



THE ECHO 0



F THE WIND

TOMMY CALDWELL
PHOTOS BY AUSTIN SIADAK

“I DON’T KNOW ABOUT THIS,” I SAY.
HUGE BLOBS OF RIME CLING TO THE WALL ABOVE. A
WATERFALL RUNS OUT FROM A HOLE IN THE MOUNTAIN
THAT RESEMBLES THE MOUTH OF A DRAGON. ICICLES
GLISTEN LIKE GIANT TEETH. THE AIR IS STILL, BUT IN MY
MIND, THE MEMORY OF THE WIND ROARS LIKE A DIN OF
INHUMAN VOICES AND A RATTLE OF ICE AND STONES.

I LOOK DOWN AT ALEX HONNOLD for reassurance. His back has stiffened; his eyebrows are slightly furrowed. “Dude, you got this,” he says. “You’re a total boss.” *What have I gotten us into?* I wonder. Just three days ago, we were walking down the newly paved streets of El Chaltén, our footsteps quick with anticipation. Alex had never been to Patagonia before.

To the west, the evening sky washes in pale purple. Far below, the shadow of the Fitz Roy massif stretches across the eastern plains: steep, sharp lines that shoot up and down the jumbled glacier and beyond to rolling brown grasslands. I can track our position on the range by looking at its cast silhouette. It’s February 13, 2014. Two days into our climbing, Alex and I are nearing the top of Fitz Roy, not even halfway into our journey. We plan to traverse the entire five-kilometer ridgeline between Aguja Guillaumet and Aguja de l’S, over seven major summits. Trying to move fast, we’ve brought so little to sustain us—only what could fit in one twenty-five- and one fifteen-liter pack. One sleeping bag and one down jacket. A light tent. Once I enter the waterfall, we’ll have to keep climbing to avoid hypothermia. I consider bivying here and waiting until the next morning, but I know that when the sun hits, the rime will start tumbling.

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. My ten-month-old son’s giggle echoes in my ears. I’d had this Romantic idea of pulling my family into my life of constant travel. So they followed me from Colorado to Argentina. Then, after two blissful weeks together in El Chaltén, the wind had calmed, and I’d packed. Fitz’s hands pattered across the dusty tile of the Centro Alpino as he crawled up to wrap his arms around my calf. I looked in my wife Becca’s blue-grey eyes. “Don’t worry, baby, we’ll be careful,” I said. I slid my callused fingers under her streaked blond hair and behind her neck. “It’s just a rock climb.”

EIGHT YEARS HAD PASSED since my first journey to Patagonia, my first alpine climbing trip. I remember the bus rattling down the washboard road in the austral summer of 2006, depositing a billowing cloud of dust that rose high and blew to the distant hills. I was twenty-seven, but in this unfamiliar place, I still felt like a child. The mountains of the Chaltén massif looked like towering monsters with white, fluffy hats. Despite the previous twenty hours of travel, I couldn’t sleep. My friend Topher Donahue was supposed to show me the way of “alpine light.” He and his father had hoped to climb Fitz Roy together. After his father died of cancer, I became a poor replacement. “If the weather is good when we



get there,” Topher said, “we’re going to have to go straight into the mountains and start climbing.” He was already dressed in his ratty synthetic pants and a polypro shirt. I forced my eyelids shut. I woke up when the rattling stopped.

From a distance, the peaks were hard to comprehend. Tumbling glaciers and jagged shapes made a strange contrast to the desert plains that surrounded them. We dragged our duffel bags past a few scattered buildings. As plumes of dust blew in, we pulled our collars over our noses. A gaucho rode by on his horse, and we hired him to help carry our stuff to the Río Blanco base camp. We all hiked for two hours to a goblins’ forest of stunted trees out of the wind. For a month, Topher and I mostly festered in damp tents.

When we finally started up the mountain, the landscape was foreign to me. Blue ice, grey, granular rock—wind. The first time I heard those famous Patagonian gusts, Topher and I were trying a route called Royal Flush. The wind blew from the west, roaring like an enraged beast. On the east face, Topher and I were protected, but I could see large chunks of ice fly from the summit and land a mile away on the glacier. Back then,

there was still no Internet forecast in El Chaltén. When the barometer’s measurements started to climb, so did we. On our way down, we emerged from the sheltered side of the mountain, and the wind threw me to the ground. I knelt on the glacier anchored by my ice tool, and I tucked in my head to avoid the flying shards.

Once, I lost hold of my helmet and watched it blow up and over the horizon. But there were also moments when the wind calmed and the skies cleared. And then different sounds would emerge: the rumble of collapsing seracs, the crunch of crampons in the snow, the rhythm of our breath. Rocky summits glowed crystal clear. There was beauty as peaceful as anything I had experienced.

Our attempt on Royal Flush was my first time sitting bolt upright on a small ledge of ice while shivering a night away. My first time falling waist deep in a crevasse. Sometimes, I felt a spark of that primal instinct to battle, so often dead in everyday life. Other times, that spark fizzled and smoldered with the relentless, dripping water. As the end of our expedition approached, I was sure that we were going to leave without a summit. While we retreated, Topher stopped at a ledge and took out a small, clear vial. “My dad was with us the whole time,” he said. With a faint, gentle smile, he released his father’s ashes. A grey cloud swirled for an instant, before the wind carried it away.

A few days later, the barometer began to rise, and we hiked back to the mountain to try another route, Línea de Eleganza. Our only information was a sketchy topo a friend had found. We brought no bivy gear because we were sure we’d fail. But this time, the weather held, and the rock was dry. When the sun set, we climbed into the blackness; it was too cold to stop. When we could no longer find our way, we huddled

[Opening Spread] **The Fitz Roy massif, Argentine Patagonia. From February 12–14, 2014, Tommy Caldwell and Alex Honnold traversed over Guillaumet (ca. 2580m), Mermoz (ca. 2730m), Val Biois (ca. 2550m), Poincenot (ca. 3000m), Rafael Juárez (ca. 2450m), Saint-**

Exúpery (ca. 2550m) and Aguja de l’S (ca. 2330m). | [This Page, Top] Alex Honnold. | [This Page, Bottom] Tommy Caldwell. | [Facing Page] Caldwell belays Honnold near the summit of Rafael Juárez. (These photos were all taken a week after the original climb.)





on a small patch of ice and rested behind burning eyelids. As the sky showed its first hues of lavender, we wandered up steep corridors of translucent ice. The sky turned white, and the ice transformed into snow. We stood on the summit. Could this really be happening? During our rappels, the sun set again, spilling red light across the stone. We staggered across the glacier and down the trail. Just before we got back to camp, the sun rose for the third time. Sleep deprivation and hunger shrouded everything in a dreamlike fog. Sounds became muffled. Only the pain in our worn-out bodies felt sharp and real. As we descended past turquoise lakes, groups of hikers stared at us. To me they looked like ghosts, silent and lethargic, their ski poles clanking with each step. I'd never been so alive.

I thought of the previous moments that had shaped me. When I was twelve years old, I ran from the top of Longs Peak as the hail beat down on my oversized helmet, and lightning struck the ground all around. I spent my teenage years afloat in the pale vertical world of El Capitan. I thought of my heroes. Todd Skinner, Lynn Hill, Alex and Thomas Huber. Their eyes seemed to reveal a wild power: they had an ability to look at the impossible and make it real. When I free climbed the Salathé Wall, I felt the start of an addiction: there was always the lure of a harder line. In the off-season, I trained in dark garages and dusty caves, chasing down pain. The campus board, the weight rack, the road bike. My body hardened, and my back hunched. I spent a month rope-soloing on the Dihedral Wall, alone amid the arc of sunlight and shadow, the sweep of stone and the dive of swallows, climbing until my toenails fell off and the skin scrubbed away from my fingers and I felt freed from the shackles of my own self-consciousness, carried along by a desire that scorched both mind and body. The truth is, that hunger for progression is the base on which nearly everything in my life was built.

But that trip to Patagonia seemed to hint at something more, a place where I could finally push myself through storms of fatigue and suffering to a state beyond, where the clouds cleared, and a valley of glassy lakes and wild flowers opened, unearthly, startling, inexpressibly new. Gradually, I began to turn away from crags and boulders, to seek out deeper sensations more easily found in the mountains. By the time I reached my mid-thirties, my elbows began to crack when I climbed. Without daily training, my fingers lost their power. Was that the reason I found myself drawn to alpinism more and more? Because I could let my experience and my willingness to suffer take the place of constant hard work and youthful talent? Or had I started to learn something over the past thirty-three years of climbing?

“ANYONE COULD DAISY-SOLO the Regular Route of Half Dome. It’s not that big of a deal,” Alex said in the spring of 2012, after we bumped into each other in the Upper Pines Campground of Yosemite Valley. “You know you’re not going to fall on 5.11.” He leaned against the trunk of a giant cedar tree. Sun filtered through the canopy of branches high above our heads. A generator fired up in an RV next to us, and we walked in our bare feet across a carpet of pine needles to the other side of his white van.

“I bet I’ve fallen completely unexpectedly at least ten times in my life,” I said. I looked toward Half Dome, and I tried to imagine myself unroped high on the Northwest Face, an ocean of granite flowing beneath my feet. I threw open the door of my own van, and I sat in the door well. Photos of my family were pinned to the bare plywood wall. In one picture, I knelt behind Becca, my arms wrapped tightly around her torso, my face nestled in the crook of her neck. It was the spring of 2010, just before we got married. Her eyes shone with love. In another image, my hands were taped and my climbing shoes were on. Four-month-old Fitz sat in my lap with his head tilted back. What must he think of this strange existence we lived? Traveling from one place to the next. Climbing up scrappy streaked rock faces, only to come right back down. Each time Becca shook her hips and Fitz threw his head back in laughter, I remembered that I wanted nothing more than to live to be an old man.

How could Alex talk about his climbs in such a cavalier way? Only twenty-six years old, he’d already achieved some of the most fascinating ascents of our lifetime. Yet he described free solos of routes like the Regular Northwest Face of Half Dome as if they were nothing more than particularly scenic hikes. His conversation never drifted to places of death, love or even innate beauty. *It’s as if he thinks everything is either badass or boring*, I thought. *That’s probably part of the reason he is so good at what he does.* I found Alex’s apparent indifference toward risk both exciting and terrifying. In an age of technology, he reminded me of a lost instinct. A hunter, a warrior. I wondered whether his secret lay in his ability to control the weight of his thoughts. To varying degrees, many of us are ruled by emotions. When something attracts us, we gravitate toward it; when we experience fear, we run. Alex seemed to treat his reactions like the dials on his car stereo. If the music got too loud, he just turned it down and kept driving.

Our objective that season was to free climb the three biggest features in Yosemite—Mt. Watkins, El Capitan and Half Dome—in fewer than twenty-four hours. When Alex first mentioned the idea to me, I told him it might be a bit too much for my aging body. When he brought it up a second time, I said, “All right, no promises, though.” At 4:45 p.m. on May 18, we roped up below the south face of Watkins. Alex’s fingers gently slid in and out of cracks with perfect precision. He rarely stopped to place gear, only a few pieces per pitch. Somehow, that boldness, that confidence that he wouldn’t fall, was contagious. The surface of the rock flowed by like the sands of a desert viewed from an airplane window. When we got to the free-climbing cruxes, we stopped and belayed; otherwise we simul-climbed. The continuous movement felt much like free soloing, but with less of the risk.

Darkness fell by the time we started climbing Freerider on El Cap. High on the wall, I jammed one hand in an overhanging crack. With my other hand, I clicked my headlamp on high. Nearly 3,000 feet of moonlit, sparkling granite dropped away. The air was motionless. All was silent, except for the faint rumble of Bridalveil Fall across the valley. Tied to the upper end of the rope, Alex was simul-climbing out of sight and earshot. Above me, the cord arched past a dark offwidth—clipped to nothing. My arms quivered with fatigue; my head pounded with dehydration. I hoped to God that he had some gear in. Best not to think too much about it. I took a deep breath, liebacked for ten feet over a bulge, and then threw my leg deep in the crack and panted. *Safe, for now.*

Twenty minutes later, we topped out just as the sun began to brighten the sky. Later that afternoon, we reached the summit of Half Dome by the Regular Route. We’d climbed almost eighty pitches in about twenty-one hours. I’d expected the trifecta to be a test of human will and endurance. I’d wanted to see that place of survival again, where we’re reminded that human capabilities are nearly limitless and that our world still contains mysteries. But Alex was just too good. The big

walls seemed to shrink to only half their size. It was just an especially tiring day of climbing. A scenic hike. I wondered what we would be able to climb if we took these techniques to Patagonia, where the big storms and bigger mountains made fast and light climbing a necessity—rather than merely a cool trick.

ABOVE FITZ ROY, the twilight deepens to a darker purple. Drips splash off rime, glowing and dimming like fleeting, violet sparks. 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 step in a sling and free my axe to chip ice out of the crack. 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 thirty minutes, I flail around like a hooked fish in a rapid until I notice a dry crack to the right. Leaning hard off my ice tool, I jam two lobes of a micro-cam. I don’t really think it will hold, but I’m desperate to get out of the water. I grab the cam with both hands. Shivering with cold and fear, I swing onto dry ground. A fading light flickers in the west. I switch on my headlamp, and my world reduces to the distance of its beam. I shine it upward: a perfect hand crack traces a dark line up red-gold stone before it fades, once more, to black.

I continue to aid until my hands and tennis shoes dry; then I unstrap my crampons and start free climbing. Coarse rock grates my skin. Blood splatters on stone. My clothes freeze. With each move, ice cracks off my jacket and chimes down the wall. The rope becomes as stiff as a steel cable. I climb faster, trying to create more body heat. As if by magic, cracks weave around most of the ice. Every sixty feet, I short fix the rope so Alex can ascend and bring up our small rack. Occasionally, my only option is to chop through the rime that blocks our passage. Debris showers on Alex’s head. Large chunks hit his back and shoulders with a guttural thud.

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—GREGORY CROUCH,
ENDURING PATAGONIA

“Are you OK?” I shout down.

“Yeah, man, you’re doing great,” Alex says, but the words sound forced.

The broad night sky shines overhead. Each time I reach a small ledge, I pause for a moment, and the exertion, the darkness and the starlight buzz through me. A warmth starts in my stomach and spreads to my lungs, propelling me upward. The angle of the rock eases. Between the shadows of stone buttresses, snow-filled gullies flow like white rivers. The most difficult part is behind us. I kick my feet in hard, knowing that without an ice tool, Alex will have to balance in my footsteps.

Around 2 a.m., just below the top of Fitz Roy, we find a place where the wind has shaped the snow into a cornice, creating a nook large enough for us to lie down. The expanse below is bathed in moon. The snow mushroom atop Cerro Torre shines like a lighthouse. Beyond it, the continental ice cap stretches in rolling hills of white to the vanishing point. Alex looks at me, and he nods. “This is freaking cool,” he says. We set up our tent and stuff two worn-out bodies into a single sleeping bag.

I wake up shivering. When I move my hands, pain shoots through my fingers like electric shocks. The intensity of the previous night’s climbing is gone. My body just hurts. I check my wristwatch. Six a.m. We’ve slept for three hours. We pack up our tent, hike to the summit, pause long enough to take a few pictures, and continue on. Twenty rappels down the Franco-Argentina route lead us to an icy saddle on the south side. We carry twenty pages of guidebook information that the great alpinist Rolando Garibotti acquired over a lifetime of climbing in Patagonia. Yet the next part of our traverse is uncharted. The sun shines directly overhead. We strip to short sleeves, climb across a sharp ridge toward an unnamed summit—and beyond.

In silence, we let our instincts guide us. Whenever we think we’ve come to an impasse, we find a hidden crack or secret passage. I watch Alex tiptoe around snow patches, always solid and controlled. *How comfortable he seems in this new environment*, I think. Once in a while, in my exhaustion, I feel as though I’ve slipped back through time to my first Patagonian trip, only now I’m the older one, and my partner is experiencing everything for the first time. Gradually, this strange existence starts to feel normal. Sometimes we stop to sip water out of huecos and small cascades; mostly we keep moving. When I look at Alex, I can see that his cheeks are becoming sunken. But his usual bored slouch is gone, and his eyes have an unfamiliar glow.

I think about home. Drawers crammed with clothes. A garage full of bikes, tools and climbing gear. My computer. Up here, the wind has stripped away all evidence of man-made things. Granite spikes shoot from valleys of flowing glaciers. In just a few weeks’ time, I’ll be flying home, responding to emails, becoming reimmersed in a technological world. The truth is, I feel content here. The way forward is so complex, and yet so simple. All that surrounds us is pure, stark, unforgiving nature. And all that we have to do is climb. We know exactly where we’re headed. At the same time, we have to step precisely and use our small set of tools with care. I think of the rapt, focused look on Fitz’s face as he plays with small rocks on the edge of an alpine lake or crawls up a flight of carpeted stairs. To him, everything remains an adventure. I hope that when he’s older, he might be able to see something like this fierce, wild place, to feel something like this excitement exploding in his chest.

On our third night, I flake out our rope as a sleeping pad: all the threads of the sheath have been cut, and they stick out like some kid’s plush toy. A core shot is developing in the middle. The next day, we rappel a 2,000-foot big wall. The core shot balloons into a fuzzy mess. We cut our rope. Three more mountains to climb, and only thirty-six meters of tattered rope. I drop a climbing shoe. The seams on my approach shoes blow out. We burn a hole in our sleeping bag. Our tent floor becomes riddled with holes after we set it up on jagged rocks. Our packs are torn from getting dragged through chimneys. 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. Lines focus and become crisp. Each footstep is sure and precise. The absurdity of our situation makes us giddy.

The last night, as we melt snow and set camp, we laugh hard, intoxicated by days spent in a magical place. “This has been a crazy four days,” Alex says. “I can’t believe you just admitted that,” I reply. As I spoon polenta into my mouth with a pair of broken sunglasses, he makes his familiar, mischievous smirk. We both know that we’re nearing the end of one of the grandest journeys of our lives. In the morning, we summit Aguja de l’S. The wind roars until it steals our breath. The weather window has closed. At the end of each eighteen-meter rappel with our shortened rope, I grab a hold and let the rope ping through my belay device. Numb to the exposure, we down climb intermittently for speed.

At the bottom, we jump across the bergschrund and post-hole through knee-deep slush. The neurochemicals begin to wear off. “Something’s wrong with my eyes,” Alex says. “Everything is blurry.” I look at his sunburned eyelids, and I realize that he’s suffering from snow blindness. For five hours, he follows close behind me until we stagger into El Chaltén.

Jessie Huey stands in a patch of weeds near the door of our rental home. The midday sun beats on his head, and the wind howls overhead. He walks up to us and wraps his big arms around my shoulders. “Man, we were starting to worry about you guys. Pretty much everyone else is back.”

I notice a glossiness in his eyes. “What’s wrong?”

Jessie drops his head and folds his hands. “There’s bad news. Chad Kellogg is dead.” He breathes deep and looks me in the eyes. “He pulled a block on his head rappelling. Died instantly. Jens Holsten was hanging shoulder to shoulder with him. He’s taking it pretty hard.”

My hands and feet begin to tingle. I can’t speak.

“When, where?” Alex says, with his eyes closed.

“A couple days ago, near the top of Supercanaleta.”

The wind reverberates off the tin siding of our home. For a moment, we say nothing.

“You guys need to get some sleep,” Jessie says. “Glad you’re back safe.” He gives us both a gentle fist bump and walks away.

[Previous Spread] Caldwell between Rafael Juárez and Saint-Exupéry. Simul-climbing most of the terrain, the pair completed the 5000-meter Fitz Traverse (VI 5.11d C1 65°) in just twenty pitches. | [Facing Page] Honnold on Blood on the Tracks (5.12b) on Ra-

fael Juárez, a week after the traverse. In *Alpinist* 5, Rolando Garibotti wrote, “Whether one contemplates its magnificence from the plains or endures the rustic struggles on the heights, Fitz Roy provides an open door to...greater humanity and compassion.”





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.

MONTHS LATER, I SIT BEHIND MY COMPUTER typing this article, and I notice the thinning skin on my hands. The brown spots on my forearms. Signs of decades of sun and cold, spells of dehydration and intense exertion. Becca opens the metal door of our wood-burning stove and throws in a log. A few sparks tumble out and smolder on the tile hearth. Fitz scoops blueberries with his tiny fingers. He looks at Becca and giggles. I think about what it would be like for them if I died. How long would Fitz keep eagerly watching the front door expecting me to

come through? Would they say I went out doing what I love? Maybe that's just what people have to say to try to ease the pain, to attempt to fill the silence and the void.

Becca takes my rough, scabbed hand and holds it close to her chest. My face flushes. Would she love me the way she does if I were a different man, someone whose mind didn't burn with the desire to travel through barren landscapes? Under the stars of distant skies, amid the flashes of lightning that shudder through the driving snow, the wind that blurs the light and erases all sound, I have seen beauty greater than my mind can comprehend. And in such moments, a sense of awe seems to saturate every cell in my body, revealing a deep well of energy and a capacity to love. It changes who I am.

For generations of climbers, these mountains have become our holy grails, beckoning us like a faraway shimmer of golden light. But when a friend is lost, it's as if that color fades, leaving only the empty rocks and the noon-white glaciers, the hollow echo of the wind; only the same questions that we will always struggle with and the inadequate replies.

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. ■