years before with Josh McCoy, but that was my only previous trip up the route, and I certainly didn’t have the moves dialed.

On the way to Vegas, I called up all the friends I could think of to ask if any of them wanted to do the Rainbow Wall. Nada. They were all busy with something or other. In my angst-driven mood, I made a snap decision: Fuck it, I’ll do it anyway.

All the way on the road from Yosemite across Nevada, I was preoccupied with thoughts about Stacey. But ever since I’d first seen the route, even before I climbed it, Rainbow Wall had been embedded in my consciousness. I’d dreamed for years about free soloing the Original Route.

So, on April 28, I found myself at the Pine Creek parking lot, the wall looming above me. My mind was jangling with a dozen interwoven streams of thought. The wind was blowing at close to gale force, and while that didn’t help my confidence, a rational part of my mind was grateful that my skin would stay dry and cool on the wall. Then, with perfect timing, Stacey called me on my cell phone. We had a very pleasant, if brief conversation. She tentatively reconfirmed our plan to meet in Tucson. Suddenly the desert morning seemed rosier, and I almost thought I could see a rainbow.

Even at the time, I knew that it probably wasn’t healthy to feel such euphoria over a girl. But I embraced the mood and harnessed it to my purpose, starting my hiking with determination and glee. Alone in the canyon, I listened to the various bird calls and the sound of water babbling through the boulder-strewn wash. Suddenly all those little things seemed so much more meaningful, and I was overcome with gratitude that I could be having such a great time in such a beautiful place.

I suppose I should have realized that I was becoming emotionally unhinged. But I wanted to maintain my elation as long as I could, maybe even to the top of the route. I focused on how exciting the climbing would be, how much I craved the challenge, how beautiful the whole region was. Behind all that sensory delight floated the real excitement, which was that maybe, just maybe, Stacey did actually care for me, and we might be able to make things work. My mind was layered like an onion, though I suppose at the core lay the deep sadness that things might be ending.

But I made it all the way to the base of the wall in my semi-blissful state, and once there my mind turned practical. Finally I could stop trying to control my mood and focus solely on the climbing. I knew that this would be where I really found peace, in the intricacies of 11+ stem corners and 12a liebacking. As usual, it took me a few pitches to find my groove, but once I got moving I really did feel peaceful. I flowed up pitch after pitch of perfect corners. The amazing flat edges that appeared from time to time were a delight to use, and I found my position on the cliff stunning.

Free soloing this route after only one previous roped ascent of it—and that several years earlier—amounted to the polar opposite of the kind of superpreparation I had applied to Moonlight Buttress a little more than a year before. In some sense, I had no idea what I was doing up there on Rainbow Wall. Some people might call this crazy. I prefer to think of it as badass. It definitely amped up the adventure. This time, it felt like I was onsighting again—only without a rope. I remembered the odd move here and there, but most of it felt like I was discovering the sequences for the first time. There’s no question, though, that my impulsive push on Rainbow Wall had everything to do with what was going on with Stacey.

About halfway up the route, there’s a stretch of easy pitches, ranging from 5.4 to 5.8, that wanders up and to the right through ramps to a cozy perch on Over the Rainbow Ledge. Here, my mind turned back to “real” life, with all the angst I had carried with me from the Valley, but fortunately, that “down” interlude was fleeting. Soon enough, I was facing the crux tenth pitch.

I was about 750 feet off the ground. I was palming and stemming up this corner on really small ripples in the sandstone. All of a sudden, I realized what the crux required. You’d have to get your feet as high as you could, then jump to grab a jug. A true “dyno” move, but not such a big deal if you were roped and had placed some solid pro nearby. Maybe that’s why I didn’t remember it from my previous ascent. But now I got there, looked at the jug out of reach, imagined jumping for it, and said to myself, Hell, no!

I could still have downclimbed to Over the Rainbow Ledge, traversed right, and finished the wall by the indirect Swainbow variation, which is only 5.10. But in the mood I was in, I wanted to finish what I’d set out to do. Four or five times I climbed up those ripples, surveyed the situation, and climbed back down. It was simply out of the question to jump for the jug. If you don’t catch the hold, you’re off and down . . . and dead.

Slowly an alternative dawned on me. Just in reach from the ripples was a tiny divot, a natural hole in the stone caused by a black iron-oxide intrusion. I could sink only about a third of the first digit of my left index finger into the divot, then stack my middle finger and my thumb on top of it. It would be the ultimate crimp, and I’m sure the divot had never been used before. Finally, I committed my whole weight to the jammed tip of my finger, smeared an opposing foot against the corner, and pulled. My finger in the divot held, and I grabbed the jug with my other hand. Strangely, instead of fear, I felt complete serenity as I made the move.

The next pitch was a 5.12 lieback. I thought it would be a lot easier than the pitch before, but it was pretty gnarly in its own right. Wait, I thought, this shouldn’t be so hard. And now I had no option of downclimbing, because there was no way I would ever reverse that crimp on the divot. But I kept it together and finished the lieback.

The last two pitches flew by in a blur. I finally felt completely warmed up and climbed with ease. But as soon as I topped out on the summit, the driving wind nearly knocked me over. On the wall, I’d been protected from the gusts, but here I was fully exposed to the brunt of the gale. When you’re free soloing, of course, rappelling the route isn’t an option, since you don’t have a rope. Now I cowered in a little hole and changed out of my rock shoes into approach shoes that I’d carried in a small backpack, along with a little food and water.

The descents from Moonlight Buttress and Half Dome had been pretty routine, down trails that scores of hikers trod every day, and it wasn’t a strain to go down barefoot. The descent from Rainbow Wall, on the other hand, was heinous. It’s a series of technical scrambles on slick sandstone slabs, all the way back to the limestone mountains west of Red Rocks, to gain the upper drainage of Oak Creek Canyon. Then all the way down Oak Creek as you circle the peak of which Rainbow Wall is the northeast face. The whole descent is a bit of a bear, really heavy on the scrambling.

Then, hiking the flat desert back to my van, I felt like I was on a death march—no food or water. Just endless walking.

And now, in an instant, the sense of peace that had carried me up the climb vanished. Away from the tranquillity of the wall, my psyche started to fray. I was exultant at having soloed the wall but suddenly much less optimistic about my “real” life. As I thrashed my way down, I wondered if I really would be able to salvage my relationship with Stacey, and whether or not it was even worth the effort. As the canyon drew out in front of me and the afternoon heat bore down harder on me, the world seemed so much less beautiful than it had on the hike in. By the time I’d reached the flat desert and started circling back toward my van, I was much less pleased with my performance and fairly sure I would soon be single. My mind sank as low as it had gone high, and I seemed powerless to keep it under control. The whole experience had left me a little raw. The constant howl of wind, the crushing heat of the sun, hunger, thirst, mental fatigue—they all left me feeling vulnerable.

As soon as I reached the van, my first thought was to check my phone to see if Stacey had called. I think we’d made some vague agreement to chat later. I hoped she had left a message. But I knew that she hadn’t. Unsurprisingly, no call, which I took to mean that Stacey just wasn’t very psyched about “us.”

The sandwiches I made helped ease my disappointment. I planned on soloing another route in the afternoon, just so I could finish all my business at Red Rocks in one day and keep on driving toward my real goal—Tucson.

I was pleased with myself for soloing the Rainbow Wall. Maybe I should have called it a day, but I’d already decided I wanted to do more. My plan was to solo up Prince of Darkness, a seven-pitch 5.10 route that soars through a blank-looking face on Black Velvet Wall. Then I’d downclimb another 5.10 route, Dream of Wild Turkeys, which joins Prince of Darkness about 650 feet off the ground.

I chatted with some other climbers in the parking lot, joking about the terrible weather in Yosemite, then drove over to the trail-head for Black Velvet Canyon. But now the euphoria was long gone, replaced by lethargy and the deep fatigue of my worn-out mind. I’d always thought that Prince of Darkness would be a good challenge for me in dealing with the exposure of tiny holds on a smooth vertical wall. I never considered calling it quits, but on the way to the base I found that I didn’t really care. I was sick of the unrelenting wind and my feet hurt from hiking and edging. The wall didn’t excite me.

Since I was already warmed up and in a soloing mindset, I expected the climbing to be smooth and effortless. But instead I felt jerky and slow. I wasted energy by overgripping the sandstone crimps and worrying about breaking footholds. I didn’t want to be there. Instead of relishing the process, the whole experience of being on the wall, I just wanted to have it finished. I wanted to be back in my van, out of the wind.

I kept trudging upward, though I never got comfortable. My feet hurt more and more, but I never passed a good-enough stance to adjust my shoes. By the time I reached the top of the route—the large ledge where Prince of Darkness joins Dream of Wild Turkeys—I hated climbing, hated the wind, and wanted to go home. On the ledge, I took off my shoes for a while, trying to allow some blood to flow back into my toes. I didn’t look around the canyon, I didn’t admire the shadows lengthening across the desert, I just looked at my feet and waited to start the descent.

I downclimbed Dream of Wild Turkeys, which turned out to be a pretty fun route. Or at least it would have been fun in a different time and place. As I descended, I would occasionally find myself having a good time. And then suddenly the wind would pick up and I would realize that I had only been enjoying a brief reprieve. But I suppose that the wind and my fatigue combined to blunt all my other emotions. I just didn’t care as much. Everything to do with “real” life, including Stacey, seemed a little less critical. What really mattered was sitting down in a sheltered place and eating. And maybe sleeping.

That evening, I met some friends for dinner in Las Vegas. In the bathroom of the restaurant, I washed my hands for the first time and discovered I had a blood blister on my left index finger, where I’d jammed it into the iron-oxide divot, stacked a finger and a thumb on top of it, and made that pioneering move up to grab the jug. I came back to the table and showed the blistered fingertip to my friends. It felt like a badge of courage.

That marathon day of veering emotions at Red Rocks was like a whole life in a nutshell. As it turned out, though, I didn’t wait for the rendezvous in Tucson. The next day I flew to Dallas, ostensibly to help Stacey pack for her move to L.A. But I really wanted to win her back. I basically re-wooed her. And it worked . . . for a while.

Two months later, we broke up—for the first time.

Conrad Anker was one of my first mentors. I’d always admired the guy, not only for his great climbs such as the Shark’s Fin on Meru Peak in the Garhwal Himalaya and his first ascents with Alex Lowe of wild-looking towers in Queen Maud Land in Antarctica, but also because of the way he lives his life. Conrad calls himself a Buddhist, and he constantly preaches and practices kindness to others and doing good for the planet. The school in the Khumbu Valley he started years ago to train Sherpas in technical climbing is a prime example of Conrad’s altruistic service to others.

And it was Conrad who convinced The North Face to sponsor me, which really improved my climbing opportunities. So even though I knew almost nothing about Borneo, I was psyched to be invited by Mark Synnott to go along on the Kinabalu expedition.

All six of us got along well during that trip, and it’s true that Mark and I hit it off from the start. But it was a really long expedition—a full month from April 2 to May 1, 2009. I was used to getting things done a lot faster—one-day ascents of big walls in the Valley, for instance. There were times during the trip when our sluggish progress nearly drove me crazy. After five days in Low’s Gully, we’d gotten nowhere on the wall. I kept saying to myself, Why is this taking so long?

The 'quirky little things' that got between Mark and me had as much to do with our difference in age as with our climbing styles. Like when Mark tried to take apart my rack—that just sent me off the deep end. I liked to think I knew how to handle my own cams and biners.

As for skipping pieces rather than building up rope drag, I do that all the time. It just depends on whether the terrain is dangerous or not. And Mark’s I-told-you-so about the stoppers isn’t the way I remember it. On the whole route, I doubt that I placed a single nut, because the wall was one pitch after another of overhanging granite. He was just too old-school for my taste.

For instance, Mark led one pitch of pure choss—crumbly rock, loose holds everywhere. It was about 5.7, but Mark aided it. He even drilled a bolt. He took forever to lead the pitch. I said to him, “Dude, it’s just five-seven. Why don’t you just climb it? It’s not really dangerous if you tread lightly.” But he was going, “Oh, man, this is really sketchy!” Once he got his anchor in, I toproped the pitch in about three and a half minutes.

Mark later took me to task for an awkward moment when he wanted Jimmy Chin to shoot some film in which I would talk about what it was like to have Conrad as a mentor. I balked. Mark thought this meant that I wasn’t open to being taught by my teammates. But back then, it was a lot harder for me to perform in front of the camera, especially with all the guys standing around, including Conrad. It felt like, “Okay, Alex, talk about this. Dance, monkey!” So I’d have to start dancing.

There was a slightly weird dynamic going on among us as a team. I knew going into the trip that none of the other guys was as good a rock climber as I was. But they were all badass mountaineers, and I figured I’d be learning a bunch of stuff from them. Halfway through, though, I just felt, This isn’t the way we should be doing this climb.

The big problem on Kinabalu is rain. We’d been climbing low on the wall for about a week before we committed to the full thrust, leaving our base camp behind. On only the second day on that push, a huge squall came over the mountain from the north. Mark and I settled in to the portaledge, while Conrad tried to push the route above. In his Men’s Journal article, Mark played this up as do-or-die drama—which is what the magazines want:

Massive waterfalls were now pouring off the cliff, and the gully below started to roar as it transformed into a raging rapid. Even if we had wanted to bail, there was no way out but up. Above, I could hear muffled yelling, followed by an alarming amount of rockfall. Anker was somewhere above us doing battle in the chaos. The truth of the matter, though, was that the Kinabalu climb just wasn’t that rad. I felt that we could always have rapped off the route if we had to, and by 2009, Low’s Gully didn’t figure anymore as the hellish abyss that had trapped the British army guys fifteen years earlier. Still, we spent twenty-four hours on the portaledge getting soaked. Since Jimmy Chin and Mark took up all the space on the portaledge, as the rookie I got the shitty seat. I had to sling a hammock beneath the portaledge, suspended from its corners, which made for a very awkward body position. The water dripped through the floor of the portaledge onto my hammock and sleeping bag. I sort of sat in a puddle for a whole day and night. It was all right as long as I didn’t move and stir up the water. I was reading The Brothers Karamazov, which fit the dreary mood. I tore the paperback in half and gave Mark the first part to read. Pretty grim, but I guess it builds character.

The weather cleared off enough so that we could finish the climb the next day. The last pitches were actually easy. After a brief celebration on the summit, we rapped the whole wall with our bags and hauled them back out the other side of Low’s Gully. It was an ordeal. I think the reason we did this is because we didn’t want to haul everything to the top of the wall. We just left it all in the middle and then lowered it to the ground in one huge lower.

In the Men’s Journal article, Mark wrote some really nice things about me, even if they were still tinged with paternalism.

Sharing a rope with Honnold had made me think a lot about what I was like when I was his age, and I couldn’t help but draw comparisons to myself. I was never close to as talented as he is, nor was I as bold, but I did have a youthful hunger and my tolerance for risk was more than a little excessive. Honnold reminded me that climbing without risk isn’t really climbing at all. And he ended the piece with this summit vignette:

Looking over at Honnold, I couldn’t help but wonder if he understood the arc that we all seem to follow as climbers any better after hanging out with a bunch of old-timers, if he understood that he would have to ultimately accept the fact that if you’re going to climb as hard as he does now his whole life, and live to tell the tales, he was going to need a little bit of luck. These days I’ve got kids waiting for me to return from expeditions like these, and there’s a line I just don’t cross anymore. The problem is figuring out where that line is at any given moment. Honnold is one of the brightest and most talented climbers I’ve ever met. If nothing else, I think he knows that climbing is the kind of sport that will sort you out, one way or another.

After the expedition was over, for all my impatience with the old-school style the other guys seemed to think the route required, I realized that I owed a lot to Mark. He was probably right about my “Yosemite bubble.” In Borneo, I realized that climbing in remote ranges did entail all kinds of techniques I hadn’t had to learn on Half Dome or El Cap.

Mark had truly broadened my climbing experience. His whole thing—exploring, traveling the world, having adventures in exotic places—was new to me, and exciting.

Because, when all was said and done, we’d forged a good friendship. Mark invited me on his next media- and sponsor-supported junket, a truly exploratory climbing trip to an untouched desert landscape full of weird pinnacles and arches in northeastern Chad, in Africa. The trip was planned for November 2010. Without a moment’s hesitation, I signed on.

Mark had discovered the Ennedi Desert by staring hard at satellite photos. On a previous expedition to Cameroon, he started wondering about the climbing possibilities in Chad, which borders Cameroon on the northeast. Civil war in the Sudan had provoked a refugee crisis in Chad, making it an inhospitable country for Westerners to visit, but Mark loves that sort of challenge. He knew that expeditions had been active in the Tibesti Mountains, near the northern border of Chad, but the much more remote Ennedi seemed untouched by climbers. And the satellite photos made it clear that the rock formations there were spectacular.

For his team, Mark put together two threesomes. What he called his “media team,” whose main mission was to film and photograph (even though all three were good climbers), consisted of Jimmy Chin, Renan Ozturk, and Tim Kemple. The “climbing team” was Mark, James Pearson, and myself. James is a Brit who’d made quite a splash on the gritstone crags of his native country, then had taken his act abroad. He was about the same age as me. I’d climbed with James for a day or two in the U.K., but I didn’t really know him. I sensed, though, that his outlook on climbing matched mine a lot better than the more old-school mountaineers I’d gone to Borneo with. By 2010, like me, he was sponsored by The North Face.

Sparsely inhabited today, the Ennedi had once been a thriving homeland to seminomadic pastoralists who herded everything from goats and cattle to camels. The vivid rock art of the region—pictographs painted in red, white, brown, and black—was first discovered in the 1930s. The human figures abound in archers leaping and dancing as they carry their bows. By now, archaeologists have been able to use the rock art to date and define a series of cultures ranging back all the way to 5000 BC.

We arrived in N’Djamena, Chad’s capital, in mid-November. One thing Mark is really good at is arranging logistics in developing countries. For our excursion, he’d recruited an Italian expat named Piero Rava, who at the age of sixty-six ran a trekking company taking foreigners on ambitious photo tours of places like the Ennedi. Piero was a veteran mountaineer himself, having participated in a bold Italian expedition to Cerro Torre in Patagonia in 1970. An amazing spire of granite and ice, Cerro Torre had once earned the reputation as “the world’s most difficult mountain.” Another Italian, Cesare Maestri, claimed to have reached the summit in 1959, only to have his partner, the Austrian Toni Egger, die on the descent when he was avalanched off the wall. Other climbers doubted the ascent, and it is now generally regarded as a complete hoax, with Maestri and Egger getting nowhere near the top.

The Italian team in 1970 got to within 200 meters of the summit. Had they succeeded, they would have claimed the true first ascent, which was finally pulled off four years later by a team led by Casimiro Ferrari, who had been Piero’s teammate in 1970. It was cool to have a Cerro Torre veteran leading our expedition, and even cooler to know that Piero had fifteen years’ experience in taking trekkers to the Ennedi. He had checked out lines on the arches and pinnacles, but he hadn’t climbed anything, and he assured us that no other climbers had touched the rock there.

Piero spoke almost no English but good French. So I ended up translating for the crew in the jeep. The whole process was kind of fun.

Borneo had been my first taste of a true Third World adventure, but Chad was far more intense. And the impact on me of those three weeks in Africa would be life-changing, in ways I never could have foreseen.

We set off from N’Djamena in a Land Rover and a pair of Toyota Land Cruisers. The Ennedi was 625 miles away as the crow flies, but a lot farther as we ended up traveling. In an essay about the trip, Mark later captured the surreal flavor of our drive:

We had been traveling Chad’s only paved road for less than an hour when Piero suddenly veered off into the sand. I assumed we were stopping, but Piero just pointed the vehicle northeast and kept going—for the next four days.

Sometimes we followed rutted tracks in the sand, while other times it seemed like we were driving across areas that had never seen a vehicle. In the softer sand, the only way we could maintain headway was to drive at 60 mph, with the vehicle skimming precariously at the limit of control. When we stopped to camp at night, our Chadian mechanic would work on the vehicles, cleaning out air filters and sometimes replacing or repairing various engine parts.

We put in long, grueling days of four-wheeling, sometimes going from sunup to sundown seeing nothing but flat sand. The key was to spend as much time as possible in Piero’s lead vehicle, because in the following vehicles you lived in a cloud of dust, which worked its way into every orifice of your body. It was the beginning of the Chadian winter, and the temperature hovered in the 90s during the day. In summer, Piero explained, it got up to 140°F. The other guys tended to space out or try to sleep during this endless, monotonous journey, but I was transfixed. With my face glued to the window, I stared out at the emptiness, watching for any change in the horizon. On our second day in the sand, we had an encounter that turned into a minor epiphany for me.

Suddenly I saw two men riding camels in the desert ahead of us. Piero slowed down for them and stopped a short distance away. In retrospect, I wonder if he was stopping only because he was used to his tourists wanting to take pictures of such things, or if he was truly stopping out of courtesy to interact with them, the way hikers do when they’re out in the backcountry. Regardless, we piled out of the jeeps and approached the nomads, one of whom dismounted and poured us a large bowl of camel milk. Piero explained that nomads will always offer you something as hospitality, even though they don’t have much for themselves. We declined his offer, taking a few pictures instead. Piero gave the two men the leftovers from our breakfast, explaining to us that it was normal for them to travel for days without any real food. They mounted their camels and continued into the desert.

Later I asked Piero how those nomads could navigate so accurately in the desert, especially when the stakes were so high. A slight mistake in bearing would mean missing the next well and dying of dehydration in the middle of nowhere. Piero explained that they use the sun and the direction of the wind, which is constant in the winter, to navigate. When I protested that it seemed like too serious a situation to rely only on the sun and wind, Piero drew an analogy to climbing. Sometimes you find yourself in positions where falling would mean death. So you don’t fall. It helped me understand. The nomads just don’t make mistakes.

Occasionally, when we passed a small oasis, we’d run into native people, small clusters of men, women, and children living in mud huts or thatched dwellings. These were Toubous, so unused to seeing strangers—especially white-skinned Westerners—that Piero warned us not to approach them or take photographs of them.

Still, I stared in fascination at these seminomadic desert dwellers.

And here I had another, more lasting epiphany. After the trip was over, it wasn’t the climbing that stuck foremost in my memory. It was the days of driving across the desert to and from the Ennedi. My lasting impressions were of kids beating donkeys to make them haul water faster, or of men riding camels through the middle of nowhere, or of other men working all day to turn mud into bricks. I was seeing a completely different way of life from any I’d ever witnessed before, in a completely alien place. The simple facts of Chadian life—what it takes to survive in that kind of climate with nothing but a hut and some animals—stunned me.

And this made me realize, perhaps for the first time, how easy my life was compared to those of people in less privileged societies. That insight would lead me, a few years later, to redirect my goals toward something other than climbing. It took a while to sink in, but that was the epiphany.

Toward the end of the fourth day, we spied some rocks in the distance. We hadn’t seen so much as a hill since leaving N’Djamena. Anticipation ran high. All of us were thinking, Will the rock be any good? When we got close enough, we piled out of the vehicles and literally ran over to the nearest formations.

We knew from Piero that the pinnacles and arches were made of sandstone. But would it be the sharp, clean sandstone of Nevada’s Red Rocks, or chossy stuff like the Fisher Towers in Utah?

To our dismay, we discovered that the sandstone in the Ennedi ranged from terrible rock to truly atrocious, abominable rock. It was all bad. No matter what, however, the Ennedi was a photographer’s and filmmaker’s paradise, and the “media team” got images and footage like you see nowhere else in the world.

Our first major objective was a 200-foot-tall spire that we called the Citadel. As Mark described it, the tower was “shaped like a giant boxcar standing on end, featuring four distinct arêtes, one of which appeared to have decent holds. A rotten overhang guarded the bottom, but sported a crack that looked doable.”

James Pearson was psyched to lead it. (I thought it looked like a death route.) He tied in and started up as Mark belayed, with the media team in rapt attention. I didn’t want to just sit around and watch someone else climb—I hadn’t come halfway around the world and four days across the desert just to spectate—so I wandered off and started soloing up a random nearby tower.

Before this trip, Tim, Jimmy, and Renan had seen me solo a little bit on solid rock, but Mark and James had never watched me solo at all. I think what I was doing now freaked them out a bit."

"No matter what the difference in our styles and approaches—old-school versus new-school, mountaineer versus rock climber—Mark Synnott and I always got along well. Today I consider him one of my mentors, as well as one of the teammates I'm most indebted to. After Chad, I signed up for yet another Synnott trip sponsored by The North Face and Men's Journal. This time, in July 2011, we headed off for Devil's Bay on the south coast of Newfoundland, where big granite cliffs rise straight out of the ocean. We hoped to put up some good new routes there and document everything with camera and film.

Two others of our gang from the Chad expedition—James Pearson and Tim Kemple—were returning, and it was good to renew our friendship in Canada. The other three were Jim Surette, Matt Irving, and Hazel Findlay. I'd climbed a bit here and there with Hazel and Matt but had never met Jim, though Mark spoke highly of him. Hazel is a really strong British chick who evolved from gym climbing (six times British junior champion in indoor competitions) to become—a rare thing for women—a very strong trad leader on dangerous runout routes. Sender Films would make a beguiling film about her called Spice Girl, and I would later climb with Hazel in South Africa for another film, called Africa Fusion, released in 2015.

The only problem with the Newfoundland expedition was that the weather didn't cooperate. It turned out to be a miserable washout. To kill the downtime, I jotted down notes almost like I was writing a diary. Some entries:

It's been raining on and off for 10 days and everything in my small tent is getting a little damp. Though I'm the lucky one on the trip, everyone else on the team had their tents either destroyed or damaged in last night's freakishly strong wind storm. . . . So far we've climbed one route and sat in the rain and brooded. Well, to be honest, I'm brooding and everyone else is drinking a lot and making the best of it.

Before coming on this trip I felt like I was in great shape, climbing my first traditional 8b+ [5.14a] and a few other hard sport routes.

I was fresh off a good season in Yosemite in which I'd soloed some things I was proud of. . . . Things should have been going great for me, and yet all I could think about while I festered in my damp tent was that my fitness was slipping away and that I was wasting my time. I could be anywhere else in the world, climbing every day. Instead, here I was in a tent, in the rain, depressed out of my mind.

I try to make the best of it and go for hikes despite the constant rain, just because the landscape is so beautiful. But then days of whiteout fog descend and it seems too dangerous to go wandering away from camp. I'm locked in my tent with nothing to do but read and do pushups.

We spend most of the time in the communal mess tent telling stories and bantering. Not that there's anything in particular to say after a week of rain, yet Mark has a distinctly entertaining way of telling stories, even if I have heard them all at least twice before. In many ways our trip to Newfoundland is what people who work normal jobs do for vacation: go somewhere exotic with a group of friends and then hang out all day eating and drinking.

Several years later, looking back on our Newfoundland trip, Mark insisted that the expedition had been a success. He thought that we'd made a good short film by making ""raininess"" the central theme. It was titled Tent Bound in Devil's Bay.

Mark told other people that the rest of the guys had a running joke about me. That I would just sit in the group tent, muttering, "This is the grimmest place on earth." Mark even called me a sort of Debbie Downer, almost a whiner. He thought I damaged the group's morale. He also thought that a route the team free climbed, called Leviathan, was ""awesome.""

Well, sorry, Mark, but that's not how I remember Devil's Bay. Tent Bound is a horrible little film, because the guys didn't have anything to work with. There was no story. James Pearson and I free climbed a route called Lucifer's Lighthouse, which was the hardest thing on the wall. But the whole trip was grim. Not just because of the rain. If you were in Patagonia, it'd be worth waiting out the weather, just to get a chance to climb on some of the most epic peaks on earth. But I'd just come from the Valley, and I was losing my fitness day after day. And this place sucked. Wet, slabby granite, not featured, not that tall . . . worse than the stuff in Tuolumne. I could have been doing this kind of climbing in Tuolumne and eating pizza every afternoon. Newfoundland just wasn't rad. It wasn't the future.

As for me being Debbie Downer, well, that's not entirely fair. Everybody was bummed and bored. I went on hikes, but then we'd get those impossible whiteouts. You could get lost in the fog. It was hard to find the latrine, a hundred feet from camp.

I was, I'll admit, the most vocal member of our crew, saying early on, "We should just leave."

But I don't hold any of this against Mark. Every trip I've gone on with him has been a life experience. I always learn something.

Between my trips to Chad and Newfoundland, in the winter of 2010–11, I embarked on what I half-jokingly called my Sport Climbing Tour of the Antiquities. From Africa I went straight to Israel, then Jordan, then Turkey, then Greece. In Israel and Jordan, I stayed with a friend. Stacey joined me for Turkey and Greece.

It wasn't a true tourist vacation. I did all the hardest routes in Israel, and all the hardest routes at Geyikbayiri in Turkey. At Kalymnos in Greece, where the climbing is terrific, I got shut down somewhat because it had rained so much the limestone cliffs were seeping.

As for the antiquities, I actually read some books about the histories of the countries where I was climbing. I did all kinds of cultural stuff. Got a pretty legit taste of the past. Saw a lot of old things. Saw a lot of people in funny dress.

A trip like that serves as a kind of filler-in between real climbing adventures. I traveled, climbed, tried new things, learned new stuff, all while I was preparing for something big. Two thousand eleven, like 2009, was what I call a year of consolidation.

In Alex Lowther's profile of me for Alpinist (summer 2011), he writes about the pressure on me to keep upping the ante. He paraphrases the public's response to my big free solos: ""What's next? Give us more!"" And he adds,

Expectations can be dangerous, and they only become more so when what you are famous for is risking your life.

That's a fair concern, but it's not like I haven't dealt with this pressure ever since folks started noticing what I was doing. The pressure only nudges me if it's about a project I want to do anyway. Actually, a bigger motivator than any media attention would be a hot chick at the base of a wall who I could impress. Though she probably couldn't tell the difference between 5.10 and 5.13. But no matter how hot the chick is, say if I was standing at the base of El Cap, and she urged me to free solo some route, my answer would be ""No way.""

For example, I can't tell you how many people over the years have pressured me to drink alcohol. We'll be at a party, and somebody will taunt me, ""Alex, just try this beer, it's not gonna hurt you to take a sip."" I've never given in. Booze doesn't interest me.

Most of the media attention that has come my way so far has been focused on my free solos. But that's not the only kind of climbing that compels me. Just as rad, in my book, are the big-wall linkups I've attempted, especially in Yosemite. And 2012 would be another watershed year for me, as I went after speed climbs on the big walls and linkups, both with partners and solo, of some of the most epic routes in North America."

"Borneo, Chad, and even Newfoundland were novel experiences for me, but throughout my still relatively short climbing career, I keep coming back to the Valley when I want to push myself. Because of the sheer scale and difficulty of its soaring, clean granite walls, Yosemite offers almost limitless challenges to today's best climbers—as it will, I'm sure, to the stars of the next generation. No one, for example, has yet attempted a free solo of any of the routes on El Capitan.

One of the great landmarks in Valley history came in 1975, when three of the Stonemasters—Jim Bridwell, John Long, and Billy Westbay—pulled off the first one-day ascent of the Nose. The first route ever climbed on El Cap, the Nose was put up in 1958 in a monstrous siege effort stretching over forty-seven days by the legendary Warren Harding and a series of teammates. Bridwell, Long, and Westbay, climbing mostly free, surged up the route in about sixteen hours. There's a famous photo of the trio shot in the meadow below El Cap after the climb. To get the wall as well as the climbers in the frame, the photographer has hunkered down to the level of the guys' knees. Because of that angle, they seem to exude cockiness—gods sneering down on mere mortals. Cigarettes dangle from Bridwell's and Long's mouths. They're dressed like hippies, in loose-fitting vests and shirts, but they could just as well pass for Hell's Angels.

By the time I first hit the Valley, almost thirty years after that landmark ascent, climbing the Nose in a single day was still a pretty big deal. In 2010, I managed to do that three times, paired with Ueli Steck. We'd talked about trying to go for the speed record, which was then held by Hans Florine and Yuji Hirayama, at an amazing 2:37:05—yes, just a little over two and a half hours. But things didn't quite work out.

Instead, in early June 2010, I took a big step upward when I soloed the Nose, also in a single day.

As I mentioned above, no one has yet even attempted to free solo a route on El Cap. But there are other kinds of soloing that aren't quite so extreme. The distinctions may seem arcane to nonclimbers, but they're huge for those of us who go after big walls.

Rope soloing is a process in which you belay yourself, usually by tying one end of the rope to an anchor, the other end to your harness, then leading more or less conventionally, placing pro or clipping fixed gear as you go. Instead of a belayer to catch your fall, you minimize the potential plunge by using one of several different devices. I generally use a grigri, the same autolocking belay device that I use to catch a friend at the sport crag or gym, though in this case I'm using it to catch myself.

The trouble with rope soloing is that it's extremely tedious. You have to negotiate each pitch three times to make progress—leading it with pro, rappelling to "clean" (retrieve) the pro, then "jugging" back up the rope (climbing the line itself with ascenders, metal devices that grip the rope under a downward pull but slide easily upward). Way back in 1971, Peter Haan climbed the Salathé route on El Cap—along with the Nose, one of its two most storied lines—in a monumental rope-soloing effort spread across six days. Haan used some kind of combination of prusik knot and Jumar (then the most popular ascender) to belay himself. What's pretty amazing is that he had never done a big wall before. I don't know Haan, but I can appreciate how rad his exploit seemed in its day.

In 2010, when I soloed the Nose, I carried a thin sixty-meter rope in my pack only because I knew there were a few pitches that I'd have to rope solo. They included the King Swing, a massive pendulum that allows you to escape from the apparent dead end of the Boot Flake. I lowered myself from my anchor a hundred feet, then started running and scrabbling sideways across blank granite, so that I could build up longer and longer swings. Finally I was able to grab the edge of a crack far to the left that leads to the crack system that continues the route. It's quite a daunting maneuver to pull off solo. The King Swing is like the biggest pendulum in climbing. At least it's the biggest one I've ever done.

It was a tough trade-off to burden myself with the weight of a sixty-meter rope that I'd use only a few times on the Nose, but I doubt that I could have gotten up the route without it. Most of the time, what I was doing was daisy soloing.

A daisy chain is a loop of nylon webbing, a little longer than an arm's reach, that's sewn into as many as a dozen regularly spaced miniloops. You keep one end firmly attached to your harness, then you clip whichever miniloop is at the right length to a cam or nut you've placed or a piton or bolt that's already in place. Then you can hang safely on aid from the gear, or just use it as a handhold to get past a tricky move. I carried two daisies, so that I could alternate clips without ever interrupting the security of my static connection to good pro. On the very hardest aid pitches on the Nose, like the crux of a big overhang called the Great Roof (rated 5.13d), I used the daisies to hang from either cams I placed or fixed gear—some of it pretty old and nearly worthless.

During most of the climb on the Nose, however—all but the very hardest passages—I was truly free soloing. The transition from daisy soloing to free is scary. I have to constantly remind myself, Now I'm safe. Now I'm not. It's tough mentally. But you never forget, never think you're clipped to pro when you're actually attached to nothing. You're fully aware during those long stretches when only your hands and feet finding the right holds keep you from taking the big plunge.

Even though by 2010 I'd already free soloed Half Dome and Moonlight Buttress, the feats that seemed to put me on the climbing map, this daisy solo of the Nose felt like a big deal for me. I was proud of how efficiently I climbed, too, since the whole ascent took me only five hours and fifty minutes.

Still, I had even grander ambitions for Yosemite that season.

When I was still a young gym rat in Sacramento, I saw a film called Masters of Stone 5. One episode covered the daisy-solo linkup by Dean Potter of the Nose on El Cap and the Regular Northwest Face on Half Dome in a single day—Potter's elapsed time was twenty-three hours and twenty-three minutes. I thought, That is fucking cool. Just the idea of climbing two big walls in a single day filled me with awe.

Dean has since become a friend of mine, but back then he was a role model and an idol, both for his speed climbs and his audacious free solos. He's thirteen years older than me. We've bouldered together a few times but never gotten to climb anything big. Unfortunately, the media have tried to paint us as rivals, with him as the aging guru being challenged by me, the young upstart.

Anyway, after climbing the Nose with Ueli Steck in May and June 2010, I had the moves pretty well dialed. And I thought the Regular Northwest Face on Half Dome should be pretty mellow if I used daisies to protect myself at the hard parts—the sequences that had scared me two years earlier, when I'd free soloed the route.

Late on June 21, I headed up the long approach to the base of Half Dome, planning to bivouac there and get started at first light. Somehow, though, I mistimed the sunrise, waking up at 4:45 a.m. and having to sit around waiting for the lights to come on. I had a minimal rack and a thirty-foot line that I use to tow my van, which I figured could work for the Robbins Traverse—the only time I expected to use a rope.

Once it got light, I scrambled up the huge snow cone at the base of the wall—still there in June, courtesy of an unusually heavy winter. Halfway up the first pitch, I changed into climbing shoes and switched to rock-climbing mode, after tossing down my jacket and headlamp. I had a small pack with my shoes, food, and water, figuring it was important for me to stay well fed and hydrated since I was going to have a long day.

The climbing itself was pretty uneventful. It felt mostly moderate, compared to my free solo two years before—especially since I used the bolt ladders to avoid the hard free climbing, the same bolt ladders I'd had to detour around in 2008 to keep my free solo pure. Farther up, I climbed the chimneys with my pack hanging down below me on a daisy. The only time I really had to pay attention was on the Zig-Zags, where I climbed with two pieces clipped to my daisies on all the hard parts. As it turned out, I never used my thirty-foot towline.

The final slab, which had been quite stressful for me free soloing two years before, felt totally casual. Instead of insecure friction moves on almost invisible footholds, I could just pull on the bolts and swing between them on my daisies when need be. It was an entirely different experience.

I topped out among a handful of hikers. It was about 7:00 a.m. and the summit was still quite peaceful, a pleasant change from the usual gong show. I savored my climb for a few minutes while eating some food, then started my descent.

I'd timed the climb at two hours and nine minutes, which made it a new solo speed record for the route. It's sort of funny, but I can convince myself that speed for its own sake isn't a high priority for me. On Thank God Ledge, for instance, I wasted ten minutes trying to ""booty"" a brand-new #4 Camalot that somebody had recently gotten stuck in a crack. Just the day before, I'd learned a trick about hitting the individual lobes a certain way and walking cams around. I wanted to make it work. But after a while I gave up. For all I know, the Camalot is still there.

On the way down from Half Dome, I stopped to look at two amazing birds. I hate to have to hurry. The whole timing thing, I've claimed in print, is not a strong point for me.

Yet if that were really true, why did I time my ascent? Why was it important for me—not only on that day, but on many climbs thereafter—to go after speed records? I suppose it all comes back to purism. A speed record on a big wall is the ultimate validation that I've climbed as efficiently as I know how. It's consistent with my philosophy of life, my emphasis on simplicity, on paring away extraneous stuff. I also like speed records because they give a baseline for improvement. It's nice to know that I can improve on a route. It's gratifying to find that I can go faster.

From the summit of Half Dome, I hustled down to Mirror Lake, where I'd stashed a bike, then rode it back to my van. I reached El Cap Meadow around 10:00 a.m. There I spent some time reracking and trying to eat and drink. I didn't really know what I would need on the Nose, so I went a little heavy on gear: pretty much a double rack of cams. I had a skinny rope that I'd borrowed from a friend, something like an 8.5 millimeter. I figured it would be enough for my purposes. I wasn't planning on whipping huge on it.

All told, my gear weighed more than I would have liked.

I hadn't really thought about it beforehand, but the problem with soloing is that you carry everything, all the time. Climbing with a partner, normally you burn off the rack as you go, so by the end of the pitch you only have a little left. And conversely, the rope weighs nothing at the beginning of a pitch. But when you're daisy soloing, you have the whole weight of everything on you all the time.

At the foot of the Nose, there were a bunch of parties converging from different directions. Some Frenchmen who were hauling bags, some Russians who were only hoping to climb to Sickle Ledge (a mere four pitches up) to check it out, some Americans who were at the very bottom and said they were taking up a lot of beer. I was a little weirded out by the whole show and took off climbing as soon as I could. I felt super self-conscious to start free soloing up a crack that people were lined up to aid climb.

It was surreal to look up the Nose and think that I would be scrambling the whole thing by myself. I had a good supply of food and water as well as a headlamp. I was prepared for anything, though I was planning on climbing in the same style as I had on Half Dome. Free soloing everything I could and daisy soloing anything hard. I had the rope for a few pendulums, the King Swing, and the Great Roof.

Everything went smoothly on the first three pitches, which seemed easier than I expected. On the fourth pitch, I got a pleasant surprise. Someone had fixed an extremely bomber line up across the two tricky pendulums to Sickle Ledge. I could see that the rope was fixed to the bolt on Sickle and refixed to a half-dozen pieces along its way down, so I happily hand-over-handed up and saved myself a lot of ropework. I figured that something useful like that makes up for all the times that you go up on a pitch and discover that someone has cleaned all the fixed gear or ripped a crucial piece that's supposed to be left in place, either by falling and pulling it out or by deliberately scavenging it. And then sometimes you get lucky and find a rope left in place!

Dolt Tower, ten pitches up, was my first real stop. It was time to eat and drink again, and I checked my timer. It read something like 1:15, which was a pretty damn good pace. I realized that I wouldn't be needing a headlamp after all. I waved down to the meadow, knowing that my friend Tom Evans was probably watching on his telescope, and I wondered if any of my other friends were around. Then I took a leak and wondered if they watched that, too. I figured if they could see everything from down in the meadow, then I had nothing to be ashamed of. . . .

I rope soloed the short aid section up to the Boot Flake, but then I took myself off belay before I free soloed the actual Boot itself. It's simpler for me not to deal with a rope, especially on something secure like a hand crack. Still, it's exciting to take yourself off belay on El Cap.

Everything went uneventfully up to the Great Roof, which is where I planned to do my only full pitch of traditional rope soloing. I'd even brought a single Jumar for the occasion. This was one of my first real pitches of rope soloing ever, but it went smoothly. I started to notice how tired I felt as I jugged, so I told myself I wouldn't do any more rope soloing. From here to the top, I was going to daisy solo, even if it took longer. I couldn't bear to go up and down to clean pitches.

At the base of the Pancake Flake, I put my rope in my pack. That was one of the more memorable moments of the day. As I unclipped my daisies from the anchor and started free soloing the easy lieback above me, I felt absolutely heroic. The sheer exposure of twenty-three pitches dropping off beneath me filled me with glee. I'd spent a lot of the season posing for photos on various routes for a couple of different projects. Now I found myself doing the most exposed climbing of my life all alone. It was invigorating.

The last six pitches are mostly hand cracks, so I largely free soloed them, but I was getting more and more tired. I started grabbing fixed gear a little more — "French freeing," we sardonically call it, after the traditional style in the Alps. As I climbed into the Changing Corners, I passed into the shade, which brought me new life. Climbing in the full sun all afternoon had left me a little wilted, and my feet hurt from hot, tight climbing shoes. And then, on the last two pitches, I finally caught up to the parties I'd seen from the base. I stopped at an anchor to eat some food and chitchat with a cute belayer. But as much as I felt like hanging out and chilling in the shade, I still had to get to the top. So I climbed through the leader, with permission of course, and didn't stop again until the summit.

I was massively psyched to reach the top. My timer said 5:50, but I rounded up to six hours, since I hadn't started it until the top of the first pitch. I'd been distracted by the mob at the base and hadn't remembered to start the timer.

Now I couldn't quite believe that I'd actually done the linkup, and in roughly half a day. Having thought about it with awe for so long, I found it a little surreal to actually do it.

Honestly, I don't remember anything about the hike down or what I did on the ground. I guess none of that stuff was as important to me as the actual climbing. Weird that I can remember individual placements I used on the Glowering Spot, but I can't remember where I went for dinner, or with who.

Even as a teenager in Sacramento, I was aware of Tommy Caldwell's stellar record in big-wall climbing. He seemed to specialize in first free ascents of routes on El Cap, including the Dihedral Wall and Magic Mushroom, both rated 5.14a. Yet he'd also excelled as a sport climber, solving a short route called Flex Luthor at the Fortress of Solitude in Colorado—rated a possible 5.15a, which remained throughout my childhood the hardest single route climbed in the United States. And in 2006, on his first trip to Patagonia, Tommy and two partners made the first free ascent of a beautiful route on Fitz Roy called Línea de Eleganza. (The first ascent, with heavy reliance on aid and fixed ropes, took an Italian party nine days. Tommy's team onsighted every pitch and got up the wall in only two days.)

I think a big key to Tommy's success is his incredible work ethic. He'll hike four hours to a route, then spend eight hours working it in the rain. Or he'll haul huge loads to the top of El Cap, then rap down just to check out a potential project. By the fall of 2014, Tommy had been trying for seven straight years to complete the first free ascent of the Dawn Wall on El Cap, which he knew would be the hardest big wall free climb in the world. I could only imagine the tenacity and drive it would take to work on a single route nearly every season for most of a decade. I don't think I'd have the patience for such a long-term challenge.

Tommy's also had some experiences you wouldn't wish on anybody. In 2000, at the age of twenty-three, with his girlfriend (and later wife), Beth Rodden, as well as two other climbing buddies, Tommy was forced off a big wall in Kyrgyzstan when terrorists shot bullets at the climbers' portaledge a thousand feet off the deck. Once on the ground, the four were taken prisoner and then forced for days to march and hide as their captors evaded army soldiers hunting them. An unfortunate soldier whom the terrorists had also captured was executed just out of sight of their bivouac. Tommy, Beth, and their two teammates believed they would be executed themselves. They succeeded in escaping one night when Tommy pushed off a cliff the sole terrorist charged with guarding them. (Amazingly, the guy survived, only to be captured by the army and imprisoned under a death sentence.) The four young climbers then ran for the government front line, coming close to getting shot at by mistake. The whole wild adventure is chronicled in Greg Child's dramatic book Over the Edge.

The very next year, 2001, Tommy accidentally cut off his left index finger with a table saw. That kind of mishap can end a climbing career. Tommy had the finger sewed back on, but when it simply got in the way of his climbing, he had it removed. Today, at age thirty-seven, he's climbing as well as he ever has, despite the missing digit.

So I had always admired Tommy from a distance, but when we started climbing together, it was a joy to discover what a kind, generous, unegotistical guy he is. Unlike some professional athletes, Tommy never toots his own horn, and, as a result, I think he's gotten less credit for what he's done than he deserves.

In May 2012, Tommy's idea for the Yosemite Triple—the south face of Mount Watkins, a route called Freerider on El Cap that weaves in and out of the standard Salathé line, and the Regular Northwest Face on Half Dome—was not simply to pull off the linkup in a single day but to free climb every single foot of all three routes. I knew that would be a tall order, but I was psyched to give it a shot with such a strong and motivated partner.

We started up Watkins at 4:45 p.m. on May 18. It was already hot in the Valley, so we arranged our schedule to maximize time in the shade. The technique we all use nowadays for speed climbing big walls is called simul-climbing. It works like this. One guy takes the rack and leads continuously, not for a single pitch but for as much as 800 or even a thousand feet. He doesn't stop to belay. Once the rope comes tight to the second, he starts up, too. Both guys climb simultaneously—hence ""simul-climbing."" The leader places cams or nuts every so often, or clips fixed gear, so that if either guy falls, the gear catches them in a kind of yo-yo effect, when the rope comes tight between them. You can take some pretty horrendous whippers simul-climbing and still not get hurt, as long as the pro is good.

Ironically, the most dangerous situation in simul-climbing arises when the second falls. If the leader falls, the rope coming tight to the second arrests the plunge, the second acting as a kind of unwitting anchor. But if the second falls, he can pull off the leader. Not good if both guys are falling at once, no matter how good your pro!

But part of what allowed Tommy and me to climb the Triple was using devices like the Kong Duck or the Petzl Micro Traxion, single-directional pulleys that allow the rope to go one way but not the other. When placed strategically, they allow the second to climb through terrain that would otherwise be considered much too hard—too close to the edge of falling off. Tommy and I could climb such big blocks—sometimes over a thousand feet at a time—because the devices made it safe for the second to climb as hard as 5.12.

Tommy and I led in what we call blocks—big stretches covering as many as twelve or thirteen conventional pitches of, say, eighty to 150 feet each. It's inevitable that as the leader places pro, he's going to run through his rack at some point. That's when you change over and give the rack and the lead to the other guy. We planned beforehand the places where our blocks would end, on ledges where a pendulum or a downclimb or some other unusual maneuver meant you had to manage the rope more carefully than in normal simul-climbing.

We got up Watkins in the excellent time of two hours and forty minutes. Neither of us took a single fall, despite pitches as hard as 5.13a. From there, a combination of hiking, driving, eating, and rehydrating got us to the foot of Freerider at 10:45 p.m. As we'd planned, we hoped to cruise all of El Cap in the dark. That's not quite as hard as it might seem, as long as you have the route sufficiently dialed so that your headlamp illuminates all the sequences and you don't get off-route.

In some ways, Freerider on El Cap was the climax of our adventure. One of the most memorable moments came in the wee hours. Tommy was leading up one of the harder corners. As he left his anchor, he said, ""I'm too tired to lieback it, I'm just going to stem it,"" and then he proceeded to just totally bust out the entire pitch. I didn't even think you could do that! It's the middle of the night and it's really hard to see your feet because it's dark, he has a headlamp, he's standing on tiny little footholds that you wouldn't even be able to see in the light, and he just stemmed it, one foot on each slab, trusting those minuscule holds.

Tommy's a technical wizard on that stuff. He's really, really good on granite, so it was cool seeing how he could improvise like that and get away with it.

We got to the top of El Cap just after 5:00 a.m., with the first light of dawn. We'd finished Freerider in 6:15, also a damn good time. Tommy fell twice on the crux face climbing section, but no harm done, since I was belaying him, not simul-climbing. I managed not to come off anywhere.

Our big enemy was fatigue, and it really hit us on Half Dome. Having to free climb 5.12+ after twenty-one straight hours on the walls takes it out of you. It's really hard, and the prospect of failure—even if it meant ""cheating"" and using aid or grabbing fixed gear—is always there. The 5.12c variations on the Regular Northwest Face gave us all we could handle.

Each of the three routes has a specific crux. When we got to them we would get all psyched up, but they were all reasonable. The real trial is an overall, cumulative ordeal. Your feet hurt more and more and you get more and more tired. Linkups aren't super fun. Once you hit hour twelve or fourteen, you aren't really thinking, ""Oh! What a great time we're having!"" You think it will be cool until it isn't fun anymore.

It was 2:00 p.m. on May 19 when we topped out on Half Dome. Our elapsed time was twenty-one hours and fifteen minutes. Not only a new speed record but also the first free linkup of the three great Yosemite faces.

I was pretty pleased that I had managed to climb 7,000 feet of steep granite—seventy guidebook pitches—without falling once. And I'm equally gratified that, as of 2015, nobody else had duplicated our free linkup, no matter how long they took to do it."

"Yes, the logistics of filming my Triple solo for the Sender guys were supercomplicated. But their presence actually made it easier and more pleasant for me. Daisy soloing requires a way lower commitment than free soloing, so it didn't really matter to me if other people were around, because I have a harness and a rope and I can just hang out. If I was free soloing and there was a cameraman next to me, it would be harder to focus. But it's nice to have friends around when you're climbing through the night.

Also, the crew made my own logistics a lot easier. If I was alone, I'd have to figure out car shuttles between the climbs—a big hassle. But with the filmmakers, I had rides already set up. And they could give me food and water on the summits. If I was doing it alone, I would have pre-stashed food and water at various places along the route.

I started up the south face of Mount Watkins at 4:00 p.m. on June 5, 2012. The first pitches were a little wet and buggy, because it had rained the day before, but I felt pretty smooth. Finished the wall in 2:20, twenty minutes faster than Tommy and I had done it two weeks earlier.

It was kind of chaotic driving down to the start of El Cap. There was all this shit on the floor of the van—the filmmakers' Pelican cases, assorted gear of my own, since I'd use a different rack for El Cap, and I'm trying to eat and hydrate. And it was dark by now. I started up the Nose at 9:30 p.m. I got 150 feet up and realized I'd forgotten my chalk bag. Must have left it among the debris on the floor of the van. Oh, shit, I said to myself. I considered scrambling back down to get the bag, but by then the van had left. So I just climbed on without chalk. The lower pitches were wet, so I found it a little bit hard and weird.

Climbing in the dark is quieter and lonelier than in the daylight. In some ways, there's no exposure. You're inside this little bubble with your headlamp. A fifteen-foot beam of light is the whole universe. There was no danger I'd get off-route, since I knew the sequences so well by now. And yet, you still sense that there's this void below you, somewhere in the darkness. It's like swimming in the ocean and realizing there's a bottomless abyss below you.

When I got to the Dolt Tower, about a thousand feet up, I met two parties: one was a pair of guys bivouacking, the other two were cooking a meal. We exchanged pleasantries, then I asked, a bit sheepishly, ""Do you guys have a chalk bag I could borrow?"" This guy named Steve Denny unhesitatingly handed over his. It was a new felt bag, and it was full of chalk. Putting my hand into it felt orgasmic. I thanked Steve and told him I'd tie the bag to a tree on the summit, so he could retrieve it later. Then I headed on.

A strange thing about climbing in the dark is that all these creatures come out. Bugs, mice, bats, even frogs that live in the cracks. And these giant centipedelike insects. I've always worried that I'd step on one and splooge off. Then, all of a sudden, I heard this loud ""whoosh!"" and a scream. I nearly peed my pants. It took a moment to realize it had to be a BASE jumper. In fact, it was a friend of mine—I won't name him here, since BASE jumping is illegal in the park, which was why he flew at night.

At the Great Roof, I met up with Stanley—Sean Leary is his real name, but everybody calls him Stanley. After filming me on the roof, he climbed with me the rest of the way up the Nose, Jumaring next to me as I daisy soloed. We actually chatted about other things, such as the speed record on the Nose, which he was keen to go after. I didn't have to concentrate too hard, except for spots here and there where I'd say, ""Hold on a moment. I need to focus.""

Finished the Nose at 3:30 a.m., still in pitch dark. Six hours for the climb, fifteen minutes faster than Tommy and I had climbed Freerider.

The psychological crux of the whole linkup was actually on the grueling hike up to Half Dome, where I started to bonk. I felt agonizingly slow on the route, but I knew I was in the home stretch. Near the top, I ran into Mike Gauthier, who was chief of staff in the park and, unlike most of the rangers, a good climber. (Traditionally, in Yosemite there's been a constant antagonism between rangers and climbers.) He was roped up with a guy from the Access Fund—a nonprofit devoted to preserving access to climbing areas across America. We sort of climbed side by side a couple of pitches together. I hadn't met Mike before, but he seemed like a really nice dude. I thought it was cool—an NPS bigshot who was a serious climber, an Access Fund partner, and all that. Then I pushed on.

I topped out at 10:55 a.m. to a whole gong show of hikers on the summit. I was really tired, and the scene felt weird, out of control. My total time was 18:55. It was another speed record, but mainly I just felt psyched to have done it.

Four days later, when he topped out, Steve Denny recovered his chalk bag, which I'd tied to a tree.

I really liked Sender's Race for the Nose when I first saw it in 2011. Besides all the great action footage, which vividly captured just how hairy simul-climbing against a stopwatch can get, the film pitted these two great climbers—Hans Florine and Dean Potter—against each other in a classic mano-a-mano duel. They have such different personalities that the contrast only enhanced the drama.

Dean likes to insist that he's not competitive, that he climbs for the spiritual rewards of perfecting his craft. Whereas Hans just lays it out there. The film billboards one of his pronouncements: ""I love competition and I'm blatant about it. If it's something that makes me climb better than before, if it pushes me to do my best, then I see it as a good thing.""

It's to Sender's credit that they get Dean to admit that the challenge of Hans's speed records brings out the competitiveness in him that's just beneath the surface. ""He was like this little dog humping my leg,"" Dean says of Hans, ""and so it brought out the little dog in me."" Classic Dean!

The film focuses on Dean's attempt with Sean Leary to break the record on June 11, 2010. By then, Hans and Yuji's mark of 2:37:05 had stood for a year and a half. Before launching on the Nose, Dean announced, ""I think it's possible to break the record by a large amount."" But when Sean, coming second, tagged the tree on top of El Cap, the stopwatch clicked off at exactly 2:36:45. They'd broken the record, but only by twenty seconds. That didn't dampen their wild celebration on top.

Dean and Sean had considered their first attempt only a practice run, so their time was impressive. But before they could push the route to their absolute limits, winter storms hit the Valley and shut down the climbing season.

Watching that film made me want to give the record my own best shot. And I thought it would be really cool if I could do it with the old master, Hans. At the end of my great season in the Valley in 2012—climbing the Triple with Tommy Caldwell, then climbing it solo—I was in such good shape that I thought I should go for the Nose. By then, Hans was forty-seven years old, but I knew that he always stayed in tremendous shape. And I knew that he'd love nothing better than to take the record back from Dean.

Hans is a super straight-up dude with everybody. Like the way he makes no bones about loving competition. To me, he epitomized the successful older climber. By 2012, he had a wife he loved and kids he loved, but the fire was still in his belly. He didn't hesitate to accept my invitation. He lives in the Bay Area, so he wouldn't be acclimated to Yosemite. He just came up and took on the challenge as a weekend warrior.

The one thing Sender may have overemphasized in Race for the Nose is the ruthlessness of the rivalry. All the guys who are interested in the speed record are friends of mine, and of each other. I even gave Sean some beta—route-finding advice—before he and Dean went up to break Hans and Yuji's record. Some climbers look askance at speed records—they even criticize us for (so they think) corrupting the purism of ascent. My answer is simple: I do it because it's so much fun.

The whole thing started, I suppose, with the cachet of "Nose-in-a-day" which has bloomed as the acronym NIAD. That's still a cherished goal for many climbers. Of course, the whole in-a-day thing is arbitrary. Twenty-four hours is an arbitrary measure. If it had taken me twenty-five hours to do the Triple Crown solo, I'd still have felt pretty good about it.

Going for the Nose speed record is simply a fun game. All this stuff is a game.

Hans and I started our stopwatch on June 17, 2012, the day before his forty-eighth birthday. And I'll have to say, we climbed the route about as efficiently as is possible. Our teamwork was perfect. The only glitch (if you can even call it that) came in the Stove Legs, on pitches 8 and 9, when Hans slowed down a little. When Hans tagged the tree at the finish line, we stopped the watch. Our time was 2:23:46. Pretty rad, we both thought. We'd knocked thirteen minutes off Dean and Sean's record. Hans was overjoyed. I was surprisingly pleased myself.

After the climb, as we were walking down the backside of El Cap, I asked Hans, ""Hey, what happened there in the Stove Legs?"" He said, ""I was catching my breath."" ""What do you mean ‘catching your breath'?"" I needled him. "We were going for the speed record!"

It's now been more than three years since Hans and I broke the record and nobody has bettered our time. Of course, that's mainly because no one has tried. We'll see how long it takes for someone to get properly motivated to go after it.

All the same, someday I'd like to try to break the two-hour frontier. I think it's possible. It's a huge psychological barrier, like the sub-two-hour marathon, but sooner or later, I'm convinced, somebody will do it. If I'm right, that you can't climb any more efficiently than Hans and I did that day in June 2012, then the only way to do the Nose faster is to get fitter. The upper part of the route is really steep and pumpy. When you're climbing fast, your forearms get superpumped. The burn is intense. That's where fitter might mean faster.

That said, and as gratifying as setting the record was, I don't see speed climbing the Nose as the same kind of major accomplishment that the Triple solo was. It's on a much smaller scale, much lighter, and two and a half hours of any kind of climbing doesn't take the mental and physical stamina of linkups on big walls. Or of free soloing.

In the spring and early summer of 2012, I'd had my best season ever in Yosemite. I wasn't sure what I'd do next, though I had plenty of projects jotted down in ""to-do"" lists in my climbing and training journals. Would 2013 be another year of consolidation? Not in the ways I might have anticipated. . . ."

"The revelation that had first come to me on our endless drive across the desert in Chad in 2010—that, compared to the men I saw spending all day turning mud into bricks, or the boys beating their donkeys to make them haul water faster, I had it pretty easy in life—had stayed with me. The eternal question was how that revelation should dictate the way I lived, especially after sponsorship made my life even easier.

One answer had to do with lifestyle. Ever since 2007, I'd lived out of the Ford Econoline van I had bought cheap as a five-year-old used car. By 2010, it was still pretty ghetto, but a friend of mine had installed industrial carpeting, side panels, finishing work, and sturdy insulation. I cooked my meals on a two-burner Coleman stove, slept in my sleeping bag with a bouldering crash pad for a mattress, and read by headlamp.

By 2012, I could easily have rented an apartment or a condo to live in, but I decided to stick with the van. One reason was that it gave me the ultimate freedom—a kind of traveling base camp as I drove from one crag to another, following the changing seasons. A permanent residence would have felt like an annoying anchor. Living in a van reflected my ideals of simplicity, frugality, and efficiency.

Instead of trading in the old Econoline for a spiffier model, I decided to refurbish the vehicle. Now it's a really well-crafted van, even though it's got 180,000 miles on it. Between climbing trips in 2013, I left my van with John Robinson, a seventy-year-old retired friend from Sacramento, who had built out his own van. He made all kinds of improvements to mine. In my kitchen area, there's a five-gallon water tank and, instead of the Coleman two-burner, a built-in range connected to propane tanks. All enclosed in nice, custom-made cabinets.

In back, where I sleep, I have to lie a little bit diagonal, because I'm slightly taller than the van is wide. I've put in a sliding curtain for privacy, or to keep the light out when I stop over in a well-lighted parking lot. Instead of the industrial carpet, I've now got a linoleum floor—Home Depot's finest.

What I call my foyer—where the side door opens into what used to be the back seats—is where I take my shoes off. It's also my bathroom, where I pee into a bottle.

Under the bed platform, John built a big sliding storage drawer where I keep all my climbing gear, just the right size for my bouldering crash pad. Side chambers for other stuff. I even haul around my baseball glove, in case somebody wants to play catch—it's a good way to limber up the shoulders.

Goal Zero, a solar company that sponsors me, was kind enough to install two sixty-watt panels on the roof of the van. They in turn power an inside battery, which I use to charge my phone and laptop—though it also powers the LED lights in the ceiling and the carbon-monoxide detector that John insisted on installing, saying, ""If I'm going to do this, it's gotta be up to code!""

The Econoline is a full-size van, but I've got the smallest engine Ford offers—a 4.2-liter V6. It might not be a powerhouse, but it manages pretty well. And, to be honest, I don't know anything about cars. I think of mine more as a tiny house that moves.

There are of course drawbacks to living in a van. One is getting hassled by security guards. A few years ago, when I was climbing at Red Rocks, I went to sleep in the parking lot of Caesar's Palace in Las Vegas. I was awakened from a deep slumber by a loud knock on my window. I had no idea what hour it was. I opened the front door a crack to talk to the guy.

"You can't camp here like this," he said irately, as if I was doing him personal harm. "Oh, sorry," I said, "I thought it was all right since I was in the casino last night."

"You have to leave" he went on, with enough disdain in his voice for me to know what he thought of anyone who would dare to desecrate the sanctity of his Palace.

Groggy and irritated, I got in the driver's seat and took off. It certainly wasn't the first time I'd been harassed like that, nor would it be the last. But for some reason the exchange stuck with me, grating on my nerves. I think it was because I could tell how much he looked down on me, how disgusted he was that someone would consider living in a van. In retrospect, I wish I'd laid into him, asking how someone who spends forty hours a week riding around a parking structure on a neon bicycle has any right to look down on my lifestyle choices.

During that Vegas outing, I used the Whole Foods parking lot for my Internet service. Their free Wi-Fi was strong enough to cover the whole surrounding lot, so I would park as close as I could to the building and settle into the back of my van for e-mail sessions. In fact, I used the Whole Foods bathrooms at least once a day as well, though I also bought a lot of their organic food, so I felt like it all balanced out.

There's no convenient camping around Vegas (the Red Rocks campground is ridiculously overpriced and underwhelming), so I split my nights among various hotel parking lots, twenty-four-hour grocery stores, and some of my friends' streets. Each venue was well-lit and loud with the sound of traffic. Getting rousted by security and told to move along was just part of the game, and being in a place like Vegas for a month or more really made me appreciate moving on to Indian Creek in Utah—at the other end of the car-camping spectrum.

Where Vegas is annoyingly bright and bustling, the Creek is almost oppressively dark and sometimes lonely. The night sky is full of stars and the only sounds are the animals (and occasionally drunk climbers). The word quiet doesn't really do justice to the deep, peaceful calm that settles over the desert at night. The camping is unregulated, so you basically just find an empty spot that suits your fancy and you post up for as long as you'd like. I've spent weeks at the Creek and marveled each day at how beautiful the landscape is—it really never gets old.

But what did get old was having no showers, no cell service, and no food. A lot of people, especially Americans, get all excited about "going camping," about how cool it is to be out in nature with nothing around you. But I think that camping holds a special appeal for those who don't do it routinely. I like showering, I like eating out, I like being able to call my friends or check my e-mail. And as beautiful or romantic a place like the Creek might be, I eventually tire of camping—even if it's in a van.

The whole thing is a trade-off. But as of 2015, I still have no plans to buy or rent an apartment anywhere. In my newly spiffed-up van, solar panels and all, I'm pretty content.

Making a lifestyle choice, of course, is merely a personal matter. What I'd taken away from Chad was a certain feeling that I had an obligation to do something for others, for those with fewer choices in life and fewer means to accomplish them. By 2012, thanks to sponsorship and commercials, I had more money than I needed to live comfortably. So I established the Honnold Foundation. Its motto is ""Helping people live better, simply."" The mission statement I posted on my new website read, ""The Honnold Foundation seeks simple, sustainable ways to improve lives world-wide. Simplicity is the key; low-impact, better living is the goal.""

Three years into its operation, the foundation is just getting started. But already we've funded projects that I'm excited about. One involves supporting SolarAid, a British nonprofit that runs a campaign to provide solar lamps to four countries in Africa—Kenya, Malawi, Tanzania, and Zambia—to replace the ubiquitous kerosene lanterns that are both costly and toxic. SolarAid's ultimate goal is to abolish the use of kerosene lanterns in Africa by the year 2020. Some folks might think that's a pie-in-the-sky dream, but it's sure worth trying to make it happen.

Another nonprofit we support, called Grid Alternatives, aims to provide solar energy for low-income housing in the United States. So far we've focused on California and Colorado. In the spring of 2014, we moved into the Kayenta region of the Navajo Reservation to start providing solar energy to traditional Navajo families, many of whom have spent their whole lives without electricity or even running water.

Some years ago, I went on what I called my God-hating kick, as I read all the major manifestos arguing against the ideas of religion and an afterlife—Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, and the like. During that period, I sometimes referred to myself as a ""born-again atheist.""

More recently, my reading kick has been focused on clean energy. I'm deeply worried about the future of the world in the face of climate change, the unbridled use of fossil fuels, and so on. It's this passion, as much as anything, that led to the idea of the Honnold Foundation."

Before January 2014, except for Moonlight Buttress, nearly all of my big free solos had been on granite walls in Yosemite. But I'd first climbed on El Potrero Chico — "The Little Corral" —in 2009 and immediately enjoyed the highly technical style demanded by its gray limestone. It may be the best crag in Mexico, and it's certainly the best known. The whole ambiance of the place is congenial. There's a website devoted to singing the praises of Potrero, which offers "a lifetime of well-bolted, multi-pitch sport routes with ratings from 5.7 to 5.14 and routes with up to 23 pitches. The climbs have very easy access with only a 5-minute walk from most campgrounds, eliminating any need for a car. The cost of living is very low and the friendly people wonderful." Sounds like tourist hype, but those words match my own experience there.

Of all the routes on Potrero, the gem is a fifteen-pitch route that arrows right up the middle of the face, called El Sendero Luminoso—""The Shining Path."" The first ascent was put up by Jeff Jackson, Kevin Gallagher, and Kurt Smith in 1992. Two years later, Jackson, Smith, and Pete Peacock freed the whole 1,750-foot climb. They rated it 5.12d. But the climb is quite sustained, eleven pitches of 5.12 and four of 5.11. Jeff is the editor of Rock and Ice, and we've corresponded quite a bit over the years, including when I wrote for the magazine or its website.

I first climbed Sendero in 2009, and I'd immediately fantasized about soloing it. But when I came back in the winter of 2013–1 to revisit the route, I realized that it would take a concentrated effort for me to feel comfortable on it. Sendero climbs a north-facing wall with a lot of vegetation, and since the climbing is sufficiently difficult to keep the crowds away, there's not enough traffic to keep the route buffed clean. Holds were full of dirt and plants, and even though I could climb around them or avoid the particularly prickly cactuses, it's hard to commit when in the back of your mind you're wondering if there's an easier way. Potrero also has a reputation for being chossy, but I think that's overrated. Yes, there are a lot of loose blocks on the wall, but you just have to avoid grabbing or standing on them. The smooth limestone texture of the wall is actually pretty nice.

Part of the appeal of Sendero for me lay in the technical complexity of the climbing. Potrero is made of slabby, gray, water-runnel limestone. It's full of small holds and solution pockets. Really subtle features. All the holds tend to face the wrong directions. You get into tricky body positions that require real precision. It's so stylish—such an old-school climb.

Of course limestone is more porous than granite. Holds just break off unexpectedly. It's less predictable than granite. There are holds that are sort of ""glued"" to the wall. You have to trust that the one time you hold it is not the time it rips off the mountain.

The plan that winter was for Cedar and Renan to come down to Mexico to make a short film if I decided to solo Sendero. Almost at once, however, I had my qualms about the project. Ever since my ""epiphany"" in Chad, I'd agonized over the environmental impact of my climbing. To fly the three of us down to Mexico—not to mention other crew members to operate automated drones to capture footage high on the wall—would be to leave a sizable carbon footprint. Could I really justify burning all that jet fuel and using pricey high-tech hardware just to capture my several hours of play on Portrero Chico? What if we got everybody down there, ready to film, and I chickened out because I decided I wasn't comfortable going up on the wall without a rope?

In my mind, our Newfoundland trip in 2011 was a classic example of waste. Both a waste of our time and a waste of natural resources. We all flew to Newfoundland, drove to Devil's Bay, and rented a boat to cruise around the fjords, and we didn't climb shit. We made a huge impact on the environment—for nothing.

There was no guarantee I'd be up for the free solo. I've had other projects I set my eye on—notably Romantic Warrior in the Needles of California, a nine-pitch 5.12b route on a steep granite crack system—that I rehearsed, planned, and then backed off. It was too hot that June, my shoes didn't feel quite right, I felt rushed by other engagements I'd committed to in the upcoming days, so I realized I wasn't ready for it. Actually, there are tons of solos that I haven't done! In such a situation, I have to pay attention to my feelings and my judgment, not to outside pressures. So there was a real possibility in January 2014 that I might be dragging Cedar and Renan and the other guys down to Potrero Chico for nothing.

Starting on January 9, Cedar and I spent four days (with a rest day when it rained) climbing, fixing, and cleaning the route, using ropes and belaying to get the moves down pat and grigris to hold us in place while we cleaned. To get all the dirt, twigs, grass, and shrubs out of the cracks, we scraped away with our climbing brushes. They're like toothbrushes with extra-stiff bristles. If we'd really been serious, we would have used something more heavy-duty, like a big scrubber.

Each day, we worked from sunrise to sunset. The more vegetation we pulled off the upper pitches, the more dirt rained down on the lower ones. The more big plants we removed from the route, the more the small ones stood out. Once we started, we couldn't stop until we saw a perfectly clean slab of limestone. Some of the plants were particularly tough to get out, adapted as they are to rugged conditions. For a week after I returned to the States, I had thorns growing out of my hands. But Jeff Jackson e-mailed me, ""God smiles every time you uproot a lechuguilla.""

Purists or nonclimbers might think that by removing natural vegetation from a cliff, you're altering or even trashing the landscape. I'll confess to faint qualms along those lines. Cedar and I knew that plants grow back quickly on Potrero, and that the wall would eventually revert to a hanging garden. I didn't worry much about our impact while we swung around plucking cactuses and ticking holds. I just felt a vague sense of unease that we were putting so much work into something that's supposed to be so pure and simple.

But at the end of the fourth day, as we rapped down a smooth, clean face, I couldn't help feeling a giddy excitement. At some point, a switch had flipped from ""Maybe I'll solo it eventually"" to ""So psyched! Must solo immediately!"" I have no idea what flipped that switch, though the climbing did look more inviting without the dirt and plants obscuring the holds. For whatever reason, I was ready, and I knew that I would solo the route the next morning, if the conditions allowed.

That's the strange paradox, for me at least, about free soloing. It's the waiting beforehand that's anxiety-producing. The vacillating over ""Should I do this?"" When I finally commit, the stress goes away. It's actually a big relief to go up there and do it.

January 14 dawned clear. I wasn't going to delay any longer. I wanted to go up on the route alone, which is sort of the point of soloing. I was seeking out a personal adventure, and the filmmakers knew that any intrusion would fundamentally alter the experience. Renan took up a position far out in the desert at the base so he could get a long shot. Cedar spent several hours guiding the drone pilots up to the summit of El Toro so they could meet me on top and film some summit footage.

I was and felt completely alone. I didn't know where the other guys were positioned or if they were even watching. I just went climbing, knowing that we could go back up on the route during the next few days to get all the filming done.

The high-tech gear was brought to Mexico by a Boulder-based firm called SkySight. The drone was a small octocopter, maybe half the size of a coffee table, with a super-expensive gimbal that held a RED camera steady. Between the high-quality drone and the top-of-the-line cinema camera, and the fact that the guys at SkySight are among the best in the industry, we were pretty sure we'd capture some amazing scenes. The drone was flown by a pilot using a big controller—a lot like a toy truck. The camera was operated by the pilot's brother. And they brought along their sister as an assistant to help carry gear and catch the craft on landing.

Renan was there shooting for Camp 4 Collective, which had been hired by The North Face to make a film of the ascent. Camp 4 owns a RED camera, so Renan had been shooting with it for years. And Renan had brought his girlfriend to be a camera assistant, so that brought the filming crew to a total of five people. And then Cedar and me as climbers.

The morning of the solo, nobody said much of anything, because they didn't want to influence me one way or another. Earlier, though, everybody had assured me that I should climb only what I felt comfortable with, and that they could shoot any other, easier route if I changed my mind. But it was hard not to feel a little pressure.

We'd rented a small casita sitting atop a hill above one of the many camping areas, which provided a glorious view of the whole area. That morning I opened my eyes lazily, gazing up from the pile of jackets I was using as a pillow through the worn, faded blinds to see the tops of the mountains just catching some morning sun. Despite the pressure, I'd slept well. I almost always sleep well, even before big solo climbs. From the sofa I used as a bed I could easily see Sendero weaving its way up the wall. There was no way of escaping. I followed my normal routine—cereal poured into the yogurt tub, news on my phone. But I lingered, trying to stay patient and let the morning humidity burn off. I focused artificially on my phone, using it to ignore the people around me with cameras and questions, but not really understanding what I read. The only thing that mattered was Sendero, just coming into the light.

Finally, I made the fifteen-minute stroll over to the base of the route, weaving through scrubby, prickly bushes and struggling up a loose scree slope. My light backpack made me feel buoyant as I scrambled up the hill. My shoes, chalk bag, energy bars, and water felt weightless compared to the 600 feet of rope and full rack that we'd been carrying the past few days.

One of my favorite aspects of soloing is the way that pain ceases to exist. The previous four long days of climbing and cleaning had worn out my fingers and toes, but now, as I pulled on the first few holds, I felt none of the soreness. Each edge seemed perfect and crisp, each fingerlock felt like an anchor. Foot jams that had been hideously painful the previous afternoon felt rock solid. Hold after hold, I worked my way up the wall, smoothly and perfectly.

What seemed to me to be the crux of the route came at the top of the second pitch, maybe 250 feet above the ground. The standard sequence involves opposing side pulls with small and slippery footholds, but I'd found a small two-finger pocket out to the side that felt slightly more secure. As I chalked up, I felt a little nervous. Or maybe just excited. Or maybe just my awareness was heightened. It's hard to untangle the various feelings, but I definitely felt alive. I knew that this was the only moment on the route where I'd have to try really hard. And that's exactly what I did, completing the sequence exactly as I needed.

Once I calmed down a little from overgripping, I knew I'd finish the route, even though there were still thirteen pitches to go.

A second crux comes on the fifth pitch, about 600 feet off the ground. The pitch ends in a huge ledge where you can stop and take a breather. On the crux sequence, I was connected to the wall by only a small, sharp limestone undercling above my head. Trusting a tiny smear for my left foot, I raised my right foot almost to my waist, and I levered off it to reach my left hand to a distant jug.

It was by no means the hardest climbing on the route, but the stark simplicity of the movement stayed with me long afterward. To me, that is soloing at its finest: to be nearly disconnected from the wall with the air all around. There's a certain purity to that kind of movement that can't be found with a rope and gear. But for all my love of simplicity, it's not always simple to get to those positions. Here on Sendero, everything came together—a perfect mixture of aesthetics and challenge, hard enough climbing to demand total concentration and commitment on a line of strength that goes straight up the biggest face on the massif.

From there to the top, I climbed easily, trusting my feet more with each step. I used new sequences on a few pitches, trusting myself to find the easiest way through the seemingly blank sea of limestone. On the midway ledge, I popped my shoes off, and again five pitches higher, just to let my toes relax after hundreds of feet of technical slab climbing. But all in all, I'd found exactly the experience I was looking for: I was only a small dot on a vast, uncaring wall, but for those two hours, I got to taste perfection.

We spent the next two days reclimbing and reshooting various pitches of the route. It's anticlimactic to go back up a route to pose all over it. The triumph of the actual achievement gets lost in what follows. But as I slithered in and out of my harness on various ledges, climbing different sections for the camera and clipping into anchors in between, I tried to remind myself that I wouldn't have the opportunity to climb a wall like this one without doing some work, and at least I was having fun with my friends.

From the start of our trip, Cedar had wanted to try to redpoint Sendero—lead it free but roped, with no falls. I owed it to my buddy to be his belay partner on such an effort. The trouble was, we had return flights booked for the following morning. So we set out on the evening of January 16 to try to climb the route in the night.

The full moon rose as he started up the first pitch, casting a pale glow across the whole wall. There's something eerily calm about moonlight. I left my headlamp off, and I fed out slack in the darkness, pondering the last week. Was it worth it? What had we really done?

For the first five pitches, Cedar moved steadily up the wall, the silence punctured only by the occasional ""I'm off belay. Line's fixed!""—my cue to start jugging as fast as I could up the rope he'd tied to his anchor. That way, Cedar could conserve the energy he otherwise would have wasted on belaying and rope management. I tried to jug each pitch in four minutes flat.

It was at this point, however, that the ethical dilemma of my little ""project"" started to nag at me. Traveling to places like Chad has made me acutely mindful of my own impact on the world around me. At first, I'd assumed that my carbon footprint would be much lower than that of the average American, because I lived in a van and didn't own many possessions. But as I read more about the issue, I realized that the amount of flying that I did still left me near the highest percentile of environmental impact. My next thought was to buy carbon offsets—until I researched them and discovered that they weren't the cure-all I was hoping for. Paying someone to plant trees in the First World seemed far less beneficial than providing clean energy in the developing world, though both could be considered to be offsetting carbon emissions. The first basically pays the rich while the second not only reduces fossil-fuel use but also improves standards of living by saving people money and reducing the health problems associated with burning things for fuel.

I've tried to approach environmentalism the same way I do my climbing: by setting small, concrete goals that build on each other. That was the idea behind starting the Honnold Foundation. I also worked on smaller projects, such as setting up my mom's house with solar panels and giving up meat in an effort to eat lower on the food chain. In some ways it might seem silly even to make the effort, since the environmental problems facing our world are so much bigger than any one person's actions. But some walls also seem so huge and impossible that it appears pointless to work toward them. The beauty of climbing has always been the reward of the process itself.

While Cedar struggled through the intricate slabs, I couldn't help wondering whether making a whole production out of climbing went against all the environmental principles I wanted to stand for. Could radio-controlled heli shots and minimalism really go together? Was it worth the impact of flying a whole crew down to Mexico for me to enjoy one three-hour climb? Or could I possibly use the climbing to do more good than harm? Might the platform I've gained through climbing be harnessed toward more useful things?

The problem with worrying too much is that it can be crippling. Somehow, I thought, it must all come down to balance—finding that line between minimizing impact but still maintaining an acceptable quality of life. But who's to judge an acceptable life? I don't even know what I truly require to be happy. Do I have to be traveling all the time? Or soloing walls? The circle of Cedar's headlamp drifted slowly away, leaving me alone in the moonlight to swim with my questions.

Then, when we were halfway up the wall, a mariachi band started playing loudly just down the road from the cliff, filling the still desert night with the blaring sounds of horns and accordions. We couldn't help laughing. I told Cedar they were rooting for him. The moon tracked across the sky as I jugged to the rhythm of live music. At the belay, I pulled my hood closer against the cool night air. The summit loomed hundreds of feet above, silhouetted against the starry blackness. Though it seemed impossibly far off, there was nothing to do but carry on. Cedar continued tiptoeing up into the night, savoring the voyage."

"The Fitz Traverse was Tommy Caldwell's idea. As soon as he mentioned it, I said, ""That sounds rad! Let's do it!"" I was on board, even though I'd never been to Patagonia. I didn't even know anything about Patagonia.

Though it stands only 11,168 feet above sea level, Fitz Roy is the tallest peak in a tight cluster of amazing granite spires in southern Patagonia, on the border between Chile and Argentina. It's named after Robert Fitzroy, the captain of the Beagle on the famous 1830s voyage that gave Charles Darwin his first inklings about the theory of evolution. The first ascent, by the great French mountaineers Lionel Terray and Guido Magnone in 1952, may have been the most technical big-range climb performed up to that date anywhere in the world.

That cluster of peaks, which also includes Cerro Torre, Torre Egger, Aguja Poincenot, and many other agujas (Spanish for ""needles""), probably comprises the ultimate collection anywhere on earth of steep, soaring, and breathtakingly beautiful mountains. The granite is shockingly good—as good as Yosemite—but Patagonia is notorious for bad weather, for shrieking winds that don't let up for weeks, and for humongous mushrooms of rime ice plating nearly vertical slabs and cracks.

Tommy first climbed in Patagonia in 2006. Even though most of his prior experience had been on rock, he put up some formidable lines that season. As mentioned in chapter five, Tommy, with Topher Donahue and Erik Roed, freed the Línea de Eleganza on Fitz Roy. Tommy and Topher also tried another massive route, Royal Flush, on the east face of Fitz Roy. The peak was pissing wet that February, and other climbers gave up on the climb, declaring it hopeless, but Tommy went up there in the same conditions and damn near freed the route onsight (on his first time on the route) before he and Topher had to back off.

By 2014, Fitz Roy had really gotten under Tommy's skin—so much so that the year before, when his wife, Becca, gave birth to a boy, they named him Fitz.

Though a formidable peak in its own right, Fitz Roy doesn't stand alone. It's the centerpiece of a chain of seven connected towers, starting on the north with the Aguja Guillaumet and ending on the south with the Aguja de l'S. The obvious challenge was to connect them all in a single continuous ridge climb—the Fitz Traverse.

In 2008, Freddie Wilkinson, who would be my partner five years later in the Ruth Gorge, and Dana Drummond completed the first half of the traverse, linking Guillaumet, Mermoz, Val Biois, and Fitz Roy, but then rapping off Fitz Roy and hiking out. They called their half-traverse the Care Bear Traverse, because they were stuck in the clouds so much of the time that they started joking with each other, ""I bet all those other climbers are thinking, ‘Those stupid Americans are up in the clouds!'"" (In the children's cartoon series Care Bears, the ursine heroes live in lairs among the clouds.)

Freddie and Dana took three days for the traverse, with two exposed bivouacs. The Care Bear was repeated numerous times after 2008, but nobody had gotten beyond Fitz Roy. The problem for all those teams was that because the second guy did so much jugging, by the time they got up Fitz Roy their ropes were pretty core-shot from rubbing against the rock.

Tommy and I arrived in El Chaltén, the gateway town to climbing in the Fitz Roy region, on February 1, 2014. For the first nine days, the weather on the peaks was horrendous, so we climbed down low, bouldering and doing sport climbs on small crags. There's a ton of good climbing all around El Chaltén. Sweet! I thought. I'm gonna get strong! But I also thought, Wow, these peaks are so intimidating, I'm not sure I'd really mind if the weather never gets good.

We climbed every day, and ate out every night in El Chaltén. It was a pretty nice lifestyle."

"When the weather finally cleared on February 12, with a forecast of a good window during the next few days, Tommy and I headed up. The big advantage we thought we had over previous parties that had tried the Fitz Traverse was that instead of having the second jug every pitch, we'd simul-climb almost everything. That ought to mean less wear and tear on our rope.

Just as we had on the Triple in Yosemite, we each led huge blocks at a time, upwards of 800 feet. Part of what makes climbing with Tommy so great is that we can lead interchangeably, though on this traverse he would get all the ice and mixed pitches, since he had vastly more experience with that terrain. We got up the first tower, Aguja Guillaumet, in only two very long pitches, taking a mere two and a half hours to climb the thousand feet of the Brenner-Moschioni route.

It turns out that Rolo—Rolando Garibotti—and Colin Haley were trying the Fitz Traverse at the same time we were. Rolo's the man when it comes to Patagonia—not only its tireless chronicler, but the guy who's put up more routes on more different peaks than anyone else. He's also become a kind of steward of the range, improving trails and assembling route guides. We met up with that pair on the summit of Guillaumet, since they'd climbed a different route. Rolo had had hip surgery the previous year, and now his hip was really bothering him, so, reluctantly, they abandoned their effort. Rolo was kind enough to lend me his aluminum strap-on crampons, which would turn out to be extremely helpful for the traverse.

We went really light, figuring speed would mean safety. Our rack was seventeen cams, a handful of nuts, and fourteen slings. No pitons. We were counting on finding fixed anchors and even fixed gear along the way, to supplement the pro we'd place as we led. The real question mark was whether we could find the rappel anchors left by other parties, so we could rap most of the big descents from each tower as we moved along the ridgeline.

We had one sixty-meter climbing rope, and a skinny eighty-meter tag line—a rope to use not for leading but for rappels. By tying the tag line and the lead rope together end to end, and feeding it through the anchor sling, we could make a rappel on the doubled rope as long as sixty meters, then pull the ropes down to use on the next rappel. For the ice, only one ice screw and a single ice tool—a Black Diamond Cobra, a short metal axe with a curved shaft and a sharp, notched pick.

We did most of the climbing in approach shoes, or tennies, as we call them. Rock shoes only for the hardest pitches. No mountain boots. We strapped our crampons onto our tennies, which doesn't make for the most stable configuration, because the soles and edges of the shoes are too soft and flexible.

One sleeping bag between us, and one big puffy (down jacket). A stove and three gas canisters. We originally planned not to bring a tent, but on one of our "training" days during the bad weather, we'd spent the night in our Black Diamond First Light tent and realized how comfortable it was. It's a pretty amazing shelter, because it weighs only one pound. At the last minute, we decided to take it. It turned out to be a godsend.

We were determined to go light enough that all our gear, stove, fuel, and food could fit into one fifteen-pound pack (for the leader) and one twenty-five-pound pack (for the second). For a multiday alpine traverse, that's pretty frickin' light!

Afterward, some clueless journalist asked us if we'd had a film crew along. As if! But Tommy had been given a very light camera, so we tried to take video clips of each other as we moved along the traverse—footage that might eventually be spliced together into a film documenting the climb. We also had iPhones to shoot photos with. Actually, my iPhone was one of my most important pieces of gear, because I had about sixty topos of the various routes on the various towers loaded onto it.

From the summit of Guillaumet, we ridge-traversed over to the Aguja Mermoz, topping out at 5:00 p.m. Four hours later, we set up the tent right on the crest of the ridge and settled in for our first night's bivouac. I got the puffy that night, and slept nice and warm. It was only a few days later that Tommy confessed that he'd basically shivered through the night. In fact, I hogged the puffy for three nights, thinking that as a suburban California boy I needed it more than a Colorado hardman did. At last, Tommy's reluctant admission of how cold he was made me stop being selfish and give him the puffy.

We got off at 8:30 a.m. on February 13. It took a long, long day to climb over the Aguja Val Biois and up the Goretta Pillar via the Casarotto route. There we found some of the finest rock climbing on the whole traverse, with free moves up to 5.11d. That stretch, which I led, was one of only a few passages on the whole traverse where we switched to rock shoes. We French freed whenever we could, either grabbing and pulling on fixed gear or popping in a cam or nut and pulling on that. Still, we did very little aid on the whole traverse, nothing that we'd rate harder than A1.

It wasn't until 7:45 p.m. that we stood at the base of the final headwall on the north pillar of Fitz Roy itself. We were pretty darn tired after more than eleven continuous hours of climbing, but this was no place for a bivouac, so we decided to try to get up the headwall and camp on the summit. We also thought that the colder snow conditions of evening would be safer than waiting till morning, when sun on the wall might send all kinds of stuff falling down on us.

We could see at once that there was way more ice and snow on that headwall than we'd expected, thanks to one of the wettest summers in recent years. It was Tommy's turn to lead. As he forged his way up into that mess of ice, snow, and rock, we faced what would turn out to be the crux of the whole traverse. And here the climbing got really scary."

"rusted up with rime ice, that headwall would have been tough enough to lead with a pair of ice tools, a good supply of screws, and crampons firmly strapped onto mountain boots. For Tommy, with only the one screw and the Cobra as his sole tool, and crampons wobbling on his tennies, it was a nightmare. As he worked his way up into the rime, he uncharacteristically shouted down, ""I don't know about this.""

I tried to encourage him. ""Dude, you got this,"" I shouted up. ""You're a total boss."" But I had my own doubts and fears.

A waterfall was springing out of the ice, as Tommy put it, ""from a hole in the mountain that resemble[d] the mouth of a dragon."" He later captured that incredibly dicey lead in his Alpinist piece:

I let the pick of my single axe pierce the sheet of flowing water and strike the new-formed ice beneath. The point glides around for a moment and then sticks in a small slot. I have to move now. In another thirty minutes, that cascade will freeze and coat everything in verglas. Our few cams will skitter, useless, out of the cracks, and the aluminum crampons strapped to our tennis shoes will be more like skates. My hand trembles. . . .

I enter the waterfall, and I gasp as the cold flow seeps into every conceivable opening. I slot my single tool in a fissure, pull up and place a nut. . . . I look down: a large, dry ledge extends like an island below me. A growing chill reminds me that it's already too late to retreat. The only option, now, is to keep moving. I'd wanted us to have an adventure, but this is a bit too much.

For the next half hour, Tommy flailed around, as he described it, ""like a hooked fish in a rapid."" Finally he leaned off his tool placement far to the side and got a tiny cam partly slotted in a crack. He wasn't sure it would hold, but he grabbed it with both hands and swung over. Soaked to the skin, he was shivering, on the verge of hypothermia, but at last he was on dry rock.

The sun had set a while before. Tommy switched on his headlamp and aided up the crack. At last he took off his crampons and free climbed beyond.

All this time, I was wearing both of our jackets, the big puffy in addition to Tommy's light puffy. He was leading in just his hoodie and hardshell. It was amazing because after he got soaked, he climbed a lot farther, then eventually dried out and got warm again. Since I was doing nothing but belay for forty-five minutes at a stretch, then jugging for fifteen minutes, I was getting kind of chilly. It was impressive that Tommy could keep it together in such cold temps. Total hardman.

Finally the angle of the headwall relented. But now, in the dark, Tommy led a 600-foot pitch of snow and mixed steps. You're just scrambling, except that it was really snowy. Since we only had the one ice tool, he was leading with it, which meant that I wound up simul-climbing in strap-on crampons with no tool. Since the rope just disappeared into the night and I didn't know if he'd gotten in any pro, I was seconding with only Tommy's pick marks to show me the route. And just generally clawing at the mountain with my hands. It was scary.

We didn't get near the summit until 2:00 a.m. Just below the top, we found a nook shaped by a cornice that gave us a lee space to set up our tent. ""What a day!"" said Tommy.

We got ourselves inside the tent and shared our single sleeping bag. Once again, since I had the puffy, Tommy shivered through the night without complaining.

I'll have to admit that, on that headwall, I was way outside my comfort zone. That was one of my hardest days of climbing ever.

After only three hours of fitful sleep, we packed up camp and hiked to the summit of Fitz Roy. We didn't spend long there, shooting a few photos, still dog-tired. But from here on, we were pushing beyond the Care Bear Traverse that Freddie Wilkinson and Dana Drummond had established in 2008.

To get off Fitz Roy and down to the col between it and the Aguja Kakito, we had to make twenty rappels down the Franco-Argentine route. The route was like a waterfall. Three days of sunny weather on a south-facing wall had melted everything in sight. The ropes were like sponges and we got massively wet—not that that was a big problem, since it was sunny and nice out. An acquaintance of ours, Whit Margo, had just successfully guided a client up one of the ice routes on the other side of Fitz, and we ran into him near the summit. He gave us good beta for how to find the rap anchors, which was really helpful. But then, as we were rapping the face, his client's ice axe came tomahawking past us at about a million miles an hour. He'd accidentally dropped it and it went the whole distance down the wall. It was kind of a weird encounter.

From the col between Fitz Roy and Kakito onward, though, we were in largely uncharted terrain. We managed to weave our way over and around the various spiky summits of Kakito. But it was 6:00 p.m. before we stood at the base of the north face of Aguja Poincenot. Here we faced our second major rock climb, as we started up the route pioneered by Dean Potter and Steph Davis in 2001. It's a serious, 1,000-foot route with some bad rock and poor protection on a few pitches. Dean and Steph rated it 5.11d A1.

Our three days of nonstop climbing were starting to take their toll. The skin on Tommy's fingers was starting to be really painful, it was rubbed so raw. On Poincenot, I led the whole wall, but instead of simul-climbing, Tommy jugged up second to save his fingers. I short-fixed—tying off the middle of the rope to an anchor so he could jug while I soloed on—as often as I could to make it less arduous for him.

For one of the few times on the traverse, I switched to rock shoes. Then I managed to lead the whole thousand feet in only three and a quarter hours. There was only one pitch of truly bad rock, up at the top, but it was easy. And there was some semi-unprotected face climbing at the bottom that was spicy. But basically the route followed nice splitter cracks and I just charged along. I really felt like I was at home in the Valley. Really comfortable climbing.

Wasted as we were on the summit of Poincenot, we were still getting along great and climbing as efficiently as we knew how to. Throughout the traverse, we'd found time to take short breaks as we shot video clips on Tommy's camera. For voice-over, we added commentary about the whole undertaking. At one point, for instance, Tommy said, ""This has gotta be the most scenic thing in the universe."" On the summit of Fitz Roy, I'd seen other climbers maybe five hundred feet below us on a different route, and I couldn't help blurting out, ""There are humans down there! We're going to go down and hug them!"" Now, with the camera rolling, Tommy said, ""Tell us where we are."" I dutifully answered, ""We're on the summit of Poincenot!"" Corny, maybe, but who knows what a good film editor could do with that stuff.

We pitched our tent again just below the summit of Poincenot on the south side and managed to get another few hours of sleep. That night, Tommy tried to build a little tent platform out of rocks so we'd have something level to sleep on while I cooked dinner. He finally gave up about halfway through because he couldn't make it work. The ledge we were on was just too rocky and misshapen. So we wound up sleeping with our legs hanging over this big drop and a bunch of rocks sticking into our backs. There was always a junk show inside the tent. But we slept well enough. Fatigue does wonders. Still, I remember that bivy as the worst of the traverse.

By now we looked pretty haggard. We weren't eating nearly enough food to match the calories we burned, and our meal breaks were pretty on-the-run. I remember at one point both of us eating polenta with Tommy's broken sunglasses because we couldn't find our spoon. We were able to stay hydrated, however, by using straws we'd brought along to suck the standing water out of little huecos (natural pockets) in the rock. Or we'd eat snow while we were belaying.

By now, our gear and clothing were in tatters. Our shoes were falling apart, and our tent floor was full of little holes from pitching it on uneven rocks. Our pants had rips and tears in them. We'd managed to burn a hole in our sleeping bag. Our packs were trashed from dragging them through chimneys. Somewhere along the way, Tommy dropped one of his climbing shoes. We didn't even see it disappear into the abyss—it just suddenly went missing. On the Fitz Traverse, you could say that we product-tested a whole line of equipment.

Getting down the 3,000-foot south face of Poincenot proved to be the second crux of the whole traverse. That wall isn't climbed very often, but we absolutely had to find the fixed anchors left by other parties to continue our traverse. If we couldn't find those anchors, we'd easily use up our rack—and then some—making anchors of our own. And then, if we could get down, we'd have to abort and hike out. It's a scary business to rappel blind down a wall you've never seen before, looking for those fugitive pitons. I'd get fifty-five meters down and start thinking, Boy, I hope I find an anchor! We downclimbed as much as we could, but we had to rap most of the way. At one point, Tommy just picked up a stone and wedged it into a four-inch crack for an anchor. I said, ""Wow. Did you ever do that before?"" Tommy reassured me: ""It's bomber.""

In the end, we never got off-route. We pretty much nailed that descent.

By now, we were sort of flying on autopilot. Tommy described our state well in Alpinist:

At times, a kind of mutual delirium builds like the electric charge of a thunderstorm. Chemicals release from our brains: dopamine, norepinephrine, endorphins. Our focus narrows and intensifies. More and more, we appear to think as one. A sixth sense seems to warn us of each loose block or hidden patch of black ice. . . . Each footstep is sure and precise. The absurdity of our situation makes us giddy.

We were beginning to think we could really pull off the traverse. There were only three towers to go, none as tall or as serious as Poincenot. We tackled the Piola-Anker route on Aguja Rafael Juárez. It's another thousand feet, rated by the 1989 first-ascent party 5.11a A1, but the rock is mostly good. I led in rock shoes, while Tommy alternately jugged or simul-climbed. Near the top of the route, though, I ran into a 150-foot-long 5.10b crack that took only number 4 cams. One edge of the crack was coated with ice. I didn't have a number 4 cam on my rack, so I kept pushing a number 3 in front of me and pulling on it. Because it was too small, it was tipped out, with the plates barely catching the edges of the crack. It would never have held a fall, but at least it helped with the climbing. That just goes to show that in an international arena like Patagonia, you never know what the ratings are going to wind up meaning.

Even so, we got up the Piola-Anker in two long pitches, taking only two and three-quarters hours. A little more than two hours later, we'd traversed the sharp ridge and climbed two longish pitches to the summit of Aguja Saint-Exupéry.

By now, though, our climbing rope was shredding, thanks to the countless abrasions we'd subjected it to as it rubbed against the gritty granite. One section was so badly damaged that we finally had to cut it, leaving us with only thirty-eight meters of usable rope. The other twenty-two meters we carried with us to cut into smaller pieces for slings for our rap anchors. What this meant, however, was that we could make only pitifully short rappels with our doubled remnant of rope—a maximum of nineteen meters. If it hadn't been so windy, we could have used our eighty-meter tag line to make longer rappels. We tried to use it, but it got so tangled up that it drove us insane trying to sort out the snarls. So we coiled it up, stuck it in a pack, and just resorted to shorter but safer raps on our thirty-eight meters of good lead rope.

Tommy would head down first, get to a stance, and yell, ""I'm off!"" I'd say, ""I know, I can see you right below me""—scarcely sixty feet from my own stance. On a bunch of the gear anchors that we constructed, after Tommy rapped I would remove one of the pieces just to save gear. So I'd rappel off a single cam or nut, which can be a bit risky. (If it pops loose, you're dead.) I did that a few times in random places. It was all about preserving the rack for as long as possible.

On the ridge between Rafael Juárez and Saint-Exupéry, we were simul-climbing with the twenty-two-meter section of our lead line. (We were trying to save the longer part for climbing later, and twenty-two meters is long enough for ridge climbing.) In the lead, I got up to a little tower that dropped off maybe eighteen feet. No place to get in any pro. So I told Tommy to hang back a bit, and I climbed over the tower and rappelled off the other side, using his body weight as my anchor. Then, when he got to the tower, he just looped the rope around a little horn on top and rapped off the other end. So we were each tied into one end of the rope, rapping off each other's body weight. There was no actual anchor, just a little natural horn that the rope ran behind. When we were done, we just flicked the rope loose and it fell down.

It was a really weird configuration. We did all kinds of improvising like that. Which is what made things go fast.

The rappel off the south side of Saint-Exupéry is down a major wall. But here we were in luck. A few years earlier, there'd been a serious accident on this wall, so it was covered with trash from the massive rescue effort. Anchors, fixed ropes, junk all over the place. It seemed as though it took us an endless number of nineteen-meter rappels, and we were so tired it felt like a nightmare, but we got down it.

It was late evening. In the col below the last tower, the Aguja de l'S, we pitched our fourth camp. This time Tommy finally got the puffy, so he was warm. I did okay myself, since we were at a relatively low altitude. That night, we got a solid six hours of sleep. But the alarming fact was that we didn't feel at all recovered in the morning. By this point, we were just crushed.

On the fifth day, we got really blasted by the famous Patagonian winds, blowing out of the west, at our backs. It was so gusty as we pushed up the Aguja de l'S that we had to wait and time our bursts of climbing around the gusts. The wind was threatening to blow us off our feet. But we got over the Aguja de l'S and down to the glacier by 10:00 a.m. The relief was tremendous. All we had to do now was hike out. The only trouble was, my vision was blurry. Apparently I'd developed a minor case of snow blindness.

That five-hour stagger back to El Chaltén, crossing the glacier by postholing through knee-deep slush, was a real trudge. Once off the glacier, we stripped off all our wet clothing. Tired as we were, I was pretty frickin' happy. Later, other climbers would hail our Fitz Traverse as ""cutting-edge alpinism."" Rolo Garibotti himself, a man of few words and high standards, saluted us in print: ""Respect, respect and more respect.""

It didn't feel so cutting-edge to me. Tommy was always in good spirits, and we always got along. It felt like a really fun five-day camping trip with a good friend. I was proud of the fact that on the whole traverse—three and a half miles of travel, gaining and losing 13,000 feet of technical rock, snow, and ice—neither of us took a single fall.

The first climber to greet us in El Chaltén said, ""Man, we were starting to worry about you guys."" Something was wrong. Then we heard the news. Just two days earlier, Chad Kellogg, an extremely experienced forty-two-year-old American climber, had been killed on the descent from Fitz Roy, after climbing the Supercanaleta route. On rappel, he'd pulled loose a huge block that hit him on the head. He died instantly, with his partner, Jens Holsten, hanging right next to him. Holsten then had to complete the long descent alone.

Tommy knew Chad better than I did. In fact, I'd only barely met the guy. The tragedy hit Tommy hard. As he later wrote in Alpinist: We can tell ourselves that we minimize the dangers. Pick objectives that we're relatively certain we'll live through. Alex can calculate every ropeless move with precision. I can choose to use a rope. We can approach our climbing as a series of athletic goals or as a quest for enlightenment. But the truth is, this kind of accident could have happened to any of us. For the next few mornings in El Chaltén, a hush appears to weigh on our little community of climbers. People wander the streets as if unsure of what to say. Each night, we still congregate under the dim lights and rustic tables of La Senyera and drink red wine. Gradually the laughter returns. But when we talk about our climbs, it's with our heads down, our voices low. The night seems to press against the windows, and the wind shakes the door.

Kellogg's death also seemed to make Tommy reconsider extreme climbing. He was thirty-five years old, and during the traverse he'd thought often about Becca and one-year-old Fitz waiting for him to return. As he concluded the essay for Alpinist,

On one hand I am still a kid, full of wonder at the world, chasing dreams of distant summits. But I'm also a father—and this means I am no longer allowed to die."

"Tommy Caldwell’s father, Mike, a serious climber in his own right, taught his son a lot of the tricks of the trade when he was very young. (Tommy was three years old when he started climbing.) A few years ago, he told me that his dad had said that he’d had about twenty-five close acquaintances die climbing. Now, in his midthirties, Tommy had his own grim roster of friends killed in the mountains or on the crags. On top of that, he’d undergone the nightmare ordeal of being kidnapped by rebels in Kyrgyzstan, marched through the mountains, and faced with the real likelihood that he was about to be executed.

It was Tommy who’d pushed the rebel entrusted to guard him and his three fellow climbers off the cliff, allowing the four to escape. That act had weighed excruciatingly on his conscience. To help assuage his guilt, the other three agreed not to make public which one of them had performed the push. But Tommy couldn’t live with that. Even before the four had reached the safety of a government camp, he’d insisted on taking responsibility for the critical act. When they found out later that the Kyrgyz guard had miraculously survived the fall, that news only minimally reduced Tommy’s guilt, for they also learned that the man had been captured by government soldiers. If the poor guy is still alive—nobody seems to know—he’s rotting away in prison for life.

By the age of twenty-eight, in contrast, I’d been relatively untouched by the tragedy of climbing buddies dying in accidents. The most significant death in my life up to that point had been that of my father, whose heart attack had taken him away when I was only nineteen. In some sense, I still hadn’t completely absorbed or processed his disappearance.

About a month after I got home from Patagonia, however, there was terrible news out of Zion National Park. The way it came down was really hard on everybody who cared—and there were a lot of us.

Sean Leary had been my partner on some memorable climbs in Yosemite, including the linkup of three big walls in one day in 2010. He was also the guy who filmed me for Sender on the Great Roof on the Nose, then accompanied me by jugging his fixed rope the rest of the way up El Cap and joining me on the hiking approach to Half Dome, filming the whole way. And we’d had our friendly rivalry as we sought the speed record on the Nose, Sean teaming up with Dean Potter to break the record before Hans Florine and I broke it back.

Everybody called him “Stanley,” a nickname he’d earned because he’d first climbed the Zodiac Wall on El Cap using a Stanley hammer—the kind you buy in a hardware store for carpentry. He didn’t have a proper climbing hammer, but he was way psyched.

By 2014, besides being a world-class climber, Stanley had become a great BASE jumper. On March 13, he hiked alone to the top of a big cliff in the West Temple area of Zion. Because jumping is illegal in the national parks, he told almost no one about his plans, and he decided to launch at night, by the light of a full moon. He was using a wingsuit, so that he could steer his flight more or less as he chose on the way down.

Stanley was thirty-eight years old, happily married to Mieka, who was seven months pregnant with their first child. A week passed with no word from Stanley. Mieka simply thought he was somewhere out of cell-phone range. Only after he failed to show for a rigging job for a film company did anyone get alarmed. Then the only friend to whom he’d confided his plans spread the word, and Zion park rangers, along with some of Stanley’s best friends, started searching the slopes below the cliff off of which they thought he might have jumped. All kinds of grim scenarios crossed their minds, the worst being that Stanley had died slowly and alone, hurt and disabled in the backcountry.

Ten days after Stanley had jumped, Dean Potter and others finally found his body. It was clear that he’d died instantly from some brutal blow. It was a jump that Stanley could have pulled off easily in the daytime, but, as Dean—a top BASE jumper himself—reconstructed the accident, he figured out what might have happened. Stanley had planned to fly through a V-notch formed by two buttresses a good ways down the cliff. As he approached the notch, he may have suddenly passed into the moon’s shadow, as it was eclipsed by the cliff. Unable to see the rock, with only a second or two to correct his course, he probably clipped one of the walls and then failed to clear the notch. If he only bounced off one of the walls, that might have been survivable, but if the impact caused him to lose height and not clear the notch, that was inevitably fatal.

I wasn’t very close to Stanley, but we were friends. His death seemed really tragic to me, especially with his first baby on the way. (Finn Stanley Leary was born two months after the accident.) At the same time—maybe I was rationalizing—I realized that a death like Stanley’s had no bearing on the risks I ran as a climber. Everybody thinks free soloing is dangerous, but I think BASE jumping is way too dangerous.

I first tried skydiving—conventionally, with a parachute out of a plane—in 2010. I was, I’ll have to admit, curious about BASE jumping. I thought that it might be a great way to make my linkups of big walls more efficient. I did eight or ten skydives and hated everything about them. I felt vaguely motion-sick on the bumpy plane rides up, crammed in with the other jumpers like sardines and breathing exhaust fumes. And I found falling out of a plane to be just plain scary. But mostly, the few jumps I did were enough for me to realize just how many it would take for me to feel comfortable and safe. A lot more skill and experience were required than I expected, and since I didn’t really enjoy the learning process, I just decided BASE jumping wasn’t for me.

I get asked all the time about risk. The usual questions are “Do you feel fear? Are you ever afraid? What’s the closest you’ve ever come to death?” I get really tired of answering those questions over and over again. In all honesty, though, I can say that so far in climbing I’ve never come at all close to death—except for my absurd snowshoeing accident near Lake Tahoe in 2004. I’ve actually had closer calls driving than climbing, like once in a pea-soup fog in California’s Central Valley, when I blew through a four-way stop I didn’t see, locked up my brakes, and just slid right through. Or another time, also in the Central Valley, when a multi-car pileup forced me to lock up my brakes and plow around the wreck on the shoulder.

I have a take on risk and climbing that surprises a lot of people. I don’t think it’s the superdifficult climbs—even free solos—that will kill you. I think it’s the sheer volume of moderate climbing that might cost you your life. John Bachar didn’t die at age fifty-two because he was trying a free solo that was at his upper limit. Instead, he fell off a route above his home in Mammoth Lakes that he’d climbed often, one that was well within his abilities. Whatever went wrong that day in 2009—whether it had to do with a back injury that had weakened his shoulder after his car accident, or whether he just slipped on a move he could normally have stuck, or whether a handhold broke—it may be that it was that sheer volume (three and a half decades of soloing) that finally caught up to him.

Paul Preuss, an Austrian born in 1886, was probably the first great free soloist. His idealism was so pure that he horrified his contemporaries, arguing, “With artificial climbing aids you have transformed the mountains into a mechanical plaything,” and insisting that using a rope to get up a route was cheating. He actually thought soloing was safer than climbing roped—which, given the primitive gear and technique of the day, may well have been true. Back then, guys who fell while roped up often pulled their teammates to their deaths along with them.

Preuss died in 1913, at the age of twenty-seven, on a free-solo attempt on a new route on the Mandlkogel, a peak in the Austrian Alps. No one witnessed his thousand-foot fall, and his body wasn’t discovered for a week, because new snows had covered it. But other climbers later found an open jackknife resting on the ridge crest near the point from which he must have fallen, which led them to propose an absurd but chilling scenario.

I can just picture it. Preuss stops for a lunch break. He takes out his knife, maybe to cut an apple or a hunk of cheese. The knife slips out of his hand, so he lunges forward to grab it, forgetting for an instant where he is. Goes off the edge, tries to grab something, and misses. Talk about the worst four seconds of his life!

The questions about fear also get tiresome, though I suppose they’re natural. Mark Synnott recently told me an amusing story. It was after Mark, Jimmy Chin, and I had given a presentation in the Nat Geo Live! series in Explorers Hall at National Geographic Society headquarters in Washington, DC. There were three separate lines of folks wanting each of us to autograph posters. One of the guys in Mark’s line was a neurobiologist. He leaned in close to Mark and said solemnly, “That kid’s amygdala isn’t firing.”

The amygdala is the part of the brain that triggers the fight-or-flight response to danger. Apparently there’s a rare genetic condition that destroys the amygdala. There’s a famous case study of one such patient, called “The woman with no fear.” Nothing the doctors probed her with—real spiders, real snakes, film clips of monsters and haunted houses—scared her at all. It wasn’t surprising that by the age of forty-four, she’d gotten herself into, but managed to survive, all kinds of truly dangerous situations.

In my case, though, the neurobiologist had it all wrong. I’m every bit as capable of feeling fear as the next person. Danger scares me. But as I’ve told countless folks who ask, if I have a certain gift, it’s the ability to keep myself together in places that allow no room for error. I somehow know, in such a fix—like the moves above Thank God Ledge on Half Dome where I stalled out in 2008—how to breathe deeply, calm myself down, and get on with it.

"As I write these pages, I'm four months past my twenty-ninth birthday. Some folks have asked me whether I might have already reached my prime. After all, in professional sports, most athletes peak between about twenty-five and twenty-eight. That Roger Federer can still win a tennis tournament at age thirty-three is regarded as miraculous. A lot of baseball owners think that giving a pitcher or a shortstop who's over thirty a long-term contract is a mistake. It's a cruel reality, but the stats seem to back up those pessimistic assessments.

All it takes is the sudden arrival on the scene of a young hotshot to make you feel old. When I was climbing at Smith Rock in Oregon in the fall of 2010, a gang of top French climbers showed up. The prodigy in their ranks was a fifteen-year-old kid named Enzo Oddo. He'd already made a big splash in France, where he'd led seven 5.14d routes in the previous year. Too young to drive a car, he was chaperoned and belayed by his mother. He just seemed like a happy-go-lucky youngster having fun in the playground. But at Smith, he was climbing surely and beautifully.

I was twenty-five at the time. ""Enzo's the shit,"" I told my friends admiringly. But watching him climb, I suddenly felt old. I remembered when I was that young kid on his way up.

I know there are plenty of folks—both friends and fans—who think I'm simply rolling the dice with my free soloing. As well as he knows me, and as fruitfully as we've worked together, Pete Mortimer talks about his doubts as to whether he should continue to film my solos. Last year he told a writer, "There's a loud chorus out there of people who are not comfortable with what Alex is doing. Even some of his partners think there's a good chance he's going to kill himself."

When Stacey and I were first dating and I was teaching her to climb, she always said she wasn't worried about me killing myself. "I feel Alex is totally in control," she told a writer in 2010. But then one day she was watching me as I tried to onsight solo a 5.12a stem corner. I went up and down as I worked it out. Naturally, it was scary to watch. And scary to do, for that matter. After that, Stacey decided she didn't want to watch that kind of stuff any more.

The odd thing is, it's harder to watch free soloing than to do it.

I gave a talk at the Harvard Travellers Club in Boston in 2011. Mostly it amounted to screening Alone on the Wall. I was sitting next to a woman in the audience who asked me a question that nobody else had yet posed. ""I know that you don't get anxious when you're free soloing,"" she said. ""But what's it like to watch yourself solo on film?""

""My palms sweat,"" I had to admit.

There have also been people, including several writers, who have wondered out loud whether my sponsors and the media are pushing me to keep risking my life. But I think they're wrong. Nobody says to me, ""Hey, Alex, can you go out and solo harder and harder routes?"" Nobody wants me to solo, except me.

I probably can't judge objectively whether, at twenty-nine, I've reached or even passed my prime. You tell a baseball or football player that he's over the hill at thirty-two, and he'll get blue in the face trying to prove he isn't. But right now, I really do feel that I'm just coming into my best years. I think my finest climbs are still ahead of me. I haven't yet pushed myself to the limit, but, even more important, I've still got a burning desire to climb that's as intense as it ever was. There are so many great challenges out there, on walls and peaks all over the world. I feel just the way I did when I dropped out of Berkeley at nineteen, that there's nothing else in life that's half as interesting as climbing.

So what are those challenges that might inspire me in the near future? For years now, everybody's been talking about the first free solo of El Cap. I've thought about it for years myself. In my journals, as early as 2009, there are entries like ""Check out Freerider,"" or ""Check out Golden Gate."" The problem with free soloing El Cap is that it's so much bigger even than Half Dome, and there are no all-free routes easier than 5.12d. I'm not surprised that nobody has yet even attempted a free solo of El Cap. I think it's possible, but you'd have to be really ready. You'd have to really want it. The hardest thing would be just getting off the ground. But it would be amazing.

For a while, the media flirted with the idea that Dean Potter and I were rivals to pull off the first free solo on El Cap. I just shrugged off that talk, but it sort of pissed Dean off. ""Let's talk about it after it's happened,"" he told Outside in 2010. ""The magazines want a race. But this would go beyond athletic achievement. For me, this would be at the highest level of my spirituality.""

By now, because I'm so well recognized in the Valley, it wouldn't be possible to work a route—rehearsing all the moves with a rope and a partner in preparation for a free solo—without attracting a lot of attention. If the word got out—""Alex is getting Freerider dialed so he can try to solo it""—it would be a gigantic distraction. Back in 2008, when I free soloed Moonlight Buttress and Half Dome, nobody knew who I was. I had the good luck to rehearse those climbs without anybody making a fuss, and the even better luck to climb them when nobody else was on the routes.

For that matter, even El Cap wouldn't be the ultimate free solo. On Nameless Tower, a huge granite spire in the Trango Towers group of the Karakoram Range in Pakistan, there's an amazing route called Eternal Flame. It's as big as El Cap, and it starts at 17,000 feet above sea level. The route was put up in 1989 by a very strong German foursome, including Wolfgang Gullich and Kurt Albert. After lots of other climbers tried and failed, the Huber brothers, Alex and Thomas, succeeded in climbing it all free in 2009. They rated it 5.13a. Claiming they were lucky to have good weather and find almost no ice in the cracks, the Hubers called Eternal Flame ""the best and most beautiful free climb on the globe."" If there's a challenge for the proverbial ""next generation,"" it would be free soloing Eternal Flame.

I suppose it's inevitable that most of the media attention I get is for free soloing. But I'm just as proud of my speed climbs and linkups. Even though they aren't as glamorous, and don't really capture the public imagination the same way, they represent the same spirit as soloing. Covering a ton of ground as simply as possible. They are all just by-products of a desire to climb a lot.

A few years ago, when I was flipping past all the pictures in Alpinist with snow in them, I swore I'd never go mountaineering. But here I am, having already gone on two big-range expeditions—to the Ruth Gorge in Alaska in 2013 and the Fitz Roy massif in Patagonia in 2014. Tommy Caldwell and I had such a great time on the Fitz Traverse that we started planning another big Patagonian enchainment for February 2015. We wanted to attempt the Torre Traverse—a linkup of four amazing towers culminating in Cerro Torre (once called ""the hardest mountain in the world""). It wouldn't be a first, because Rolo Garibotti and Colin Haley nailed it in 2008. But there's a lot more ice on the Torre Traverse than we ran into on the Fitz Traverse—especially the hideous rime mushroom cap on Cerro Torre—and Tommy and I aren't veteran ice climbers.

It took Rolo and Colin four days to make the traverse, as they gained and lost almost 7,000 feet of elevation on steep rock and near-vertical rime ice. The scariest part of their marathon climb came as they headed up the El Arca route on Cerro Torre. As Rolo later wrote in the American Alpine Journal,

Then, suddenly, it was too warm. Ice fell around us, crashing against the rock with the sound of waves. For the next two hours we climbed as fast as possible, ducking our heads, until we found a rock prow under which we could find shelter. It was only 5 p.m., but we decided to stop and bivy.

The next morning, in colder, safer conditions, they climbed the El Arca route and completed the traverse.

Tommy and I thought it would be cool to see whether we could repeat the Torre Traverse, no matter how long it might take. If we managed to do it at all, it would be a crowning achievement in both of our climbing careers, largely because it would be so different from what we normally attempt.

But then, on January 14, 2015, Tommy and Kevin Jorgeson finally completed the first free ascent of the Dawn Wall on El Cap. Before topping out, they spent nineteen straight days on the wall, sleeping on a portaledge, as they painfully worked their way through each of the route's thirty-one pitches, including the 5.14 cruxes on pitches 14, 15, and 16. I was not only rooting constantly for those guys—I jugged up the fixed ropes to chat with them and supply them with snacks.

The climb got huge attention worldwide, including front-page coverage several days running in the New York Times, as well as a shout-out from President Obama. Nobody argued with the indisputable fact that Tommy and Kevin had put up the hardest free big-wall rock climb in the world. My admiration for Tommy simply swelled to a new dimension. The guy's an amazing hardman, climbing better than he ever has at age thirty-six.

In the frenzy of media attention that the Dawn Wall stirred up, however, with Tommy besieged by agents wanting him to write a memoir and producers hoping to film his life story, he had to back out of Patagonia. I decided to head down there anyway, still hoping to find a partner to attempt the Torre Traverse.

During a stormy three weeks last February, I paired up with Colin Haley, who was game to try to repeat his own Torre Traverse with me. The weather didn't cooperate, though we made several good ascents, including Torre Egger in fast alpine style. Colin had not only first completed the Torre Traverse with Rolo Garibotti in 2008, but he had since repeated it in the opposite direction (south to north), so it was only for my sake that he was willing to give it a third go. During our weeks together, he and I had a whole list of objectives. I suggested trying to do the Torre Traverse in one 24-hour blitz. (Colin's two previous jaunts had taken about four days each.) We agreed that that was the most exciting project to focus on.

Despite mists, wind, running water on the rocks, and lousy ice conditions, we got over Standhardt, Punta Herron, and Torre Egger in really good time. At 7:30 p.m. we started up Cerro Torre in the waning light. Halfway up, it got truly dark, so we climbed on with headlamps. We got only two pitches short of the summit before the storm really socked in.

For two hours, we hung out in a wretched nook, half-hanging from our harnesses. We were waiting for the first light of dawn, so that we could see how stormy it really was. In the dark all we could tell was that there was a crazy strong wind and we couldn't see any stars. It felt like it was about to snow. According to the forecast, the storm wasn't due for another 24 hours, but it had actually arrived way ahead of time.

At last we decided to bail. Colin thought that rapping the complicated and exposed north face in these conditions would be too dangerous, so we made an emergency descent of the west face. Then we had a soul-destroying march through the Paso Marconi. The whole adventure lasted 53 hours, with no stove or bivy gear the whole way, and the last twenty hours without food, before we got back to El Chaltén.

As Colin wrote the next day, ""It's unfortunate that we didn't quite get to finish the goal, but I'm very pleased with our performance, knowing that if the weather had held out we would've easily finished within a cool 24 hours of starting. Despite failing, it is probably the best day of climbing I've ever done in these mountains, and it certainly turned into the most epic experience I've had here."""

"If there's a great range I haven't visited that intrigues me, it's the Karakoram. I could see trying big walls in the Trango group. I'd love to bring Yosemite-style in-a-day tactics to some of the biggest faces in the world. The highest I've been so far is only 19,341 feet, on the summit of Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania, at the end of what amounted to a long stroll. I'd kind of like to see if I could still perform well above 20,000 feet.

The media are fond of talking about the ""ultimate limits"" of adventure. I sort of follow other ""sports,"" like big-wave surfing, or huge waterfall drops in kayaks, or crazy mountain biking. Guys (and gals) are doing unbelievable things in those realms. It's hard to imagine improving on what they're pulling off.

But I believe there are no real limits to adventure. Each wave of athletes just takes it a step further, then another step further. After all, before Warren Harding and his gang of siege climbers got up the Nose in 1958, El Capitan itself was widely believed to be unclimbable. By now, fifty-seven years later, the Nose has been climbed free (Lynn Hill), free in a single day (Lynn again, as well as Tommy Caldwell), and in two hours, twenty-three minutes, and forty-six seconds (Hans Florine's and my speed record).

I'm sure there will come a time in the future when everything that I've done will be regarded as mundane. Someday climbers will consider 5.12 totally casual. They'll warm up on 5.14a. Ascents such as my free solos of Moonlight Buttress and Half Dome will be relegated to the history books, interesting for their time but no longer a big deal."

"A criticism you sometimes hear about climbing is that it's selfish. Putting up a new route, after all, does nothing to improve the human condition. Yet there's a kind of paradox, as I see it, in the fact that the public's enthusiasm for the kinds of climbing I've done since 2008 has led to sponsorship, commercials, and media coverage, which in turn have allowed me to pour money and motivation into trying to improve the lives of some of the least fortunate people on earth, those living marginalized lives in Africa or on Native American reservations in this country.

It was climbing, starting with our expedition to Chad in 2010, that awakened me to the plight of those impoverished peoples, and it was the money I made as a high-profile climber that allowed me to try to do something about it. Long before I started the Honnold Foundation, when people asked me which nonclimbers I most admired, I cited guys like Warren Buffett and Bill Gates. Billionaires who used their riches to address problems of environmental degradation and income inequality, and to provide educational opportunities to the disadvantaged. Today I'd add Elon Musk to the list—a business magnate and engineer who's reinventing the world.

With my Honnold Foundation, what I really hope to do in the coming years is to improve the lives of the most vulnerable people in the world in a way that helps the environment. To support projects that both help the earth and help lift people out of poverty.

I feel obligated to do something along those lines just because of the privileged life I've been given. But I'm doing it publicly in the hope that it will inspire more good deeds from others. Either way, I'd be donating some of my income, just so that I could sleep well at night. But by doing it publicly through the foundation, I'm hoping to inspire others to do the same—or at least to think about the issues more and reflect on their own lifestyles.

And in a more self-serving sense, it's good to have a hobby, particularly as I get older and pure rock climbing becomes less of a dominant force in my life. It's fun to work on a side project and learn new things.

Hand in hand with the critique that climbing is selfish is the claim that climbing is useless. But I think that perfecting your skills on rock (or ice and snow) ends up improving you in other ways. I fully believe that what I've learned from climbing translates into other aspects of life. Figuring out how to suppress my fear while free soloing, I'm pretty sure, has helped me suppress my fear of, say, public speaking. It's certainly helped cure my shyness, which, if you can believe my childhood pal Ben Smalley, was close to pathological. And if the kind of climbing I do inspires others to push their own limits, that's not a bad thing.

At the same time, I'd never set myself up as an ""inspirational speaker."" It's just not in my nature to turn my own experience into a soapbox from which to preach to others how they should live their lives. Some climbers have no trouble doing just that. For instance, Reinhold Messner, the first guy to climb the fourteen 8,000-meter peaks and the first guy to climb Everest solo without bottled oxygen, published a book in 1996 whose English title is Moving Mountains: Lessons on Life and Leadership. Each chapter ends with very didactic advice, under the headings ""Application"" and ""Action."" A sample: ""Devise a wise risk management plan of action."" Or, ""Pursue a course of action that demands the exercise of your best qualities of character.""

You can turn this whole inspirational thing on its head. Every once in a while, I hear that somebody thinks I'm a bad role model for kids. The argument goes something like this: Some kid sees a film like Alone on the Wall and decides he wants to try free soloing. Doesn't have the judgment yet to know how to stay safe. In the worst scenario, the kid gets on some route right at his limit, loses his cool, and falls off.

Well, I challenge those critics to cite a single case in which a climbing accident has been caused by some youngster trying to emulate me. It just doesn't work that way. If you've never free soloed before, you're likely to get twelve feet off the ground, freak out, and back off.

Climbers pushing the limits of their ""sport"" are pretty self-motivated. They're driven by the challenge itself, not by the urge to imitate some badass hero. For that matter, sailing across the Atlantic in 1492 was a pretty dangerous business. A scholar has calculated that on any voyage from Europe to the New World during the Renaissance, you stood a one-in-three chance of dying. But I doubt that anybody in Spain accused Columbus of being a bad role model for kids.

Anyway, I've never told anyone else (except maybe Tommy) that they ought to try free soloing or speed linkups involving simul-climbing or daisy soloing. I've even done the opposite, like throwing in that little disclaimer in a voice-over in Honnold 3.0. In effect, ""Don't try this at home""—though that was also sort of a joke.

If what I do inspires others, that's fine. But that's not why I do it. No matter how much pressure sponsors or the media might put on me to try something rad (and by and large, they don't apply that kind of pressure), the ultimate decision is mine. I've walked away from more climbs than I can count, just because I sensed that things were not quite right. It's a deeply subjective decision, a combination of my mood and the vibe of the place and the weather. It's nothing I can precisely quantify, more like a vague feeling that some days are just not the right day."

"As the milestone of turning thirty fast approaches, I’ve had to think long and hard about my personal life.

In the end, do I want to "settle down" move into an apartment and stop living in my van, get married, have kids, and inevitably scale down my ambition—and if so, when? How soon?

Whatever the statistics are about athletes being past their prime at thirty, in climbing there are stellar counterexamples. At thirty-seven, Tommy Caldwell is still cranking as hard as he ever did. Whether or not little Fitz convinces him to cut back on his risk-taking—and so far, there’s little evidence of that—I remain in awe of his accomplishments, his determination, and his talent. Peter Croft is another climber I deeply admire. At fifty-seven, he’s still climbing nearly as hard as he did in his late twenties, when he free soloed Astroman and the Rostrum in a single day. He has a circuit of 5.13 sport routes that he does in the Owens River Gorge every week. He’s still shockingly fit. When I was an up-and-coming young climber, Peter seemed like a rock god—he was “the Man.” Now I respect him not so much as a hero as for his whole climbing career. He’s still passionate, but he only climbs what he cares about. I hope I can be like him when I get to that age.

In the fall of 2014, Stacey and I had another one of our periodic spats. The same old issues reared their heads—the questions of marriage, of kids down the line, of where and how to live. She really wanted to get on with her career as a nurse, not just follow me around from crag to crag or country to country. Our quarrel basically revolved around the idea of commitment. She wanted more commitment to the relationship on my part, while I still cherished the freedom to roam and see where things might take me.

So I sat down and made two separate plans for 2015. One was a program of traveling and climbing, tempered with Stacey time. The other was a program of pure climbing.

Stacey finally pulled the plug for good in December 2014, though we’d been talking about the issues for weeks and her decision came as no surprise. Having completed a graduate program in nursing the previous summer, she now moved to Salt Lake City and got a full-time job. And this time, when she said it was over, it felt final in a way it never had before.

Thank God it wasn’t a bitter breakup. We didn’t scream at each other. There was no major drama. We parted because in the long run what each of us wanted out of life was incompatible with the other’s plans. We’ll still be friends, eventually.

There was a lot of sadness on both sides. I felt the loss of something I might never find again. I had felt for years that I wanted to be with Stacey for a very long time, and she was the one woman I could imagine having kids with some day. I’ve never had a girlfriend I was half so serious about. I continue to admire and respect her as a person.

At the same time, I felt an unexpected surge of liberation. Ahead of me stretched another full year of great adventures and new climbs. Patagonia, Australia, maybe Pakistan. . . . I used to say that I couldn’t think six months ahead, let alone five years. For the first time ever, I can now see five years into the future. I’ve got at least five years of climbing and exploring at my highest level ahead of me. Maybe more.

A shrink might accuse me of clinging to my boyhood, of refusing to grow up. But boyhood, in the best sense, is all tied up with adventure.

Climbing as well as you can for as long as you can is a boyhood dream, even if you’re about to turn thirty.

What matters most to me right now is that climbing is still totally involving. I’m still learning new tricks of the trade, from direct aid to mixed rock and ice in the great ranges. I’m still exploring my limits. I may talk about what it would mean to free solo El Cap, but I also have a whole notebook in my head of potential projects on my tick list. I generally don’t like to share these publicly—not because I’m being coy, or because I’m afraid somebody else might poach them, but simply because I don’t like to create expectations. I don’t want to feel obligated to climb in any way, and I worry that creating expectations ahead of time would add external pressure.

What keeps me motivated is an insatiable hunger and curiosity. The best way I can sum it up is to paraphrase the ending of my op-ed piece for the New York Times.

The mountains are calling, and I must go.

# Alex’s Interview

<https://youtu.be/nQEXNUy-IIA>

<https://youtu.be/nq9ZAGqvmfY>

Going into 2020 it felt like climbing was having a huge moment it's funny I'm on the board of a climbing gym organization as well and and it felt like was this huge moment for climbing is comics in the Olympics yeah first time it's like going off. Obviously covid changed quite a bit and right so when we started talking about doing a podcast it made sense it's like to to explore sort of the history and the future of climbing during this moment and and then, when the Olympics got pushed because covid, we sort of went forward with it anyway, mostly because we felt like there were still interesting stories to tell because much of climbing history has occurred before there was media, to some extent, you know before things were easily recorded or you know did your five and shared. And so they're just so many classic climbing stories that are sort of lost to history, a little bit.

We seek out interesting guests in different spaces, and I think the thing that we're trying to sort of add to the space of climbing podcasting, as it were. A little bit more editing and a little bit more of a fanatic focus like. You know, having multiple voices for different people in the same episode talking about specific themes to sort of help.

educate about certain aspects of climbing and share a little bit about where we're climbing has come from. My cohost did another podcast diaries that fits call who's an actual professional podcaster he actually he's there he's the one that sent me the microphone that I use and told me how to set it up and how to use everything. I mean really the whole reason that podcast exists is because he he approached me about working on a project together, and I was like oh he's the perfect person to work with, because he already knows how to do it.

So so fun story, I am actually supposed to be going to Tokyo to do commentary for the Olympic channel so. Technically, I have a contract already with the actual Olympic Committee or whatever to go commentary for climbing. And so, part of doing the podcast was because I personally felt like it would be a great way to learn how to commentate you know I don't know anything about sports confrontation. But I figured i'd learned before the Olympics, and so the podcast seemed like a really great way to get to know some of the backstory meet some of the competitors learn, you know about their process and you know, so, as it turns out, we haven't focused on that, so far, because the lovely Scott post I just decided to kind of wait and see on that time. But it's almost better this way because this way the episodes that we have recorded are like the deeper backstory and then allows sort of set the stage that when we get to the Olympic side of the podcast there's already a good context for it so somebody who doesn't know anything and listen to that, and then by the time the competition starts they feel like they have a context that right. Somebody who's interested in the outdoors and maybe client wants or you know just sort of a general interest could listen to the podcast, understand and appreciate the stories and still feel like they learned something important about the sport right.

How do I feel in general about climbing being in the Olympics? I'm pretty into it, I mean there are a lot of climbers particularly older climbers that are sort of crusty about it, I think that it degrades the sports and what you're sort of really the fact that I'm calling climbing a sport, I think some climbers would take take take umbrage with that you know, because a lot of people consider climate more of a lifestyle or more like an adventure. But you know I come from a gym climbing background I grew up going to a climbing gym so i've always thought of climbing, at least in some part as a sport. And so I'm excited about the Olympics, I mean i'm psyched to go see it it's a I saw rendering of the venue it would look credible yeah I haven't seen huge like amphitheater with the walls.

I mean climbing in Japan is a big deal is it yeah it's really popular and and Japanese competitor so sort of dominated the World Cup seen for the last few years, and which I think is maybe part of the reason that the climate has any Olympics in Tokyo this year is because I think the host country has some influence on that, but uh yeah Japanese competitors will likely do very well and will likely have enthusiastic support from home cry. Well what's what's interesting about it now being a sport, where there's the controversy of it being a sport to begin with, and then there's controversy around how they're constructing the competition right when you have these three events essentially like speed boulder lead and it's kind of your your cumulative score across those three disciplines that determines your ranking yeah that's exactly it and so it's a slightly confused system in some ways, I mean I think it's fine is towards doing it fast, though right which is so now you're.

I'll dive into like the nitty gritty of climbing scoring. But I think was interesting about it is that you can kind of apply this tall sports because, like the decathlete or you know the Babylon or whatever and. Like to some extent any sport, you see, in the Olympics is being arbitrarily scored and way that that the competitors, or at least the organizing committees have agreed upon. And so you know any sport that you're watching is slightly arbitrary, you know yeah I mean other than just a purely elemental like swimming you know are running like strictly for speed, other than that you're always getting into formatting issues and, like. You know it's just it's just interesting and so with with climbing like you said it's the combination of the three disciplines it's a combined format, but um, it's actually you multiply the scores in them, and so it sort of disproportionately weights excellence in specific categories and weird way right, you know I mean and so. In theory, if someone's average if someone's pretty good at all three disciplines like they get forth and all three. I think that's great, but it actually they would do worse than someone who was a great speed climber, but, but not as good as the other two disciplines so it's it's got kind of weird formatting style. That favors you know dominance in one category and that's one of the reasons that a lot of climbers have complained about speed climbing being included because most people focus on the other two aspects, most people focus on boulder and the climate. And sort of excludes becoming right and so by combining them all into this combined format is suddenly forced these otherwise elite competitors to sort of learn this new sport right and really want right like like trying to tell a middle distance runner that suddenly they have to be 100 meter sprinter. Yeah it's like telling a middle distance runner that all of a sudden they're going to have to do 100 meter sprint and that's going to count in their score right, you know and they're like physiologically it's different things you know. In more than the physiological difference there's also a skill difference with speed climbing. Because the the speed wall for climbing is like a specific track basically so specific sequence of movements, so you do have to learn that track like learn how to jump between the holds well and. So it's made for TV and because you have two people right next to each other scurrying up or whatever so small yeah me personally five seconds, or something yeah exactly that's exactly you got five seconds of a 15 year wall looks completely insane.

Yeah So for me as a spectator I think it's awesome right like it's easy to understand it's incredibly it's an incredible display of athleticism like when you see people speak on it and elite level you're like that guy is a good athlete. You know just hands down, and you know I can understand why the climbing competitors aren't into it from like I don't know from an outside perspective looks amazing it's great for TV it's easy to understand. And I kind of like the well rounded you know, the fact that it forces the competitors to be well rounded right, you know right. So that's part of the thing is that because climbing is an exhibition sport and 2020. It the sport is only allowed one metal so that's why they did it combined format, because that way, had they just excluded speak on it all together that's not fair to the speed athletes and. But you know, with only one metal like how are you going to do it, so they just get on it and one yeah so the other one is.

So lead climbing is climbing a taller wall with the rope, bouldering and it's a short wall without the rope. And both of those are basically just measures of pure difficulty, so the bolder and bolder routes the climber incredibly difficult, so they they're like a test of max physical power so it's almost like power lifting but with an incredible amount of you know gymnastic skill and technique built into it, and then the lead climbing wall is the same thing, but on a higher you know because you're climbing higher, it's more of an endurance test right. They're are score numbers because you basically count how many holds up the route, you make it so if the lead route is you know 50 holds long like 50 hand movements up your score is basically you know which hand movement you do before you fall off right. But in general, if you see somebody successfully climb from the bottom, to the top there basically irwin like if someone makes it to the top you like that guy's champions.

That are obvious down standouts are Japanese man and tomorrow in our Saki who dominated world cup seen incredible boulder but also happens to be a very good speed climber so he kind of has this this leg up in the combined format, where he can really win in any of the three disciplines which makes them incredibly competitive. And then there's Adam Andrea who's chat climber, the Czech Republic, who is arguably the best climb in the world he's he's pushed the standards of difficulty twice now like breaking into new you know categories of difficulty for climate and he's also repeated all the hardest walls in the world and he's an incredible climber. And he basically one all the World Cups that he entered last year, so I mean, these are the year before last, and so they kind of cast the covid season but incredible climber, not a great speed climber sort of a self described poor speed climbing which is ironic, because he actually climbs very, very fast, but he's just not good at the sport of speed climbing which is that's where all this stuff gets so weird because any casual climber, looking at him climbs would be like wow he's so fast and then, when it comes to speed climbing he just doesn't quite sprint it, like so weird.

I'm essentially an adventurer, you know, like by the standards of Olympic competition I'm, not even a climber, like I'm not even rhyming at the difficulty that then these competitors warm up on basically. I bridge it a little bit because I came from the indoor world I still love climbing indoor I still train you know, at a similar way to competitors were just at a much lower level, but at least I'm still trying to do the same things. But um yeah It is interesting, I mean and that's a big part of what we we get into into podcast talking mountain climbing gold is is this contrast between adventure and athleticism and. And you know, like where's the sport going because, like you said, people to get into it now get into in the gym and train indoors. And I mean it's just interesting that an Olympic climber, could potentially never climb outdoors right and then even more interesting when you think that the history of rock climbing sort of branches off from from classical mountaineering and like people so many peaks in the Alps and things like that. And when you think that an Olympic rock climber, nowadays, could have never even hike up a mountain outside you know never, never even gone hiking which I'm not saying that's good or bad, but it's just interesting to see how the sport has has sort of splintered over time.

The Olympics should go and fix should reflect the times, I think. You know, and you know, in the what 40s or 50s the Olympics included mountaineering they gave medals for not hearing back in the day wow you know when you think of old school, like the first ascent of the Eiger and things like that, like classic mountains and in Europe. Like those received Olympic medalists at some you know and that went away.

A podcast yeah I think it's the end of the month, so on, so I think the 26th of March is the first episode. But honestly I'm uninvolved with it with the whole launch, it's yeah it's been fun, though, because you know so many of our guests so many people get to talk to our personal heroes in mind from childhood, you know people whose films I watch your books, I read or you know whose posters I had my room things like that. And so it's fun to be able to talk to them about how they got into climate and what it means them and just hear some of their opinions about where the sports going right because so many of them like my heros.

It's interesting because I think a big part of what made me, you know somewhat successful as a climber, and my life was the fact that I had access to a climbing gym earlier than most. And the gym the climbing gym that I was going to had you know it had a little gear shop built in it had this little video display constant going with certain climate film, so you always see like certain. Films going, you know old school vhs like this is awesome yeah super inspiring and you know I'd be climbing and then I'd like read all the climate magazines watch the films and. You know, to have that opportunity as a young person, you know, is a big part of what allowed me to become a decent climber yeah like and nowadays people have that. You're exponentially more of that like more access to information, you know more climbing footage available to them and they have way better facilities like way better gyms and not just more common, but just better you know better live more open cleaner like nicer better holds better setting. like higher quality training facilities, you know better pads like better flooring, which is a big deal, you know I broke my arm in the gym when I was a kid not so much because the flooring was bad. But that kind of thing does factor, and you know, like if you can safely climb in a like basically modern gyms are just saved and so you can climb, you can push yourself super hard physically, with no risk of injury.

When I was doing the free solo tour, I mean it would be I would share like in every city that you would go to for the the tour. It was all about like where's the climbing gym yeah like the workout that day for that screening or whatever i've sampled like almost every climbing gym in America, it feels like it, but actually there's so many gyms in America, now that is probably sampled a tiny percentage, actually, but it is true that every major city in the country i've sampled the gym. Because I typically would land I would go from the airport straight to the gym I would train. I take a shower at the gym I would go straight to the venue do whatever event I was supposed to do and then basically either go to a hotel or go back to the airport right but it's like gyms have always felt like a second home to me almost you know I walk into a climbing gym anywhere and i'm like home sweet home your shoes off I wander around and don't my stuff everywhere.

You were your hood you have your you keep your head down, just like climb. I mean everyone's there to do the same thing as you like, it is nice because you're all just there to climb together right. Ultimately you're like let's just send all these boulders together yeah cuz like we're all just there to do something.

I mean I think part of why the film gets a wells. So I don't know i've got nothing but positive yeah it's like the the media to around it was crazy and like going to the Oscars is crazy and you know meeting a Prince William, like meeting royalty it's all totally crazy whirlwind tour but um, but I can still look back on it and be be happy about the whole thing you know because I am proud of soling El Cap, but it was something very difficult that I worked hard for that I'm proud of, and I think the film reflected that really well and very honestly, and so I'm proud of the whole deal. You know, I was like so in it that I can't really say you know, like, I was just surviving the tour is like such a whirlwind but um but no now looking back on it with a little bit of perspective few years away, you know, like what a life experience like what a crazy whirlwind crazy, I mean before the movie was made, I joke that all I wanted was to see El cap on Imax just because El Cap to me is the most meaningful wall in the world, it's like the most beautiful iconic face. And to see it on the biggest possible screen, it was like that's that's cool right and I got to see the movie on Imax couple times not like it is so awesome. We did the wall justice we did Yosemite justice, I'm pretty proud of that.

Everyone that doesn't know anything about climbing they're like is you know so do you use a rope and you're like yeah mostly use it it's just this one crazy movie. Because I know a lot of my serious climbing friends, you know their families watch the movie and they're like is that what you're doing and they're like no no that's not what i'm doing right but. And that's not even what i'm mostly doing you know because I typically find with partners and. You know, training and just like climbing normally uh huh but, but obviously the documentary is focused entirely on this. Yeah I got this one sort of quixotic goal yeah but, but you know even that I mean the film for two years, you know the preparation, training and like getting ready for that climb. And I did, maybe a half dozen sort of cutting edge free solos to build up to that, but still that's like seven days of so long in the two years that we were filming. You know, so you watch the film and you know he's a crazy soloist and you're like yeah you know for seven days out of years, like you know you got to keep in keep in perspective right so.

Yeah I mean, so I live in Las Vegas and yeah and through the whole pandemic. Even during like lockdowns and shutdowns and everything outdoor recreation was always explicitly allowed in the state of Nevada so combined with the fact there's almost limitless rock around town, it was always totally Okay, for us to grow and develop and you climbing areas and go climbing and do to do things here the House. And so, is an incredible place to live. Yeah I mean the whole pandemic, for me, is just been sort of returning to roots, you know we're have no obligations I go climb every day I explore new crags you know develop new clients. There's like a you know it's not that bad and I know that's an incredibly fortunate position to be in. There was also I mean you know I do live there for a reason it's like you know I moved there because it's the best rock and because of that degree of access and you're married now I am married oh yeah yeah that also happened, like everything is I mean personally have a good year. But yeah but it's like embarrassing to say so, because obviously there's been so much hardship for some of the other view yeah but you know, sometimes things just work out my really.

So Sanni, yeah, is in a weird like I don't know if podcast listeners care about this kind of thing but she's like climbing really hard right now, which is like started this whole interesting positive feedback thing where because she's really strong. She's like more excited about it because it's like more fun for and which makes me more excited train harder, which is making her stronger she she's like total positive phase of life, right now, where she's like really cranking she's like climbing or hardest grades she's all fired up like that's cool yeah we just train in the gym last night, and she was like performing to a degree that I was like haha well yeah. You know, because i've been gone an expedition for a month and she's been basically just like cranking for the month I was gone right and I came home i'm like whoa. When we first met she had barely started climbing for sure her sister was into it and her cousin to something basically like a man, we got her into it, a tiny bit. And then, when we started dating obviously she started climbing more yeah that's good yeah now she's like pretty sure, because I ran do it yeah it's like anything you get good at it, you get strong and then you're more connected yeah yeah we're excited yeah and I think for her. You know I don't know for sure, but I think, as she started climbing there was a little more fear involved, you know it's like he's climbing is kind of serious and kind of hardcore and. And I think that, because she was dating me she kind of like went into the deep end right away, and it was maybe exposed to like a little too much like hardcore side climbing right away. And I think now is she gets like stronger and more able and can like do more as a climber it's all like much less scary right and so it's like obviously more fun when you're not scared at all. I mean there's some degree of luck involved with it all too because, like because she's been connected me for years and I know like basically everybody in the climbing community. Over the last few years, there were sort of like a series of unfortunate accidents were like people prominent climbers died in various ways, and so. You know all of those sorts of accidents like affected her personally in a way that he just started climbing in the gym and not known means you have no need to people in a window like not sure quite as much.

There is a degree of luck to that because the for several years, it seemed like really bad were like there were just a bunch of high profile accidents there were kind of terrible, but then you can go five years and have nobody that you know die, you know.

Well, is that you know, because if you live in one place, and you don't have access to big mountains, you can leave make the mountains, that you do have challenging in an appropriate way, but. t's not yeah i'm going to show up exhausted yeah see how I do on boys it's I really love challenges that you can do from home when you just like out of your driveway and then have this crazy epic day in the mountain and bike back to your home. And you know to be able to do that in the suburbs and Las Vegas it's pretty awesome yeah. You know you're like biking along surface streets, just like and especially in Vegas I actually right on the sidewalk a lot, which is kind of embarrassing but it's the best way and not get hit by a car. I feel like a little kid or something like afraid to bike in the shoulder, but there are big sections of Vegas where it's definitely safer to read the side rotten and. You know you're like this is totally absurd, but then you know, three hours later you're grinding up this crazy hill like a mountainside. And then you know, a couple hours after that you're like hiking through the woods by yourself yeah and you're like it's pretty amazing to have that kind of access.

About NatGeo project, I think it was yes, it was a it was being filmed for an episode of National Geographic explorer which I think is a series has been filmed by some friends of mine. And it was a crazy trip yeah so we flew into Guyana into georgetown and then the goal was to climb this ui which is like a big sandstone well sort of quartz sandstone while that sticks out of the jungle. And they're a bunch of movies, that are kind of scattered across kind of sweater one guy on and Brazil. Actually have you seen a movie Up? They're like charming Disney movie at pixar movie with like floating balloon house. The ones in Avator modeled on this area in China that's like limestone, like it's a different geological process that creates the Avatar mountains, but yeah it is kind of a similarly surreal mountain landscape with dense jungle around it. Anyways, so we were going to climb this wall that hadn't been climbed and then we also had this sort of renown biologist with us this guy Bruce who had done extensive work researching the the frog species in there, so he was going to sort of finish this transact of of the river basin that this wall formed the top and he was basically researching different species of frogs along the way. And so it's kind of a combined trouble we're going to get him up the walls that he could find some of the frogs on the summit and possibly on the cliff itself. So it's like adventure meets science. We're just sort of the perfect nat GEO thing you know it's like adventurous, but there's a strong, educational, scientific component to it.

Those peaks not been climb before so that particular peak hadn't been climbed, I think, largely because it's next to this mountain called for Roraima, which is a I forgot the name means but it's like a source of waters or something. It marks the boundary between Venezuela guy on in Brazil so like this one point in the middle of this big mountain is the highest mountain in the region and then from that summit, the water that comes off of various sides like one aspect drains into the Amazon river one rains and Orinoco and that's what I think and the other into Ghana. But um so basically it's a you know, imagine a Big Mountain that splits three countries and splits the headwaters of three distinct basins so it's like this really famous sort of important peak. And we were kind of a little peek next to it, so you can kind of see why the little peek next to it hadn't really had much action because like people love Roraima has this huge history to it and, like people were doing expeditions at 1900s like people are all about Roraima. It rained something like eight hours a day was totally a day wow every day we were joke, or like what the heck kind of dry season is this.

Technically it was not a difficult climb, it's just hadn't been done, I mean we didn't know, obviously it has never been done so we climbed this sort of large overhanging wall you kind of have to only find the overhangs there, because otherwise they're covering vegetation and water which is cool it makes the style of climbing really fun the rock is incredible some of the best rock on earth it's like there's amazing courtside really hard really solid and then what we did for climbers is a six pitch 12 be so it's like you know hard enough that it's like it's not easy, by any means, but it's not like cutting edge elite climbing either you know, but for an expedition like that it's pretty you know, a solid, we did something that we're proud of. But basically, he left the jungle, with many, many specimens like he had glass jar is full of specimens. And then he he'll take him back to his university and do a DNA sequencing on all of them, to see whether or not they're new species, whether or not they're related to existing things just basically to break it all down but um he was personally focus on the frogs but he also took many other creepy crawlies adventure is because basically anything, the thing with where we were is that no one's ever been there before so there's been like no science done because there's the rain forest approach to get into the mountains, but then between the rain forest and the actual mountain, which is say three or 4000 feet higher there's a big steep long hillside which is sort of the cloud forest which is like, if you imagine like stunted kind of gnarly trees growing over the talus field like the rocks that would have been below the cliff. It's like a whole different ecosystem that's a known it ever been through the cloud forest at all in this area so potentially anything that he found there alive, you know could be new to science right, so you know I think he cast a pretty wide net in terms of collecting specimens because, like anything could be new and it could all contribute to to scientists understanding of that bio.

We we called it, the SLIME forest because it's like it was really interesting while we were there because you know it's the tropics so it starts from 6pm to 6am every day, and we were staying in hammocks the whole time there's nothing like there's no flat ground basically the whole trip there's no fire ground so you're always just bringing your hammock between trees. And so I was in my hammock for like 12 hours a day, basically read books and like you know learning and so it's kind of fun yeah. It was is it's just wild I mean the cloud forest there's no there's no soil it's like a rain so much that it washes away soil, and this is particularly true on the summit's, the EU is like on top of the wall that we were climbing. It rains so much that any kind of earth gets washed away so you wind up with plants just stuck to the rock itself. And then that means because there's no soil means that the plants i'll have to get their nutrients and other ways so. The summit septic movies have some of the highest rates of carnivorous plants, like the you know the plants all eat insects and then. And then or they're like big like tea cup type things where like things will fall into the water collecting the bottom and drown and then brought and then the plant would like absorb the right the you know the. Material basically it's just like this crazy crazy plant kingdom out of the right I'll. Also the highest rates of animism on earth like endemic species like species that are unique to that specific place. Because these species, they are so isolated from the jungle below like because they're like a 2000 foot wall that's a sticking up out of the jungle The summit's are totally different climate, basically, then the area down below these as higher gets higher UV exposure more rain harsher conditions. And then the summit's have been separated from the jungle below for like 40 million years or something, because of the erosion and the way it winds up being an island, so it means that all the species have been diverging for 40 million years right. So it's like it's sort of like the last vestige Galapagos type situation where it's a it's like a petri dish first study you know exactly it's exactly like the Galapagos. I was about to say, welcome to the ritual science. It was a it was a crazy trip, but no it's just I mean a monster, though I like the if you, you did that one time, dude I read a lot of bugs. And like it's so grim being in the hammock I mean you know it's one thing they're like oh you're in a hammock but, like my hammock had a puddle on the bottom for the whole time we were at the wall basically because because we're in the cloud, we were just toiling away, you know takes a long time to get to the wall to end because we were filming you know because it's a TV project everything's a little bit slower, because you have to wait for cameras and. there's just more equipment to move around it's an incredibly difficult environment to move equipment around it, because you're like. Literally crawling through roots and vines and things you know that's what we call this line forest because you're basically like climbing up this lattice of roots and like shriveled little tree trunk right but. Like I was saying, because it's kind of a difficult environment it's not like the plants are like rooted in soil, most of the plants are growing on other plants so it's like. there'll be a tree trunk but the tree trunk is like covered in Moss and then their little parasitic flower is growing out of the tree trunk as well, and then. You know it's like there's all kinds of like epiphytes I guess like plants growing the other clients and so it's just like this crazy dense like wall of life, you know and you're like crawling through. it's like not an easy place to get around yeah you know it's not like i'm walking on a flat trail it's like so grid or they're predators are no there aren't that many living things actually there aren't that many animals because the whole. places like pretty tough actually you know we sell birds, we saw apparently we saw slots droppings at the wall so there's laws there and I guess. But we didn't see that much you know most things come out after dark like the frogs come out after dark. You know, we heard lots of things, I mean tons of spiders and snakes and all kinds of things like that. But nothing you know nothing like exciting when you think of the jungle monkeys all over it's like just not that kind of scene, because. We were kind of in like Alpine jungle, you know, like a pie towards the base of the walls it's all like a little bit more inhospitable than than like a tropical rainforest.

My foundation of the combination actually this year we funded, like last year, we funding this project called a carsalon which does a solar powered boats in the Amazon. You know, but so part of the reason I was excited about this trip down and my climbing this wall was because you know we adjust find to this project in Amazon, I was kind of like oh that's interesting and a big part of that that project cars are was that by keeping transportation costs on rivers low like basically by enabling boats to navigate these rivers easily without you know with low fuel costs basic solar power boats and electric motor it prevents the need to cut roads, through the jungle. And it was interesting because you know we did exactly that we basically flew to the most remote airstrip. And then took a whole day in a dugout canoe up this river, which was totally insane it felt like an amusement park ride because there's so many. Big logs that fall over the river that you're constantly ducking and like you know, avoiding binds and, and each time you go your boat barely makes it under some log. You know, all kinds of things like fall in your boat and then they're like spiders all over the boat and my you know there's just so much life and so crazy. You know, I was like this is exactly the type of project that we are supporting documentation is like making sure that this type of transit is economical and and functional that you don't have to cut roads through places like this, because you know rivers really are the primary means of transit through that whole. The upper half of South America, you know it's like they're just there's so much water. I've never been somewhere where it rains so much. More importantly, you don't have to import the gasoline or diesel or whatever, because in the super remote villages to get gasoline in there to power, your boat. You know first, it has to fly in one or more small flights and then take other boats, you know before you even get to the villages, at the very end of the rivers basically uh huh you know so it means that the cost of gas in those communities is incredibly high because it's really hard to get gasoline there. So when you can do something like a solar powered though it's just a lot more economical option, so how many boats down outfitted with solar. Our project I think they built a couple of boats, it was not quite a demonstration project, but I think it was like you know they were creating this this new idea basically and and I think you know moving forward they'll just keep building poses as you know demand.

One of the projects I'm most proud of through the whole foundation is the Puerto Rico creating a micro solar grid using batteries from Rvian trucks. It's just such an interesting and potentially transformative project. Just for context Adjuntas is in Puerto Rico which is kind of the Center of Puerto Rico which is pretty hard hit by the by the hurricane and basically because it sort of in the Center of the island, it was cut off transmission distribution lines for power were sort of separate for a long time, so you wind up with the whole city, you know off the grid for like months after the hurricane. And so sort of just as luck would have it, that community has this committee organization called a Casa Pueblo, which is already done sort of environmentally focused community organizing for many years, like opposing a big mine in the middle of the country and a couple others sort of like environmental advocacy type projects and they've always embraced solar like cosplay blows always has solar on their own facility and so after the hurricane they became sort of this energy oasis in the middle of you know and otherwise blacked out town. And so I think that's a big part of why there's such community bond in Adjuntas you know because they had months, where there's basically one structure in the whole city that has power and it's cosplay alone is because they embrace solar. And so, so there's tremendous community bond and combined with the fact that utility rates are really high people are basically paying way too much for their power anyway so they're really open to other solutions and so consequently flow is looking to institute a micro grid and the whole city center so basically all the main businesses downtown could go on to a micro grid and sort of separate from from the utility. And then we wind up wrangling Caribbean, which is a personal sponsor of mine electric truck manufacturer. They offer to supply the batteries for storage for the project because half the micro grid is being able to store the energy to ues. And then that's basically how it all came together. An important part of the Rivian design, because some electric cars haven't really designed their batteries, with the second life applications in mind, they just make the cheapest battery they can, and then, when it's done it just kind of gets you know shredded like. You know, so I think that when you go into the design process with the intention of using the batteries for something else useful after that their life in the car. You know that's an important and i'm really that should be a design principle for all products, you know anything about what happens to it when it no longer used is important. But the thing that um I think my the thing the biggest like personal thing for me through from the Adjuntas project micro grid nutrient is is that When you're in the city center it's like a classic sort of plaza like what you think of you know, small town America or something with a city square. And to power the whole thing it's something like eight Ruby and truck batteries. So, if you think of is eight trucks are going to power that whole downtown. When you're standing in the downtown and you look at how many cars around you they're like hundreds of cars, you know, like parked on both sides of the street, you know bumper to bumper going around the square it's like crazy a super dense you know. And you're like man eight of those can power the whole thing right it's like pretty striking actually. I think Amazon has already pre ordered 100,000 Electric delivery vans from Rivian and maybe more now. That was a big deal right like that's that's like a huge part of ravines business yeah be powering the Amazon sleep totally but so 100,000 electric delivery vans and you think that. You know all of those will be you know sort of phasing out in 10 to 15 years and it only takes eight of them to power, this whole city center. In a way, that's like transformative for the Community you're like when you multiply that out you're like man that's a lot of things that could be positively impacted that way. And so that's kind of the exciting opportunity for the whole foundation, I think, is to help establish a pipeline for a second life batteries know potentially implement more micro grids like this around say the Caribbean or something right.

The foundation for many years was just a way of me personally donating money. And then, in the last three or four years sort of since Free Solo and the whole crazy movie tour it's really become right like much more of its own organization. When I started the Foundation, you know, like he said it was just my way of sort of trying to affect you know effective altruism. Well, I guess you know starting the beginning, I think that the most important issue facing humanity is climate change or sort of environmental degradation, more broadly let's say. And at the same time, I think there's no point in trying to solve environmental problems that don't also improve quality of life to like help the human populations that in the area because you know I've been on enough expeditions to various parts of the world where you see communities that you know, like don't cut down the last tree. You know, on earth of it means boiling water for their family to like keep their kids safe and things like that. he thing is, like yeah in anywhere you go in the world do and it's funny because we're you know we're talking about guy on it like we were just hanging with these all the Indian folks like deep in the interior like basically you know Native Americans for South America. You know, a bunch of the villages they're living super traditional lifestyles it's like you know basically still practicing slash and burn agriculture cultivating cassava. It's all you know, as it has been for thousands of years songs done they're all like we want directTV you know. You don't even have power like there's no grid there's no there's no cell service there's no connectivity there's no transportation, you know they have to take a boat for a day to get to the closest town. It's like so disconnected and they're like when's the directTV gettinghere and you're like I think it might be a minute, you know. You gotta like there are a lot of things like first, you to metal roof, you need to be able to keep stuff dry, you know. I've been on enough trips like that, where we realized that there really humans all over earth, you know, even if they're actively trying to preserve their their traditional lifestyle like they still want you know refrigeration they want access to medicine and when communication like pretty much all humans want some degree of material comfort in their lives. And and that's only fair, you know it's like you know I want to be relatively comfortable I want you know climate controlled at least to some extent, you know I want like flooring you know it's like. I want to not get parasites things like that, like I want access to clean food and water, and so you know, I think that when you focus on environmental issues it's important also sort of focus on equity issues of like well humans, like all humans should be entitled to certain standards of living. I think that if you're trying to solve environmental issues without also focusing on the equity side like making sure that all humans, you know are are equally able to take care of themselves. That's sort of informed the initial projects from the Foundation is like looking for environmental projects that also improve standard of living like help help folks. And over the years we basically always wind up choosing solar projects because they just often are the most elegant solutions to those kinds of problems where it's like good for the environment, good for people.

After several years of supporting a bunch of different solar projects we were like we should just make this explicit at a certain point. You know, you may as well, focus on what you already know, and what you're kind of good at, and I just I just think solar is such an obvious solution to many human problems. I think a lot of those personal experiences depending on your home because you know i've put solar on a bunch of homes now through the Foundation. Most of that stuff remotely to or like a my home and suburban Las Vegas, I was actually on a climbing trip in Wyoming at the time, living in the van I basically made some calls people went to the house, they installed solar turned it on all worked fine I was like never even involved, you know I just wired money online is like totally chill. It's not that hard in the US, and I mean and you see that because rates of solar adoption are steadily increasing, you know it's all sort of exponential growth. Also the cost of panels has been exponentially dropping, to the point that nowadays, you know the panel's themselves aren't even the most expensive part of the install anymore it's like the actual Labor and, like the racking you know the, like the other things like everything else that goes into a installation.

The foundation just closed latest open call for what we called the core fun grants which are sort of like the interesting why we're talking about cars alarm the Ecuadorian Amazon. Solar boat project things like that come through the core fund, which are basically like grants around the world for interesting solar projects, so the latest round, you know will probably find you know 10 ish projects like that, but we got what we got hundreds of applications and of those we probably had about 50 or 60 that are legitimately good applications, but we can only find the top 10 or so. So really there's tons of incredible ideas and good projects out there it's just a matter of having enough money to actually you know implement them all. We gave away a million dollars this this year which for me personally counts is tremendous success, you know, because when I started the Foundation, it was me donating 50 K, a year just my so to see you know 20 times the impact. As when I started i'm like oh that's awesome right 20 times more work that's great right, but then also knowing that we could have a $10 million budget and still fill all the things that we're seeing right now but, but you know there's like hundreds of millions of dollars worth of good projects out there that it could be done right there are.

So banking is pretty much the the number one thing that you can do for personal impact which is funny because it's so much less satisfying than like changing your diet because it's less obvious, but the thing is wherever you bank, you know they're using your money at the whole time that it sits in whatever account you know, like you put into an account and then they're investing in things they're spending and they're like using it basically. A famous example is like wells fargo North Dakota access pipeline or something. But, in general, every bank, you know every major bank America is supporting both sides of the political aisle they're making political donations there. You know, investing in fossil fuels, like basically if you're using a mainstream big bank it for sure is doing stuff that you personally wouldn't do. You know whether you're on the left or the right it's like your bank is for sure doing stuff that you wouldn't want it to do. And so you know, the solution there is to do bank with you know nonprofit credit unions things like that, like local banks smaller scale banks that investing in like fossil fuel infrastructure and things like that that you might not personally support right.

My sister actually many years ago, before I started my foundation before I started any of this stuff. She gave me this book called the better world shopping guide, which I think is out of print now but, at the time was this incredible resource where for any consumer product, including banking and things like that you could flip through and basically see all brands listed from A to F and it was a In it was eye opening for me at the time, because I realized, I could go to the grocery store look at breads and see two different brands on the shelf same price point same basic quality except one. You know, is basically actively supporting the type of world that I want to live in, you know, like paying its. Employees good living wages and like you know, providing maternity leave and things like that, and the other is like ruthlessly exploiting its its workers, and you know degrading the earth. and its exact same product and you're gonna like well, obviously I should support the one that you know makes for a better world. And so you have a better world shopping guide my of my of my sister she signed up for me is that a for Alex in case you ever start giving a shit, love, Stasha. The interesting thing about like the long gradual you know awakening like you just learn more and you start to care more about it and you know sort of virtuous cycle.

Personal choice, it's funny because i've sort of come full circle on this a little bit, because obviously I care a lot about personal choices, I went vegetarian, because you know, or like sort of aspiration vegan and basically partially because i'm lactose intolerant partially because basically just it's a much lower impact for for diet. I changed my banking of you know change all kinds of lifestyle things and effort to minimize my my personal impact on earth and even start an honor foundation which, to some extent to know that I personally was doing as much good as harm, you know, because just by living and traveling to climb, and all that, like obviously i'm having a negative impact on the world and so i'd like to think that i'm doing as much good as harm. But now i'm sort of coming back around to where I feel like the whole onus on personal choice has been been sort of foisted upon us by outside forces, you know it's like basically industry telling us like you should think about your choices. Rather than have the industry regulated in a way that's appropriate. Actually Covid has been an issue measure of this because, even with travel lockdowns for the whole world, for the last year, you know global missions have only dropped, you know seven or 10% or something like 7% I mean that's still barely in line with Paris Accord type things so if you think all of human society is fundamentally changed for the last year and we're still barely hitting the numbers that we pledged to me for the latest round of climate accord. Like that's crazy, you know I mean it just showed our scale yeah it shows the scale of real change has to happen. And that kind of thing only happens with policy because it's one thing for individuals to like choose the right product all the time, but it's another thing to just make sure that all the products have to be made, well, to begin with yeah you know I mean like limiting pollution in different ways policy is also are. it's probably easier to lead with policy changes yeah you know, like in the US, you know, the adoption of electric cars and things like that, and like basically public transit and changing transportation models. Transit accounts for like a third of our carbon emissions, and so you know it's like an area right for change. An easy way would just be to basically put a tax on gasoline or something like that, basically, on on carbon emissions, and that would drive all kinds of changes in consumer behavior. You know, rather than just hoping that individuals who go out like buy a Prius or like buy a Rivian or whatever.

The thing is, you get a lot of shit, no matter what you know it doesn't really matter. You know, and while we're talking about getting a lot of shit like it's not like i'm just like advocating for gas tax because I know that kind of thing is is super nuanced because in a lot of ways that's regressive because it affects lower income folks way more than hiring and that's not totally fair, so it has to be very finely executed, you know it's like yeah I get all that i'm just saying that, I think that starting from the policy side can potentially have a bigger impact in the world, you know So what do you mostly mostly because I think individual choice is great for individuals that have the bandwidth to think about it right, I mean like I have plenty of free time reading books about environment thing about it but, like the vast majority of Americans. You know, like if you're working a minimum wage job, what you are not going home and reading books about the environment to like think about minimizing your footprint sure you're like you're struggling you know, like it's hard. So when you, basically, so I think that putting the responsibility on the individual is is sort of hard on the individuals because most individuals are never going to have the time to think about it, like they're just trying to survive.

In an ideal world, when you go to a store or something every product would be justly made you know, like fairly manufacturer, with no pollution and like know externalize costs and all that. And that's kind of the world that I think. Most of us would like to live in, you know, like you would like to think that anything you buy will not be you know, exploiting child Labor and other parts of the world, or something like that it is like an arms race, though, because I do feel like we're moving into an economic culture in which people really do care about those kinds of things and it's incumbent upon these corporations to be transparent about their supply chain and how they treat their workers and the like, and you know, the average consumer, if given the opportunity to think about it for a minute is going to make the better choice like we're good people, and we all want a better world.

I think you know optimism pessimism side, I think that a realistic assessment of 6Global climate you're basically realistic assessment is that my personal lifestyle will probably be fine regardless, you know I mean like i'm lucky enough that that I go climbing all the time and if, like impacted by climate impacts affect me I can move to other places, and you know and so. I don't know I mean that's kind of the and that's the real thing about climate change is that for most of us like it's not gonna it's not gonna affect us personally, you know mean like anyone listening to this podcast basically is comfortable enough that they're not going to be the ones that suffer from from the effects of climate change it's like. You know the subsistence farmers in sub Saharan Africa, you know that have crushing drought and then have crop failures and can't feed their families, you know what I mean, but like that's so far removed from our reality this used to be like all that and we don't even know what that is so we're in we're not stressed about it, I know, so I mean. I don't know I mean yeah i'm optimistic that humanity can sort of confront and solve some of these problems. But even if we do move too slowly, and it doesn't really work out, you know i'm also sort of recognize the fact that you know, like realistically my life will probably play out along a certain path regardless Which which is incredibly unfair, which is a big part of why I started Honnold foundation and things like that.

I think we're going to have kids and that changes like how you see all this stuff I am you mean because you're worried about the world, your perspective is tweaked yeah but the thing is like you know your lane is solar right now but that's an example of technology that currently exists to solve these problems like most of these problems, we have the ability to solve.

I know and that's like probably the most frustrating thing about reading environmental books is that you're like oh all the solutions area it's like a buffet of solutions. And so many of them are just such obvious and that's my thing was solar's it's like an obvious when when you know, like this is such a clear solution to certain problems and I can draw it on one of the biggest climate impacts we can have is women's education around the world and you're like well, that seems like an obvious thing regardless, you know, like climate aside, even if you don't believe in climate change, you should definitely believe in educating women, you know it's like that's like basic fairness.

My family has a place in in tahoe that I like grew up going to this like cabin and into and last summer the wildfire smoke was so thick across the lake that you can see, the other side of of wicca. At one point, I saw this like party boat coming into shore. That like a big like tug almost like tons of people on it like partying on the boat like I don't really know what was going on, but I sort of joking it was like oh look it's climate refugees like escaping because it's like it looks like the ocean and it looks like a bar. Like the kind of seeing that you expect to see in in southern Europe, you know, like folks fleeing to Italy, and you always kind of like kind of tongue in cheek and I was like this is kind of true you know, like all these folks. On fire yeah this guy's on fire and people were bailing out of the bay area to try to come to the mountains, the mountains are on fire, you know, because the bay area, it was like crazy fire, this year too, and I you know I don't know if this will wind up mattering in the world, but it is interesting when effects of climate change, or to be felt, closer to home, you know it's like when you can't spend a summer in California, people are like what the heck like that's crazy, you know, especially you know I spent my whole life spending summers in California and kind of like that's the first, it's kind of unprecedented. Especially when when you consider that, I mean fires are a natural part of the life cycle for us, you know it's like when you're in the Sierra Nevada you're like yeah this is natural and should be fine and yet you know the sky is blacked out for for almost a month and part of this summer was totally insane and you're like that's not natural yes that's craziness. It's like super depressing but also you know super important like this is probably the most, we need to be talking about it.

I mean uh you know I free soloed El Cap I think 2017 and the tour was in 2018. And so it's kind of taken me a year and a half, but um but really the season is sort of the beginning of like a real fire or like real hunger for for challenging things again and so. I mean you're right that nothing will ever trump El CAP like nothing yeah nothing will be better than that El CAP, but um. You know, but there's still some other things they're pretty cool that i'm excited about. Actually a couple of things i'm excited about is just at home, like projects in red rock, which is the climbing area outside of Las Vegas. You know I mean sometimes you just get inspired by certain things and you're like this seems crazy and really hard, but then you're like I think I can do it, and then you're like can I do it, and then you have to find out if you can do it. And really that's like the whole joy of the processes to finding out like what can I do like crazy let's let's find out.

Am I right in thinking that before coven hit you were thinking of doing the seven summits yeah, though, that I mean, I still would like to in my life that's not like a that's not really like a big climate goal.

For me, that stems large like I don't know if you ever read the book The Seven Summits Dick Bass who's the first person now he was he's kind of a non climber, he on snowbird back in the days like this man, I think he may have been oil or something but.

But I think he was like a Texas businessman or something, but he just got this like wild idea that you wanted to climb the highest points on earth. And so, he was guided on them, and this is like before was the thing and people did anyway it's a great book it's kind of like classic adventure writing. And you know I read that many, many years ago and it's like that's awesome like you know i'd like to do that in my life and now it's a little bit weird because Seven Summits is so commercialized that real climbers kind of thumb their nose at it like that's not cool I'm like I still kind of want to you know but um but that's not that's not a like a rad climbing project that's just like a personal thing i'd love to do that in my life but we'll see how it plays out.

I've climbed a mountain yes it's not it's not a, I find that's distasteful. Like basically that's just not the experience that i'm seeking in the mountains and is especially on on Everest, in particular, their there're robes going the whole way up and so everyone just like clipped into a rope the whole way up and somebody else's put those ropes out for them. And so you know I personally have sort of mixed feelings about like outsourcing the risk and the challenge of climbing like I don't want to pay somebody else to put the rope up for me. You know it's like if I can't put the rope up myself I probably shouldn't be climbing it, you know and not to say that that's a standard that that all people should should hold you know because you know i'm sure and and I think climbing Everest is really, really hard regardless, I think that even if you are just following the rope or something but it's still quite difficult check that you know it's a challenging physical experience. But um but I don't know I just feel like if I want to go up there, I want to like actually climb something.

One of the things i'm playing with this season is a traverse the entire range of red rocks which is like this actually, as the crow flies probably only like 10 or 15 miles like linearly but you're going up and over all these peaks and so. I haven't quite piece it all together, yet because it's incredibly complicated refining and climbing and climbing classic climbing roots and then down and I going up and down to tag the different segments, so do a bunch of good times but um it's coming in, like 25,000 feet vertical or something well it's like a really, really big traverse and you know we'll see if I manage to should do it and how exactly it shapes up and i'm like what an adventure, you know to like leave your house yeah just climb this entire skyline that you can see from from anywhere in town.

With these really long and technical rock climbing traverses is actually a hard to quantify the vert and, like the numbers because GPS doesn't really work when you're climbing vertical routes, you know, like when you're doing sheer vertical walls your GPS for like pen pen you all over the place, so like messes up all the numbers. So you have that experience like if you have really steep hills with GPS I don't go hills that steep steep enough to do that. Like because basically GPS doesn't really work on a vertical plan right, you know it's like more for like horizontal. But um and then the thing I did with Tommy last summer have taken us like 36 hours, so all our device died anyway cuz your batteries don't last that long if they're tracking. We had no pants so we were like 13,000 feet and running sure it's all night, and it was it was pretty character building.

Tommy, he's one of my best venture partners for sure. Actually, I had just gone with him last week, like the day I got home from from this exhibition Guyana. Tommy just happened to be in Las Vegas contrary something so we managed to sneak out for. But um he's been doing some home repair he's like right he was he's doing a plumbing project on his house. He's always he's just such an incredible climber, then you know even relatively off the couch.

Environmental leaders are scientists about climate change, I think, which, if it happens I'd be pretty excited about but, honestly sort of intimidated, because you know, as you know, most podcasting is just chit chatting with people you rarely have to know, a subject super well.

Before covid when it comes to the environmental stuff, I don't know um that's an interesting question, I mean so on this trip I just finished book Energy and Civilization and sort of the progression of different energy systems in human civilization and it was interesting I mean, I think that book gave me an appreciation for how long and slowly the transitions between energy systems are you know basically like going from you know human power to like the introduction to the steam engine to you know coal fire to eventually you know oil like full on fossil fuels. It's just like each transition takes quite a long time and it's given me an interesting perspective I guess on like our current transition to renewables and what you know what that will take, and one of the interesting things I got from the book was that um you know every transition has been powered by the previous fuel let's say you know so like the transition to coal uses like by steam engines. Which is funny because that's a common criticism of renewables is all based on fossil fuels, you kind of like well yeah because any transition is going to be based on the previous system which I found it slightly heartening, in a way, because i've always found it like you know it's a little bit of a bummer that like to build you know wind turbines let's say you have to melt a bunch of steel and like a steel is all being powered by you know those plants are all being powered by fossil fuels is kinda like is it even worth building wind turbines if it's all if all the raw Materials behind are being mined and milled through fossil fuel extraction you're like is that worth it.

Though that, though I mean you, when you do the math on it, even if it's all powered by coal it's still better than then internal combustion engine car. So you know it's like yeah it's still a step in the right direction, but I think the takeaway with all those you know sort of the messy technical questions of energy transition is like you still have to take the small steps in a different direction if you're ever going to get anywhere you know it's like if you're hoping to decarbonize grid, or like to change energy systems it's like you have to start taking some steps you know, even if they're not perfect, even if it's not 100% correct like you have to at least move in a direction and appreciation that these things take time. I mean it's not that removed from like athletic performance, you know it's like, if you want to get better at something like you have to just grinding away, you know training it's like just keep grinding away at it and, eventually, and you know, hopefully, eventually, you do something that's actually meaningful.

But it's it's super I mean when I went to the headquarters for the company outside Detroit, it was like full on vision, a futurist it's I kind of what you would expect from like a new technological startups are happening, I was like blown away I had this vr experience there were, I was like in a room I put on like a VR headset and then basically like sampled an assortment of their like futuristic ideas you know, like like concept vehicles, but you could like walk around the space with a VR headset and like interact with their concept vehicles, and I was like totally blew my mind, I was like. It was like this star trek was like like where am I. Classic like nice new facility with with a you know it's like just clean well lit and like classy with lighting electric trucks all over, and I was like this is so right like now what you think. I was like this is the future for sure. I'm actually i'm supposed to be doing a VR project, this year, I think actually it has the potential to be really cool well let's see yeah I had.

For even like or even as a gym climber who's just realistically never going to go to these places like the guy that i'm working with on the VR experience shot and Everest VR piece, I guess, three episode, you know basically goes to the summit of Mount Everest in VR. And I found it incredibly immersive and rich in a way that I did not expect because you know i've read tons of books about Everest over the years. And then to actually be in it in VR and be able to look around and like interact, the landscape was like this is so much better than all the books i've read, I was like crazy.

I mean like wearing noise cancelling headphones with a good headset with like high res really good. You know, not to like jerky, and I mean like obviously the technical side of it will only improve yeah and you're just like it's just so. Yeah i've always felt like it wasn't quite there and then I watched the VR experience, and I was like this is pretty there and that's kind of what inspired me to feel like it was worth right shooting a VR piece was like. Even if the current headsets aren't perfect you know someone will be able to use that footage on on better models soon yeah it's pretty incredible.

So the idea is that the subject like climbs to the frame, so the cameras fixed in a certain place and I sold 360 camera you know crazy VR setup and then the climber climbs through the frame. It apparently to minimizes motion sickness, because if the subject itself is the VR focus like. Like basically if you're wearing your headset and everything's moving around you, you get incredibly motion sick. But if, when you're wearing the headset you feel like you're in a stable place and you're able to control the vision and like look around and then you can just see someone doing an action in your frame and then it makes you less sick.

And then sort of center the camera so that you're looking at the climber, as the climber goes up the wall, the point is for the camera to stay totally static. These Ideally I think for the viewer you they want to be in like a swivel chair, or something or like standing in a room where they can fully move around at their own pace and the way they want. And there'll be something happening in the frame.

No, I think the climate stuff that will be shooting a sort of the other end in spectrum where it's like more expansive, broader views you know a lot of it is about putting somebody in a position, and they can never see like the Molar shark stuff feels very like intimate and you know you're like oh my God the sharks about to eat me, seems super close and seems scary. I think the climbing footage is more about being in a spectacular place and having a super broad, when you can like see the world around you and then also when somebody's climbing something totally spectacular.

I honestly don't know I just do what i'm told you. Yeah I think I think Jay leno's garage is where you live chats with people buy cars and he's a car collectors right, so he has all kinds of interesting he's kind of a car collector. But I think there's something to be said for talking about the utility of card like basically I don't care at all about my car, but I care about what it allows me to do in the life that I lead, you know I been on the road. It's not so much about the car it's about what I get to do with the car right.

I think I think I might be taking him climbing to or so, or you know it all plays out right. I'm psyched. I think stony point it's like a kind of historic climbing area like murkier now that's cool but we'll see. I don't know, like all things in my life i'm like I don't really know i'll just show up and see how it goes, will have a good time. Honestly my whole life it's like easier to just go with go with the flow and then like oh it's all the crazy adventure i'm just on the ride, you know plays out.

Like in the whole free solar film tour, which was like six or eight months of like non stop scheduling. Sometimes two events in two different cities and the same day, like something in Chicago and something in SF and the same day, which is like pretty rugged when you have the flights in between everything. I think in the whole tour there was one event that I was supposed to go to that I was just like I just can't. But it was only because either Jimmy or Chailike took it over for me like they did the event for me that night or something.

Well that's the thing is, I knew it's like a once in a lifetime adventure, you know if you instead of looking at it is like this heinous work experience, if you look at it like this is a crazy adventure. That you know i'll tell my grandkids about like the one time I got to sample the movie star life yeah you know, then, then it makes it all that bad because it's um I kept calling it my deployment to Hollywood because I think people will be in like deployed overseas for six months. And it did kind of feel like that, because totally different world totally different scene. You know i'm being taken places by car service and i'm like I don't use a car service. I'm not used to having like fancy SUV sitting out from waiting for me to like waste me to hotel and i'm just like i'm just going with it, you know i'm doing what Brad does Brad Pitt.

Funny enough the formal wear stuff like that actually does get more comfortable if you were more because i've only ever worn formal wear like once and you're like oh so starchy and painful and like not that nice and then, if you were him a couple times you're actually like yeah starts to break in a little bit. For deployment at the Oscars the tux was like so tight and crisp that I felt like my nipples chafe like in the way that you read about that, like marathon runners you know, like if you're running 20 miles in the rain, or whatever that like you start chage weird ways. I was like oh like I feel like my nipples with this like starch shirt like, this is heinous.

Every yeah Sanni to like my wife. To me, and then it was like turning to introduce himself to Sanni or something. She was like holding little like appetizer pizzas in both hands and probably just threw it on the floor and was like so great, to meet you so you know, like had this really like nice moment with them like where she was like so charmed. He wandered on, he had this whole entourage with like a crew and then as soon as he walked away, Sanni is like cleaning up for pizza off the floor.

He's genuinely like every big eyes and supersonic he seems like a good dude. I mean you know I only met him briefly through the tour bus super nice guy. I was like you're really strong for very big man he's huge he's so yeah like climb when you're that big well you just have to be really strong. I belayed with him at the climbing gym and it was fully like it's like scary to catch him on the head of the rope is so much bigger than me that I was like I don't know it's like I can't. You know, obviously I caught him, like a quarter of a bottle just like shaking up when I caught him I was like whoa so excited.

I can't remember if I talked about Anderson Cooper not but i'm recently I kind of abandoned the app and abandoned meditation so I was like I just don't know if I actually need that like now that i'm climbing full time again now. I think, for me, personally, I was like I don't know if I need to practice less attachment because that' that is not my problem and if anything I need more reasons to like care more, like get more amped up. I was like I think the time that I spend meditating could almost be better spent, listening to like heavy rock and like thinking about climbing projects and like get on climbing so think of anything I need to be more amped. For the two mindful people out there, i'm far from like any actual mindful practice like I mean a lot of it, you know I found just as challenging as anybody else to like stay fully focused and all that. I don't know I just find that you know hiking like being I spent a lot of time by myself in nature and peaceful places just kind of like wandering and in my own thoughts and i'm like you know I think I think that works enough for me. Like I just don't know if I need to consciously spend time during my day doing that during the day. I could just do it through outdoor exercises. It's just nice to have a varieties.

So I think my love of climbing stems more from the actual physical act to the sensation of it, the feeling of moving upward. I mean, I think that the actual the feeling of it basically the the movement to flow whatever you want to call it yeah I mean that that looks fun. I think beyond that there's also the honestly the curiosity about the unknown the the pushing your own limits that discovering what you're capable of or maybe wouldn't most satisfying things in climbing for me is the feeling of improvement, you know, taking something that seemed impossible before and then working hard toward and eventually being able to do it. I think does slow, gradual improvement is one of the most satisfying aspects of climbing to me.

Well, so when you say it's dangerous, I was say that it has consequence, you know. Some climbing is more games or some other type some you know basically there's this whole array of of risk and danger and consequence and it depends on the exact circumstances of what's going on. I just I'm distracted by the photo i'm like actually that is actually the most dangerous, most challenging part of that specific route so in this particular case that photo does in capture everything that that. What i'm doing in that photo is is maybe the four hardest meters of the entire 900-meter wall. And so, of those other of the 900 meters, 200 meters of it is relatively easy and that I wouldn't call dangerous that I could do anytime recreationally I could you know it's a pleasure, but then you know four meters of it is incredibly hard, and you know arguably dangerous.

But it's a spectrum, and I think that the normal life, you know everything we do has a spectrum of risk as well. Every time you get in a car, there is danger involved that there is risk there is uncertainty and every time you step out your front door there is uncertainty.

May I add something, just talking about risk and and that kind of uncertainty, I think that you know when you look at presenting you look at the rock climbing it seems so crazy. But that is risk that's fully chosen and appreciate it and mitigate as much as I can. And I think that the real danger in life is when you're taking risks without thinking about it which, when we talk about driving we talked about so many other aspects of normal life. And so it comparison that I like to try, it is a you know when people go partying on the weekends like they go drink on Friday night, and then they drive home and they're like oh it's not that big a risk, I do it every weekend it's fine. You're sort of like when you start taking on calculated risks like that that's when you're really just rolling the dice and you know, even though rock climbing or free soloing only might look much more extreme those are risks that i've thought about for very long time i've prepared for i've trained for and then i've chosen them intentionally and and executed them, as well as I can. You know it's really different than just going out on a Saturday night getting a little incapacitated and then hoping for the best.

It's nice to hear you explain it that way, because I, you know, I have no technical knowledge about fear, except that I spent a lot of time being very afraid and so when when i'm talking about fear I always frame it in exactly the same way, where there's actual rational fear that makes sense because it's your body response to danger, and then the the perceived, you know, just the felt fear. And, and I think that the challenge in you know, in a situation I rock climbing has been able to differentiate between the two and know which to heat and in which to ignore.

I mean there's certainly moments in climbing when it all goes bad and that's exactly what you're describing I mean. Yeah I mean for free solo that it's best when you do have an element of control when you've prepared or you're at least confident your abilities, but basically if It all starts to go sideways and you're not confident you don't know what you're doing it gets quite scary I mean that's exactly when you're having a bad experience and you don't want to be up there and i've certainly had that occur many times. But that's what you're trying to avoid.

Well, so yeah, how do you prepare for the for the unknown. I don't know I mean, so I think for me it's about just having a wide range of preparations just a wide range of experience and just and then you know, to build a build a broad comfort zone basically. So that anything unforeseen will still hopefully fall within your comfort zone to some extent. And I think that for me, anyway, with climbing i've consistently push myself inside the different directions, I suppose I you know where you should have, if you think of your comfort zone as a bubble just slowly pushing it and little directions in each each way. And then eventually it winds up with a pretty big bubble, and then, all you can really do is hope that that, whatever your objective is will will still fit within your bubble. I think within preparation would fall, you know into visualization is sort of a subcategory of imagining things that are otherwise unpractical we preview in the case of free zone something where you're going to do. A big climb once and probably only once, so you can't exactly practice it in the conventional sense of the word, because it's something is only going to occur one time. But, thankfully, you know as humans, we can imagine we can project ourselves, you can think through the movements, you can even imagine the sensations like what it will feel like under your skin, so you can kind of experience that climb many times without whilst only doing it once.

You have to think about the downsides if you're also going to think about the good sides.

Well to some extend it doesn't really matter. Well, I mean it's true, I mean people can can be as scared as they want, but ultimately it doesn't change the likelihood of me falling off, it doesn't change the consequences of me falling off, I mean no matter how scared everybody else's doesn't change whether or not I can actually do the thing that i'm setting out to do. So, to some extent you just said it all aside, but obviously when your friends are really scared for you. You know I value their opinions in it, and certainly my peers, you know other professional climbers of some of the people whose opinions I really respect are horrified for me that i'm like well, maybe i'll rethink it. You know, but at a certain point only I can know how prepared and how I feel for it and other people's you know opinions don't really matter at that point. But you know as much as you want to say that you take your family into account all that kind of stuff I mean it's you know it's true a little bit, but ultimately, nobody else has put that kind of time and preparation energy into it, so I mean they don't really have an informed opinion on it. Which you know, so if I watch a video of big wave surfing let's say like I don't like swimming I don't like going to the ocean i've never surfed. I see a video of somebody surfing, you know 20 meter wave and i'm like that is completely insane like I must have a death wish that's so scary that's crazy. You know, and obviously that's the experience that most people have when they watch Free Solo and it's because not that many people have experienced with with climbing except everybody in this room who turns out to be a climber. But um but, most people don't have that much experience with free soloing and so they're looking like that's totally insane. You know, and I feel the same way about things that I don't know much about, but ultimately you just have to trust that that the person engaging in that behavior has properly prepared for it.

I spent a lot of time, I mean so sometime visualizing the actual mechanics of what would happen if my foot slips or something or like you know at the photo that was showing a minute ago that that was the boulder problem. It's the hardest part of you know, I imagine a lot like oh my left foot slab that probably didn't we off the wall I broke it to the left side bounce off the ledge below I maybe hit this other legends 150 meters lower but then either way i'm going to die, and then you go to the ground, you know, so I mean yeah I definitely thought through every position on the wall I grow up I slip there, I would just slide all the way down this hundred meters slab you know things like that, I mean it would all be a disaster but it's important for me to think about this kinds of things ahead of time, so that when i'm doing the actual climb, it doesn't occur to me, for the first time, like oh no What if my foot slipped you know i've already thought about it. I know what will happen, i'm going to frickin it's going to be terrible i'm going to die, but i've already thought about it. You know, I think, for me the the negative visualization is important to do ahead of time, just so that in the actual moment it doesn't come up for the first time. But you know I mean the positive visualization is easy, because you just think like oh i'm going to feel great i'm holding on to these holes, the climb is going to feel fluid and beautiful and fun it's going to be this incredible experience. But I think you know it's important to balance that against the negative visualization with the you know what does happen if. Or or even not the actual visualization of falling to your death, but the visualize imagining what it would feel like to get into a position and suddenly hesitate, or you know worried that your foots going to go into slip you're basically just think through all those anxieties ahead of time, so they're less likely to occur when it matters.

Best solution to fight fear? I mean one sort of trick is to sort of reframe it as excitement, you know you take sort of fear or nervousness or whatever, and you just sort of shifted a little bit in your head to "Oh i'm so excited for this this thing that i'm about to do." I mean, I certainly think that that's the case with it with public speaking or a lot of other things like that, where you're standing backstage you're like oh i'm a little bit afraid and you're like no no i'm not afraid i'm just excited. Because honestly they feel almost the same with your body and so it's pretty easy just to shift mentally.

Definitely the ideal is to enter a state of flow, I mean I don't really. I don't really like to word flow and I, you know, but I mean I have read the books and I suppose that is technically what what's occurring. But you know I sort of prefer to think of it as sort of automated or you know autopilot whatever you want to call it, but just performing are executing the client without thinking much about it. And I mean I think that's kind of what i've been touching on with all the visualization and the practice is in order to make sure that i've done everything I need so that I don't have to think about anything on the actual climb. So when i'm climbing I can just do the climb and think of nothing else that's that's the idea. You know, of course, there are moments where where you're like wait which hand depending on the route.

# Free Solo Movie

And I feel like anybody could conceivably die on any given day. Soloing makes it feel far more immediate and much more present.

When you're climbing without a rope, it's obviously like much higher consequence, much, much higher level of focus. You know, it's a whole different experience. So it's not like I'm just pushing and pushing and pushing until something terrible happens. I don't look at it, like, with that perspective. But maybe that's why it's dangerous for me. Maybe I'm too close to it and I can't tell that I'm speeding towards a cliff.

I like to differentiate between risk and consequence. You know, when I'm doing these hard free solos I like to think that the risk, you know, the chance of me falling off is quite low even though the consequence is extremely high. And that's kind of like one of the appeals of free soloing, you know, to take something that seems difficult and dangerous and make it feel safe.

Being a rock climber has been a positive or negative for your dating life? My dating life? I think, uh, I think overall it's been a negative. Um, I just travel too much and I live in a car.

Let's talk through some of the climbing adventures I've had, the historic free solo climb, Moonlight Buttress. When I did it, it was like, "Oh," you know, kind of groundbreaking, kind of extreme. But for me it always felt quite easy and pretty secure.

Half Dome was a huge step for me because it was twice as big as anything I'd ever soloed. Free soloing is so dangerous that less than 1% of people who climb attempt it. I have done more than 1,000 free solo climbs, but none were tougher than this one. I got quite scared in some places, and then you start to panic a little bit. And then you have to, like, reel it all back in.

What is next in free solo climbing? Well, I don't know, I mean, I've thought about El Cap, like, for years and every year I look at it and I'm like, "That's really scary." Um, well, I've never even wanted to really, or I've always wanted to but then I've always been like, "That's too scary."

I'm aiming towards the most beautiful valley on earth. I remember coming to Yosemite as a little kid and my dad would always have a little cooler in the back of the car, and have our cookies in the cold milk, and we'd sit on these slabs above Tunnel View, which is, like, the most epic view of Yosemite. As soon as you see El Cap it's like, "Oh, there it is, pretty exciting."

El Cap is the most impressive wall on earth. Yeah, I mean I love, I love being in the van. I probably feel extra comfortable in the van now because I've lived in it for nine years.

My first van, well, I actually stole the family minivan.

My dad died when I was 19 and I, I quit school. There was some life insurance. I had just enough to dirt bag.

Six years ago I was living in a Walmart parking lot and spending eighty-eight cents on dinner every night.

Living in a van is great but, you know, at a certain point it'd be nice to have a bathroom and have, like, a shower at least.

So I have a girlfriend now, she's very supportive about, like, you know, you have to do you. Yeah we'll, we'll see. But yeah, there probably will be plenty of girlfriends in my life, you know, in terms of, like, big climbing, lifetime achievement deals, where you're just like, well, like I will always choose climbing, over, over a lady. At least, you know, so far.

How many times have I climbed El Cap? Probably like 40 something maybe. I ever free solo? -No and nobody has. Why haven't I done it yet? Um, look at it, like, I mean, you know, think about it, it's freaking scary. I don't know, so I mean I've thought about this since 2009, like, each year since 2009. I've been like, "This is the year," and each year I climb it and I'm like, "This isn't the year, like, this is fucked," you know. So I'm like, "Uh." But the thing is I'll never be content, unless I at least put in the effort. Because, like, if I do all the work and I'm still like, "This is messed up," then maybe it's just not for me, maybe its future generation, you know. Or maybe just somebody who has nothing to live for.

When I thought about El Cap years ago, there were question marks all over the walls. It's like I don't know about this pitch, I don't know about that pitch, like I don't know about this particular slab, there are all these things that seem pretty crazy to me.

If the ultimate dream is to solo El Cap, then I need a good map of what that will take, you know, like a, a mental image of what the hard parts are, where they are, what they will entail. If I'm going to do it, Free Rider seems like the best route.

The idea of going up on El Cap with Tommy Caldwell is to get a feel for the route and just visualize it.nTo see what feels scary and what doesn't. Oh, God. Look at those fixed ropes the first climb. Tommy's been a hero of mine since I was a kid. I didn't technically have posters of him up in my room as a kid, but it was like the same deal, you know, where I was like, "Tommy's the man." Tommy really showed what was possible, free climbing on El Cap. Tommy is the one that explored every aspect of the wall.

And most of the routes that he's put up on El Cap haven't been repeated because they're, they're basically too hard. And then, ultimately culminated with the Dawn Wall which was his multi-year project. I mean possibly the hardest big wall in the world.

I've been obsessed with El Cap for years. El Capitan is unbelievably huge, kind of unfathomably huge. It's 3,200 feet of sheer granite. Looking at it, it doesn't seem right, it doesn't seem like you should be able to climb it. I think it was first climbed in 1958 by Warren Harding, and it took them 46 days over 16 months because they couldn't do it continuously. They had to drill bolts into the granite and pull themselves up. And then ever since then, it's been the center of the rock climbing universe.

I've spent 20 years of my life climbing El Cap but I'd never do it without a rope. There's no margin for error. Imagine an Olympic gold medal level athletic achievement, that if you don't get that gold medal you're gonna die. That's pretty much what free soloing El Cap is like. You have to do it perfectly. Today I am playing through a lot of different scenarios, so thinking about the moves, thinking about the body position, and more than anything just thinking about what it would feel like to, to be in that position without a rope.

There are a lot of things that you can physically do on a rope. Oh, God. But then the idea of taking the rope away, you're just like, "I don't know if I'd wanna trust that little foothold. Oh, my God, my feet hurt so bad and I'm so pumped and my hand hurts. I just feel pooped.

We're kind of getting worked. When you've been thinking about something for years, that's a long time to be, like, sort of considering an idea without, like, really talking to anybody about it. Especially someone like Tommy. When I was climbing, like, up the endurance corner and across the traverse, I was just looking down thinking about, I was like, "Dude, this seems so scary." I don't know. That part is just so exposed and it's pretty. See, that part again is like, at least you have holds though, you know. The Freeblast slabs have like several moves where it's like, your whole life just depends on one foothold, you know. Soloing is like such a weird personal activity. You never talk about soloing projects.

I mean, I've done all my soloing without telling anybody, because I don't want any extra pressure. The idea of climbing El Cap, obviously I get interview questions about it all the time, like, "Oh, would you like to do that?" And I've always been like, "No, well maybe, we'll see. You know, who knows?" But like in the back of your mind you're like, "Yes, for sure."

I used to be like a super picky eater. When I was like 19 or 20 or, well, between like, 20 and 24, I basically decided that I had to start eating vegetables, and then sort of, like, systematically introduced myself to vegetables, like one at a time, which worked pretty well, now I pretty much eat anything. I stopped eating meat maybe three or four years ago, um, mostly for environmental reasons.

Then once I stopped I also kind of got into the ethics of it a little bit more. We'll just see how this comes out. Yeah, I mean there are plenty of folks who probably think that this is, like, terrible. I'm eating, like, canned chili and eggs. Growing up, I mean, I didn't like eating weird foods, I didn't like bugs, you know, I was just like a total tweeker. I guess I was quite a shy child. Bit of a dark soul, I think. Maybe melancholic is the word. I remember really liking to play with my Legos and play computer games and, uh, and then obviously once I started rock climbing I was going to the climbing gym all the time.

But I didn't really have a whole lot of hobbies or interests. I definitely wasn't cool, you know. I grew up in Sacramento and the high school I went to, I was, uh, in an international baccalaureate program, so we were all sort of the intellectual kids. So, in a way it was fine to be sort of a dorky loner cause, you know, the whole program was focused around that. There was definitely a time when I started climbing outside more and I was just starting to road trip and go to campgrounds, but I was too afraid to talk to strangers. So, I was doing a lot of soloing, or just a lot of climbing by myself just because I didn't know anybody and I didn't wanna talk to anybody.

As a kid I just love climbing trees and climbing buildings and, like, playing on things. And when I was going to school here I was also climbing on all the roofs and stuff here. Uh, and, uh, yeah. It's actually kind of intimidating talking to groups of kids. Like, when I was in high school I was mortified of standing in front of the class. But, like, you kind of get through it and, like, eventually you feel more and more comfortable. I don't know.

How do I feel about being famous, just for, like, turning my hobby into my career? I mean, I think it's the best thing in life to be able to take the one thing you love most and have it, like, work out that you can make a living that way. You know, so it's nice that I now get paid to do that, yeah.

Could I talk about your foundation a bit and what I'm doing? Yeah, so, I started a non-profit, um, I guess maybe four years ago. Let's watch this piece of video so you're gonna get a little taste of that. Climbing has allowed me to travel all over the world, which has really opened my eyes to how the rest of the world lives. I mean, I see all these people, I mean they're like a billion people on Earth without access to power. And so I started my foundation sort of as an attempt to, like, balance the cosmic scales. So, I've been giving, maybe, like, a third of my income every year through the foundation to, like, environmental non-profits. I mean, so, like off-grid solar projects, things like that, like, things that lift people out of poverty, but also help the Earth.

I met Sanni, book touring in Seattle. And then we just have been hanging out ever since. I think, I think this is our very first date in Las Vegas, and I think we're climbing, like, a very easy multi-pitch together. Um, you know I just took her up this big tall route because then, I kind of knew it would blow her mind. Is she a climber? Um, Sanni's like a little bit of a climber.She, she's just starting but I'd hardly characterize her as a climber. You see straight in front of us, there's like an depression that looks like a heart.

When you start getting eaten by mosquitoes, feel free to just start climbing.

Having the girlfriend in the van is awesome. I mean, she's cute and small and, like, livens the place up a bit, doesn't take up too much room.I mean, it's, pretty much makes life better in every way.I think that you could have a steady girlfriend and climb."

As it turns out, compression fracture isn't too serious.They said that I could climb and just be careful about pain management and all that stuff. But it's just a little bit rattling. Because I definitely know some people who have fallen super far and survived or, like, gone through a tree and sort of been okay. And now I'm like, "I don't know, like, I don't think I'd be okay."

And so I imagine falling free soloing or something from 50 meters up, I mean, I realize that my body would just explode on impact.

In 2012, I was here for the first time and it was right before I went to Yosemite for the season, and that was like my best Yosemite season ever.

Jimmy and I have worked together for 10 years. We've climbed all over the world. We are doing the triple link up too, right? I mean, by the time we get to Yosemite we're gonna be as Cheyne says, "Yoked." The team that Jimmy assembled are all professional climbers. The best possible crew for this kind of thing. And so in a way, I'm like, "This is kinda awesome." You know, it's kind of just like I get to go climb with all my friends.

It's a funny thing, people who know a little bit about climbing, they're like, "Oh, he says he has it, he's, he's totally safe." And then people who really know exactly what he's doing are freaked out. My dad was always like, "I don't want you to go ice climbing. I don't want you to free solo," you know. Just not, I wonder if your dad had been like. When he was my age, he had had like 20 or 30 friends that had died in the mountains. And now I'm at that point where I've had, you know, 30 or 40 friends that have died in the mountains. People that I have met, I haven't had anybody die who I was, like, really, really, close to yet.

I think everybody who has made free soloing a big part of their life, is dead now. John Bachar was a pioneer of so-called free solo climbing, he fell to his death this past week at the age of 52 from a cliff. And we're sorry to have to report on the death of U.S. Climber Sean Leary. Sean was killed in Utah and was found a couple of days ago. Derek Hersey was climbing in Yosemite Valley. His body was found Saturday morning.

So when a writer contacted me about doing an MRI, I thought it's kind of cool just to go and get an MRI and, like, see what's actually going on. You know, scan your brain and then see if it's all there structurally. We're gonna start the task now.

I've had several ex-girlfriends said that I have personality disorders or things like that. That there's something wrong with me. Emotionally stable, tends to find fault with others somewhat.

Climbing a steep mountain would be too scary for me? I have trouble controlling my impulses?

Those little two dots that are further towards the top of the screen, that's the amygdala. So an interesting thing, do you have no activation in your amygdala? There's just not much going on in my brain, it seems. Um, do you think my amygdala actually just doesn't work or something?nYour amygdala works, it's just that it needs a much higher level of stimulation.

Things that are typically stimulating for most of the rest of us are not really doing it for you. Maybe my amygdala's just tired, you know, from too many years of being all gripped.

I'm feeling quite fit, but, um, there's such a mental component to free soloing. The big challenge is controlling your mind, I guess. Because you're not, you're not controlling your fear, you're sort of just trying to step outside of it. And when people talk about trying to suppress your fear, I mean, I look at it in a different way.

I try to expand my comfort zone by practicing the moves over and over again. I work through the fear, until it's just not scary anymore. But, um, for years Freeblast has given me the heebie-jeebies. You're standing on tiny edges, small variations in the texture of the rock. If you slip, your hands can't hold you. It's just the two tiny points of contact that keep you from falling, and when you step up, there's only one.

We're up there, we're roped up, Sanni's belaying me, and then I just fell off, I don't know. I just, I don't even know how, I just, like, fell off.

I've been able to stand on one foot while I put my harness and my shoes and stuff on, and getting' this like kind of, a minor victory. Um, I haven't put on my climbing shoe basically since I did it.

Unfortunately, crack climbing is all ankle-dependent. And Freerider is 3,000 feet of crack climbing.

All my friends that have sprained their ankles in serious ways have all been like, "Oh, it's gonna be at least six months until it's normal." If I can't get this done in the next month then the weather will change and I'll have to wait until next year.

I want nothing to do with the pumpkin carving, and I won't carve anything and I hate holidays. I like having fun when I have fun. I don't like being told that it's time to have fun.

No one in any part of my family has hugged during all my formative years. I had to teach myself how to hug when I was, like, 23 or something. 'Cause I was like, "Everyone seems to hug, that seems like something I should get into," and then I started, like, practicing. Now I'm quite a good hugger.

Part of the thing with the L word, you know, is saying love and stuff, is that, like, in my entire life no one in any part of my family has ever used, you know, that word. My Mom has only spoken French to my sister and I our whole lives. She's a French teacher, so she says, "Je t'aime" or whatever, and then my dad didn't talk about anything.

Nobody had an emotional bond with Charlie. Charlie was probably what we call nowadays Asperger's. Charlie's obsession, what everyone called monomania. He loved to travel. He lived to travel like

I lives to climb. When he wasn't traveling, things were not good.

I don't think my dad put down anybody. I think my dad is like a teddy bear, but dad was pretty morose. And then the thing is once they got divorced, then they both were, like, so much happier and it all seemed great, but he died the next summer. It's really kind of too bad that he doesn't get to see how it all played out, 'cause he put so much effort into nurturing my climbing. But who knows? Maybe mom thought that he was, like,

holding us back or, like, you know, not pushing us to achieve our full potential or, like, whatever, you know what I mean? My Mom's favorite sayings are, "Presque ne compte pas," "Almost doesn't count," or, uh, "Good enough isn't." No matter how well I ever do at anything, it's not that good. The bottomless pit of self-loathing.

I mean, that's definitely the motivation for some soloing.

So I still never, like, quietly, quite understand what happened when you fell, you, like, do you even know? It should be just kinda, like. Uh, I don't know why I fell off,

but I mean I know that my skin was, like, hard and dry.

Look, I don't wanna fall off and die either, but there's a satisfaction to challenging yourself and doing something well.

That feeling is heightened when you're for sure facing death. You can't make a mistake. If you're seeking perfection, free soloing is as close as you can get. And, uh, it does feel good to feel perfect, like, for a brief moment.

My friends are like, "Oh, that'd be terrible," but if I kill myself in an accident, they'll be like, "Oh, that was too bad," but like life goes on, you know, like they'll be fine. Like if I perish, like, it doesn't matter, like you'll find somebody else, like, that's not, that's not that big a deal.

If you look at soloing El Cap objectively, there are probably six pitches that worry me the most. Just off the ground, there's some insecure climbing. And then Freeblast, Pitch 6, being the one I fell off of, which is obviously a total botch. Then the down climb to the Hollow Flake. And then the Monster Offwidth, which is super physical, difficult style of climbing. When you're in the Monster Offwidth, some part of you is always being crushed in the mountain. Imagine like the worst type of

Pilates class in the whole world, somebody like flogging as you do it, and occasionally like sandpapering skin off your body, telling you to hold the position until you freakin' vomit, and if you lose the position you die.

The Enduro Corner, in and of itself, would have been the most difficult part of virtually any big solo I've done. Your feet aren't on any specific holds. What makes your feet stay to the wall is the amount of pressure that you pull with your hands. The harder you pull with your hands, the more your feet stick. The most demanding for your arms on the whole route.

And you've climbed 2,500 feet to get to the Enduro Corner, so you're pretty fatigued. But the piece that I've always worried about the most is the crux, the hardest part. To get past the crux, you have climb either the Boulder Problem or the Teflon Corner. 2,000 off the ground, each of which I've fallen off many times with a rope.

The Teflon Corner, which is basically like a 90-degree corner of glass, which is ultra-slippery, just fills me with terror. Pushing against the two walls of it, with my feet on glass, my palms on glass, and trying to make these little micro adjustments to keep my balance centered so that I can push evenly on all four sides of it.

And then I imagine 2,500 feet of air beneath my feet, you're, like, that's just a crazy thing to think about. The alternative is the Boulder Problem. But the Boulder Problem has a 10-foot section that's incredibly difficult.

It's a very intricate sequence. You've got your right hand on a crimp, left hand on a side pole, and then you put your right foot onto this dimple thing. Right hand goes up to a small down-pulling crimp, left foot goes into a little dish, and then you drive up off the left foot into the thumb press. That's the worst hold on the entire route.

So, you get maybe half your thumb on the hold. Then you roll your two fingers over the thumb, switch your feet, left foot stems out to this really bad sloping black foothold. Switch your thumbs.

And then reach out left to a big sloping bread loaf type hold that feels kind of grainy. From there, you either karate kick or double-dyno to an edge on the opposite wall.

In some ways, it makes more sense to do the big two-handed jump because you're jumping to a good edge so there's actually something to catch. But the idea of jumping without a rope seems completely outrageous, if you miss it, that's that.

But then the karate kick always feels like you're falling into the other wall, which also feels outrageous for soloing. Honestly, it wasn't like, I mean I felt, like, pretty strong just pinching that shit and just being that, put the foot.

Well, as I said, when you actually put your foot out there, I was like, but to free solo at that level, you really have to have the mental armor. Having that romantic relationship around is detrimental to that armor. You have to focus and inherently a close romantic relationship removes that armor. You kinda can't have both at the same time. There's always something that has to give you the confidence to go out and free solo a route. So sometimes, that confidence just comes from feeling super, super fit. Sometimes, that confidence comes through preparation and rehearsal.But I mean there's always something that makes you feel ready.

There's something to be said for, like, soloing a bunch of pitches to, like, get into that right space. It's a little stressful. It's just, it's unreal.

And El Cap is that cool. There's incremental advances that happen in all kinds of things, but every once in a while there's just this iconic leap, soloing El Cap, if he pulls this off, is this quantum leap. It is hard to imagine somebody up there by themselves, without a rope, where it's pretty much all the other big cliffs around here.

How many times have I soloed both those routes now? Well, Astroman, three or four times, but the Rostrum, I mean, literally, like, fifty, sixty.I've soloed the Rostrum 50 or 60 times. It was like part of the circuit and I would, I would go there and I

would do it at least twice. Like I was just glommed on. Not like I had a fear, but just kind of like this is how. I love that about soloing.

But it's not for anybody else, this is just for me.

And after Astroman, people were like, "Ah, we wanna film you, film you up there," and I'm like, "Not interested, not even slightly." For me, it was so incredibly important to be doing it for the right reasons. I mean, I think I'm still doing everything for the right reasons, and I'm still totally stoked, but I feel like from the outside observer, you know, they'd be like, "Oh, he's got a movie crew," like clearly that's the

wrong reasons, you know. The worst thing about having a film crew is if it changes your mindset.

I mean the soloing headspace is so fragile.

The idea of falling off is, you know, obviously I'm trying to avoid that, but it's like kind of okay if it's just by myself. But, like, I wouldn't wanna fall off right in front of my friends, 'cause that's like, that's kind of messed up.

And then a, just a camera above, sitting above the Boulder Pitch, essentially. Well, it's not just distracting.

You don't want it to be sunny when you get to the crux, and it takes three or four hours to get up to the Boulder Problem, and it's fall so in order to beat the sun, you basically have to start in the dark.

I don't know. I'm starting to get kind of psyched.

The moment of just letting go to it is in some ways the most peaceful because then it's like you just do your thing. There's no more stress, there's no more anxiety, there's no fear, whatever, you just go up and do it.

I put on my tight shoes today, it's like very exciting. It would be, like, it would be like a samurai pulling out his favorite sword. So stoked. I like sinking into it. It's, it goes with the Jedi thing, the samurai with the, and then I just started taking Ibuprofen. I've been, like, icing a bunch and, like, I think my foot's gonna be pretty good.

You know, the fewer people know anything, the better really. How do I feel? I'm, you know, I mean, excited.

Well, we're all gonna die, like might as well do what we wanna do while we're here and it's okay when people die.

If I had some kind of obligation to maximize my lifespan, then like yeah, obviously I'd have to give up soloing and, um. You know, I'm already doing my best. So I could just, like, not do certain things, but then you have, like, weird simmering resentment because it's things that you love most in life have now been squashed. You know what I mean?

It's like always about, like, excellence and perfection. And I was certainly raised that way, you know, that you need to, you need to perform.

It's also just like kind of rad because you're doing something for the first time in human history. Let's hope it's a low gravity day.

I don't know if I can try with everybody watching. I mean there's just too many random folks about and stuff, whatever. I mean in some ways it'd be kind of reassuring that Spock has nerves. It was the first time I've ever gone up on something like real and then not done it. But it's also the first time I've ever gone up on something real with people all watching.

By myself, I maybe would have just, like, persevered, I don't know, maybe I just suck, but you know, at least I've like, at least I've tried.

I've always thought that I ought to buy a house, just haven't quite had the energy to make it all happen myself. I think Sanni will be stoked to have a place to live and there's so much climbing all around Vegas.

Big sectional here and chair or like sofa and two chairs. Potential, like, bar area.

I would just sleep straight on the carpet.

Definitely my relationship with Sanni like, the most healthy and stable relationship I've ever had. Certainly more communicative. Even Sanni over the year and a half we've been dating is like she sees things in a different way. For Sanni the point of life is like happiness. To be with people that make you feel fulfilled and to have a good time. For me it's all bout performance.

The thing is anybody can be happy and cozy. Nothing good happens in the world by being happy and cozy. You know, like nobody achieves anything great because they're happy and cozy. It's about being a warrior.

It doesn't matter about the cause necessarily.This is your path and you will pursue it with excellence. You face your fear because your goal demands it. That is the goddamn warrior spirit.

I think that the free soloing mentality is pretty close to warrior culture, where you give something 100% focus because your life depends on it.

The move I gave up on in the fall was a right foot on this little edge right here, and I basically just have to like stand on the right foot and just trust it. And I was like, "I don't really wanna have my whole life depend on like standing on this one right foot." But maybe I can find another way.

I think this is like kind of the business of the whole deal which is interesting because if you're climbing with a rope it's not at all, but without a rope it is. I mean, of course I, I mean, I know I could do that and just walk away. But it's like, you know, I mean, you know, I don't want to.

Having all these people around requires a higher level of preparation, a higher level of confidence basically. I need to like dial it in so much that, you know, it doesn't matter if there's like a stadium of people watching me because it's so easy for me that I'm just like, Pitch one, stay left towards the top, splitter, it feels more secure. Pitch two, trust the right foot, rock on, trust the feet, right hand to the last under cling. Eight, easy romp. Go fast. Nine, stay outside of the down climb, careful of blocks.

I mean, I didn't ask her to leave. I mean, I would never ask her to leave. But, you know, I think she kind of understands that, that it's probably easier for me if she's gone.

I don't, I, the whole like saying goodbye thing I'm like "I'll probably see her in like five days or something." It's not like goodbye, it's just goodbye for a few days. You know, I mean there's just that like weird thought of like, don't freaking let that be our last hug or whatever.

That arête move as I stepped around has gotta be, I mean that's one of the most exposed moves like anywhere on El Cap. I don't know. Not me. I'm done, yeah, no, this is it, I don't, we don't need to do this again.

Summit on El Cap felt so good, it's freaking raged. Like a gigantic weight off of my shoulders too. I have to admit, I mean. So delighted, what a journey. Yeah, I just can't even believe after eight years of dreaming, I'm, I'm sort of at, at risk of crying here too, I'm like, I feel quite emotional.

I think the movie would be better if I burst into tears, but I, I don't know. I don't, I don't think the mountain looked that scary this morning.

It's funny because it does look the same and hiking up looked the same, everything just felt pretty much the same, except I just didn't have much of a backpack. I did, I forgot my rope and rack.

I felt so good. I mean that's why I'm so happy that the experience was like what I hoped for. I didn't compromise on any of the things that were super important to me.

You know some of the people that have come before you, they, they didn't quit while they were ahead. Maybe it's good. Maybe I don't need to keep charging ahead.

Right now there's some kid that just read about El Cap being soloed and he's like. "What's bigger?" Like "What's cooler?" And I mean somebody's gonna think of something and it's gonna be cooler. But I don't know if that will be me. Maybe, I don't know.

# Alex Wire Interview

<https://youtu.be/nq9ZAGqvmfY>

"What's your favorite type of climbing holds pinch, crimp, slope, slab, heel hook, toe hook, jam or knee drop?" Some of those aren't even climbing holds but who cares he just named all kinds of fancy kind words and I will show you how to do all these fancy techniques on a climbing gym wall. Check it out, pinches are as you would expect just pinching with your hand. Crimp, it means like an edge that you then bring your thumb over your fingers and pull really hard. Slope is just anything you know where your hand is sort of open. A heel hook isn't really hold either but it's just something you put your heel on. Toe hooking is something you'd hook your toe on, pretty straightforward. Jamming is just any time you put your hands or your feet or even your elbow or whatever else into a crevice and then jam it into place. An need dropping, Brits call it knee Egyptian, you know because you turn all hieroglyphic style. I like pinches I like big limestone I like to tufa, that's like a type of limestone pinch. I kinda like it all...really depends on how clean the rock is and how aesthetic the line is, how flowy the climbing is.

Question from Glen Holland, "why are yellow holes or is the little creepy stalkers or the slimy slopers?" That is a fair question, I don't know why the yellow hole always suck like I don't know why somebody decided that yellow would be hard and it is.

A question from the Queen Cooking, "Have you climb cracks? I found gloves made for crack climbing. Interested in different opinions. Some consider it to be cheating. You got to have pain! You don't have to endure pain if you don't want to. Gloves protect against rock abrasions." I think what she's getting at is that a lot of people think that it's cheating to use crack gloves. But I think I have thick skin and so it's not as big an issue for me. I do actually think for beginners it's probably better to use crack gloves or tape or something to protect their hands and learn good techiniques to begin with.

I'm going to show you how to crack climb in the gym which I basically mean just very carefully. Good techniques in crack climbing is putting your hand into cracks, locking into place and then not having it slide or move. Nothing like passing blood stains next to cracks to know that you're doing it right. People tear holes in your skin when their hand slides out of the crack or if it gives but if you can place it in and exert enough pressure into 1 spot it won't cut your skin unless you slide out of the jam.

Next question from Jay "Do all rock climbers live in vans?" hashtag Free Solo. So not all climbers live in vans. And I lived in a ten with the bicycle for a while before and I didn't have a car for a while. But I think that living in a van is definitely a nice way to live as a rock climber it because it allows you a lot of the comfort of home but with the flexibility of traveling outside to get to good climbing areas and follow good weather. A lot of climbers live out of the back of trucks and live out a friend of mine who's a climber lived out of his Honda Civic for many years, it's pretty scrappy but he did just fine.

Next question from Mike Ball "Anyone have advice on how to keep my forearms from filling with blood and losing my grip during hashtag bouldering or hashtag rock climbing?" What he's asking is how do you keep from being pumped when you climb. The only real way to do that is just to build up more fitness. And if you are in the middle of a climb and you find that your arms are really really pumped then you kind of just have to find a hole is big enough for you to recover on. So I'll show you now in a climbing gym how I would recover which is basically finding a big hole and hanging from a one-handed to relax the other hand, just let your muscles relax. Some people find like shaking it helps other people find it just letting it dangle helps or just taking deep breaths. If you've never practiced resting then you won't be able to recover even on a really big hole.

Question "Hey Alex, you climbed El Capitan, I want to know how you just remain focused rather than being afraid of the height?" If you really want to know how I climbed El Capitan, you should just watch the film Free Solo because it's a pretty good coverage of the two years of preparation and training that I put into practice climbing it. I don't know. There's a lot to unpack in that question but I think in general it's pretty easy to remain focused when your life is on the line you know.

Question from Nicole Vandenbroek "Once you got to the top? How did you get down? Another easier path or abseilling? And how did the whole crew get there so fast. And no water drinks on the whole climb of Free Solo?" Basically she wants to know about the logistics of free soling El Cap. To get down from the top of El Cap, you can walk down from the side and do a little bit of repelling at the end of it. So the whole crew hiked up that way, just funny how did the crew get there so fast. They would probably argue that it took them a long time. It takes couple hours to walk up there and it's very hard work and it's heavy backpack on. You know if feels like a lot of toil. And there were water drink on the climb, I stashed water and food in two places on the route. Both big natural edges one of a thousand feet off the ground and the other one about 2,000 feet off the ground so kind of broke the route into thirds, so I was able to relax in a couple of places. It's just not showing the film because you know it's a 90-minute documentary the covers 2 years of my life, so it's hard to show everything.

Question from Dominic "Alex, if you can remember I'd love to know the mystery meal you cooked in Free Solo, I know it consisted of eggs with spicy canned chilli, spinach and some other crunchy vegetable? And I can't be the only one who wants to try it. Best documentary, hashtag mystery meal." I think the meal that he's referring to was sort of an egg scramble. I think I did sweet potatoes and maybe an onion, sort of grill them up and then added eggs and then, probably, well apparently, a can of chili and maybe spinach on top as well. Basically just me mixing all the vegetables in my van together and added some eggs and making it delicious.

Question from Dave Barker "How do rock climbers get the ropes back when coming down? Must cost them a fortune." I don't totally even know where to start with that you. So normally you climb up to an anchor. It's a fix anchor on the wall there carabiners or chains or something attached to the wall permanently and then you just lower back down from those and when you get the ground you just untie your knot, you pull the rope back down everything comes down so it's no problem. Your rope don't really cost a fortune. Typically, you know you rope would last for years and you use it over and over.

From BeachChicken.etsy, "I'm going indoor rock climbing today...It should be very interesting. What does one wear rock climbing? Need advice." I think you can wear anything, wear exercise, wear yoga clothes, wear pajamas you know whatever is comfortable. If you wear tight jeans you might not be able to put your feet where you need to.

"I'm joining a rock climbing gym. Any advice on equipment to get?" just basics, I think you basically need shoes, harness and chalk bag and a belay device and then eventually maybe a rope or depending on the gym. Even just shoes and it would be enough or if you're feeling really cheap, just shoes and then borrow other people's chalk. Climbing shoes affect your performance as a climber more than any other piece of equipment.

This is from your girl Katie, "How does one get over the fear of falling when bouldering? I fell once and almost busted my leg so now I'm afraid to boulder without being worried about falling. Tips?" I think that to feel comfortable falling you have to trust that you're not going to get hurt when you fall and I think that trust needs to be built up over time.

And now I'm going to show how I fall in a bouldering gym which honestly I don't know if it's the best way but I've been falling this way for 20 years and you know I generally don't get hurt so will see. You know there's a few basic on how to fall well while bouldering, landing on your feet ideally and then sort of rolling backwards, disbursing the force, not putting her hands behind you, not landing to crooked or anything. But I think that if you have some kind of an accident, you know it takes a while to build the confidence back up after that. So I think that start small, take very small falls you know, fall with a lot of control and build back up. But know that the gym is made for you to be safe so you should be okay. That said I've broken my arm in the gym.

"How do rock climbers get the ropes tied to the top so they can use the ropes to climb? Hashtag things I ponder." So most rock climbers don't get the rope tied to the top, most climbers climb from the bottom and they clip the rope into protection as they go. So if sometimes they carry equipment with them and place it in the cracks, sometimes the equipment's already in situ and you just have to clip i. But one way or another people normally start from the bottom and then climb upward and clip in as they go. So it's kind of up to them to make sure that they stay safe.

"Alex Honnold is a God and psychopath all-in-one he's on some transcendental stuff. How does he do that? What happens if he sneezes on the clip?" I don't even know where to go with that. So if I sneeze on the cliff, I fall to my death you know so I just make sure that my sinuses are totally clear before I climb every time. I mean if you sneeze, you sneeze, I don't know. It's like when you're driving on the highway if you sneeze are you instantly going to die, probably not. Just stay straight and sneeze I don't think I'm on any type of transcentental stuff.

He asked "how many pull-ups can elite rock climbers bang out"" I think that's a very wide range. I think that most climbers can probably do you know at least 20 pull-ups maybe. But I know a few professional climbers who you know can't do that many pull-ups, they can only do a handful but they have freakishly strong fingers and that's kind of enough to hang on to the rock and in the nails if they have really good technique. I'll do a few pull-ups on a bouldering wall just to show that I can do them so I'm going to bet that I can do at least 10. Really the number of pull-ups you can do doesn't necessarily correlate to how well you can climb but I'm definitely not maxing out because I'd rather save my energy for actual climbing.

Question from from Dan, "what's a good beginner guide to hangboard training? Do you still use them? hashtag rock climbing." I think as a beginner, you probably shouldn't worry about hangboarding that much if you just started climbing. Having a really strong arms and strong fingers isn't really the most important thing, you want to focus on your footwork, you want to work on technique, you want to learn how to move your body well and I think that hangboarding becomes more of a useful training tool as you get more advanced in climbing. But I think if you're a beginner and you really want to train on hangboard then you should focus on bodyweight hangs and start very gently.

"Any chance you will be in Tokyo for the 2020 games? Wife and I are having a great conversation of the different types of climbing gym. How gym is different than rock? We want to hear your thoughts on Olympic climbing." So there is a chance that I'll be in Tokyo for the 2020 games and not competing however, maybe doing some comentating or talking about it because I really want to watch. But it is true that the gym climbing of olympic-style is fundamentally different than rock climbing, particular on big walls like in Yosemite. So the people who are currently qualifying for the Olympics and will be competing in the Olympics are for the most part teenagers and in the way that olympic-level gymnasts, they're mostly from the age of 15 to maybe 21 or something. So by that standard, I'm way over the hill and I'm and I'm way past my prime climbing wise. The people who are going to be winning the Olympics are focused on training in the gym but to climb something like El Capitan, you spend all your time outside of adventuring and hiking. It's just two totally different areas.

"Elon Musk, have you reached out to Alex Honnold about a climbing trip to Mars?" And so just in case Elon is listening to this, I would love to go and you just said the word.