



This is the first in a series of columns on J.B. MacKinnon's bid to climb *The Nose* on Yosemite's famed El Capitan.

photo, but somehow I came to know them long ago. The climber is American John Bachar, famous for his visionary ropeless ascents in the 1980s. The route is *Crack-A-Go-Go* at Cookie Cliff in that most legendary of rock climbing arenas, Yosemite Valley. Bachar looks relaxed as he hangs back against his straight right arm, and yet the blond surfer ringlets that hide his eyes somehow cannot conceal their intensity, which threatens to turn the granite into diamond. If John Bachar fell on *Crack-A-Go-Go* there was nothing and no one to catch him. He would need a miracle, or he would die.

It was decided, then. In June 1985, I became a climber. A few months passed before I had a harness, a rope, a mentor or two, and a first handful of easy scrambles to my name, but my life had heaved in that instant in, yes, Saskatchewan. Within two years I had, in my lesser way, followed in Bachar's footsteps, climbing ropeless and alone into the death zone.

**I went looking** for that photo because I finally made it to Yosemite a few months ago. No one needs to hear the reasons that it took me 23 years to get there—apply the usual excuses. My climbing partner Jill and I took the train as far as San Francisco, and we packed light when it came to expectations. Jill was newly married and getting ready to start a family. I was preparing for a year of responsibilities that seemed set to take me pretty much everywhere but to the base of sun-warmed cliffs. We were excited, but it was the damp and sheepish excitement of a journey that is long overdue. Twenty years ago everything about the trip would have sparkled with the pixie dust of novelty. But a bittersweet pleasure comes with time and experience, too: the ability to see clearly.

What I saw the next morning, as far as I could tell, was a refugee camp. With the first light that spilled into the valley I could hear my neighbours roll over, scratch, unseal

## How Things Begin

It's been a long, long road to one of the world's ultimate climbs

BY J.B. MACKINNON

*The act of a madman or a drunkard or of a man labouring under violent excitement seems less free and more inevitable to the one who knows the mental condition of the man who performed the action, and more free and less inevitable to the one who does not know it.*

—Malcolm Lowry, *Under the Volcano*

**The other day** in the library I uncovered the month and year of my transformation. June, 1985. It was during a visit to relatives in Saskatchewan (the irony of the location will be made clear in a moment). I was a pent-up teenager, virginal, still too young to drive, just beginning the quest for the rune stones that might foretell my adult self. Standing in front of a magazine rack my gaze settled on the cover of *Outside* magazine.

I recently found that cover again in the library's dusty volumes, and it still had the power to disquiet me. A young man hangs by the fingertips of his right hand from a slot in a thin crack that marks the only passage up a vertical grey wall. His feet smear on nothing in particular, while his left hand is in motion, bursting out of the bag of gymnast's chalk slung to his waist that he dips into to keep his grip dry. With the passage of time, the man's clothing has come to seem mildly ridiculous: a tight blue tank top tucked into high-cut white shorts with Adidas stripes, and socks—white socks!—in his climbing shoes. The route, on the other hand, is timeless: damned hard.

The young man is ropeless.

The magazine offers no details about the

gummy lips. Poking my head into the wider world, I saw tents the size of permanent dwellings pegged all around us in the loose dirt. Boots tromped through our site—our camp was in line with the toilets. Yellow pines stretched overhead, but at ground level there was not so much as a blade of grass or a no-see-um. Every living thing had been erased by six generations of reverence for the wild.

Yosemite National Park is an iconic wilderness. You might even call it a certified wilderness, stamped with the golden epigrams of the early conservationist John Muir, he of the briar-patch beard and the gold panner's hat. "It is by far the grandest of all the special temples of Nature I was ever permitted to enter," said Muir, and his words have been recalled to visitors ever since. Muir found his transcendent peace—"The clearest way into the Uni-

verse is through a forest wilderness"—you can almost see the reflection of your own terrified face.

"It's not what I expected, exactly," Jill admitted at some point.

"Not exactly," I acknowledged.

"I'm not sure that I'd recommend it," she said.

"No," I agreed. "Not really."

Much later, I reached out to friends—fellow climbers—who had always spoken of Yosemite with the reverence otherwise reserved for tantric trysts, absinthe benders and evangelical conversion. I couldn't recall a single instance when anyone had said a critical word about Yosemite. Then, cautiously admitting that I had gone to the temple and found it crowded with moneylenders, I began to hear a different story. "Oh yeah," said a friend who had road-tripped there in his twenties. "It's a circus. A total gong show. You end up climbing just to get

tidings," John Muir had said. "Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their own freshness into you, and the storms their energy, while cares will drop off like autumn leaves."

That old man talked a lot of nonsense.

**And yet.** While there, had we not climbed every day without rest, stopping only as the first raindrops fell and Jill's fingertips wore through to the blood? Had I not literally crawled over the lip of one climb more exhausted than I've been in a decade and with a bruised prostate from attempting to hang on to the cliff face with my ass? And then there was El Capitan.

All week the walls of El Capitan, "The Captain"—2,900 vertical feet of pearl-tone granite—had loomed into my consciousness. Often the presence was physical. The cliff is the gateway to the valley, and driving through the forest below, what you glimpse through the canopy is not the sky, as the eye would expect, but that strange, shining, orange-grey stone.

Much more, the beast lingered in the mind's eye. Consider: the first ascent of El Capitan took place *five years later* than the first ascent of Mount Everest, and took almost exactly the same number of days (45 and 47, respectively). The immensity of the upward struggle had magnified rather than diminished the conquered summit. Above all else, the climb's power to mark the psyche results from an image: the pure line. Impossibly, the route stays true over its entire length to the forwardmost prow of the giant, the striking edge that gives The Captain the appearance of some great sky ship bearing for deeper cosmological waters. The route is known, humbly, as *The Nose*.

Jill and I found ourselves clinging to the monster's coat strings. We spent a day on Middle Cathedral Spire, which just happens to stare directly across the valley onto *The Nose*. The following day we ascended the East Buttress of El Capitan, which studies *The Nose* in profile. We passed two British hardmen with plans to stay in the valley for months. Would they climb *The Nose*? Oh no, they said. Too much hype. Too many people. But it was clear they felt a need to explain themselves.

There are good reasons to avoid climbing *The Nose*. The route has matured into a classic, attracting, like Everest, more than its

**The Nose has matured into a classic, attracting more than its share of tick-listers and performing seals. It has been climbed solo. It has been climbed blind. It has been climbed blind-drunk**

verse is through a forest wilderness"—on his first visit to Yosemite in 1868, as well he might have. By then, 17 years had passed since the Mariposa War drove out the Ahwahnechee, who had lived in the valley for perhaps 4,000 years. In fact, it was a colonial militia that gave Yosemite Valley its name, taken from the particular Ahwahnechee tribe that the troops were hunting down.

So we awoke, Jill and I, in that cathedral wilderness, to the sounds of generators burping to life and satellite dishes—one featured a mural of a bear in a meadow beneath the famous rock face of Half Dome—rotating in search of network programming. We ate breakfast in a hush and headed out into the traffic of a funhog rush hour to discover what we could of the Yosemite Valley. We learned, among other things, that: A martini served with a tiny carabiner clipped onto the stem of the glass costs \$17 in the famed Ahwahnee Lodge; it is nearly impossible to find a private place for a skinny dip in the storied Merced River; 70 bears have been hit by cars in the fabled valley in the past five years; the holds on many celebrated climbing routes are so polished by hands and boots that

away from the crowds." He laughed.

I fired off an e-mail to another longtime climbing partner, one who had always spoken, wherever we were and whatever we were climbing, as though we should have been in Yosemite instead. When he mentioned the place, his eyes took on a different cast, a mixture of fear and awe, like a man who has returned with unspeakable knowledge from a different dimension.

He replied: "I know what you mean about Yosemite and all it is and likely was, but is clearly no longer. I continue to feel drawn to the place, but I think it is more because I feel as though I ought to be drawn there... It always felt too urban, too over the top, too uncomfortable, and yet... I keep wondering if there might be a better time of year."

**So it was a myth.** A cotton-candy confection, and every visitor spun a new skein of sweetness around the hollow core. The realization felt like a small death. On the morning that Jill and I left, a torrential rainstorm cast down mudslides to close the roads behind us. It didn't take a lot of superstition to believe we had been sent a message.

"Climb the mountains and get their good

share of tick-listers and performing seals. It has been climbed solo. It has been climbed by an 11-year-old. It has been climbed blind. It has been climbed blind-drunk. Last year it was climbed in 2 hours, 37 minutes and 5 seconds, an average speed of about 1,115 feet per hour (0.2 mph). The hairsplitting of accomplishment has surpassed the absurd. I see from an apparently satirical entry on an El Capitan records website that September 1980 marked the first time *The Nose* was ever climbed by a 19-year-old from Issaquah, Washington.

However, while descending the shoul-

der of El Cap, Jill and I bumped into a

Welsh party that had spent four days on the wall (approximate speed 30 feet per hour or 0.005 mph), and there was something about them that approached the religious. On the one hand they craved touch-down—the knowledge that an adventure has brought them back safely to the world of beer and nachos and social responsibility. On the other they were still cradling their fear, their suffering, their frigid nights and searing days, their cracked lips and mashed fingers, their aching muscles. Their freedom. They spoke without prompting, wanting us to know they had climbed *The Nose*. Their description of the experience didn't go much further than dumbfounded head-shaking and repetition of the words *Oh my God*.

**We met a party that had spent four days climbing *The Nose*. Their description of the experience didn't go much farther than dumbfounded head-shaking and repetition of the words *Oh my god***

The train trip back to Canada from California takes about 30 hours. When Jill and I got on board, we had no intention of ever returning to Yosemite Valley. The Captain had other ideas. By the time we stepped off, Jill had postponed her family planning and my year had a new focus. We were going to climb *The Nose*.

**What was it** about that image of man and stone back in 1985? At the time I had no idea—I only knew that the photograph had put me onto a new path. The picture is the type that might appear on an inspirational poster beneath the heading Courage or Determination. Maybe its potency was nothing more than a cloying appeal to the

adolescent ego. But I doubt it. What I believe I saw that day—was it in Moose Jaw? Regina?—was not a singular act of daring, but the end point of a process. Unconsciously I knew that to call myself a climber would demand a physical and mental evolution. The discipline would be total, like a martial art, invoking strength and endurance, a mental state at once alert and preternaturally calm, and the rewiring of fear into a fuelling energy. All of this, I somehow understood, would take place in landscapes of stark beauty. Because my transformation would never be complete,

there would inevitably be crises of weakness, terror and surrender. There would also be those moments, though, when previously unthinkable possibilities opened up. John Bachar standing at the base of *Crack-A-Go-Go* and thinking, *I could leave the rope at home*. But I have to wonder what the climbing life wants from me now. Why *The Nose*? What is there for me in the unshakable image of that long, pure line? A farewell to youth? Another metamorphosis? To do ourselves proud on El Capitan, Jill and I will each need to get stronger—much stronger. I foresee fingertip pull-ups and dashes up 2,900-foot trails with backpacks full of weights and hours strung out on the longest, most demanding routes we can find. We will need new skills for points like the King Swing, where a blank stretch of rock is surpassed by swinging on the end of a rope in a gigantic, 150-foot arc. I picture us packing and repacking gear, reducing what we need to the basics of survival. And each of us will need to wrestle inner demons, from Jill's reluctance to see just how good a climber she really is to my own tendency to plummet all too easily into the abyss of anxiety.

All this I can see. What I can't see—what can never be seen from the beginning—is the ultimate destination. Who will I be in the end? **e**

*J.B. MacKinnon is explore magazine's senior contributing editor.*

This is the third in a series of columns on J.B. MacKinnon's bid to climb *The Nose* on Yosemite's famed El Capitan.



## How I got superpowers

There was a time when I thought training was for dorks. No more

BY J.B. MACKINNON

*My paleolithic soul feels at home here.*

—Henno Martin,  
*The Sheltering Desert*

### “Training takes the fun out of climbing.”

I’ve been told this three times since I started training to climb the 2,900-foot wall of El Capitan, a feat that will also, I imagine, fail to meet any reasonable definition of “fun.” The comments have made me feel a bit like a boom-time derivatives trader trying to justify his penthouse in Dubai to families who’ve lost their homes to the global economic collapse. You know, kind of defensive. That’s because, for most of my life, I would have agreed with my accusers.

I’ve never truly trained for anything, in

large part because it always struck me as profoundly unfun and uncool. The jargon alone—my god, the jargon. On any given day I can now be found pulling “frenchies.” I do “offsets,” I engage in “campusing” and I “work” those damnable “obliques.” All of it involves more jungle-love grunting and sweating than I am comfortable with in public.

I loathe the earnestness of training. It feels as though I am doing therapy in front of an audience, an effect that is in no way softened by the fact that my two training partners are professional therapists. Like many if not most people, I have tended to look on amateur athletes who put themselves through rigorous training as individ-

uals driven by particularly boring personal demons, and alternately pity and mock them. Look at their determined little faces! See them smugly doing push-ups in the rain! As if running a sub-three-hour marathon or bicycling to the North Pole mattered in any way whatsoever to the world as a whole. Do you really want the soundtrack of your life to be a pump-up classic like Survivor’s “Eye of the Tiger?”

I am suspicious of the cult of personal achievement (isn’t it often just a cover for consuming life’s experiences as if they were a bottomless bowl of Doritos?), and I never really feel much sense of accomplishment about anything (here I blame my Scots-Finnish blood). It’s also plain that there are enough great athletes who are lousy human beings to discount any link between personal bests and being a better person. Is individual goal-setting really what the world needs more of right now? Wouldn’t it benefit more from, say, the latter-days guidance of the author Aldous Huxley: “Try to be a little kinder”?

I have always equated training with cheating. If each of us has his or her own preferred scenario for a parallel-universe Olympics, then mine would be the Lottery Olympics, in which each country is represented by citizens selected at random (good luck in that one, Team USA). I also dream of an Olympics in which everyone trains and competes using the same technology—preferably involving chains, logs and old tractor tires.

During the one period in my life when, despite having zero interest in *mano a mano* competition, I was a competitive athlete (in judo, in my early teens), I made the provincial championships. As far as I was concerned, the outcome had already been decided by factors beyond my control: I would win the silver. There was one guy whom I could sometimes beat but who usually beat me, and so, given the high stakes, he would be motivated to take the gold, which was fine with me because I lacked that motivation. There was another fellow whom I

usually beat but who sometimes beat me, but he would not be a factor because he had recently had a growth spurt and moved up to another weight class. But then, much to my surprise, he “trained.” He did set after set of sit-ups and push-ups, all while wearing a black plastic garbage bag, until he had sweated off enough pounds to squeak into

Then she pulled out and ripped—*ripped*—past our glorious leader. We were not a part of his world of pain, not in the least. We felt like two dogs that had been choking at their leashes and were suddenly cut loose to run like hell. If you know the feeling of a good horse between your legs, its veins mapped out beneath the skin, the veins feed-

tion for the multi-day siege against gravity that is big-wall rock climbing. On another level, it is an end in itself.

A few details about the program: It was developed, for the most part, by Mike Doyle, who is one of North America’s strongest climbers, the former head coach of the Canadian Junior National Climbing Team, and a lunatic Vancouver Canucks fan. With Mike’s oversight, I adapted the plan to focus more on the long days that climbing in Yosemite Valley demands, and less on getting to the top of some 50-foot competition climbing wall. The most impressive drills include hanging from my pinkie and ring fingers with weights dangling off my harness, or making leaps from one set of holds to another with no points of contact in between. Mostly, though, it’s training as you would imagine it: tedious repetition of pointless-seeming tasks.

I’ve never seen Mike in person, because he is currently climbing, surfing and working his way around the world. Instead, he generously writes with advice and timely warnings, such as that my overall climbing ability might actually worsen before it gets better. (Bingo!) But deep down I feel an elemental shift, and maybe in it a justification for training that I can believe in.

There is new strength in my hands, for example, which won’t surprise anyone. What is surprising is how *normal* that strength seems to be. I don’t feel suddenly, unnaturally strong; I feel like I used to be unnaturally weak. I catch myself staring at my palms, opening and closing my fists, as if my body were welcoming home some ghost limb that had somehow been reattached a decade after the amputation.

Have you, like me, ever picked up a rock or stick and found the weight of it inexplicably pleasing, as though the rock or stick wanted you to throw it, maybe even in a certain way, such as shot-put style? Have you ever thought, as I have, that we might be the least physical human beings to exist in our history as a species? That perhaps our bodies are missing the good old days?

These are not unreasonable thoughts. An interdisciplinary school of academe has emerged to argue that, because human beings evolved as gatherer-hunters and stayed that way for all but the past few millennia, we maintain the genetic memory of those eons. As a result, the more we mimic our ancient selves, the more at ease we will be. For those who can endure the taunting, there are ice-

What is surprising about the new-found strength in my hands is how *normal* that strength seems to be. I don’t feel suddenly, unnaturally strong; I feel like I used to be unnaturally weak

my category and bring his newly pubescent body down hard on my teenage ass. I took the bronze.

I started rock climbing to get away from assholes like that. And now, here I am, sweating off pounds and doing “technique drills” and attracting commentary from people who plainly suspect that I am exactly that kind of dork.

**Earlier I said that** I’ve never trained for anything, and this is true—with one small asterisk. A couple of years ago, while my partner Alisa trained—really and truly trained—for the 100-mile cycling challenge known as a century ride, I tagged along, sort of, in a manner of speaking. I sucked her rear wheel through maybe 20 per cent of the training distance. Then, while riding the actual century, I had two revelations, one of them beautiful and the other humbling.

The first took place as Alisa and I climbed a long, steady hill through the rainforest east of Seattle. We soon found ourselves lined up behind a fellow whom we felt we had no right to pass. He was marvellously muscled, and his bike looked like something that elves had designed for rides along shimmering sunbeams. Alisa’s road bike dates from the early 1980s, with gears that shift with a sound like microwaveable popcorn, while I keep up on a knackered rigid-frame mountain bike widely known as Pinky (technically, the colour is *raspberry*). Neither of us has anything so advanced as clipless pedals (invented in 1895; in widespread use since 1985), or even toe-clips.

So we rode this fellow’s wake until it dawned on us that he was suffering. Grinding. Hurting. Alisa glanced over her shoulder at me with a look that said, *Do we dare?*

ing twitching muscles, the muscles twitching to gallop, then that’s how we felt. But the horse was us.

We had superpowers that day. I say “we,” but I really mean Alisa, because a few hills later, my proud inner Thoroughbred had transformed into a grumpy and flatulent pony. I recall trying to keep pace as the pair of us approached the top of yet another long hill and feeling all the familiar human pain and desire for it all to be over. Once again Alisa looked over her shoulder. This time her expression said, *What’s wrong with you?* She was still in that other world—the one where buildings are leapt in a single bound and the ability to fly is as common as a talent for burping the names of Greek gods. She had trained, and I had just been schooled.

**But I had tasted** the superhuman world, and was intrigued. Not long afterward, I met my friend Brian for a beer—which he agrees is the best recovery beverage on the market—while he was still flush from training for an upcoming marathon. He had laid 32 miles of track that evening. “I ran the last two,” he said. “I mean, I *ran* them.” He was saying that he took off, booster rockets firing, companions left in the dust, not jogging but *running*, letting his body do what it was suddenly ready to do. Why, all my life, had people tried to sell the idea of training to me with platitudes about dedication and life goals and learning about myself? Why not just say: *You will develop superpowers?*

This fresh expectation may be enough to explain why I’m aching right now. In fact, much of my body has been gently throbbing for the past two months. At one level, the training is a means of physical prepara-

age diets and even specific paleolithic fitness regimes (chains, logs, old tractor tires).

All of which would be more amusing if I had never visited the pebble beach of Dritvík, on the west coast of Iceland, where four stones were once used to test strength. With the first stone, I qualified as a Viking crewman; I also quickly dispatched the second, 120-pound stone. I snowboard, I rock climb, I canoe, I commute by bicycle. The typical Canadian averages one half hour of physical activity per day, a figure that I exceed by 20 times on a slow week. But I could not lift the third stone, named Hálfsterkur, or “Half-Strong.” To be “strong” was far beyond me; the stone known as Fullsterkur weighs 340 pounds. I could hardly make it move, and I don’t personally know anyone who could raise it off the ground. I suspect, though, that there was a time when most every Icelandic outport was home to at least a person or two who was *fullsterkur*.

There are modern people who can lift the Dritvík stones, and even larger ones like Leggstein, or “Tombstone,” which weighs 485 pounds and is traditionally carried

around an old farmer’s grave. It has become a minor outdoor sport of its own, stonelifting. These days it involves a great deal of training, naturally, but perhaps training is an act of remembering.

**So is training fun?** I’m going to say yes, it is. That doesn’t mean that I won’t turn

climb, Jill is attempting one-armed running and yoga, and she is working those damnable obliques, because she’s *training*, by golly, and she needs to *stick with the program*.

Yes, it’s fun. I am inhabiting my body in a way I never have before, and it turns out to be a pleasant place to pass the time

I am inhabiting my body in a way I never have before, and it turns out to be a pleasant place to pass the time of day. Through the aches and pains I can hear the distant thrumming of the evolutionary engines

red and stutter when people ask me if I’m training and what I’m training for. The whole process still seems overweening and big-picture pointless and dorky. Obsessive, too. If I haven’t mentioned my climbing partner Jill much in this column, it’s because she recently cut her hand half-open with a half-opened can while half-cut on lemondrop martinis. (She denies this last part, but no one believes her.) Unable to

of day. Through the aches and pains I can hear the distant thrumming of the evolutionary engines. The inner caveman and superman high-five in the temple. What universes we contain! How many of us never find them? **e**

*J.B. MacKinnon is a senior contributing editor to explore. To learn more about Mike Doyle and his climbing travels, visit [mikedoyle.ca](http://mikedoyle.ca).*



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## Upward bound

At long last, it was time for us to take our shot at El Capitan

BY J.B. MACKINNON

*As I hammered in the last bolt and staggered over the rim, it was not at all clear to me who was conqueror and who was conquered: I do recall that El Cap seemed to be in much better condition than I was.*

—Warren Harding,  
first ascentionist of El Capitan

**DAY 1:** We are driving through the night, always darkest just before dawn. Searching my road music for 5 a.m. inspiration, I settle on Neil Young, “Rockin’ in the Free World.” The song is exactly long enough to get us from Camp 4, the climbers’ ghetto

in Yosemite National Park, to the trailhead where we’ll abandon the car for the next three or more days. After six months of preparation, my climbing partner Jill and I are about to start up the most famous rock climb in the world.

My overwhelming feeling is relief. Anticipation has troubled my sleep for a week. So has a virus. Leaving home for California, I kissed my obviously ill girlfriend-of-17-years goodbye. The kiss was deep and full, because—who knows? People die while climbing El Capitan. People die on the California freeways, too. I wasn’t leaving

home without the kiss, but within 12 hours it had given me a fever.

Then we postponed the climb due to weather. A measly 20 per cent chance of a thunderstorm, but both Jill and I had heard how lightning can come pouring down El Capitan’s crack systems seeking a place to go to ground. So we sat around Camp 4, watching and being watched as teams from Romania, Spain, Britain, France, Korea and beyond fiddled with their gear. Yosemite at ground level is a zoo, where people line up for campsite cancellations the way Boxing Day shoppers queue for sales; where a bear might peel back the window of a Toyota Tacoma to eat a used condom; where tourists form flash-popping paparazzi rings around fully racked, 10-point buck deer. With each passing day we felt our sanity under siege. We had already turned obsessive, grading energy bars by calories per gram and wondering aloud, given our pack-it-in, pack-it-out philosophy, exactly what percentage of the weight of a Twizzler comes out the other end as dung. Finally, we just had to climb. The forecast still called for thunderstorms.

“So I try to forget it any way I can,” wails Neil on the stereo. I am 39 years old and attempting the world’s most famous rock climbing route with a registered professional therapist for a partner. I know that the optics are not good. We are conditioned by modern life to see people who take on big challenges—a triathlon, an expedition to the South Pole, a sex change—as seekers. Nearly a year ago, when the idea of climbing *The Nose* first took hold, I wondered as much as anyone what the journey would ultimately mean. Now I can’t think about that question, because every time I do I feel like a 39-year-old climbing the world’s most famous rock with a therapist.

Meaning can wait.

**From our parking spot** in El Capitan Meadow the so-called Big Stone is a black triangle cut out of the starlight. High on

the 2,900-foot wall we see the pinpricks of two climbers' headlamps—what are known locally as “El Cap constellations.” Jill and I move lightly up the short trail to the base. *The Nose* route is 31 pitches, or rope-lengths, long, and yesterday we climbed the first five to give ourselves a head start. We left our haulbag up there full of water, food and warm clothes, then set a series of three ropes back down to the ground. That, at least, was the plan. Much to our surprise, our three fixed ropes left us still 100 feet off the deck. We dangled in space, trying not to see this oversight as an omen, until fate appeared in the form of a surfer-haired climbing bum named Roger, rappelling down our lines. Roger was a pulsing quasar of good intentions. He lent us a fourth rope, and when we were all on solid ground he wished us luck as though we were not a couple of gumbies who had already made a major error, but rather the two most fortunate people on this green Earth. We were going big-wall climbing.

There is still no hint of first light as Jill disappears overhead, pulling up on two ascending devices along the fixed lines we left yesterday. I follow once she is clear of the first rope. We will continue up El Capitan with just two of the four ropes, so my first job is to untie and drop the extra lines. It's a moment of commitment that gives me pause: severing our link to the ordinary world.

Yet we fall easily into the rhythm of what we have trained to do. To move upward on hands and feet tucked into cracks; to create around us a bubble of safety in a lethally unsafe place; to build clever pulley systems to drag the 70-pound haulbag up the wall. What we don't know yet is that this will be our easiest day—that we should be savouring this. After we've climbed 11 pitches, I face a classic Yosemite crack, too wide for conventional techniques. I hardly pause, attacking the problem with a ju-jitsu of thrusting elbows and knees. The awkward moves feel almost graceful.

“You gotta be happy with that,” says Jill, as she appears from below.

“I am feeling a bit like Yosemite Man at the moment,” I admit.

A short scramble later, we reach our first camp, which is a ledge atop a formation known as El Cap Tower. Since our arrival in Yosemite, we've seen three of four parties attempting *The Nose* give up and rappel back to the ground, including one British team

today. Neither Jill nor I raise the possibility, even as we set up for the night on a ledge barely wide enough for two. Perched with our backs to the wall and our legs extended, the soles of our feet are cooled by a draft pouring upward 1,000 feet from the valley floor.

We sit. We say meaningful things like, “This is so cool,” again and again. We swap sips of cinnamon whisky until we turn into El Cap constellations.

**DAY 2:** Rain. It sweeps over our tarp before dawn. All through the early morning light it comes, and then—is that a clap of thunder?

There is nothing to do but wait, and nothing could be worse. Two pitches above lurks the King Swing, which, for me, has become an unshakeable psychic burden. The Swing is not climbing by any ordinary definition. Climbing goes up; the King Swing goes down and sideways. Climbing is steady, contained, calculated; the Swing is *gung-ho*. It begins with the lead climber—for this pitch, me—being lowered about 75 feet. That climber then takes off running across the wall, turning himself into a giant pendulum in order, finally, to make it out and over a rib of rock and onto the small rectangle of Eagle Ledge, where normal climbing begins again. All of this takes place with what climbers call “full exposure,” or an unbroken sightline from your own sorry ass to the ground. Most first-timers bobble back and forth at least a half-dozen times before they finally lose themselves to the maniac energy that the Swing demands.

I do not wait well for things that I dread. Anxiety, in daily life as much as in climbing, is my constant companion. As Jill and I trained for El Cap, I knew that the mental game was my greatest weakness and vowed to get stronger—to chase my skeletons out of their closets and banish my bouts of the nerves. Here I am, though, still tying knots in my guts, still fundamentally a nail-biter and hand-wringer. The difference is that today I am wringing my hands a thousand feet above the Yosemite Valley floor. As the dark clouds continue to scud in from the west, I have time to ponder such things. I don't say them out loud, though, because then I would feel like a 39-year-old climbing a rock with a therapist.

Jill is not *my* therapist, of course. She is my good friend and climbing partner, though even in these enlightened times we are often assumed to be husband and wife.

We are alike: punctual, obsessive, with a cold fire behind blue eyes. The night before a big route, Jill would see nothing abnormal about piling your clothes in the order that you will put them on in the morning, and neither would I. Yet we are different. I see life as strategic—a game, sometimes with the playfulness that the word suggests but more often a game of survival. Jill sees the world in terms of relationships, including with herself. Make those relationships healthy enough, and what is there that you cannot sustain? But then again, we are alike: both wired for resilience.

Another squall comes and goes and somehow, in the taste of the air or the feel of the wind on the surface of the eye, we know that

light to its sunset side. Above, devious faultlines lead to the faraway summit. It takes some fancy ropework to bring the haulbag and Jill across the King Swing, but we have trained for this moment, and everything goes smoothly. We've lost the morning to rain. Can we still make our day's goal, the ledges known as Camp V? We have seven pitches to go. So we go.

**What we don't know yet** is that El Capitan *accumulates*. It is the Big Stone, and its tactics are tectonic. It erodes you: stress, and recovery, stress, and recovery. Consider one particular split second on what is known as the Great Roof. The pitch is terminally intimidating, a glowering brow of rock that

For two hours, it is pretty quiet up there.

Finally, I hear a strange sound. Coughing and wheezing, as though Jill has swallowed a fly. Only later do I learn that she reached the top of the pitch dry-heaving from stress and exhaustion.

Camp V is a ledge the size and shape of a coffin. It slopes gently downward and outward: a coffin set to tumble out the back of the hearse. It's like the bedtime equivalent of a dribble glass. I have promised Jill's husband, John, that I will sleep on the exposed side of the ledges; they've been married only a year, have a future family in mind. At Camp V, though, it's hard to say which is the better bunk. Either you're at the edge of the abyss or you're pressed into the wall. "It's a choice between a physical and a psychological cage," I say, but I stick to my promise. I shorten the leash that tethers me to the rock three times before I doze off.

Stress.

And recovery.

**DAY 3:** The summit of El Capitan comes suddenly. It's late afternoon, and I have just finished the twenty-ninth rope-length of climbing and, as has become my constant habit, I am staring downward. There it is, the entire route, spilling out below the tips of my boots through more than 2,500 feet of vertical space. We've been climbing since dawn and—what can I say about the experience? If a feeling can be expressed in a fact, then consider that El Capitan was first climbed in 1958, just one year before humanity landed a spacecraft on the moon. Day 3 has been like that: otherworldly. It has left me homesick for Planet Earth, where gravity is a comfort rather than a threat.

Then, for a change, I look up. There it is—the top. Still out of reach, but *right there*. A horizon where the cliff face rolls back from the brink and gives way to the sky. An hour later I crawl over the final rim onto a slab of stone that I can stand on without a rope or a handhold to keep me in place. Jill comes up behind me, wide-eyed at the horizontal world. We touch the famous, wind-battered pine that grows on the first stretch of flat ground. We touch the tree the way you would touch a beloved but deaf and blind grandmother.

The top of El Capitan. It seems like we should slap a high-five or yodel or shout out some hip-hop slogan, but we don't. A hug. "That was something," says Jill.

There I am, slung in space beneath the Great Roof with all my weight on what is called a "fixed" piece of gear, as in "fixed in place and not supposed to come out." In the next instant I am plunging...

the storm has passed. Immediately, we are on the move. Jill starts out in the lead, and then it's time for the King Swing. We stand there on the thinnest ledge, as if waiting on a curb for a bus to fall out of the sky. "I probably don't have to remind you that I'm scared shitless of this pitch," I declare. Jill, always supportive, says that my fear is completely understandable. I have to say, it's not much of a boost.

So, let's get this over with. Hang on the rope's end. Signal Jill to lower me away, down 75 feet. And then go for it. I sprint out across the rock to build my counterswing, then soar back the way I came. The arc is huge, but at its deadpoint I know it is still not enough. The backswing takes me by surprise, a vaudeville stage hook dragging me out into wide-open air. I push off hard with my legs, twisting to face the stone once again, but my push is too much and my feet slap painfully as I touch down at a full run. My second attempt is half-hearted. Then another big counterswing, leaping out against the tension of the rope, and again that wild ride, the Human Yo-Yo, the Pit and the Pendulum, the ol' Gravitational Slingshot. At the end of which I scramble like some nightmare spider over a smooth rib of rock and onto Eagle Ledge.

I am not much given to whooping, but I whoop. We have bridged *The Nose*, crossing the prow of El Capitan from its morning-

stares straight down at the impossibly distant valley floor. There I am, slung in space beneath the roof with all my weight on what is called a "fixed" piece of gear, as in "fixed in place and not supposed to come out." In the next instant I am plunging and swinging and—worst of all—*wondering why I am plunging and swinging*. Could it be that my rope has snapped or my harness failed and I am starting the fall that will end in my death? But no. It's only that a "fixed" piece has pulled out of the rock, leaving me to fall until I'm caught by another, more dependable fixed piece. This I must suck up. From this I must recover, because the next pitch is the infamous Pancake Flake with its burly crack climbing and more of that "full exposure." Stress, and recovery, stress, and recovery.

Which leaves only one rope-length to Camp V. The pitch is nameless, a mystery. On the late side of sunset, Jill starts up into the unknown. A funny thing about Jill: when the going gets scary, her response follows a predictable scale. As anxiety builds, she giggles. As it reaches gale force, she slips into understated cussing, such as, "Oh goodness gracious." Under storm-strength strain, bizarrely, she begins to serve up malapropisms, or the use of one word in mistake for another that sounds similar: "I'm in a pretty *vicarious* position here!" Eventually, as the hurricane hits, there's silence.

“That was quite something,” I reply. Nothing has really sunk in yet.

The sun will set in less than an hour. We had hoped to summit earlier, with plenty of daylight for the standard descent, which involves more exposure, more ropework, more devious route-finding. It is still a possibility. We’re surprised to discover that each of us has reached the top of El Cap with energy to spare—our training has paid off. Mentally, though, we are beyond fatigue. There are only so many ways to get ready for the psychological realities of a big wall. We’ve maintained an epic headspace for three full days and we don’t want to sink back into it so soon. We want pizza and beer and a patch of ground wide enough to stretch out on.

So we take a small gamble. There is a hiking trail down the backside of El Capitan. That much we know, and that’s where our useful knowledge ends. As the fading sun turns the surrounding summits furnace orange, we shoulder the bags and set off.

Two hours later, moving by headlamp through the night, the situation is more clear: we are not heading anywhere close to our

car or our camp. What we don’t know yet is that this is only the beginning. That the night’s sojourn will go on for seven hours, during which we will walk more than 20 kilometres, at one point through the ash and smoke of a recent forest fire with eerie pools of flame still glowing. We will carry on, hungry and thirsty, blistered and aching, until at last we reach a road, where three cars will pass in an hour and a half, by which time Jill is hearing distant engines that don’t exist and I am seeing ghost lights in the forest; until at last a fresh-faced Scottish couple picks us up—how bizarre to be making small talk! the novels of Ian Rankin! summer traffic in Edinburgh!—and takes us to within a 10-minute walk of Jill’s car. We arrive at 1 a.m.

Along the way there is time to find some meaning in the journey to the top of El Capitan. I had predicted transformation. The big wall was the greatest climbing challenge I had given myself since the day that I took up the sport, 23 years ago. (My original inspiration—a photo of the legendary John Bachar climbing ropeless—has recently lost some of its sheen; Bachar fell to his death in

July while climbing ropeless.) Those early days had been a process of profound change in everything from my teenage body to my sense of life’s potential. I expected something similar from El Cap, wondered whom my new self was going to be.

But there wasn’t any transformation. Realization would be a better word, and it sticks with me in an image more than in words. A person sees strange things on a big wall, and once, as I stood many hundreds of feet off the ground, I looked out to see a plant slowly rotating in space. It was the thing entire, leaves, stem and roots, turning gently in midair. How did it come to be there, absolutely untethered, altogether whole? It didn’t matter. It just was.

I wasn’t changed by El Capitan. I was myself—uncertain, intrepid, sacred, absurd—when I left the ground. I was myself when I reached the top. And that was me, too, in the middle of the Yosemite wilderness at night, low on water, lost and found, going what I choose to call forward. **e**

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