

FREE PASSAGE

Finding the path of least resistance means climbing the hardest big-wall free climb in the world

By Tommy Caldwell

Obsession is like an illness. At first you don't realize anything is happening. But then the pain grows in your gut, like something is shredding your insides. Suddenly, the only thing that matters is beating it. You'll do whatever it takes; spend all of your time, money and energy trying to overcome. Over months, even years, the obsession eats away at you. Then one day you look in the mirror, see the sunken cheeks and protruding ribs, and realize the toll taken.

My obsession is a 3,000-foot chunk of granite, El Capitan in Yosemite Valley. As a teenager, I was first lured to El Cap because I could drive my van right up to the base of North America's grandest wall and start climbing. I grew up a clumsy kid with bad hand-eye coordination, yet here on El Cap I felt as though I had stumbled into a world where I thrived. Being up on those steep walls demanded the right amount of climbing skill, pain tolerance and sheer bull-headedness that came naturally to me.

For the last decade El Cap has beaten the crap out of me, yet I return to scour its monstrous walls to find the tiniest holds that will just barely go free. So far I have dedicated a third of my life to free climbing these soaring cracks and razor-sharp crimpers. Getting to the top is no longer important. It's how—preferably via a first free ascent—that matters.

This is not a process of finding happiness or peace, but rather pain. This is not a place I go to seek contentment, but to find my limits. And still, after 10 years, I continue to push myself to find out what lies beneath. Sometimes I think I've only scratched the surface.

LINESPACE

The winter of late 2007 was the darkest period of my life. For six months, a tornado of depression had spun through my head. My wife had left me. Nightmares haunted me. I had visions of my dad falling off El Cap. Twice I died in my own dreams. I didn't even know that could happen. What brings you to a place where you dream about your

death?

A friend once told me about the body of a BASE jumper he had found. His parachute had failed to open and he fell 3,000 feet. His skin stayed intact while the internal contents turned into a jellified heap.

Something about that fate seemed OK to me. I didn't care about anything except finding a release from the pain, the pounding thunderclap in my head. I was known for being a fighter. A finger amputation as a professional climber. Six days held captive by Islamic militants in the mountains of southwest Kyrgyzstan with no food or water. I had always bounced back, an eternal optimist, the "happy nice guy who never said anything negative," as my mom told people.

I sat on top of the Rostrum, wearing only shorts, climbing shoes and a chalk bag, looking down at this 1,000-foot detached granite spire that I intended to free solo. I hung my feet off the edge to feel the void below, and watched the wispy clouds swim through the narrow valley below me.

Soloing the Rostrum was to be my warm up. El Cap was next. I had more experience on this King of Big Walls than any other free climber, yet until then, soloing it had never been an option. I had always regarded soloing as selfish, reckless and stupid. I always gagged when I heard self-righteous soloists talking about a "spiritual journey," or saying, "It's not about cheating death, it's about living," and, "It's the time in my life when I feel most in control." That's crap. They just wanted to look like badasses, and were willing to risk hurting everyone who loved them.

Strange how quickly my perspective had changed. The marriage counselor had said to me, as I reclined in the musty leather torture chamber, "Complacency is the eventual outcome of unhappiness." He didn't know what it meant to love someone. Love, adventure and inspiration were the plan, and the dream of one day starting a family. We'd spent our married lives living together in the sky, becoming the best big-wall free climbers we could be. She had trusted me, even with her life when I walked right up to a terrorist with an AK-74 and shoved him off a cliff. That's how the relationship started. Maybe that was the problem.

LINESPACE

If a decade spent free climbing El Cap had taught me anything, it was that if something you want seems impossible, work harder. Since age 14, I had pursued climbing with a workhorse mentality: *If I can train harder than everyone else, I will be the best.* The problem was, I wasn't very talented at the bouldering and sport climbing I practiced. Beyond that, my childhood in the mountains had created a craving for adventure that I wasn't finding at the crags.

My first trip up El Cap with my dad at age 17 left me bruised, bloodied and humbled. That failed free attempt on the *Salathé Wall* was one of the biggest learning experiences of my life. It also lit a fire within me. I craved the queasy feeling in my stomach that I'd experience stepping off a portaledge, and sinking my fingers into a soaring crack thousands of feet above the trees.

I was looking for my ultimate challenge. It wasn't going to be enough merely to climb El Cap. The climbers of the 1950s and '60s had showed us that any wall could be aid climbed. And now, with gear advances like copperheads, beaks, and micro-cams, any bold, bull-headed climber could make it to the top in slings. For me, big-wall free climbing would require it all. And my doggedness would come in handy. It drove me to train year-round. I gathered as much experience and logistical knowledge as I could about living and performing at a high level on a 3,000-foot wall.

In 1999, I free-climbed the *Salathé* for the first time and it motivated me to think, train, and perform better than I had ever known. After that I focused on repeating free climbs that followed the natural weaknesses and continuous crack systems on El Cap. Then I progressed to the steeper climbs, venturing onto the blank faces and learning how to climb micro bumps and thin flakes. If I wanted a relatively quick hit, I would repeat one of the climbs the Huber brothers had established. For a more complete experience, I looked for my own. Eventually, I free climbed 11 of El Cap's 13 free climbs.

In the spring of 2007 I had my eyes on the Dawn Wall, just to the right of the *Nose*: the steepest, tallest, blankest face on El Cap. Could it actually go free? I did some cursory exploration, but wrote it off as too hard. But then, a little more than half a year later, the day I sat on top of the Rostrum contemplating soloing it, something changed inside me. It became clear to me that I needed a distraction from the heartbreak. Instead of soloing to my death I would throw myself into the biggest project I could fathom. I would free climb the Dawn Wall.

LINESPACE

I spent the first few months of 2008 scoping the Dawn Wall, either rope soloing up, or rapping down from the top, swinging around, searching for holds and trying the moves.

The Dawn Wall became an excellent distraction. Occasionally, I'd think about actually sending this monster project, and experience fleeting moments of excitement and the old enthusiasm. For the most part, though, I just focused on crimping, or the logistics of piecing the climb together. Each day I'd leap out of bed at 4:00 am, rope solo up 1,800 feet by noon, and then boulder until dark.

Occasionally, the improbability of free climbing the Dawn Wall overwhelmed me. This massive acreage of steep, blank granite had no true weakness to follow. I found at least seven pitches of 5.14 to 5.14+ and another 10 in the 5.13 range. A first free ascent of the Dawn Wall would mean catapulting forward what I thought was possible in the world of big-wall free climbing.

Several times I gave up and moved on, worried I might waste too much of my life on the impossible. But having already invested so much, in February 2009 I went up for another inspection.

On this trip, an ominous feeling surrounded my tiny, airy portaledge home. I was alone, 2,000 feet up and in the dead center of El Cap's steepest aspect. Each morning, the warming sun woke me and I felt cozy for a few moments until the ice that formed during the night melted off the wall above and bombed past my hanging camp. I zipped up my fly and tucked my head inside my sleeping bag. Frigid wind blew.

On the third day I poked my head out. Most of the ice seemed to have fallen. A few hours later, I rapped 800 feet to top-rope one possible free section on a Mini-Traxion, a self-belay device. The granite wall was freezing cold and my fingers went numb crimping the smooth, faint ripples. My goal was not to redpoint pitches, just to figure out whether they were even possible.

A hundred feet later I reached a blank spot. I bounced and swung back and forth across the wall until I found a hairline crack to the left. It looked climbable, so I descended 60 feet and found a few tiny holds to

gain the crack. I began working on this new sequence. The wall was like a giant maze and I was searching for the solution to it. The moves were hard and I could only do one or two at a time, if at all. But there was enough evidence here to entice and encourage me.

Then on one pitch, I found an eight-foot blank section. Could my dreams of freeing this 3,000-foot route really be demolished by a measly eight feet? I tried to dyno from one hold to the next, but it seemed too crazy and improbable to ever work.

I took a moment to rest and look around. Blood seeped through the tape on my fingertips. My stomach groaned and I realized that I had been searching for more than nine hours without pause. My food, water, and warm clothes were hundreds of feet above in my portaledge. Clouds billowed below me, and when they parted I saw the Valley floor was now covered in snow. Flakes floated down on me.

"What am I doing here?" I thought. "What is wrong with me?" But as quickly as these thoughts arose, I pushed them out of my head.

LINESPACE

Later that spring, Josh Lowell, a good friend of mine, asked me if he could film me working the Dawn Wall for his upcoming movie, *Progression*. I hesitated. I wasn't sure if the Dawn Wall would go free or if I could do it. But then I thought if I couldn't do it, someone should. A film would at least put it out there and show other climbers what this line was all about. So I agreed.

We organized a crew and for the first time I had company on the wall. Corey Rich, Chris McNamara and Cooper Roberts spent a week filming and working on the route with me. Sharing this mega project with some of my best friends made me realize how desperately I needed company. They brought fresh energy and, most important, laughter. Before, my mind had been filled with doubts, frustrations and darkness during the lonely nights on the portaledge. Now we drank whiskey and told jokes. In hindsight, they had come to my rescue.

Their energy affected everything, changing the experience from a struggle to an exciting journey.

One day I noticed an inconspicuous line of holds around one of the most troubling pitches. More inspection revealed a miraculous sequence of edges that stretched improbably for 200 feet. The next day I came close to sticking the crazy eight-foot dyno. I realized that I had finally found the passage through the maze. It was all there, and in terms of scale and difficulty the project surpassed my wildest dreams. For a brief time, I had written it off as impossible; but now, I felt an elusive psyche. Dangling from the rope just below the dyno, a surge of giddiness welled up in my chest. I screamed, laughed and pounded my fists on the wall. The route could go free.

LINESPACE

On our third day a snowstorm rolled in. We hunkered down in our portaledge while snow flurried around us. We ate burritos, drank whiskey and told stories of past adventures, then about life ... then about girls. Corey thought that being a bachelor once again presented me with an amazing opportunity.

“Do you know how many girls are going to be chasing you down?”

I laughed his assessment off, then started into a story of my own. I told the guys about a girl named Becca I had met a few months earlier in a pub in Estes Park, Colorado, where I grew up. It was Friday night and the Rock Inn was rocking with live bluegrass music by a local band named Glentucky Funkdown. I first noticed the playful but confident way she smiled. Becca was dancing among a group of bearded locals dressed in plaid.

Definitely way out of my league, I thought. What is she doing in Estes Park anyway?

In a divine stroke of luck she walked up to me and told me she had just started climbing.

“Do you think you could help me learn to train? I heard you might know something about that.” I've heard that one before, I thought.

But she had a presence I couldn't ignore, and I went ahead and made plans to climb with her in my dusty garage in Estes Park. Then we took a trip to Indian Creek. On a nighttime snowstorm drive she rolled down the windows and sang at the top of her lungs. Then she looked at me and said, "If you don't start singing too, I am going to kick your butt!" I tucked my lower lip and let go. The more foolish I made

myself, the more she laughed.

Before I left for this trip to Yosemite, I had managed to convince Becca to join me at the end of the spring season. Sitting in the snowstorm, I told my friends about her energy, her confidence and the way she seemed so together. A smile came across Chris' face.

"We should double date with my girlfriend, Lita, in Napa Valley next week. I know some pretty dreamy spots, and I am house sitting a huge place in the redwood forest outside Marin. If you want to impress Becca, you guys should definitely come. She'll be blown away."

LINESPACE

I met Becca in the Sacramento airport on her birthday, May 6, and we spent the next few days drinking wine in Napa Valley, lying on deserted beaches in Northern California, and walking the streets of San Francisco.

A few days later we drove into Yosemite Valley under a full moon. Becca had never been to Yosemite, so I brought her straight to the base of Bridalveil Falls. We stood in the ankle-deep water that fanned out like a skirt at the foot of the waterfall. She gazed up at the millions of gallons of water in free fall, and laughed in amazement. My heart started pounding, and didn't stop for the next few days, during which time we climbed some of the Valley's classic 5.11 grade IV's.

After Yosemite we went to South Africa for a month-long bouldering trip, then returned to Estes Park and life got back to normal. I trained with renewed energy and Becca started a nursing job at a local clinic.

In late summer *Progression* came out and almost immediately I got an e-mail from a young boulderer named Kevin Jorgeson. He said he had seen the film and thought the Dawn Wall looked cool. He wanted to join me on the project, "Even if it's just a way to learn the ways of big-wall free climbing," he wrote.

I knew his reputation as strong, hard-working, and very bold. We had climbed together once in an adrenaline-filled day of "deep snow soloing" (free soloing short sport climbs above 12 feet of snow) on Donner Summit. I remembered Kevin exploded with excitement as we progressively plunged into the snow from higher and higher up. I was

nervous about inviting someone with no big-wall experience on such a monster project, but in the end figured I might as well give it a shot. The worst thing that could happen was that I got a belayer for a few days.

LINESPACE

Big-wall free climbing is an art.

Most people prefer the well-traveled routes that have been buffed out after many ascents and have fixed gear and bolts in all the right places. Few know the adventure and challenge of going ground-up, onsight, with no prior inspection.

Over the years, I have tried many styles, from climbing ground-up onsight, to fixed-rope sieges lasting months and taking little commitment. In the 1980s climbers looking to free new routes on El Cap approached the monolith in the same style as aid climbers: Start at the bottom, climb to the top in a push. Simple enough. The only problem was, it never worked. When sport climbers like Todd Skinner, Lynn Hill and the Huber Brothers got their hands on El Cap, they worked the wall like a sport climb or boulder problem by working out the moves first, then returning for the ground-up send. That's how all the first free ascents were done.

Climbers have spent countless hours around campfires discussing "what is legit" and everybody has a different opinion. Many have even tried to make hard-and-fast rules about how one should establish new climbing terrain. While this kind of thinking has a place in terms of keeping standards high, all too often it turns into a way to make *your* style sound rad, or discredit other ascents.

In theory, ground-up onsight is a better style. But in reality, few people actually know what it is like to establish a big-wall free climb this way. In places like Patagonia or Pakistan, the rock is comparatively featured and the free climbing tends to be easier than on El Cap. On crags, or even places like Medicott Dome, you can stand at the base and get a good idea of where the holds are. Even the continuous crack systems on the left side of El Cap offer the luxury of plentiful natural gear placements close together. But when free climbers venture onto the blanker walls ground-up, they usually find themselves hooking and drilling into impossible blankness, only to have unnecessarily damaged hundreds of feet of rock. Top-down rehearsal lets you scope the best line, and climb it with minimal

impact. Believe me, running it out 50 feet above a manky copperhead—even if you have rehearsed the moves—feels plenty adventurous.

Regardless of what style you choose, every experienced climber—from Warren Harding to John Bachar, Ron Kauk, Todd Skinner, Paul Piana, Lynn Hill, to Alex and Thomas Huber—has employed logistical tricks to get their routes done, and shared these tactics with each other. Style is much more nuanced than ground-up versus top-down, sport versus trad, and campfire/Internet discussions about what's legit versus what isn't. Further, over the years, I've watched the most core purists—those who don't see style as flexible—become increasingly bitter, and eventually fade into oblivion. But style is a body of knowledge and a collective, generational work in progress, and nowhere is this truer than on the still-burgeoning frontier of big-wall free climbing.

My personal style has evolved over the years. It comes partially from my sport-climbing background mixed with a search for just the right amount of adventure. Growing up in Colorado, my dad and I would be developing sport climbs one day, then high on the Diamond the next. Embracing all styles of climbing made me the climber I am today.

In my approach to big projects, I think respect is most important. I do my best to respect the original aid lines by leaving them unchanged, although even this line gets fuzzy because I have pulled out old dowels and bolts and replaced them with good ones. I use fixed ropes, but keep them out of the way of other climbers. When working to free climb the *Nose*, I fixed a thousand feet of rope from the top of El Cap in order to work the Changing Corners pitch. Each day, I would pull the ropes up with me.

On the Dawn Wall, I continued to keep the ropes out of the way of other climbers. To work the free-climbing moves, I preferred to approach the terrain in the most efficient way possible. That could mean leading up from the bottom, or rapping in from above. I had no qualms about pre-equipping camps with food, clothing and water. Since free climbing is not just about ascending the wall, I use these logistical tricks to allow myself to completely and utterly focus on the *free climbing*.

When I have dialed a climb, I like to go for a continuous, ground-up send. If two of us are free climbing, one member of the team must lead every pitch, and the other climber either has to lead or toprope it cleanly. On the initial attempt to redpoint a pitch, the leader places all

gear on lead, but in the case of a fall, the leader usually doesn't clean the gear for each subsequent try.

I used to shun help from others, wanting to own the ascent, but El Cap climbing seems to be going in the direction of using porters to haul and hike loads to allow the climber to save strength for free climbing, and succeed at establishing hard routes faster. I also used to shun having film crews or photographers on the wall during the final send. However, on the Dawn Wall, I learned to appreciate any company, especially when the filmmakers were my close friends. Their presence added fun, motivation and excitement, and helped make all the time, energy and money I'd put into free climbing El Cap seem like more of a shared pursuit.

LINESPACE

My first day climbing on the Dawn Wall with Kevin was in the fall of 2009. We met in El Cap Meadow. As I parked behind his truck, he walked up dressed and ready to climb. I started talking logistics and he listened intently. He was enthusiastic but at the same time easygoing and game for anything. Instead of offering a mellow introduction to the route's climbing, I suggested we shoulder 70-pound packs and hike to the top. Secretly, I was testing Kevin. Did he have the right spirit to endure this project? Would he man up, take the weight, and keep a smile on his face? We spent three hours packing our supplies, then another five hours of sweaty, leg-wobbling hiking and jugging. When we got to the top I looked Kevin in the eyes, expecting to see him crushed. To my surprise, he threw down his pack and stretched his arms.

"That felt good," he said.

We spent the next day taking 100-foot pendulums right at the top to establish a variation around a bolt ladder.

"Yaaaahooooooooo," Kevin yelled as he flew through the air. I couldn't keep from smiling. Finally, after two and a half years, the pieces were coming together; I had a solid partner and I knew the climb was possible.

Over two months that fall Kevin and I rapped in and worked on the hardest pitches in the middle of the climb. We set up a portaledge

camp halfway up the wall and based from there. It became our second home, with great meals and visitors. Each day we would rappel from our base camp with our second portaledge and set it up at either the beginning or end of the pitch we were working on. Most of the time, it felt like we were cragging, only we were thousands of feet in the air and on the most breathtaking pitches we had ever seen. In the evenings the sun would reflect off the wall and surround us in surreal incandescence.

Days turned into weeks, and we developed a routine: Hike to the top and rap to our camp. Spend three to five days climbing. Then rap to the ground for a few days of rest. Slowly we whittled away at the climbing. Our bodies started to morph. Thick calluses formed on our fingers, and the skin of our waists got tougher from hanging in our harnesses. The work was challenging and tedious, but neither Kevin nor I could imagine anything better than being in the middle of the best piece of stone on earth. Kevin was shocked at first by how intimidating and scary leading way off the ground was, but it soon became second nature. He only made a few gummy moves, like dropping the cook pot, two cams and a whole rack of nuts. (I wasn't much better.)

One day nature called on Kevin during a windstorm. He crouched on the portaledge, made his deposit, stuffed it in the poop bag, and then sat down with a look of relief. Only when a pungent odor hit his nose did he realize that one of his turds had missed and landed on the leg loop of his harness, which in turn smeared all over the fabric of the portaledge. Making no effort to suppress my laughter I pulled out my camera and shot a quick interview.

It was fun to watch Kevin's confidence build. One day he'd tried the dyno about 30 times, his fingers wrapped around the ending hold and he held the swing. For a moment we both hung in shock. Did he really just do it? When the realization set in we both let out a scream that could be heard in El Cap meadow.

The climbing was so sustained that hundreds of moves had to be committed to memory and executed perfectly. In an effort to remember every detail we would sit up for hours at night rehearsing the moves in our minds and discussing each one. When a move gave us trouble we analyzed it—which finger goes on which crystal? Where are our hips? At what point is the rubber on our shoes peeling back and how can we push differently on the hold to avoid this? La Sportiva let me design a new shoe specifically to put up with the abuse of this

climb. Just working out the pitches demanded the perfected accumulation of all our experience. Our focus and strength had to be as honed as if we were doing hundreds of difficult boulder problems. The mental stamina necessary to get to the end of every pitch was greater than any sport climb either of us had ever done. To cope, we adopted an absurdly positive attitude. When pitches were wet we just climbed them that way. When the skin on our fingers gave out, we taped them up and kept climbing.

LINESPACE

In the off season, during the winter of 2009, I sat at home and remembered the thrill of watching Kevin stick that eight-foot sideways dyno for the first time or finding that improbable line of edges that linked a section I was sure was going to be completely blank. At times the psyche felt as strong as a Patagonian gust, and I'd have to run into the dusty storage room of my 600-square-foot cabin and crank out a few sets of fingertip pull-ups on my hangboard, then do sit-ups and pull-ups until my muscles shook with fatigue.

I knew that to free the Dawn Wall, I'd need to train harder, endure more. When the outdoor thermometer read 10 degrees, I slid on my running shoes, walked out the front door and was hit in the face with a 50-mile-an-hour wind gust. I put my head down and start running.

Over the past two years, sheer motivation had grown in me, not only due to the psyche of this project and finding a solid, committed partner like Kevin, but also because of Becca. That winter, I convinced her to marry me. It was 12:30 a.m. and we were driving back to Estes Park after a date in Boulder. I purposely popped the clutch on the car and killed it. The temperature on the outdoor thermometer read -10.

"Uh, oh. It won't start!" I said, popping the hood and stepping out of the car.

It's hard to get Becca to complain about much, I thought. What better time to piss her off then when I am proposing to her?

"Baby, I'm gonna need your help. Can you get the flashlight out of the trunk?" With a little grumbling, she stepped out into a snowbank in her high heels and dress. The flashlight was the type that you have to wind a handle to produce light. With a shiver, she shined it under the hood and started to wind. I had tied the engagement ring to the

handle of the flashlight so when she began to wind, each revolution produced a loud clank.

"What is that?" She looked down. Realizing it was a ring, she started to laugh uncontrollably.

"You're crazy ... you're crazy!"

We got married that summer.

LINESPACE

Spring in the Valley can be cruel, and otherworldly. One day Becca, Kevin and I sat on the portledge, a three-by-six-foot nylon island in the sky, watching water droplets the size of gumballs floating weightless all around us, suspended by the updraft. I reached out and plucked a droplet from the sky with my hand, and suddenly, the wind was gone and they plummeted away.

We looked up at the snow creeping over the lip of El Cap's summit. As the sun melted it, drops splashed gently around us. One hit me in the nose and I snapped out of my daze, realizing that a waterfall was about to teem down onto us. Frantic, we scrambled for our ledge's fly, while the wind lifted our ledge like a magic carpet. The wind beat the fly like a snare drum.

"Just another day at the office, huh?" Kevin shouted.

Five hours later the sun finally dropped below the horizon and the water stopped. By 2 a.m. the wall had dried enough so that we could climb. We put on headlamps and started it all over again.

Spring is a battle with conditions. In the winter of 2009/2010, major storms dumped a foot or two every week, creating an unusually large snowpack. Becca, who wanted to come along and shoot photos, spent her first days on El Cap juggling 1,500 feet with a pack, sitting out afternoon and evening with snowmelt pouring onto our heads, and frigid conditions. She seemed to love it.

Despite wet conditions, we managed to work out the first 12 pitches. By now, in his second season on the Big Stone, Kevin no longer regarded this project as a learning exercise. He had become obsessed, too.

But after six weeks of persistently wet rock, we decided to throw in the towel and return in the fall.

Climbing is mostly about failure, and so far, the Dawn Wall had delivered on par. Our muscles failed. Our skin failed. Usually, we failed to send the pitches, and sometimes we failed to find gear good enough to hold falls.

Most of the time we felt overwhelmed by the magnitude of what we were trying to do. I got frustrated, but my bad temper passed quickly. When I looked back three years and considered where I had started in that dark trough, and then thought about where I was now, I was blown away. After six weeks of working on the route, Kevin and I finally decided to give it our first ground-up try.

On the morning of November 19th I felt uneasy. I had now worked on the Dawn Wall for parts of four years. Josh Lowell and his brother Brett had come back to film the attempt. We had a camp stashed at the top of pitch eight with two weeks of supplies. I could hardly imagine what the next 14 days would be like. I could tell Kevin was nervous too because he hardly said a word.

This time of year El Cap shines brightly, while the Valley is mostly shrouded in frigid darkness. That first day was hotter than we would've preferred. Kevin tiptoed up the first pitch, stepping around water streaks that flowed from a drip several hundred feet up.

I followed, then led pitch two. At 5.13a this pitch should have felt like a warm-up. Halfway up the pitch, I slipped ... not a good sign. Our hope was to climb eight hard pitches that day. Each fall took us further from that goal. I quickly pulled the rope and re-climbed the pitch to the top.

On pitch three, a discontinuous 5.13+ fingercrack split with a thin bouldery face traverse, Kevin fell after 50 feet. On his second and third try he fell again in the same place. As I lowered him I could see the frustration in his face.

"Man, I'm nervous. And it's making me climb too tense," Kevin said.

"Yeah, I'm feeling nervous too. And this sun is cooking me. Maybe we should start over tomorrow in the dark. Let's just think of today as a way to work the jitters out," I said.

We talked for 10 minutes then Kevin decided to give it one more try. This time he climbed with confidence and after an hour-long battle, made it to the top. We continued and on the next few pitches, things went better, but by the time we reached the top of pitch five, most of the day was gone.

Racking up for the next pitch I wondered if our day would have been different if we were not being filmed. Would we have decided to go down after the rough start?

Hard climbing projects have always been an intensely personal meditation for me. A place where I have felt free to get frustrated when things are not going well, or scream like a fool when the mood hits me. This was the first time I had attempted a big send with a film crew. But over the years I have learned to channel pressure in a way that pushes me. I make my living as a public face for my sponsors. I must acknowledge that climbing media has changed. People want an instant fix. They want to feel like they are on the project with us. During the day, Kevin posted Twitter updates to our friends, family and any fans.

Pitch six, a 5.13+ stemming corner that stretches for 200 feet, was my lead. I shook my way through a dihedral at the bottom, rested on a small foot ledge, then liebacked through a few small roofs. By the time I neared the anchor, the sun had set, it was dark and I ended up climbing by feel and memory. Kevin pulled out his headlamp and climbed to within 30 feet of the top, then slipped off. Feeling haggard we called it for the day and jugged to our camp.

The next morning we woke up before light, made some coffee, rappelled back to the top of pitch six, and Kevin sent right out of bed with no warm up. Often on these big-wall free climbs, the adrenaline rush of just being up on the wall with a goal in mind is warm up enough.

As I put on my shoes for the next pitch the sun hit us. It was immediately too hot to send, so we went back to camp to rest. We were already a day behind schedule, our muscles were sore and skin worn. The forecast said it was only supposed to get hotter. Our only chance was to change our schedule. My 24-hour El Cap linkups have taught me that if you know where you are going, climbing at night, although eerie, is really no harder. The micro footholds cast shadows that can actually make them easier to see and the temps are better. We decided that as long as it stayed hot, we would climb at night.

Pitch seven was the route's first 5.14 pitch, a thin lieback seam mostly protected by dodgy Peckers and fixed copperheads. I had first scoped this pitch years ago with a seasoned aid climber, and he had backed off it. Both Kevin and I had experienced long zipper falls while working it. The only comfort came from the fact that the wall was so sheer there was nothing to hit if we did end up pulling all the gear and going the entire length of the pitch. We each took a warm-up burn and bounce-tested some of the gear to gain some confidence. I went first, climbed efficiently through the bottom, but fell 30 feet from the top. On Kevin's first try he climbed a move above my high point and peeled off. We continued to swap attempts and progressed higher each time. On Kevin's sixth attempt he went all out, grunting and yelling. He was two moves from the jug that marks the end of the last hard move when his foot exploded off a slick smear and he sailed 30 feet onto a fixed beak.

"Well," he said, "I guess that piece is good."

On my next try I fell low, then lowered to our portaledge belay for a rest. We sat in tense silence knowing that we were going to have to climb better. Kevin pulled out his iPhone and updated his Twitter feed. As I sat there, feeling defeated, he played a song out of his phone's speakers.

"Is that *really* 'Eye Of The Tiger?'" I asked, smiling.

"Hell yeah!" Kevin turned the screen of his phone around to reveal a You Tube video of Rocky Balboa post holing through deep snow with a log on his shoulders. I pumped my fist and sang along for a few lines until my singing deteriorated into laughter. When the song was over, Kevin put on his shoes and sent. I did too. It turned out, we just needed to release the tension.

LINESPACE

Eleven-thirty p.m., day four: Kevin and I nervously huddled in our single portaledge. Pitch 10 is a relentless hairline fingertip seam with a few fixed Peckers. To send it we would have to lieback 80 feet of tendon-straining pin scars, stem through dripping slime, attempt to dry our shoes and hands while standing on dime edges and then, burl through the bouldery crux that required pressing our fingers against a flat roof far overhead, then, with iron tension, walk our feet on miserable smears until they were six inches from our hands and cross

to a sloping pin scar. Kevin had named it "the lift the car off the baby" move. This all took place in the middle of the night after five days of climbing. As I laced up my shoes, we told jokes to distract ourselves.

I led up, but after 70 feet my fingers slipped out of a wet pin scar. On my second try I shakily reached the anchor with numb toes, then let out a scream that left my voice hoarse. Kevin followed, climbing efficiently, but his foot slipped 10 feet from the top. On his second try he fired through the pitch with the determination of a freight train ascending a mountain.

On day seven, we reached the mid point of the wall and a pitch on the aid route *Mescalito* called the Molar Traverse. From here, the next three pitches are all 5.14 to 5.14+ and the definite crux of the route. Our nerves were fried but we pushed on. I managed to climb Pitch 12 on my third attempt, then Kevin gave it *seven* burns. We decided I should work out the moves on the next pitch while Kevin rested. I spent three hours trying to link them.

Dark clouds rolled in. The top of El Cap vanished, and then the clouds began to swirl around us. We checked the weather forecast on our phones. It called for five days of hard snow and high winds, with four feet of accumulation on top of the wall. We were willing to sit out some stormy weather, but this forecast would likely put the wall out of commission for a week or more. For hours we discussed whether to retreat. Our biggest concern was falling ice after the storm. We both knew success was extremely unlikely on this attempt even with good weather.

We decided that sticking it out would be pointless. It had been an adventure and we were proud of our effort. Besides, we had learned a ton that would help us on our next attempt. As the storm ramped up we put on our rain gear, rappelled back to our camp and packed up. We tied our ropes into a thousand-foot continuous strand, and lowered everything to the ground in one big load. That night two feet of snow fell on Yosemite Valley.

On the 20-hour drive back home to Colorado I replayed the last two months in my mind. I thought about logistics, what worked and what we could have done better. I considered building an ice-deflecting shield for our portaledge so we could be safer sitting out storms.

Before I knew it I was crossing the border into Colorado. It was as if I had blinked, and an entire day had passed.

On this monumental weeklong effort, Tommy Caldwell and Kevin Jorgeson achieved the following. After resting on day six, the storm hit on day seven, and they retreated. Both plan to return this spring for a few weeks working out the crux in the middle of the route. They plan to go for another big push next fall.