



TEXT AND PHOTOS BY RYAN JENNINGS

UNSPROKEN

Ice crystals bounce off my helmet. They hint at larger pieces that could fall, detaching from the summit slopes high above, ending me, ending this dream. Near-ninety-degree névé, eight inches deep, clings to the granite. *It wasn't supposed to be so steep!* The crevasses on the Ruth Glacier already seem distant, like penciled-in squiggles, even though I'm only 500 feet up the massive north face of Mt. Johnson. Echoing in the background, avalanches rumble down the south face of Mt. Wake.



IT'S MAY 1, 2014, and the Alaskan air is warming. The valley between us and Mt. Wake is so narrow that I imagine shards of stone, torn loose by the falling debris, ricocheting to claim us. Above a tipped-out cam, with no more options, I stab a picket at a slight downward angle, holding it with my shoulder, hammering with the same arm.

But this snow is too soft for ice screws and too thin for pickets. I give up on protection. With each pick-stick and kick, I pray the falling crystals remain miniscule. Even a glancing blow from a softball-sized chunk could peel me from the wall. My pack, heavy with four days of gear, pulls on my shoulders. My last piece, a marginal picket, was 180 feet ago. My partner Kevin Cooper—Coop—can't see or hear me. We communicate only through the movement of the rope, and when it comes tight, he'll know that he has to leave the anchor and start climbing. I look up: the white névé highway stretches toward azure Alaskan skies. I hope we'll climb fluidly as one.

THE ART OF ALPINISM, encompassing all disciplines, has always drawn me in. During my youth, I immersed myself in stories of climbers who plied their creativity in the mountains, striving to realize their

vision with limited and fair means, going clean from bottom to top without a trace.

Mugs Stump was that kind of climber. As Conrad Anker once wrote, "He used big, hard routes to try to cross into that ideal space where you climb without conscious thought and imagine an unlimited reality." In 1978 Mugs and Jim Logan completed the first ascent of the Emperor Face of Mt. Robson. Camped below the brooding wall, they watched its rhythm for days, slowly understanding the mountain, before dancing up a glaze of thin ice over rock as the sun rose and fell. On their third night, they carved two seats out of seventy-degree ice and sat there until dawn while waves of snow washed over them. In the morning, Logan embarked on an eight-hour lead into the final rotten headwall. Linking ice and cobbles with desperate aid, he continued to the ridge—and onward to that silent moment they'd always hoped to achieve. Logan later explained it in the *American Alpine Journal*: "Instead of feeling that I am pursuing a craft or exercising a particular technique, it becomes possible for me, sometimes, in some very special places to transcend my ego, my learned skills, my hopes, fears and expectations, and simply climb. It is nothing more than 'sleeping when tired; eating when hungry' (Ma-Tsu, died 788)."



Last time I was here, I had to be hauled out. Are we **really** going back again?

I would forever believe a route of such magnitude was the quintessence of climbing. Then, in 1992, on Denali, while Mugs was searching for a safe route across the glacier for his clients, the edge of a crevasse gave way. Mugs vanished, buried deep under blocks of ice and snow, soon sealed in by the barren, blustery landscape.

FORTY-ONE, with a wife, two children and a desk job as a real-estate broker in Carbondale, Colorado, I am almost the same age as Mugs was when he died. I sit behind mounds of paperwork, struggling to secure our financial future, craving more time in the hills. Still, I have come to appreciate the comforts of home: a warm bed to share; children to tickle and read to, their bright faces so close to mine as they shake me awake each morning.

More than 200 miles away, in Estes Park, Coop balances atop the framed wall of a house he is building. A stiff Rocky Mountain breeze threatens his equilibrium as he stretches for his chalk-line. Though he's seven years older, his body is stronger, and he is not as tied to modern luxuries as I am. His loving wife and two daughters honor his passion. I keep my adventures more removed from my family, concerned about seeming selfish.

I first met Coop in 1997, in an Estes Park hippy bar. Slurring over *cervezas*, we realized a common love of the obscure: big walls, long routes, frozen waterfalls. Like Mugs, we imagined climbing as a way to seek an understanding of that unlimited reality. We set out under moonlit skies to climb Mt. Meeker. High on its flanks, we postholed into the gut of a large, scooped corner system, simul-climbing snow spines to a small constriction. "You want me to take the lead, man?" Coop asked. He pointed to a four-foot pseudo-cruix. "I'm not sure you can handle the sickness, brah." It was the first time I realized how brash he was. I thought someone like him could help loosen me up, that we could learn together in the wild.

A year later, we ran into each other in Curry Village. Yosemite's granite walls glimmered high above. I soon found out that Coop had little fear of going airborne, and he required careful attention. Once, when he was longboarding down Trail Ridge Road in Rocky Mountain National Park, a deer stepped into his path. Coop dropped his shoulder into the beast, and they tumbled together. Another time, back on his board, he slid at high speed into a corner just as a helicopter, filming his

downhill race, crashed. Somehow, both the crowd and crew escaped with only minor injuries. "I had to go full tuck to avoid the flying shrapnel, man. It was total gnar!" he told me. In 2001, after blowing a copperhead forty feet up the first pitch of Lost in America on El Capitan, I sailed into his lap. His body broke my fall. The talus bruised his hamstrings black. After that, I started calling him the "Kevlar crash pad."

Locked-in, boxed-in walls. In November 2013, as the day's last magenta rays bounced off snowy scrub-oak hills outside my office, images of icy lines danced in my imagination. The Front Range floods of 2013 had cut off Coop's construction work and income, and so we'd had to cancel our trip to Patagonia. At home, I'd hung a photo of Cerro Torre in a dark hallway, hidden from view except when I passed by, typically in too much of a hurry to notice it, busy getting the kids off to school, racing to arrive here, to this chair that I sit in too much.

I'll have to be more cunning.

I knew how limited our time was: we were getting older; we didn't have that many dream routes left. But there was, as ever, the direct north face of Mt. Johnson in the Ruth Gorge.... I scoured the Internet. The Alaskan photographer Carl Battreall had captured the wall in a photo so sharp it felt tangible. A pyramid dripping with veins of white rose 3,800 feet above a gashed valley ringed with 'serchund-, crevasse- and serac-filled chaos. A symmetrical diamond of crisp Alaskan snow glimmered at the top, its lower left edge dropping into a massive corner that reached halfway down the face, spilling spindrift down compact black granite. This névé in turn poured over a final guardian roof 300 feet off the deck.

We were here once. We planned to climb this wall, and then....

The north face terminates at the East Buttress, the mythical left skyline, still unclimbed. Jim McCarthy, Yvon Chouinard, Henry Barber, Renny Jackson and Doug Chabot have all tried it. Near the end of his life, Mugs attempted it several times, one of only two routes he returned to that often; the other was Meru. Back to the right, three quarters of the way across, as if sliced by a sword, is a perfect elevator shaft. While approaching this feature in 1987, Charlie Sassara and Dave McGivern were hit by serac blocks and avalanche debris. Sassara became so entangled in the rope that McGivern had to resuscitate him. Two years later, at a large chockstone about 1,000 feet up the route, Jim Sweeney fell, dislocated his hip, fractured his femur and injured his head. His partner Dave Nyman lowered him to the base and took off for help, only to return thirty-two hours later still alone. Their would-be rescuers had bailed: the approach, on foot, was too dangerous. A plane crashed, trying to land after seeing an SOS stomped in the snow. The passengers survived and activated an emergency locator beacon, but snowstorms delayed any response. As Nyman continued to drag Sweeney out, avalanches buried them numerous times. Eventually, a helicopter picked them up.

[Opening Spread] The view between Ryan Jennings' feet, Pitch 4 (AI5 X) on the first ascent of Stairway to Heaven (AK 6: A1 WI4 AI5+ M6), north face of Mt. Johnson (8460'), Ruth Gorge, Alaska, with Kevin Cooper, May 1-4, 2014. | [Facing Page] Carl Battreall's image of

the north face, with Stairway to Heaven in red. The Elevator Shaft is the gash that ends at a notch on the right skyline. The East Buttress is the prominent ridge to the left. Carl Battreall | [This Page, Left] Jennings. | [This Page, Right] Cooper savors the team's last beer.



In 1995 Jack Tackle, also a repeat visitor, tried the Shaft again with Doug Chabot. “A few times we had to simul-climb because the leader hadn’t found an anchor in 60 meters,” Chabot reported on *Alpinist.com*. Navigating loose snice and monolithic granite, the pair completed the first ascent of the Elevator Shaft, only the second ascent of Mt. Johnson.

Between the East Buttress and the Shaft, the central north face is so sheer and impenetrable, so unfathomable and scary, that it had only two recorded attempts. In the summer of 1989, the Austrian architect Andi Orgler tried it with Michael Rutter. That season, the wall was mostly rock—planed and devoid of features. Rutter recalls that after taking six hours to climb fifty meters of brittle, hollow scales of stone, they realized alpine style was out of the question. Orgler was a staunch minimalist; thus, with great reluctance, he drilled a single bolt, and they rappelled. A year later, Orgler returned with Klaus Gaiswinkler to remove the offending bolt. They climbed one and a half pitches higher before giving up. Orgler was never able to return. He died hang-gliding in 2007.

In spring 2003, Coop and I came to the Ruth for our first attempt at the north face, lured in by a Chabot photo in a 1996 *American Alpine Journal* article. In his picture, the face stood out like a sentinel. Cascading lines of white fell dreamily, weaving together distinct features. Our imaginations twisted with possibilities. For a warm-up, we climbed Shaken Not Stirred on the Mooses Tooth. As we rappelled after twenty hours on the go, the auburn sky flickered and went extinct behind a dark range. Like a zombie, I rode the line to a large boulder with slings. My senses tingled while I clipped in, and my vision—or was it the boulder?—bounced as I tested the block in the leaping beam of my headlamp. *Others have used it before*. I called Coop down to join me.

I continued down the next rappel, my headlamp illuminating the runnel around me, the rock close on either side and steep underfoot, filled with deep snow from the day’s sloughing. Fifteen feet above, Coop momentarily weighted the anchor. An abrupt “Oh SHIT!” sliced the night. I fell backward. Before the trip, I’d foreseen this moment, obsessed about it: *If I find myself falling down a mountain, do I curl into a ball or go limp?* Now, I felt curiously unconcerned. The warm weather must have loosened the boulder. Freed of its cradle, the rock slammed me in the shoulder, and I spun into a névé-filled constriction, going upside down, curling instinctually into a ball.

My ankle snapped when my crampons caught the wall, and then I went limp as I shot over a large cliff, floating, following my pack down, hanging in the dark air as if in a dream. Coop fell behind me, still tied to the anchor, hitting his knee. There was no noise, just my thoughts so clear and time so slow. I drifted on time, waiting for something, imagining what would come next, visualizing the bergschrund swallowing us. A stark understanding of the moments ahead filled my mind. *I am falling, through the night, off a mountain in Alaska. I am going to die...* I had

visions of my then-girlfriend and parents attending my funeral, photos from my adventures wreathed in flowers, until, with surprising softness, I sailed over the ‘schrund, touched terra firma, and then tumbled another 600 feet down chunks of solid ice embedded in the slope. When we stopped, I sat straight up, facing out under a cold bath of stars. My foot was now on backwards. Coop told me in a matter-of-fact tone that he could still walk to summon a rescue. Saying little, he wrapped me in our jackets and extra clothes. He turned to hobble away, fading into the inky darkness that pooled around us like a fresh coat of snow.

Failure often precedes success.

Sitting, staring at the Battreall photo, I was entranced again.

Eleven winters have come and gone...

The next day, I called Coop.

“Dude, what do you think of revisiting the Johnson Project?”

“The unspoken dream line?” Coop said. “We’ve yearned for that for years. Hell yeah!”

I emailed him Battreall’s photo. Somewhere in the marble-smooth belly of the mountain must be Orgler’s highpoint. I imagined finding the remnants of his chopped bolt, lost in a sea of stone. Above a black roof, ice-covered slabs might bypass the blank section of his line. Higher yet, a dark crease some 300 feet long—an offwidth—pointed toward a glistening white velvet tendril that coursed down the upper three-quarters of a dihedral. Each barest eyebrow of a feature, I hoped, was a crack.

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I furiously scribbled potential lines on a printout of the photo. Visions of Hallucinogen Wall-style hooking mixed with images of crampons skittering on cold grey granite. I thought I could see past the illusion of impossibility to the inevitable. It’s moments like these that I wait for, when fate, faith and magic combine. *The timing is right; my life is in balance; my mind is ready to let go.*

APRIL 20, 2014. THE SMELL of airline fuel tickled my nose as I stepped from the car. My eight-year-old son and five-year-old daughter helped each other drag the smallest of my many bags from the luggage pile in the trunk. They wrapped their arms around my legs, and the weight of their love swayed me. A tear fell as I hugged them. Coop waited in the terminal. His family was already heading back through the bustling city, back into the mountains to their peaceful home hidden in the trees.

“F’n AK, baby!” Coop proclaimed when we tumbled through the Talkeetna bunkhouse door.

“Shhhhhhh,” I said. “Someone could be sleeping, man.”

He turned with a smirk, and we boiled over with laughter. I pulled us outside to the gear tent where we kept giggling. The next morning, aboard a Talkeetna Air Taxi plane, we drifted up and over town. Soon,

plains became hills, which grew into peaks, and then giant mountains protruded from a carpet of white. Our pilot circled in front of Mt. Johnson, and I trembled at what was now clearly a distinct lack of cracks. I surveyed the face through my camera lens, trying to make it less real.

“Beware the monolithic granite,” Jack Tackle had warned when we spoke weeks earlier. I was starting to see his point. A day later, a light morning breeze pushed us down-glacier, our skis gliding on the slick, windblown surface past the storied peaks of Mt. Dickey, Mt. Bradley and Mt. Wake, en route to a reconnaissance of Mt. Johnson. I’d told others we had a 5 percent chance of success. Now I wondered whether I’d been too generous.

We picked our way through the crevassed edge of the Ruth Glacier, toward the jumble of seracs that hangs above the valley. Years ago, a block of ice had calved there and buried Seth Shaw. Sheets of spindrift fell toward us as we climbed well left of the fall line. We crossed into the shadow of Johnson’s north face, where the dimness sparkled with stray flakes of airborne snow. Ghostly memories of past epics circled: Sweeney and Nyman likely tumbled ahead, just beyond the serac I stood atop. Up close, a few cracks appeared in the granite, only to fade out. Meanwhile, the massive roof was larger than we’d imagined. Not a single fissure breached it; snow mushrooms perched like gargoyles at each end. Our eyes adjusted. The veil pulled back. Features, unseen before, crystallized. We agreed on two options: a slight weakness heading to the right of the great roof, or a snow-choked, barely visible corner near its left edge.

“You gotta have the vision,” Coop said. He flashed his signature hang-loose gesture with one hand while flexing his other arm.

We toured other camps on the Ruth the next day. At each stop, Coop burst in, arms raised overhead in anarchy, declaring, “Sickest line on the planet! That’s where we’re going. You guys gunnin for it, too? You

better have some balls for that shit.”

“Calm’er down now,” I said. I shrugged and apologized. I often wondered how Coop and I had made it so far together. Almost everyone we met asked that question.

A day later, we began. Coop bounced a pick off the rock while dancing up a smear, three inches thick. Soon he entered the left line, clawing and stemming to a belay. I followed, reveling at his skill. At the belay, we peeked into the unknown before fixing a line and heading back to camp. In the morning, we jumared our single rope, stiff with cold. The gargoyle mushrooms hung above. I tapped my way under the first ‘shroom, shifting onto it gradually, pounded a picket, and mushroom-wrestled a steep chimney between me and a second ‘shroom. I glided over the remaining ‘shroom on my belly and then stretched across a blank slab toward an iced-up corner that hid perfect nut placements.

“Hell yeah!” I shouted. Coop cawed back, mimicking a crow. I built a belay at an alcove protected from the ice crystals that spilled constantly from above. For the last time, we fixed a line, tying both of our ropes together to descend. We were now positioned for the ascent.

Sparkles of ice sprinkled lightly down the wall. Occasional waves of spindrift overtook them. On a snowfield out right, the impacts of larger debris pocked the white surface with shards of blue. A traverse of this snowfield would be inevitable. I slid down the ropes, trying to block out thoughts of how much debris cascaded from above—and how all that snow sat clinging to the slab instead of sliding off the roof.

BACK IN THE YELLOW GLOW of our base-camp tent that night, I sobbed over the ring-bound set of laminated 5"x7" cards my wife had slipped into my luggage. Battreall’s photo lay at the front, a Dr. Seuss saying to its side: “Today is your day! Your mountain is waiting so get on

[Facing Page] From left to right: Cooper scopes the north face of Mt. Johnson from base camp; cooking dinner while waiting for a weather window; the laminated cards Jennings’ wife gave him for inspiration, with Battreall’s photo and the Dr. Seuss quotation on

top. | [This Page] Jennings recalls being frightened while approaching the massive face on their first day, searching for a spot to cross the bergschrund. The route’s central corner is directly above him, while Mt. Wake comprises the sunny face to the right. Kevin Cooper



We now know what it means to be in this space. I'd wanted for so long to **dance with** this mountain to the end of its cold, frozen stage.

your way!" There were other photos, quotes and notes adorning each card from each family member, three sets of grandparents and even my dog. How could I believe that climbing mountains is noble? When I could perish and leave my wife a widow, my children fatherless...

We almost died here in 2003. I do understand it almost happened.

The next day we lounged in base camp, waiting for our weather window. Up-glacier, two figures exited a plane. We skied over to greet Jack Tackle and Fabrizio Zangrilli, hoping for a few moments with the legend of Alaska. Jack has made more trips to this range and completed more first ascents here than most other climbers. The synchronicity did not escape me. *The pendulum swings our way.*

Returning from a ski down-glacier, Fabrizio and I discussed the north face of Johnson. "You think it's wise to be so bold with family at home?" Fabrizio asked. "I've lost a lot of friends." I didn't have an easy answer. I remembered Jonny Copp's wide, toothy smile; the glint in Jack Roberts' eyes as he rappelled past us on the Smear of Fear; Alex Lowe's endless pull-ups. I'd hung Alex's classic photo of Charlie Fowler in my home gym: buried in powder, Charlie clung to the top of the North Chimney on Longs Peak, moments before he fell its length and somehow survived. One by one, all these men had died in the mountains.

In the early morning, Coop and I spotted headlamps shimmering atop a strip of ice that coursed down the Escalator, left of Johnson's East Buttress. We knew it must be Kim and Jewell from Salt Lake City. Minutes later, when I exited the cook tent, only one lamp appeared, hundreds of feet lower at the base. We skied over to awaken Jack and Fabrizio, and then we took off while they dressed, skating down the icy, windblown glacier. Gusts whooshed at our backs. *One second your headlamp is there, hundreds of feet above the hard, blue ice, the next it's on the glacier broken to pieces, and you along with it. There is so little time to consider what's really happening...*

As we drew closer, two dark figures appeared, ascending high above in the aqua light of predawn. Relief. It must have been a dropped headlamp that fell just as the other climber turned hers off. Kim and Jewell went on to the summit, clueless about the drama that unspooled below.

Shortly thereafter, our weather window arrived. We juggled to our highpoint and gathered our ropes. Spindrift and debris fell while Coop traversed over the long roof to reach the "Safehouse" cave, concealed behind a névé curtain that extended from the fall line of white above. I swung a tool above the roof into the bottom of the endless white sheet, and I hid as chunks of ice bounced by, drumming down with a terrible fury. I could try to manage the risk, but I could not control this mountain's temper. *Am I an idiot for being here, for putting myself in this position?*

THIS IS IT. I CALCULATE the odds of successfully simul-climbing the névé and the odds of lethal debris careering down from above. While my math is rudimentary, I know the ratio skews toward certain death, at least for now, until the sun leaves the upper face. I wait, poised in my

own private hell, glancing up now and again, willing the wall to settle. Once the sun is gone, a quiet calm creeps in. I start again. In time—I'm not sure how much—the rope runs out. There is only that one tipped-out cam and that unreliable picket between me and Coop. He'll have to leave the belay and begin climbing soon.

Soon, the rope slackens, only to come taut again. I try to climb, but we are out of rhythm. *Damn it! Damn him and damn me! Why the fuck am I here? Why the hell is he not moving in synch?* "COOP! I'M PULLING YOU UP THIS THING! MOVE WITH ME, GODDAMMIT!" I shout, but I know he doesn't hear. I cling to insanity's edge, held back by the cord that connects us. My mind wanders to warm days on limestone, to my children playing in the dirt at the cliff base. My wife crawls into bed with me, snuggling under down covers, until I can feel the warmth. Ice skitters. I tuck my head. There is only one way home now: up.

I dare not look down.

Barely soon enough, just as my tiring hands struggle to grasp my tools, our rhythms meet. More than a thousand feet of air fall vertically below. The névé blends with the glowing glacier, making the distance seem not so bad: Even survivable? We'd tumbled almost that far on the Mooses Tooth. The fall line is clean. I picture our bodies plunging with so many metal spikes lashed to them toward the gaping bergschrund. I imagine us sliding into its depths, wedged there for eternity.

I did not come here to die.

As the rope slackens, my grip relaxes. Revived, I swing tools and kick to a staccato beat: *Positive thoughts remain my only protection, our only protection.* Nothing I could place will hold a fall. *I must be present in this moment; there is no other moment.* Coop has found his rhythm and moves confidently, riding on years of experience. Later, he'll describe hearing one word echo in his mind: *Focus.* My calves and arms ache, but I rest when I can, shifting my weight from limb to limb. I concentrate on my breath. Three ropelengths go by on an ocean of white. We've been tied together for hours now, connected to the mountain only by points of steel, imprisoned in a purgatory of our own making.

The skies are still blue. The air is quiet. *This is what we came for.* I am here despite the choices I could have or should have made earlier. Back at the Safehouse, burrowed like an ant into the flank of the great gorge, I'd stood to take the next step committing us to these hours on life's edge. I'd made a decision, the one that felt right at that moment. I'd understood that fear is sometimes an illusion that limits possibility: *If the picks remain solid, I will move up.*

Now, 700 vertical feet higher, I search for a belay as Coop comes into view. The rope is distracting to behold, arching and pulling at its apex off the slope between us without a single point of protection to interrupt the line. I place gear in a pile of boulders wedged in a ramp, and then dig an almost-hole to stand in.

"What do you think?" I ask Coop as he arrives.

"That went well!" he says. "You should continue leading."

The thought turns my stomach. But we're 1,000 feet up the climb. *Are the eight rivets we carry enough to get us down?* It is almost "safer" to continue. The angle steepens as I approach an overlap—again, no protection. I yell down to Coop to remove the belay, and we ascend together untethered again. I want to cry. I do cry, ashamed at my need for this bullshit and at the risk it poses to my family. I am here, though, in this moment, realizing how unlimited reality is: the immensity of the golden air around me, the myriad tiny facets of the snow. I dance in the direction of the solidest névé, weaving and kicking and picking at the endless, tilted plane as the tears dry on my cheeks.

Four hundred feet out, I spy a crack. My next anchor is two cams, an ice screw and two tools, all equalized. I sag onto the gear. Darkness is just ahead, a purple-red horizon in the distance. I'm level with the Mooses Tooth, its hulking mass jutting into the layers of twilight. We have survived. I smile at Coop as he comes into view, swinging slowly, his eyes wide, a grin on his face.

"Sorry, man. I had to set the belay under this mushroom—I was done," I tell him. As we hug, I realize that I'm crying again.

"I would have done the same," Coop says. His eyes roll back as if his mind is returning from some distant place. He shivers and says, "Nice lead."

DARKNESS FALLS as Coop heads off, his headlamp beam drifting across solid ice. The night is quiet, except for the constant hiss of spindrift and the clatter of ice shards. When the rope comes tight, with no calls from above, I flick on my light. A ten-foot-wide swath of water ice shimmers between rock walls. The rope hardly moves. I fight to stay awake, often laying my head atop my tools as if on a pillow. Ice chunks rain down while I imagine myself back home, sitting in the hot springs alongside the Crystal River, its rock-strewn pools flashing in the moonlight. Close to dawn, I join Coop at the "Bomb Bivi": a natural anchor, a flake of sorts, the cracks around and behind it stuffed with gear. *Good job, Cooper!*

We excavate platforms and face the stars and the crescent moon. A colossal wall, the start of the corner, overhangs on our left. The Ruth Glacier, turning pink with sunrise, stretches north to the Don Sheldon Amphitheater and Mt. Silverthorne beyond. The ragged skyline of the Tooth Traverse is to our northeast. I look down at Coop wrapped tightly in his bivy bag. Spindrift gently covers him till he blends in with the ledge. A peaceful presence hangs in the air. I think of the splendor of life that has led me here. I feel connected to the creator, as if I'm merely an extension of senses sent to experience this place and this moment. Soon I lie back for some sleep, wondering if Coop also feels this connection. For the moment, I'm happy.

"This is the life, Coop," I say.

"Sure is...sure is," he replies, too tired to say more.

We doze for two hours. Soon after dawn, pieces of snow and ice begin to fall, cascading through saturated hues of violet and indigo reflecting off the snow. I enter a white chamber, tunneling under a chockstone and bombing Coop with large blobs of excavated snow. I hang all my gear, including my helmet, from my harness, and I shrink my chest to wriggle into an overhanging offwidth until I'm tickling its

[Facing Page] A weary Jennings in his bivy sack at the "Bomb Bivi," thousands of feet above the Ruth Glacier, on the morning of Day 2, after only two hours of sleep. | [This Page] Looking down the "Shredder" Pitch (M6), just above the Bomb Bivi. The men

climbed through a snowy tunnel, visible just above Cooper (in red), to reach the upper squeeze chimney. Jennings told Alpinist.com, "Since [2003]...the line has haunted our dreams. I often felt I would have left something out of life if I never gave it an attempt."

throat. Months earlier, my daughter squirmed through just such a spot in the cave of a Colorado theme park. She giggled with delight as we marveled at the way the stone crystals reflected the lights back to us like the snow on a mountain.

Bird Beaks back up Big Bros. Crampons scratch at rock to release a sulfur scent. We reach more névé, the drippings of our seductive white velvet tendrils. I traverse left under bulging rock, dancing on delicate edges. With each move, the pendulum fall-line back into the corner becomes more worrisome. I cannot fall. I must get home to cuddle on the couch again, watch movies and idly get fat. Twenty-five hundred feet above the valley floor, I reach the tendril. *Our salvation.* "I'm in there!" I yell.



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“Caw, cawww!” Coop chants from below.

I carve a butt-cheek seat into an eighty-degree slope and watch as a magenta sky blends clouds into shapes of dragons that I imagine my children see back home. One pitch higher, Coop finds a tight cave. We dig side-by-side beds and rest, now fifty hours into our ascent. Our feet hang above the abyss.

MORNING DRIPS ON MY BAG; the splashing water glistens in the intense yellow light. We debate waiting for the sun to leave, but perhaps there is too little ice. Rock rips away as I stem wide between two walls to surmount a bulge. I reach a paint-strip line in a corner, shoulder-width névé packed perfectly between two walls of smooth golden granite. Droplets sparkle on the surface of snice. Up a series of bulges, I make delicately balanced high-steps past manted tools. Rotten ice falls away with the flick of a foot.

“I don’t think that pitch will be here tomorrow,” I say when Coop reaches my stance. He nods in agreement before taking the rack.

Coop continues up better tendril ice to another belay. I’m convinced we should head right to the diamond snowfield, where I believe we’ll find solid ice to the summit. For years, I’ve dreamed about the beauty of this feature; now I waste hours looking for the way. Eventually, I back-aid on shifting blocks, hooking sliding dirt clods to return to the corner. I concede that we must follow it to the summit ridge. My pace slows on a final bulge of crumbly rock.

Coop calls up, “What’s going on? Why’s it taking you forever?”

“Fuck you, bastard! I’m doing all I can. It’s not like any of your leads have been any faster!”

No reply. Coop understands. We often shout at each other, just to relieve the tension. On a ledge, I pound home our first piton of the climb. Later, this pin will be too wedged to remove. Would Mugs or Orgler criticize the lapse? I imagine myself lecturing my children: “Whatever you do, don’t pollute!” Too exhausted to get it out, I’m no longer as concerned about ethics. I hope someone will be glad to find it someday.

Monstrous black granite walls hang above and right. Blank slabs stretch left to the unclimbed East Buttress. Escape is still uncertain. Coop’s next anchor comprises a Lowe Ball and a micro-cam backed up by his body. I jumar, only to recoil in horror at what I’ve been trusting. But up ahead a perfectly dimensional corner crack shoots skyward.

[Facing Page] Cooper follows “Névé’s Nightmare” (A15 R snice) ten pitches up, on the morning of Day 3. Meltwater runs down the rock from the morning sun. | [This Page] Cooper and Jennings back at base camp. In a book about his Mt. Johnson epic, *Marine*

“We’re in there!” I call down. Beneath my stemmed-out legs, the wall unfolds in strange triangles and panels and improbable planes of black granite and pristine snow, the glacier’s crevasses so distant as to be almost invisible. Did we really climb all that? My final piece is the same one Coop placed at the start of the climb.

Darkness engulfs us for a third time 3,500 feet above the Ruth Glacier. Clouds wisp in the blue-black distance. Anchored to the steep slope, we hang on the edge of a sword-like ridge. We now know what it means to be in this space. I’d wanted for so long to dance with this mountain to the end of its cold, frozen stage. And now, almost, we have.

I follow Coop the final thousand feet, floating under the green streaks of the Northern Lights. I imagine telling stories about this enchanted sight to my family. On the summit, Coop grins through the morning twilight. His rough red facial hair surrounds chapped lips. His eyes glimmer above a tired smile. His face tells me that he knows—only together could we have made this happen. A wave of snow blows over him. Storms boil in the distance. Denali looms to our northwest, shrouded in billowing black clouds.

By the time we reach base camp, we’ve been on the go for eighty hours.

WHEN WE WAKE, WE FIND ourselves locked in a whiteout. Coop steps from the tent to see a flock of tiny birds. Finches, perhaps? We watch them hop about in the silent fog. They approach as if we’re all old friends, bouncing about and tilting their heads at us, nodding with seeming approval. One bird with brighter eyes and color, braver than the others, flies over to greet each of us in turn. We joke that he must be Mugs, and we are sure that Alex, Charlie and Jonny are there, too. I thank them for their stories, for reminding me to chase adventure, to remember that death is real and that climbing, no matter how much I love it, is not everything.

Coop, antsy as ever, straps on skis in the hopes of visiting neighboring camps. He turns back multiple times, concerned about the thick fog. I know that the summit is already fading from his mind, replaced by the eager faces of his family. We haul a load to the landing strip, making nervous jokes about getting lost and dying ten feet from camp. I’m thankful, I realize, for fear and ideals and vast mountain hinterlands. Without them, our art would be only sport, and these memories we build together, these feelings of having done something beautiful, would cease to exist.

Like many climbers before us, Coop and I have found our instants of perfect faith and flow, those moments when we felt as though we were carrying out what we were born to do. And though we never discovered the traces of Orgler’s chopped bolt, likely buried under névé, we unearthed other treasures on Mt. Johnson, glimpsing the potential within ourselves. It’s only when we saw through the veil of illusion, focused on the present and let fate take us, that the pendulum between success and failure swung our way. Yet perhaps that sense of pure synchronistic magic was just another illusion. Ultimately, the mountains aren’t aware of how in control you think you are. A collapsing crevasse or a falling block of ice doesn’t know if you’re a visionary like Mugs Stump; it doesn’t care if you have children at home. This time, we were lucky. This time, we came back.

Hope hangs on the thread of our thoughts. ■

Life Solidarity, James P. Sweeney writes, “The granite on Johnson is darker than the granite on the other mountains.... Johnson’s shadow leans way out onto the glacier, and the mountain emanates cold.... It’s hard to find a mountain more difficult to climb.”