

Climb



the Prophet

LEO HOULDING
ON HIS EPIC
EL CAP ODYSSEY

CRATCLIFFE TOR
REDISCOVERED

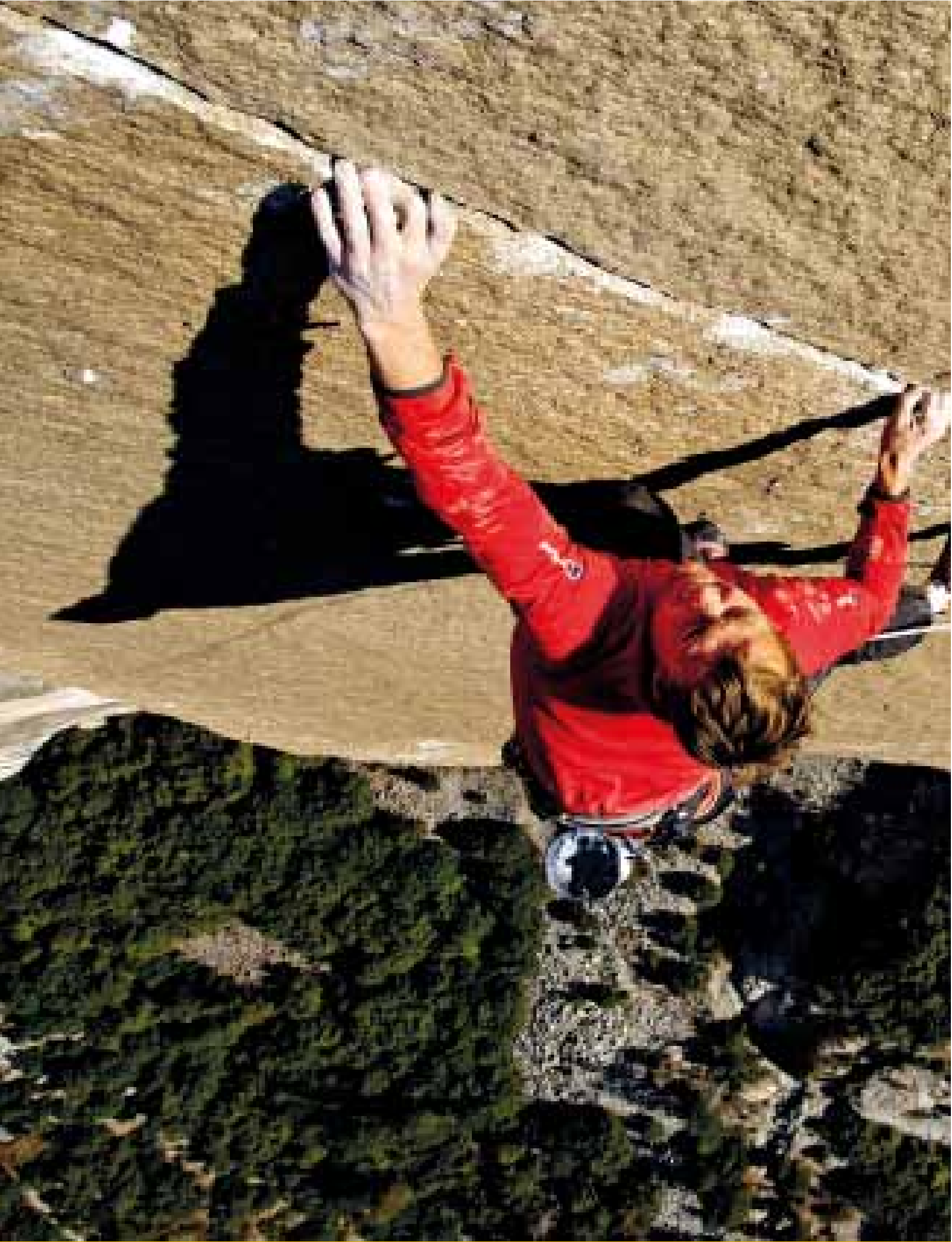
NIAL GRIMES
BEATS THE SYSTEM

ANDY TURNER
GOES TRAINING FOR WINTER

RYAN PASQUILL
KNOCKS ON HEAVEN'S DOOR

MARTIN MORAN
CLIMBS A NORWEGIAN GIANT





long climb to freedom

NINE YEARS AGO, ONE OF BRITAIN'S MOST AMBITIOUS YOUNG CLIMBERS HAD AN EXTRAORDINARY IDEA:

TO PIONEER A NEW FREE ROUTE ON YOSEMITE'S MIGHTY EL CAPITAN - THE HARD WAY.

IN OCTOBER 2010, HE FINALLY SUCCEEDED ON HIS QUEST, AFTER ONE OF THE LONGEST AND MOST DRAMATIC SAGAS IN THE MODERN HISTORY OF BIG WALL CLIMBING.

IN THIS CLIMB EXCLUSIVE, LEO HOULDING TELLS THE STORY OF THE PROPHET, HIS EPIC ODYSSEY ON THE GREATEST CLIFF IN NORTH AMERICA .



In October 2001, I was 21 and living the dream as full time professional climber. Like many risk-taking young men, I felt I was indestructible. In the Spring Jason Pickles and I had made the first free ascent of the West face of the Leaning Tower, a classic aid route, we were amazed that such rich pickings were still there for the taking. This time we were back in the valley for our fifth season to make a first free ascent on the great stone, El Capitan. With the speed climbing skills and general understanding of big walling we'd gained over the years, we were no longer awestruck by the scale and logistics of climbing on the Captain. The intimidating, and apparently impossible monolith had been transformed into a giant canvas onto which any dream could be dared. Anything, it seemed, might go.

We were ambitious and hungry with a desire to push the limits of style. Having cut our teeth on the big numbers of North Wales and the Grit we were keen to apply the strict onsight ethic we often adopted on British crags to a new free route on the most influential face in world climbing. We spent many hazy days in the meadow, intently studying the complex wall through a spotting scope. The range of light and shadow throughout the day reveals entire ledge systems, flying grooves and hanging corners, invisible just minutes before or after.

An ambitious-looking line enticed us on the far right side of the South East buttress. This side is only half the height of *The Nose*, a mere 1500ft. However what it lacks in stature is replaced by the complex nature of the geology and three-dimensional architecture of the wall.

This side is home to many of the hardest and most dangerous aid routes on El Cap (and the world) with ominous titles like *Plastic Surgery Disaster*, *Surgeon General*, and *Bad To The Bone*. Tracking down the few who knew anything about these routes, we gleaned strategic information. We spent one unforgettable session with a 12 pack of Old English (think Special Brew) a couple of packs of Camel no filters and the legendary Jim Birdwell. Known as a master aid climber, Jim has always been ahead of his time. He has an unrivalled eye for a line and first hand experience of our main concern, the Devil's Brow, a 25ft roof and hanging corner system forming a prominent feature 2/3rds of the way up the wall. For a brief part of the day a shadow reveals an invisible ledge and a potential breach in the Devil's defenses. He pointed out this subtlety, adding 'you kids might be able to do something with that, but be careful up there boys, it's a fine

line between badass and dumbass'.

Emboldened by this Gandafel-esque gift of knowledge - and unperturbed by its implicit warning - we began the quest.

We wanted to free a new route on El Capitan, utilizing no aid, no drill, no port-a-ledge and no fixed rope. To us it was - and remains - the ultimate challenge, though at heart I think we knew ticking all these boxes was unattainable. The point was to try; fully embracing the concept that climbing is not principally about getting to the top.



Our chosen line was built largely around the aid route *Bad To The Bone*, first climbed by Smith and Painkiher in 1984. Their reputation for deadly hard-aid has led to only a handful of repeats. However, aid and free share surprising little common ground. A0 often implies a bolt ladder and hence totally blank rock, and impossible free climbing territory. Conversely, A5 can be loose rock where fine footwork, delicate balance and lengthy run outs can reveal relatively mild yet bold free climbing.

The first pitch was more challenging than it ap-

peared. Later we discovered that the seasonal yet mighty Horsetail falls pounds this slab for half the year polishing the immaculate granite to a marble finish. Some in-situ copperheads provided the only protection for a slate like rock-over crux.

On the next pitch, we found a Gritstone-like boulder problem protected by cams behind an "expando" flake. A long, wandering pitch of moderate climbing on surprisingly unprotectable rock and then we were into the realm of the big numbers. I progressed up the fragile discontinuous cracks and grooves. After more than an hour, about 100ft up the pitch I reached a poor stance. Having laced most of my rack into the dodgy placements of the pitch I wasn't keen to continue up the blank wall and hollow overhangs above. For another hour, I built a woeful belay out of tied off pitons, and equalized RP's with the confidence of youth - and instructed Jason not to fall off. He climbed free without weighting the rope, arriving at my web wide-eyed.

Gear re-racked, highest points of the belay equalized into the first runner I progressed up and down the next 15ft, re-climbing with more ease each time until finally I had to make a move I would not be able to reverse. Absolutely committed, I laid one on for the distant edge on tiptoes. To my horror it was not the positive edge-of-matchbox I had expected but was in fact too sloping to hold. My fingers slid from the edge. For a split second the unthinkable flashed through my mind. A factor two fall onto a marginal belay, and two dead monkeys. Bridwell's warning glinted menacingly, it's a fine line between badass and dumbass. But with the strength of survival and fortune of faith, my fingers found traction on a hidden edge below and more positive than my target hold.

I stuck it, pulled a couple more hard moves and placed a tiny cam with huge relief. The imminent fear of death greatly diminished, more hollow flakes on a steep surface led to a belay from the aid route obscured in a corner. On subsequent ascents, we skipped this dangerous belay using the equalized pegs as runners.

Spurred by our success and a bomber belay, I continued over severely fractured ground, delicately tip-toeing up the bottomless diagonal groove. Small cams rattled in sandy cracks and behind exfoliating flakes until finally a Walnut 00 lodged in relatively sound rock. Creeping upwards with patience and control, I reached a small roof and impassable terrain. I spent ages arranging sketchy protection in the crumbly crack.

About to retreat, I noticed the distinctive scratches of aid climbers toils out to my left leading to a hanging arête. I could not see around the corner but knew



'You kids might be able to do something with that, but be careful up there
- it's a fine line between badass and dumbass.'

- JIM BRIDWELL

the rock quality improved. Arms well recovered, I smeared across the hanging slab with non-holds for hands reaching a foothold and pinch on the arête sufficiently good to recompose. Peering around the corner, I spotted an ancient, rusty bolt some 20-ft up and left.

In a shockingly exposed position, I teetered around the corner committing to the tiny crimps, and a sequence I knew I could not reverse. Pulling the hardest moves of the route so far, I reached far left to better holds leading to the bolt. But over extended, I began to barn door with no way of avoiding the ensuing 50 footer into the void. My faith in the 'bomber' 00 wire was repaid: it held. With adrenalin surging, I lowered to the belay.

One of the ropes had been severely cut on a sharp edge during the ride. We swapped ends and with Jas's loyal encouragement I found myself once again committed to the crimps. This time I got my feet higher and stuck the better holds. On reaching the aged bolt my energy was too low and fear far too high to continue.

I recognized the bolt from an infamous dodgy (recalled) batch used extensively during the mid 1980's ultra-hard aid boom. In a state of terror I hung on the bolt. It held, and as the fear subsided I realized with gut wrenching tension there was more of the same to come. I wished for it to be blank, impossible, to tempt me no further. Yet again, I unwillingly recomposed, and begrudgingly found the boldness and stupidity to run the gauntlet once more. Another sustained, appallingly thin sequence led to another sickening bolt; at the limit of my reach 20ft above the last, and another terrifying hang.

By now too high to lower off, and too scared to abseil, a brail trail leading to a distant belay seemed the best option. An outrageous mantelshelf then another terrifying run out led with relief to the distant belay. Just three questionable runners in almost a hundred feet of hard climbing - and in the most exposed position I'd ever experienced - The Screamer pitch had taken it out of me big time.

Looking up, I cringed at the discontinuous, bottomed out fissures and evidently climbable but barely protectable hard aid terrain above. It was time to go down. As we retreated, I checked and chalked the cruxes and best gear placements in preparation for the next assault.

I had been doing all the leading so far, so we decided next time Jason should lead the initial easier pitches. In the first light, he set off. Reaching the first crux he committed to the high rock over and froze.

"Oh fuck, I can't stand up. I'M OFF!" he yelled. Sliding down the slab, he didn't stop, but accelerated. One by one the copperheads ripped, sending him bouncing down before finally the one wire left brought him to a halt as he slammed into a big ledge on rope stretch. It was clear he was not okay. In hindsight we should have known the heads were bad, as



they are in a waterfall for half of the year. With much assistance, Jason made it heroically down to the road.

A physio friend examined him and suspected a fractured pelvis. Jason's a tough lad, and in the absence of travel insurance we procured some strong painkillers and he embarked on a painful journey home to Manchester. I was angry with myself for not replacing the in-situ gear resulting in Jason's accident, but was now enthralled by the awaiting adventure.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, I had difficulty persuading anybody else to join me on the line now christened *The Prophet*. (Named after the epic CJ Bollen techno record, and Lebanese philosopher Khalil Gibran's classic work). Eventually I convinced top speed climber Cedar Wright to join me on the condition we bring more aid gear (but no drill), and a fatter rope so he could jummar.

Fully rested, now intimate with the route and climbing at my best, I placed a decent peg where the fixed copperheads had been, and proceeded to climb quickly, efficiently and entirely free to our previous high point. The next section looked hard and hollow with no decent gear. When Cedar joined me at the scabby bolt belay, we had plenty of daylight but he didn't look happy. I asked him what he thought we should do. 'I think we should rap the fuck down whilst we still can, and take you to the fucking lunatic asylum!'

Unable and unwilling to talk him into a situation he wasn't happy with we descended. I was again

stumped for a partner that Fall of 2001, until Kevin Thaw showed up in the valley. Kevin - seasoned in hard British trad, and big walls across the world - was up for it, but convinced me to take a port-a-ledge. I stubbornly resisted his advice to bring a drill. Arriving again at the highpoint, Kevin was up for the challenge.

We used the ropes to lower and offset the belay, enabling me to use the bolts as the first runner - meaning a fall would be factor 1 as opposed to 2, and I would not land on Kevin!

I fought my way upward, managing to awkwardly place a knife blade peg from a free position. Slightly higher, I clipped a tiny in-situ copperhead and a RURP before reversing to the belay for a rest. From the security of the belay, I tested the gear. The head ripped immediately, though the other pieces tentatively held. Satisfied with the gear, I committed to the hard moves above, on shifting holds, to reach easier ground.

Hammering in another peg, I continued with increasing difficulty up the steep groove. A long way above the gear a short, overhanging step of crumbly rock blocked my path. I reversed, and resorted to all-out aid. I struggled with the A4+ placements, using birdbeaks and skyhooks in anger for the first time.

I began free climbing. Passing an especially loose section I started to get scared then everything crumbled and I took a 30 footer onto the slab below, spraining both my ankles. Already pushed so far, a little over half way up the wall I had reached my limit. As November and winter storms approached, Kevin and I retreated. Yet I was already planning the next offensive for the following spring with Jason.

That winter, I made my first pilgrimage to Patagonia. Kevin Thaw, the late Scottish winter master Alan Mullin and I teamed up for an ambitious attempt of the infamous and terrifying *Maestri/Egger* line on Cerro Torre. To cut a very long story short, my youthful 'anything's possible, I'm indestructible' attitude came to an abrupt halt in a big fall that crushed the Talus bone in my right foot and almost took me out of the game forever. The ensuing epic self rescue and long recovery changed my life in many ways. With a year out and lots of physiotherapy, the bone healed and I returned to fitness. With time, I realized that I had an accident like that coming. I'm still thankful that it was my Talus and not my neck that broke on Cerro Torre.

For the next three years, *The Prophet* went on the back burner. I returned to Yosemite several times enjoying easier climbs and safer styles, but I continued to stare at the upper section of the route during the hours of down time. Reluctantly, I admitted to myself I was too scared to push so hard again. I had been gun-ho and going well on those 2001 attempts, and still pushed way past my limit.

In the fall of 2004 Jas and I were both back in valley and on decent form. We hadn't set out to try *The Prophet* but when Ivo Ninov the aid master and dynamo of psyche was keen we decided to compromise the original dream and go with aid, drill and a

OPENING PAGE: Leo finally cracks the awesome 'A1 Beauty' crux pitch (E9 7a, 5.13d) of *The Prophet* in Oct 2010. Almost all the moves on the 120ft pitch are UK 6c or harder. ALASTAIR LEE

FACING PAGE: Jason at the marginal belay as Leo onsights the E7 6c terrain above on pitch four in October 2001. A fall from this point could have ended in disaster due to the extremely poor belay. IAN PARNELL

THIS PAGE: Leo on 'The Screamer' pitch (E8 6c) in October 2001. A walnut 00 with shock absorbing 'screamer' quickdraw and 2 rusty old bolts were all that protected almost 100ft of sustained F8a climbing. JOHN DICKEY

'With a scream he warned us as a flake the size of an ironing board began to peel off from the wall.

It didn't quite go, and Ivo nervously tried to tie it back onto the wall.'

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port-a-ledge from the ground. In big wall terms this is of course ground-up, tough with reference to free climbing this style is head-point. The hard pitches are aided, top roped then freed. In reality it shares more in common with top down tactics than a true ground-up, onsight.

Jason re-led the first pitch, now dubbed 'the train wreck' with typical Mancunian black humor. This time, he slayed his demons easily with the help of the bomber peg.

Ghosts stalked me on the first of the hard pitches. Ivo offered to aid it, allowing me to refresh my memory. Hard aid is a slow process. Ivo tinkered his way upwards at a snails pace. After 4 hours on lead, he reached the tied off pegs I had placed in 2001. Horrified we had belayed there he continued nailing up the detachable flakes above. With a scream he warned us as a flake the size of an ironing board began to peel off from the wall. It didn't quite go, and Ivo nervously tried to tie it back onto the wall. Visibly shaken he returned to the belay and we descended to the port-a-ledge camp.

That night, predicted poor weather mutated into an epic winter storm. Our seemingly comfortable perch became a full-on waterfall, and our decrepit port-a-ledge flooded as rocks dislodged by the flow rained down. In a lull the next day, we hastily retreated before another; even more vicious front blew through in which a Japanese couple tragically perished high on the Nose. When it finally cleared, at least eight teams had to be rescued. The Yosemite season was over. *The Prophet* would have to wait, again, for another year.

Jason stopped making his annual valley pilgrimage. I spent my time in Never-Never Land climbing with the local masters and learning to fly with the lost boys whilst evading Ranger Hook. Discovering that the descents could be even more fun than the climbs!

*The Prophet* lay dormant for 5 years. Nobody went up there. Over the last decade many of the great aid lines have fallen free largely at the hands of the Huber brothers and Tommy Caldwell. Their remarkable successes have been achieved by employing red-point tactics on a big wall scale. Rappelling to find the line, rehearsing the moves, chalking the holds, inspecting the gear and adding bolts where necessary.

To claim a true free ascent of El Cap you must make a continuous ascent, climbing all the pitches in sequence, without retreating to the ground or going to the top. Whether it takes a day or week it is valid so long as it is one ascent with either one person leading it all or both climbers swapping leads and seconding everything clean. This has come to be the accepted style, particularly for first free ascents defining it as one free climb as opposed to a collection of free pitches done over any period.

In May 2009 I was once again chilling in the sublime meadow. It was an unusually wet spring; I was recovering from knee surgery and was without a partner. Staring at the upper part of *The Prophet* for the thousandth hour, finally my desire to know what was up there overpowered my strict code of ethics. I walked to the top with a rack and a thousand feet of rope. With some regret, I laid to rest my ambitious dream as I began a wild, solo rappel.

Near the top I found a beautiful hair-line crack, comparable in perfection and position to the awesome *Salathé* headwall. So thin it looked impossible running diagonally, sides offset it split the golden slab. To my surprise, with acute fingertip pain I was able to hold on even in the thinnest sections. The very first move looked desperate as did the finish with holds literally two matchsticks wide. Referencing the guide book I found out that this remarkable feature was the "A1 beauty" pitch of the route *Eagle's Way*.

Continuing down I reached the Devil's Brow. At last I was actually up close and personal with the feature I'd eyed for so long. Sure enough the 'invisible ledge' Bridwell had pointed out existed, the exposed hand traverse offered the only free line through a spectacularly steep and blank section.

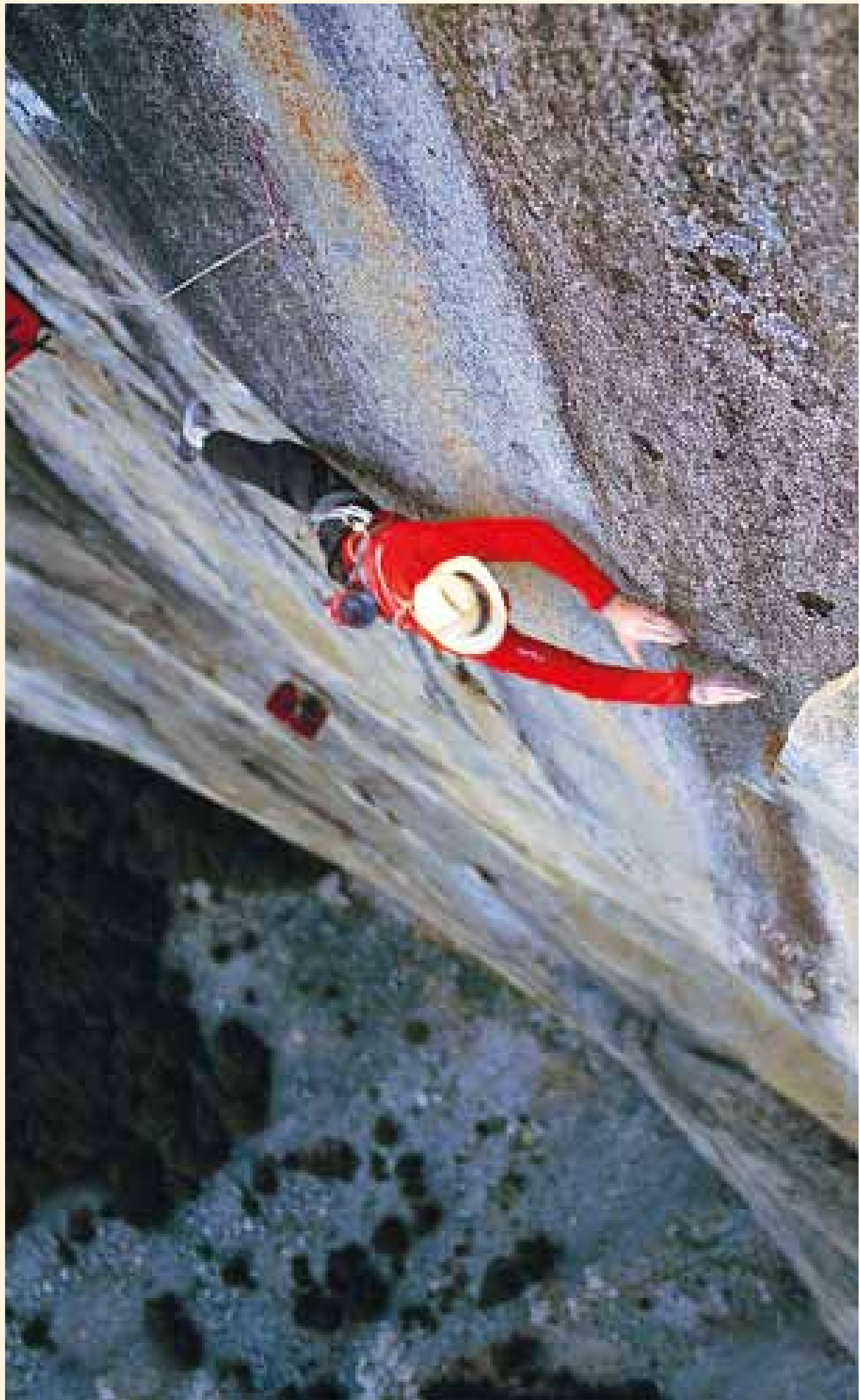
Employing complex tension traverses, scary pendulums and directional runners behind dangerously loose flakes I made my way down totally virgin terrain in a state of perpetual fear. There were holds but the terrifyingly hollow diorite was gently overhanging the whole way. Dinner plates detached with a stroke, flying like Frisbees landing far away from the wall. Exhaustively investigating the possibilities my terror subsided to excitement as one by one the moves went free.

Towards the bottom of the pitch my feet touched a flake the size of a garage door. Attached only along its upper edge it resonated like a gong. Reluctantly it dawned on me that this 'Gunglo-



**THIS PAGE, TOP:** Leo on the 'Invisible Ledge' in June 2010, pointed out years earlier by Jim Bridwell. Following the 'Devil's Dyno' (E8 7a, 5.13b/c) this 40ft traverse is shared with the Belgian route, *The Secret Passage*. ALASTAIR LEE  
**THIS PAGE, LOWER:** Leo and Jas relaxing on the portledge above the 'Devil's Brow' (the route's 9th belay) in June 2010. ALASTAIR LEE **FACING PAGE:** The 'Devil's Dyno' (E8 7a, 5.13b/c, p9) An 8-foot sideways and slightly downwards double dyno underneath the Devils Brow proved the final piece of the Jigsaw in June 2010. ALASTAIR LEE







Or tomorrow, we could sail on straight into the heart of the storm,  
condemning ourselves to the tempest with no hope of rescue or retreat.  
We quickly realised that we had no choice but the third option.  
jason and i are neither cowards nor fools,  
yet once again we flirted with the line between boldness and stupidity that bridwell had warned us of all those years before.



tine' had to be negotiated. Keeping as much weight on my feet as possible, it flexed several inches but seemed not to mind.

Almost all the moves executed there was the small issue of the protection. Several more Frisbees were prized from the face by cams that did not hold body weight. Only one piece withheld a bounce test, bolts would be required.

Lower, a strange feeling of loss came over me as I tensioned around a corner and found myself at the ultimate high point I had reached in 2001. In exactly the same spot, I was in a completely different place merely a spectator to the heroics of my younger self. The cams I had lowered off years early were still there, apparently undisturbed throughout my twenties.

With the loosest shale removed the snappy boulder problem that had forced me to start aid climbing on my last visit to this unfrequented spot felt difficult but doable though it would need a bolt.

My top down adventure put to death my onsite dream but gave birth to a new more tangible goal. Except for a few short sections I had done all of the moves, the game was on.

In June 2010 Jason and I were back with the heavy artillery to finish the job. In the absolute antithesis of the style in which we had begun the project back in 2001 we fixed the entire route from the top down.

A blank streak below the Devil's Brow leading to the invisible ledge was our main concern. The pitch, a hundred foot traverse, around a big corner, guarded by giant ceilings in the airiest spot imaginable was extremely complicated to work. I rigged an insane top-rope system with two ropes, requiring two belay devices creating a remarkably perfect baby bouncer allowing us to rehearse the wild, three-dimensional gymnastics. An unbelievable leap of faith overcame the blank streak, a massive sideways double dyno.



**ABOVE:** Jason Pickles and Leo Houlding - the Lost Boys in Never Never Land. **ALASTAIR LEE THIS PAGE, RIGHT:** Leo leading 'The Guillotine' (E7 6c, 5.13b, p8) in June 2010. 5 bolts were added to this virgin 160ft pitch. Thankfully, nobody was beheaded. (Although a helmet may have been more appropriate headwear.) **ALASTAIR LEE FACING PAGE:** Leo at the rest on the 'A1/E9 Beauty' (E9 7a, 5.13d, p11) - the crux pitch of *The Prophet*. The warmth of June 2010 repulsed Leo's attempts, requiring another season to finish the job. **FACING PAGE, TOP:** Jason and Leo looking stressed by the continuous serious, sustained climbing about to launch the Devil's Dyno. **ALASTAIR LEE**

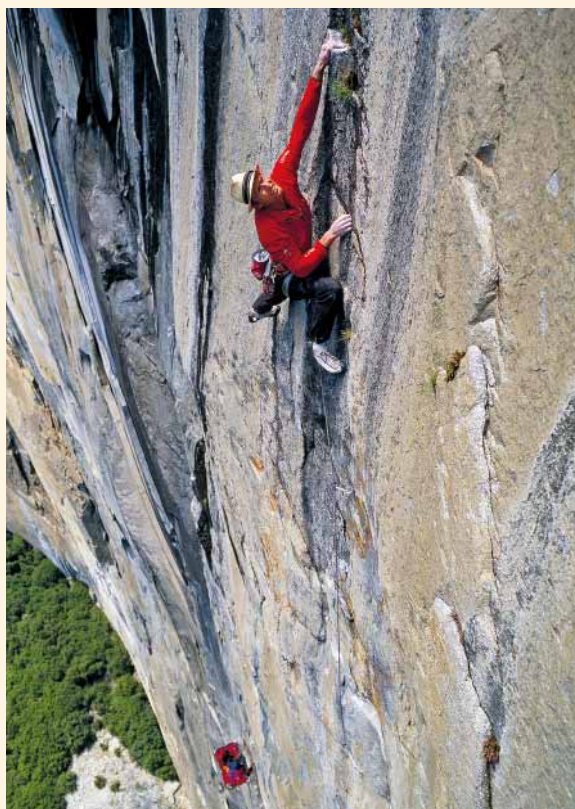
It didn't look possible but with absolute commitment and a good deal of self-belief the Devils Dyno provided the final piece of the jigsaw. We had found a line, 100% free up this monumental face. Now just the simple task of climbing it!

Turning our attention to the Guillotine pitch we placed bolt belays at its foot and end. After much debate we added five bolts in the solid rock between the hollow flakes and replaced two ancient rivets. With more bolts it would be a sport pitch however we tried to maintain the serious character of the climb leaving the easier sections severely run out. We added a bolt at the 2001 high point, one to protect the Devil's dyno as well as replacing the scabby ones in the Screamer pitch and several at belays. In total 7 holes were drilled for protection and 5 for belays.

The ropes were expertly rigged along the precise line enabling every hold to be reached, every move rehearsed and every gear placement inspected. Essentially an 1800ft top rope, we climbed the entire route from the ground self-belaying with a Gri-Gri.

In fighting form the A1 Beauty started to feel possible. I quickly did it in sections but each individually felt close to my limit, it was going to be hard to link. We cleaned the ropes and made an attempt from the ground. In two days I led the whole route up to the A1 beauty with no falls. Jason followed everything free bar the Devils dyno.

In the heat of late June I fell time and time again



from the desperate crack without reaching the peg. After many tries with bleeding fingertips and bruised pride finally I admitted defeat. The ever-dependable Pickles vowed to return with me in the cooler temps of the autumn.

Back again in Oct 2010 I was starting to suffer from project fatigue. Never have I invested half as much in any climb. Some 60 days over five seasons, four partners, two injuries, one serious and a fatal storm not to mention all the near misses on this 9 year odyssey. My fear of failure began to outweigh my fear of getting hurt.

The route is so serious we had to once again familiarize ourselves with all 13 pitches of wild and wonderful climbing from the top down, a heat wave hindering our efforts. The A1 beauty catches the sun





for all but the first hour of the day requiring wear-  
ingly early starts.

After two weeks work by the skin of my teeth I finally linked the A1 Beauty on top rope. Rising at 4am to feel sufficiently awake to perform at my limit by 7am we rapped in. With no warm up I set off on lead. Placing all the gear on lead I climbed with near perfection past the potential fifty footers, working the rests, calming my breathing to the final crux. I did the long stretch out left, fancy footwork, and massive reach to a good finger lock. Totally devoid of footholds a crippling flash pump took hold on the usually simple undercut crack. Without the power to place the final cam I took the risk pushing on with trembling legs and elbows skyward. A fall now from way above the peg into the corner would not be pretty. I'd done the crux pitch of *The Prophet* but felt physically sick as I reached the belay. This was partly due to the massive physical effort, partly fear yet mostly because I knew I had to do it again on the continuous ascent.

A week of bad weather forced us to extend the trip. I cancelled the first date in a slideshow tour and Jas risked his long-term relationship, his girlfriend justifiably feeling abandoned. Reacquainted with everything, a wall camp in place underneath the Devils Brow we were ready for the continuous ascent.

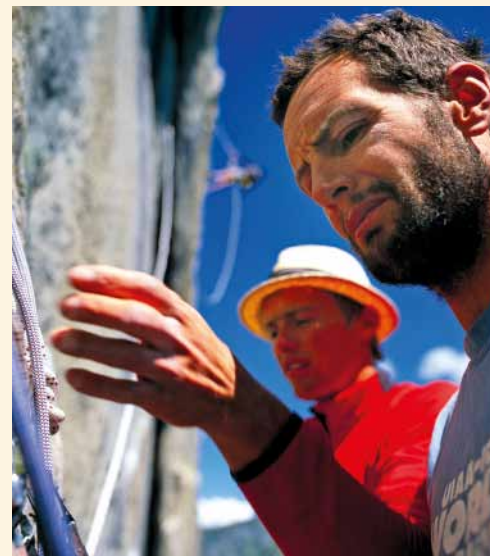
"Do you want the bad news or the bad news?" Said Jas returning with the weather forecast. "The Park Service has issued a severe weather warning. A winter storm is coming. It's going to be a bad one"

The trip already extended to it's maximum our options were limited. We either accept defeat settling for having done every pitch; we wait for the storm to pass, think like Tommy Caldwell and go for it in a day. In our current state of fitness and given the extreme difficulties high on the route this seemed unlikely. Or tomorrow, insufficiently rested on the last day of fine weather, we sail straight into the heart of the storm, condemning ourselves to the tempest with no hope of rescue or retreat and pray that not only that we survive but that we find the strength to then climb the A1/E9 Beauty. We had no choice. Jason and I are neither cowards nor fools yet once again we flirted with the line between boldness and stupidity.

As every other team on El Capitan either topped out or retreated we began our ascent, setting off up the train wreck for the tenth time. Abandoning our shoes at the base with a minuet rack, (we couldn't afford to drop or fix a single piece) we climbed incredibly light save for the bottle of Southern Comfort that Jason carried to aid our inevitable confinement.

Trying not to worry about anything other than the

pitch being led and the move faced we climbed with pace and efficiency. Big lead followed big lead. Never have I known a climb with so much continuously hard and potentially lethal climbing. After nine stern pitches we made it to our stash at the top of the Guil-  
lotine having both climbed it all totally clean. Already four fifths of the way up the wall, with daylight to





# 'Traversing the invisible ledge, i felt like jack up the beanstalk, my sense of wonder haunted by a latent menace in the sky.'



spare we were tempted to continue. But with the two hardest pitches yet to come and pangs of cramp in our elbows we set up the ledge.

We awoke to a very different atmosphere in a kingdom of cloud. Indescribably magnificent, towering cumulonimbus morphed around us whilst an inversion obscured the valley floor. I stepped out of my sleeping bag digesting the Devils Dyno for breakfast. Traversing the invisible ledge, I felt like Jack up the beanstalk, my sense of wonder haunted by the menacing vibe.

The threat of rain very real I linked the next short pitch, a couple of hard moves and an easy ramp to arrive at the A1/E9 beauty. Tick marked to perfection I was feeling good and the temperature was sweet. Then the first innocent drops of rain started to fall. Though whisper light the rock was soaked in minutes. Fixing the rope I returned to the ledge, cleaning the Devils Brow on my way down, no mean feat through the giant overhangs.

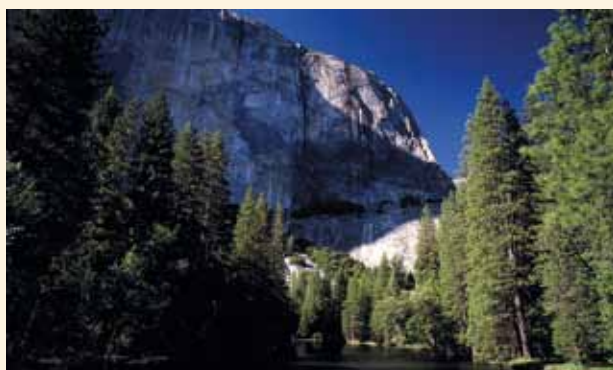
What began as a whisper, carried across the face of the North America wall and swelled to a chorus of biblical proportions. The ensuing 48-hour tempest was the wettest anyone can remember. The river rose from its lowest level of the year to higher than springs peak flow overnight. We were the only team on the wall. When it rains up there the whole wall turns into a waterfall. For the first 40 hours we rode the turbulent weather with the attitude of seasoned pirates in a four by six foot galleon.

"Argh! Is that all you've got!" I would scream in response to the more vicious gusts of wind.

But when the Southern Comfort ran out, the gusts reached hurricane force and our down sleeping bags were thoroughly soaked it wasn't funny anymore. Updrafts strong enough to lift the port-a-ledge, missing its fly pole, smashed us around like puppets as a torrent the strength of a fire hose doused us with a deafening roar. Inescapably trapped had it the fly blown out we would've been in trouble. By the third morning we were beginning to get worryingly cold. As we contemplated the best way to surrender, the storm switched off and my beloved Yosemite-blue skies returned. Ledge flooded, fingers and toes utterly pruned; everything was completely soaked except my boots and chalk, which I had guarded fiercely.

Wringing out our sleeping bags we began to dry out. Huge cascades of runoff bellowed all around, changes in the wind delivered fresh dousings but it was sunny and warm. As the great face flowed we recounted the nights horrors with the exhausted joy of survivors. By the evening we had succeed in drying everything sufficiently to survi-ve another night though it was a cold one.

On wall day five with far less water around we moved the camp up to the A1/E9 Beauty. A prominent wet streak ran down the last crux and all the chalk had been pressure washed away. Patiently we waited for the rock to dry at a remarkable Californian rate.



Having endured the worst warm up imaginable I set off to repeat the hardest pitch I've ever done. With no chalk ticks marking the holds it felt way harder. By now so intimate with this beautiful shield of gold I made it to the peg and final crux. Proud of my performance I was way too pumped to stand a chance but tried anyway thankfully defeated before the fall consequences got bad. Working and chalking it on the way down I felt confident for the next round. Less violent clouds filled the valley creating a tremendously atmospheric sunset.

"Go Leo!" Rang out in chorus from friends in the meadow far below.

Leaving the rest at half height, I felt good, too good. Placing my foot imprecisely I was off without realizing and devastated. We had to top out the next day whatever. The weight of my over ambition tore me apart. I couldn't sleep, I couldn't eat and I vomited my morning coffee.

Out of bed and into desperateness. In the best

conditions I'd experienced I arrived at the peg not destroyed. The final crux over, out of sight of Jas, he heard my screams as all power abandoned me. I dropped the trophy on the podium, just a few feet from the good holds. Back at the bottom, Jas consoled me with silence.

Physically and emotionally drained I passed out almost sobbing waking in the warmth of the midday sun. Having basically accepted defeat knowing we had given it our all I ventured once more into the breach.

Fighting the poor conditions every step of the way I once again made it to the peg.

Working the terrible rest for longer than the other tries, this was it - last go, last day. Somehow I did it, making it to the belay with nothing in reserve. Relief at having not failed and let us both down out weighed the joy of success.

With the last hard boulder problem to go it was not quite over. Right off the belay I made the very hard move off an awkward undercut accompanied by a snap and a sharp pain in my finger. Unable to move up, I crashed down onto Jas nursing my first ever tweaked tendon.

Unconcerned by the pain with tape and a hit of adrenalin I attacked *The Prophet's* final defence, sticking the crux moves with just two fingers. The very last move of the route surmounts the dry stone-wall we had built terracing our summit bivi - the magnificent "Falcons nest".

Collapsing into it elated, *The Prophet* was finally free.



**THIS PAGE, TOP:** The Southeast Buttress of the magnificent El Capitan - the greatest cliff in North America. ALASTAIR LEE

**THIS PAGE, LOWER:** The line of *The Prophet*. Though half the size of *The Nose*, this side of the wall is home to many of El Cap's hardest and most dangerous aid climbs. ALASTAIR LEE