

ROCKPIRATES FOUR



In loving memory of Travis Foster



ROCKPIRATES

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Special thanks to Maureen Foster, Adyn Annetts, Griffin Smith, Paul McSorley and Kate Sabo. And thank you to Drew Leiterman and Evan Guibault, whom without I could not have had the strength, knowledge, or grace to write about Travis.

And to all the contributors: You guys get me PSYCHED! SO FUCKING PSYCHED!
Thank you for the honor of showcasing your stories.

The injustices of our world have not gone away. Treat everyone with kindness, and do what you can. Inform yourself. Empathize. Use your voice for good.

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“...*They were made* just out of a pure desire to make media that reflected what was most important to them,” my friend told me about 1970s Punk zines. All killer. No filler. His words begged the question: What matters? What actually fucking matters?

Our lives are so cluttered with things **that simply do not matter**. Complacency hitches a ride on time’s back, and after a while we become weighted down by the things we carry that do us no good. It is laborious living, but it is comfortable.

And then, our lives are periodically sucker-punched off their comfortable pedestals, and normal shatters. *What matters?* comes to the forefront, and the answers are different from when we were undisturbed. The most recent sucker punch to a lot of the folks reading this is losing Travis Foster to suicide. Upon taking the punch, my head was in my hands for a few weeks, shaking and ruminating on the question. *What matters?*

Have a story?
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First, the bullshit has to be pressure washed away to get at the heart of the question. If you, like me, are privileged enough to know the cliché list of things that do not matter, ponder them and their place in your life for a moment.

And then, and better yet, ponder **the things that do matter**. Most importantly, ponder their place in your life.

This issue, all 73 pages, was created with *What matters?* as the orbital point. I care more that it makes you ask yourself that question, and less if this magazine falls under that list. Of course there are more important things than *Rockpirates*. I’m in a café among a masked nine of them. Ten, if you add coffee.

I hope that you enjoy this issue, because hope and joy are important. In this issue, some of the other things I believe to be most important are highlighted: kindness, courage, living passionately, the natural world—and fuck it, climbing! Climbing is important! At least it is to me! Oh, and YOUR FRIENDS!!!! AND STRANGERS! The list goes on, and this is getting messy. You get the idea.

Love matters most.

-Nat



Photo by Eric Bissell



In climbing, the way in which ascents are done sometimes gets glazed over
when success lies at the end of the story.

The tales of failure fall through the cracks.



THE PRESCOTT BOYS

By Jane Jackson

As Tom Robbins articulates in *Another Roadside Attraction*, “the most important thing in life is style. That is, the style of one’s existence the characteristic mode of one’s actions - is basically ultimately what matters. For if a [person] defines [themselves] by doing, then style is doubly definitive because style describes the doing.”

I have a hard time getting inspired by newswatches about the most recent send of a 5.15. As a mediocre climber who was raised on stories of survival and suffering, like Shackleton’s *Endurance* or Herzog’s *Annapurna*, my ears perk up more at campfires when I hear stories about epics and suffering. One particular place seemed to continuously be the source of these stories: **The Pan American Wall, on Gran Trono Blanco**; unbearable heat, objective hazard, hard free climbing. The more I heard, the more I obsessed: a friend mentioned a story of the early free ascent of The Pan Am that had perhaps occurred before the documented first free ascent by Paul Piana in the fall of 1993. This was real. It had to be.

Who were these unsung heroes?

What humility to have done such a proud free ascent without saying a word!

The Trono Blanco itself is shrouded in mystery; a shoe-lace tied around a branch supposedly marks the proper fork in the dusty dirt road south of La Rumerosa. It holds supposed boulder fields so rugged that one climber claimed to see a Bighorn Sheep (known for their climbing prowess) miscalculate a leap and fall to its death into a deep, gravelly chasm. This fog extends to the routes themselves. There are a handful of articles online, trip reports mostly, that tell elaborate tales of excessive tequila drinking, incredible thirst, powerful winds (“The Poor Man’s Patagonia” it’s been called), and approaches heinous enough to bring some of climbing’s greatest heroes to their knees.

Of course, the internet has changed things now. Curiosity eventually overtook me, and I found myself bumping along the Baja road toward The Trono in my aging Toyota 4-Runner. We followed our small blue dot on an iPhone screen, which led us directly to the campsite we had scouted on google earth a few nights before at a friend’s house in Joshua Tree. Not so mysterious anymore. My visit—which is another story in itself—left me even more intrigued about the darkhorse history. I managed to track down the contact information of my valiant heroes, and asked them if they might talk about their experience.

“I had to know more and pursued this rumour in search of something **true, real, and honest** in modern climbing.”

What I found was more complicated than a simple tale of humility and undercover badassery. The story that unfolded raised questions that seem relevant as modern big-wall free climbing continues to gain popularity.

25 years ago the Gran Trono Blanco was even more cloaked in a remote fog than it was for us this past January. No smart phones, no beta, no detailed spray-down from friends who have climbed there before. 1993 was a very different time in Baja.



Photos, Baja Shenanigans, two decades after the Prescott Boys expedition. Photos By Eric Bissell

Spring, 1993

Three twenty-year old boys from Prescott College, in northern Arizona, bump along a dirt road in Northern Baja in an ancient Land Cruiser. Their names are Greg, Ted, and Jason and they are about to embark on the adventure of their young lives. Greg had scouted the Trono from afar on a previous trip to Baja, and had planted the seed in the minds of the other two.

The Trono towers above the Laguna Salada, which is a large, dry inland lakebed that lies in a salty depression south of Mexicali. It was from this desert-scape that Greg had spotted the Trono years prior. He had been in the area working on a creative film piece set in this desolate landscape and in the adjacent village of La Rumerosa. From this barren salt flat, the Trono rises about 5,500 feet above sea level. The massif quickly gains relief above the Laguna as the steep walls of Cañon Tajo fall away like curtains to reveal the clean, white granite.

The three climbers had their sights set on the obvious line that leads up the center of the face. This route, they knew, had been done as an aid line, and the three hoped to give the route a free attempt.

The dirt road veered right and the car slowed at the mouth of Cañon Tajo. They drove the car as far as they could as the river bottom narrowed. Spines of ochre and dark brown rock wind down from the pink and grey granite-lined summits above. The walls of this canyon are too steep for much vegetation to grow, so the yucca, palm, and other hostile looking succulents grow mainly in the bottom of the wash where water sometimes flows. Sometimes. Luckily, it was spring in the high Baja desert, and fresh water flowed among water polished granite, sparkling in the bright sunlight.



At some point, the road disappeared and the three began to shuttle enormous loads from the canyon bottom up the steep talus to the base of the wall. The heat in this part of the desert can be unbearable, even in the dead of winter. Delirium clouded their judgment as they slogged toward the base of the wall.

Before leaving Prescott, they approached the local natural foods store to get the bulk of their food at cost, reducing expenses for their desert expedition. This left them with pounds and pounds of powdered veggie burger mix and spaghetti, among other delicacies like PowerBars and Creatine powder. Early in their foray to the *Pan Am* they realized that without any spices, their food was irritatingly monotonous and bland. So, as any savvy outdoorsmen would, they looked to their environment to add some excitement to the powdered veggie burger and plain pasta dinners. Occasionally, a hawk circled high above. I picture a raven or two cruising down the valley as well, but in general the Baja desert can appear fairly devoid of wildlife. Ted looked down into the clear pool at his feet and noticed small tadpoles languishing in the shallow waters. An idea formed.

“How about adding some foraged protein to the burger mix?” he suggested.

The others shrugged and began to catch tadpoles in the pool, mixing them in with the veggie burger powder, only to find out that **in fact tadpoles add little flavoring to food but rather a terrible textural combination reminiscent of mucus and sand.**

After their ill-fated snack, they forged on to stash their first cache of gear at the base of the wall, and then back down to the Land Cruiser to load up again, and then back up. On the second trip up the hill, Ted and Jason noticed a suspicious patch of sand and tiptoe to avoid what they assumed to be quicksand. Their delicate traversing with cumbersome, heavy bags was too much for Greg, and he grew impatient and forged directly through the sand. They


were right to avoid it, for Greg sunk to his waist in sand. Ted and Jason jumped up into a flurry of activity, grabbing a rope and tossing an end to Greg. They pulled him out and shook off the close call.

Exhausted, they continued up to the base, where they found half of their cached food has been eaten by a crafty desert rodent. Supplies are reassessed and it is confirmed that the team can continue, but on restricted rations.

They started up the wall with supplies for multiple days, as well as a camera and a handmade audio boom consisting of two extendable painter's poles and assorted bike parts and climbing gear. Their bread and butter energy source was premixed flavourless Carbo-Fuel powder (premixed so as not to risk losing the powder to the notorious winds).

Cutting his teeth on the notoriously runout granite domes of Tuolumne meadows, Ted found himself well-prepared for this kind of climbing. Thin edging lead him past ancient hardware that may, or may not have caught a fall. A third pitch of face climbing and tricky gear lead the trio up to a long, brown corner. Its rounded edges and obtuse angle is intimidating from below. The first three pitches had passed smoothly, with the team finding ways to free climb through previously aided terrain. The imposing corner above implied a step up in the level of difficulty.

Upon inspection, the bottom of the corner is thin and gear seems difficult to place. From the portaledge camp at the base of the pitch, Jason tied in and stepped off, pulling onto the slabby, slippery granite. The crack is flared and thin, requiring demanding lay-backing and blind gear placements. Jason looked down at the portaledge and his friends below, imagining the impact of a fall from higher up in the corner onto the belay. The walls of Cañon Tajo fall away in front of the Trono, making their position feel even more exposed. Eventually, Jason decided to pass the lead over to Greg, and to the style of aid climbing. Hours later, Greg reached the belay, climbing the corner not free, but clean; without the use of a hammer.



Where Jason bailed and Greg aided them higher is the crux pitch of the route, a pumpy 12+ corner that is out of character with the rest of the climb.

In order to free it six months later, Piau Piana added a dozen bolts to this pitch and eventually sent, claiming the first free ascent of the Pan-Am Wall.

On this particular ascent, though, the Prescott Boys had over half the route still to go, and were already running low on precious CarboFuel.

The notion of bolting this corner in order to free climb it never crossed their minds.



A few easier free-climbing pitches lead up to the final headwall of the Trono. From a blocky, but comfortable ledge, a boulder filled gully lay to the right while a clean, steep slab with an enticing seam snakes up above. This time, it was Ted's lead. Youthful confidence and a sense of immortality that comes with days and days on the wall fueled him as he stepped out onto the slab. Focusing on one single move at a time he went farther and farther away from the safety of the belay. The seam he followed proved to be barely protectable, with only one or two old copperheads and a slider nut, just to give the rope the illusion of usefulness.

Finally, he reached a small stance, where he was able to get a few cams in. Just enough for a belay, Ted decided, but not an anchor that could be trusted to haul their bags, ledge, and assorted camera equipment. Ted belayed Jason up and turned over the lead. The next pitch appeared obvious: A steep finger crack corner, with infrequent pods leading to the top of the wall.

A second wind hit Jason. They were close to the top, and far from any other options of retreat. A few small stoppers protected punchy, steep free climbing. After four days of being on the wall, the moves are at Jason's absolute limit. Ted followed the pitch, whooping as he reached the summit. All that is left is to haul their massive loads to the top. At one point the bags get so wedged in a chimney that Greg tunneled behind and jammed his legs against the bags to free them. The force required to free the bags catapulted Greg out from the crack like a cork from a bottle and he and the bags careened across the face. Hysterical laughter, the kind that flows from relief and joy, ensued.

Even now, twenty years later, when I talked to Ted on the phone about this trip I couldn't help but laugh as he described the scene. It was as if he, and not I, had just returned from a trip to Northern Baja.

Their story dances on to a rhythm of ridiculousness:

They realized their premixed protein powder had begun fermenting on the wall; after topping out the wall they encountered a group of jeepers on the backside of the Trono who offered the haggard three showers and sustenance. They got exactly what they were looking for: A mindbending adventure.

A few months after the Prescott team returned from the Trono, Paul Piana, accompanied by Heidi Badaracco, made the first free ascent of the route using top-down tactics and adding a handful of bolts to the Brown Dihedral crux pitch. Piana's ascent, though problematic to many, went down as a cutting edge addition to the pursuit of big wall free climbing. In the years following, Piana's bolts were removed, except for one whose hanger was smashed into uselessness and another that has been replaced by a fixed removable bolt. The route still goes free without them.

For the purpose of this story and for underdogs everywhere, I desperately wished that the Prescott team had secretly freed the Brown Dihedral in impeccable ground-up style prior to Piana's ascent. Unfortunately, climbing, and life in general, is rarely that simple.

Instead, the story is messy and murky. The lack of clarity, and my disappointed feelings around it, did rise an important question within me and my views on climbing: What truly matters?

The difference between these ascents couldn't be more stark. A college junkshow that managed to pull-off a 99% free-ascent from the ground compared to a top-down siege ending in a successful send of the route. Is it not worth telling simply because it doesn't end with a tidy victory? Who's to say— I rapped in and didn't free the route at all. But I do know what makes a better story.

You can follow Jane Jackson [here](#) and photographer Eric Bissell [here](#).

“My physical twin flame” “My son. My hero.” “Undeniably genuine, and just as loving.” “An incredibly open heart.” “...with so

Remembering



PHOTO: Travis Foster on the summit of the "Superunknown", Daniels River Valley. PHOTO BY DREW LEFFERMAN

much patented Travis stoke he exclaimed "hell yeah I'm in!" "...pure distilled 100 proof silliness." "My parents second son."

Travis Foster



FREEDOM! YEAAAAH!

I looked to my left to see Travis Foster psyching himself up to his favourite playlist, one composed mostly of *Rage Against The Machine*. Each step was purposeful. He was in pre-game mode, a boxer walking into the ring. *Freedom* ended, and Travis took his headphones off. He looked around slowly at the cliffs surrounding the village of Liming, China, and then shot his gaze toward me: “Mate,” he said like he was about to cackle, “IT IS GOING TO BE A GREAT DAY!”

And it was.

Travis Foster was born April 11, 1990. He was adopted by Duane and Maureen Foster, and spent his childhood in Cranbrook BC, the urban centre of the Kootenays.

“When he was learning how to walk, Travis never walked flat-footed,” his mother Maureen says, laughing. “I was thinking the walk that he would do on his tip-toes was an early sign that he was going to be a rock climber.”

Early on in Travis’ life, the defiant eccentricity that became a shining quality began to show. Mostly in harmless, mischievous ways. When he was a pre-teen, he would steal from the cabinet of gifted liquor that he knew his parents didn’t drink. It wasn’t totally for personal consumption, but rather for a bootlegging operation he ran out of an adjacent alley. The stolen booty would sit hidden in the alley, awaiting pick up from a customer. “You couldn’t even get mad at him,” Maureen told me. “It was just so funny. He was eleven or twelve!” As he got a little older, Maureen recalls “that he was a totally different kid. In Junior High he got suspended I don’t know how many times. He skateboarded everywhere. He got into some trouble.”

Among his cohort of middle school punk asses were lifelong friends Griffin Smith and Drew Leiterman.

“We became friends in grade eight,” says Griffin. “We got along because we didn’t like school. Man, we hated school. We bonded over that, and punk rock. *Lower Class Brats. Casualties. Unseen. Global Threat.* I remember fawning over the punk t-shirts he had, and vice versa. And this was all pre-internet; we’d skateboard to the post office and send them money for these shirts.”

Drew’s recollection of those coming-of-age days ring a similar tune:

*When I moved to Cranbrook. Travis was one of the first people I met. At the time, we were thirteen, but at four-foot-ten, with a baby face, Travis looked much younger. He often rocked a thick leather jacket and gelled his hair into liberty spikes. Unphased by his height and soft facial features, he was completely **that** punk rock skater kid.*

Our friendship was instantaneous; sneaking ciggies in the alley at lunch break, breaking into his dad's liquor cabinet on the weekends; getting into just enough trouble to keep us occupied. You know, the normal kid stuff.

Maureen remembers that middle school era leather jacket and its story quite well. She bought it for him at a pawn shop, like any loving mother. And, like any loving mother, “was mortified” when studs were added to the jacket, and a mohawk to her son's head. “But I knew he would outgrow it.”



A yearbook photo, just before the mohawk.

And indeed, he did outgrow it. **If there was one constant thing in Travis' life, it was evolution.**

“One summer,” Griffin recalls, “Travis went from being a skate punk to going to Shambala. He was sixteen. Full *Bassnectar* and smoking mad weed.”

I can hear Griffin laughing and shaking his head over the phone. It is just so imaginable, so lighthearted. So classic.

From one life to the next; when he was nineteen, Travis moved to Whistler to follow his teenage passion of snowboarding. How'd he get there? He hitched a ride from Shambala, of course. After a year of shredding and living footloose and fancy-free in Whistler, he returned to the Kootenays for another round at Shambala where he convinced Griffin to go back with him. They saved \$1000 each working jobs around town, and moved back to Whistler for another season of debauchery and snowboarding. Travis befriended neighbors who were DJs, and they showed him the ropes. **He started DJing regularly under the Eastern Bloc inspired stage name DJ Czravis, “aka CZ, aka it ain't easy being CZ,” Griffin adds. He had a weekly residency at a few of the bars and clubs.**

In the spring of 2011, Travis moved home to Cranbrook. He'd been funding his winters in Whistler by odd jobs first, and then devoting a few months of the year to working in Alberta's oil fields. I distinctly remember him telling me that “the oilfield is a place where spirits go to die, and that no matter what, I must never go back there.” But at the time, it was also a place where he could fund large quantities of freedom fast. As he worked, he watched his co-workers and friends take their earnings and spend them on things; parties, trucks, snowmobiles, quads, houses. Again in his life, he refused to conform. Maureen recalls this “epiphany” as a major change in Travis' life. All of a sudden he was asking himself, “why would I buy these things when I could take this money and travel all over the place?”

So that's what he did. He took flight, splitting his time between Cranbrook, the rigs, and wherever the next plane ticket would take him. **Nepal**, to Everest Base Camp. **Pakistan**, to hike the Karakoram. Southeast Asia, where he found climbing—thank goodness. In Tonsai, **Thailand**, he crossed paths with Adyn Annetts, “a once in a lifetime love at first sight style bromance,” Adyn called their relationship:

*After knowing each other for all of three weeks in Tonsai and despite him being from Canada and me from Australia, we had devised a plan to meet back up and do a mega trip through Europe. We met back up eight months later for an adventure that ended up being the biggest epic of my life and likely one of his. For 5 months we travelled, sharing a two man tent. **Turkey, Greece, Albania, Macedonia, and Croatia.** We were like two young pups that had escaped the confines of the yard venturing with wide open eyes, endless playful energy, and the magnetic brightness that accompanies naivety. We shared the good times and battled the hard times. Day by day we were growing up fast. We disclosed the best and most undesirable corners of ourselves; a knowing of each other's core wounds, vulnerabilities, and strengths. Not only on that trip but over the following years, Travis and I learnt who we were, together.*



I could take this money and travel all over the place

Travis was growing up. During his travels he filled journals, and read voraciously. The rebellion and freedom to self-express, those qualities that burned within him, were becoming much more nuanced than smoking pot (which he had quit in 2010) and wearing leather jackets. His journals during his travels were covered with nuggets of wisdom that he learned along the way, and massive dreams in which to apply them. These entries are from around 2012:

See the forest for the trees.

A wise man once said, "Don't be a fool, you fucking idiot."

It doesn't matter how small you are, all that matters is the fire in your engine.

Expand your definition of intimacy.

PAKISTAN

CLIMB AMIN BRAKK. CLIMB LAILA PEAK.

And, profoundly:

The time has come to recognize that negative circumstances can be transformed into spiritual power & attainment. Utilize adversities and obstacles as the path!

Suffer your losses by counting what remains.

With growing, come growing pains. Like all of us, Travis was by no means perfect, and writing about a glimpse of his life as if he was wouldn't do him any favours. It would be phony, and, in the words of his friend Stu Smith, "Travis wasn't phony, the dude was absolutely punk rock." Though I'm leaving things opaque out of respect and love. For Travis, and for the sake of his spirit, I should say that he fucked up from time to time, like I have. Like you have. Maybe this isn't a good thing to have in here, but I can see him giving me a nod in agreeance from across the room, and that's enough for me.

Besides, his life was nuanced, too full with high peaks and low valleys to capture with words. This doesn't even come close. Only a few of the many important voices of his life are heard from.

The nuances of his life don't necessarily live here, in this article. They live in you. In your quiver of memories; the smile that was shared with just the two of you, the words you're now holding extra close. This is where magic lives, and like so many things, to the chagrin of humanity, it cannot be simply captured and manifested.



Drew, one of the kids wreaking havoc on the streets of Cranbrook with Travis, remembers those quiet times at home amidst Travis' traveling frenzy:

Our teenage friendship was rekindled later in life through climbing. We were both in our early twenties, had outgrown our rebellious youth, and were consumed by climbing. Travis was usually off traveling and climbing the world, but when he came back to Canada, we would throw down at Lakit Lake, our local crag. We pushed our physical limits, and nourished what punk spirit remained in us by ignoring bolts on the routes that would take any traditional protection.

What I remember most about those crag days are the conversations. We'd swap stories of all the past adventures, and scheme adventures to come. Travis eventually moved to Australia but we kept in touch.

Both of us were psyched on training, and would push each other to go harder through texts with new exercises. He was always a letter grade above me when it came to climbing.

As Drew mentioned, Travis moved to Australia for two years, following the same rhythm as Canada: Rigging for a few months, and then living his life as he saw fit for the rest. His horizons were broadening. He dug himself deeper into the rabbit hole of climbing, and its orbiting activities, specifically slacklining. Australia's Blue Mountains, Grampians, and the island of Tasmania became his playground for two years.

I can hear him fondly recalling those places. "The Blueys mate! Maaaaate! You gotta go to the Blueys."

Two years is a lot of time. Through the trials, tribulations, and triumphs of a passionate life, Travis continued to come into his own. **The short kid in the leather jacket had become a young man with muscles in spades, fire in his eyes, a headful of dreams, and a journal filled with the blueprints to put them into action.** When Travis returned to Canada, he hit the ground running.



Travis Foster, walking the first highline rigged in the Bugaboos. PHOTO BY DREW LEITERMAN





His travels had opened his eyes to the meaningful adventure of exploration, and he looked at British Columbia with a unique vision of how to explore it. “That’s when our partnership in the mountains really began,” Drew recalls about Travis moving back to Canada. They went on a tear, **establishing the first highline in Bugaboo Provincial Park**, and **rigging a highline on Alberta’s Grand Sentinel**. The ball rolled on, and they found themselves satiated only for a moment, and then, “what’s next?” There was potential to be realized, and Travis had no intention of wasting it. In Drew’s words: *The stoke was uncontainable; his dreams and ambitions were unlike anyone I had met before, it was infectious. At the end of 2016 after the Bugaboo and Grand Sentinel highlines, the question loomed: What’s next?*



Travis' mom had moved to Powell River and he had climbed once in the Eldred Valley. He was blown away by the amount of rock in the valley and figured that there had to be more...so he surfed Google Earth. Low and behold, there were some interesting formations with some intense contour lines in the Daniels River Valley. Travis sent out a few emails and eventually got a reply. Evan Guilbault got back to him with all the beta: How to get there, what to expect on the approach and most importantly to Travis and I, that none of the formations had been successfully climbed. We had found our answer to that looming question.

It was exactly what they were looking for, a complete vision quest. They bartered for rides with Loggers using a 24 case of Lucky. They witnessed upclose a large hungry Grizzly Bear's high speed pursuit of a Black Bear through their camp in a moment of nature displaying its Punk Rock side. And, over nine days of climbing, they established the first route in the entire valley. As Drew writes, **"In a world where everything has been explored, we found wild, untamed adventure."**



You can read both Travis' account of the adventure [here](#) and Drew's full account [here](#).

Travis and Drew had found "What's next?". With an unimaginable amount of potential objectives, they spent three more seasons exploring the wilderness surrounding Powell River with the help of a few close friends. "Travis undoubtedly made his mark on the area. The routes he put up will inspire generations to come," Drew writes.

Evan Guilbault, who Travis originally reached out to for information on the Daniel's River Valley, became one of those close friends. In an email, Evan highlights one of the things I am coming to most admire about Travis: He lived and learned. And with vigor, he hung on to what it means to be a dreamer. I also know that he wasn't "lucky" in having this quality. **Continued possession of the ability to dream is no coincidence. It takes courage and commitment:**

...We had become partners in spurring remote climbing dreams. This looked like two giddy boys rapid-fire sending Google Earth screenshots (no coordinates allowed!) and arguing incessantly over logistics, lines, and spiritual philosophies. Our Facebook messenger thread is a Super-Saiyan leveled, Beckey-black-book of the creme home stone that we had plans to blast off on one day.

Evan also touches on what it means when a spirit like Travis' parts ways with us:

I literally don't have that connection anymore. With Travis moving on, that old outlet needs to either be reformed or revolutionized. And that is grief. Just doing constant touch-ups to your soul. Checking in and honouring how deeply good and bad life is and how things will never be the same, they can still become just as good as they once were. I say that still very much swimming in the sea of sorrow. That is my outward optimism trying to arise from the ashes of acceptance.

By the time I met him in China in April of 2019, he was still self-admittedly a work in progress. But to me, a nineteen year old kid with a headful of dreams on his first international trip, Travis seemed dialled. There was a great group of people in The Faraway Inn hostel that spring. Travis, his girlfriend Jaimie, and the rest of us hostel dwelling climbers would watch movies at night, smoke rollies in the rain, and chase down dreams on the Chinese sandstone during the day. I clung to him on that trip, his spirit was magnetic and his words were intentional and genuine.

We reconnected again in Squamish this summer. He revamped and expanded my psyche for ABBA, and, after watching a glimmer of his teenage years as he kickflipped over a yoga block in the Chief Lot, he taught me how to kickflip. The unlikely but beautiful fusion of ABBA and Skateboarding is a telling microcosm of what Travis had become. *His self expression was deeper and lacked the limitations of trying to fit into a box*

I remember a day of climbing at Petrifying Wall, and like Drew recalls of those days at Lakit Lake, the conversations are mostly what stick with me. Travis told me, with the same glimmer in his eyes that shined when he talked about climbing or any other artistic pursuit, that he was going back to school, to become a teacher. I remember conversations about both of us wanting to teach one day, but neither being ready to stop being so free. Now, Travis, with a decade of gritty, rugged, and rich travels under his belt, was ready. There were scholarships, too. He was excited.

“When he told me he was going to go to university, I just about fell on the floor! He hated school,” Maureen adds.

Griffin too, compares those days of skipping class and getting suspended to Travis as an adult student. “It was crazy to see him excel so hard, because that wasn't the case in highschool. We hated it.”



His life is a tale of the scrappy junkyard dog.
Lovable, hungry, badass;
filled with an almost necessary passion.

Travis Foster, hungry in the pursuit of knowledge and love, courageous in interactions with the unknown, died by his own hand, in November of 2020 at the age of 30.

His death is an ultimate tragedy, and a stabbing reminder that none of us are immune to deep, profound pain and suicide. In Barry Blanchard's memoir *The Calling*, he writes, "**A dark lake of sadness underlies human life and we skate on thin ice. Most of us break through at some point and it is solely human hands that bring us back to the surface.**" Human hands, and perhaps most importantly, somehow finding the hope to continue to tread water, and call for help. Why? Because surely, there was more joy in Travis' life.

There was a teacher still unbloomed,
a prominent first ascensionist whose complete vision had not yet been realized,
and mostly, a friend, lover, and son, who was deeply cherished.



When I spoke with Maureen about Travis, she concluded the conversation saying that she wanted her son's life to have meaning.

"I don't want him to be forgotten."

How do you measure meaning in life?

Meaning isn't a tangible thing, and you can't find it in things like material wealth, or a ticklist of hard climbs. I dare not define meaning, and instead list a few of the places you might be able to find it:

- The magical synergy of leapfrogging one rope length at a time up a big wall of granite.
- The frantic typing of message after message as a daring scheme begins to take shape.
- The quiet moments, in tents and vans, where we learn about love.
- Forgiveness
- Good books, and pondering their themes.
- Believing in others
- Daring to dream.
- Sharing dreams.
- Reconciliation
- Silliness. Total, ridiculous, silliness.
- A scrap piece of paper that becomes a handwritten letter to Mom on Christmas morning.

Yes, Travis Foster, a man of few things, was one rich motherfucker who lived a meaningful life filled to the brim.

This article was written by Nat Bailey, with extensive help from Drew Leiterman, Maureen Foster, Griffin Smith, Evan Guibault, Adyn Annetts, and others. Thank you.

If you'd like to read the full stories from Travis's friends who contributed to this story, you can find them [here](#). If you have an anecdote about Travis and would like it to be added to this collection, please email it to rockpirates69@gmail.com

We love you Travis, and we miss you.





*Suffer your losses
by counting what remains*



Optimistically Candid

Stories and insights from Lizzy Van Patten

Interview by Nat Bailey

Photos by Jules Jimreivat unless noted



More inspiring than storyless talent, or most things for that matter, is grit; a willingness to work for what matters. Lizzy Van Patten is one gritty individual. In this interview, Lizzy is optimistically candid. With a sharp knife of blunt positivity, she cuts through the bullshit that often surrounds classic community topics: projecting, hard climbing, and guiding. It is an inspiring reminder that both art and change are the result of process, and that positivity and action are the most useful tools in the box, especially when paired. -Nat

How sad would it be to live a life this extraordinary and not notice it?

For me climbing is more of a reflection of myself than a way to escape. It highlights my mental health, and I have a hard time climbing if I'm not doing well.

For a lot of my life I was really insecure, I was medicated from depression from fifteen to college. I felt that I had no worth. I haven't been medicated since I was nineteen. There were so many things I didn't think I could do because I wasn't worthy.

When I started climbing, I wanted a different narrative: That you don't have to look like xyz to be a climber. I made a commitment to show myself what it was like to be a woman in the outdoors; to embrace and be candid about the highs and lows, and the grit.

I'm someone that is full of self doubt and insecurity, but I still try.

It is important to me that the way that I showcase climbing is to show the hard parts. Not just as a woman, not just as a short person, but as a human. To share what it takes. So often, people, myself included, say, "Ugh, I'll never be able to do that." No. You can do it. But this is what it takes. It takes a lot of effort. Of course that effort does come with privilege. It requires time and resources, and not everyone has that.

And how much privilege it is! Who has so much time to do whatever the fuck they want!

It is important to put the privilege into perspective: This isn't something I have to do, this is something I'm choosing to do!

*I dont diet
I dont hangboard
I dont follow climbing media*

Lizzy is the owner/operator of She Moves Mountains- a guiding company whose mission is “to create an educational space for women (CIS, TRANS, FEMME) to realize their strength through rock climbing... for the complete beginner to the advanced rock climber.”

Why do I think She Moves Mountains is important?



I don't think climbing is for everybody, but I think everyone can learn from climbing. My clients want to prove something to themselves; that they are strong and capable. When they get to the top, regardless of whether it is on lead or being pulled up on a top rope, they feel this pure joy! And they realize and believe that they can do hard things.

For me, watching these mini-journeys put into perspective how silly climbing can be when we make it about something other than a personal journey. My first time clients are having a better experience than these people who are falling off a 5.13 and whining. And they got pulled up a 5.7!

It makes me realize that if it is not making us joyful, or a better human, then what is the fucking point?



On owning a small business (She Moves Mountains) in the pandemic age.

I don't know how to describe the loss that it was for me. Not just financially, mostly not financially. I know that She Moves Mountains is something that empowers people, and that people look forward to. To not be able to provide that was so hard.

Plus, She Moves Mountains is only three years old. I've been through the weeds with it; I lived in a tent and rented out my van to make do for that company. This was the first year that I was going to be able to pay myself, and because of our losses, I ended up just paying my staff. Which I'm happy I was able to do, but I wasn't able to pay myself. It all left me in a terrible mood. I'm someone who allows myself to feel my emotions. I don't let myself live there, but I can't escape things. I've done that enough, and it isn't the life for me.

*On the process of the first ascent of “Make Me Sanguine”,
the hardest pitch she’s ever climbed:*





In the beginning of the pandemic, Chris [Lizzy's partner] was in Norway. He came back and saw what I was going through. He took me to an unknown climbing area, where he put up his first, first ascents.

Even before we chose to put in the anchors, I was doubting myself. Regardless, I tried it, and the movement was incredible. The crux moves felt impossible, but it was so beautiful, I wanted to keep trying. So I did. Chris put up a few more new routes, and dabbled on the project before happily deciding it was too hard for him. I kept whittling away at it.

I remember the first time I figured out the crux, I'm 5'2, the only way I could do it was to toe hook, and go into a sideways stem;

Two hands on one side

Two feet on the other

all above a 0.1 and a brassie.

I began to understand how hard the route was for me. I'd take to two rest days to prepare, and then I'd get two attempts. After, I'd be so sore that I'd need two more rest days.

Emotionally, I still wasn't doing too great, and the project wasn't totally helping to alleviate that. After awhile, I knew I needed to stepback. When I came back to it and tried to lead it for the first time, I invited my friend Jules to come take photos. The conditions weren't right, but I felt a pressure to perform because I invited her. I tried to lead it anyways, and I FREAKED out! Jules threw her fixed line in my direction and came to the rescue.

As time went by and seasons changed, Chris and I continued to go to the crag. In the fall, most days he wouldn't even climb. He'd just bring a book, puffy pants, a thermos of tea, and spend the day belaying me. The whole time, he was psyched. It was awesome! My dedication was paying off, and I started to get close. But work was picking up again too. I would try it in the mornings and then guide all day, for a week straight. I was close, but so busy!

The first time I one hung it, I fell on the last move and cried. I was wiped, and had two rest days to ruminate and obsess over this.

To me, that is the worst part of a project; when you're close to sending. If I have a special skill, it is maintaining joy in process. I learned to hope, but not expect.

I had such a strong desire to prove to myself that I could do it, that I could do the route and be optimistic. And it was a way to wrap up a personal journey that was so much larger than just that route. I had a hard summer, and with the fall I was coming back into my own. I wanted to close that part of the chapter.

I knew it had to happen now. The weather was getting bad, and I knew it had to happen. “You have to do it, you’re going to do it,” I told myself. When I did do it, it was believing in myself made it all come together.

On the go that I did it, I was saying the name of the route to myself over and over again.

Make me sanguine

Make me sanguine

I willed myself to believe that it was possible. When I clipped the chains, I was happy and relieved, there was no bittersweet. It required so much of me, and forced me to sacrifice so many other things in my life in order to see it through. I finished the route, came home, and went for a run, because I missed running so much!

What does “Make Me Sanguine” mean?

To be sanguine, is to be willfully optimistic while facing intense adversity. It made me give it everything even though I didn’t know the outcome. And that’s what this year, as a whole, felt like to me. I planned events for She Moves Mountains even though I knew they probably weren’t going to happen

I liked the idea that optimism is not something that is always natural, it is something you have to fight for.

I put in a lot of work. But I did it my way. I put in a lot of mental effort, my way.

It was a huge thing for me.

I graded it 5.13-, and up until then the hardest I had climbed was mid 5.12. I felt pressure surrounding this claim. People questioned me. Even a friend (who had never been to the crag) challenged me, stating that the climbs I was comparing it to weren't a similar style. It was frustrating, and what was most frustrating was that it made me doubt myself. Was it 5.13? Why didn't she believe that I was worthy, and that I was strong enough to climb such a thing? It was repeated by someone seven inches taller than me, and they confirmed that the way I climbed it was certainly 5.13.

I based this route and its grade off of MY body.

A woman.

A first ascensionist.

I find this especially interesting. Around the same time Lizzy established "Make Me Sanguine", I finished up a long-term first ascent project, which was a step up from anything I'd ever climbed. No one questioned the difficulty of the line and the legitimacy of my claim that it was the hardest thing I'd ever climbed. It remains unrepeated, which you would think would be more cause for questioning, not less.

Either the community is less critical because I am a man, or nobody cares about some random kid and some random route in Canada. But then again, why would anyone care more about a single pitch in backwoods Oregon? -Nat

Lizzy continues on this topic:

I have a difficult time navigating between unfair skepticism and fair questioning. Throughout my life, my achievements and abilities have been questioned because of the way that I look.

For example, I have a degree in math, and during my schooling I was accused of cheating because someone— a man, copied me. I was given a 0 and he was not.





This comes up a lot at work. I've been accosted at the crag while I'm teaching: Someone random comes up to me and asks why I'm teaching what I am and how I am... while I, a certified guide, am teaching!

When you are unfairly challenged so many times, you build defenses. You learn to brush people off. This becomes problematic when the challenges are fair and worth engaging. For example, I've had many industry professionals ask fair questions; fair criticism for the betterment of my career.



*I put in a lot of work but I did it **my way***

What has climbing taken away from you?

Time, and mental energy. I have to balance my love for family, and my love for climbing. Before COVID I would go home every month and take my nana for a pedicure. It has taken selflessness from me for sure. And I don't know if that is a bad thing, but it's a true thing.

What has climbing given from you?

So much confidence in myself. For a lot of my life I was pretty insecure, and I don't feel that insecure anymore. A lot of that has come through climbing and what I've learned through it.

I feel valued by this community.

It has given me purpose, and a form of advocacy that I feel that I can thrive at, that feels natural.

On current direction of motivation:

[Laughs] not in climbing right now. Just trying to stay joyful, my motivation isn't trying to be motivated about something.

Setting an alarm, reading, meditating, finding where I'm going to be motivated.

I try my best to keep climbing fun and keep it about my own personal journey.

*I put in a lot of mental effort **my way***

You can find more information on She Moves Mountains [here](#), follow Lizzy [here](#), and Jules Jimreivat [here](#).

THE

NEXT

STEP

By John Forestell

Thoughts swelling
Gasping for air
The anxiety building up
Again.

I looked at the crimp that kept thwarting me. I gasped for more air again, and reached for a familiarly elusive razor sharp edge. I latched on, but only briefly. My fingers uncurled, and I was falling.

FUUUUUUUUUCK! ” I roared, letting out the remaining air in me. My frustrated cry was dampened by the light rain that kept the crag empty.

I'd been working on *Dr. Suess' Wild Ride (5.13a)* in British Columbia's Skaha Bluffs for a few weeks now, and I kept falling going to that razor sharp edge. It would be my first of the grade; something everyone says doesn't matter. I've muttered that to myself too, "that a grade doesn't matter". Deep down I cared about this one, and breaking the plateau of a grade was representative of something bigger. Breaking on through mattered for the war I was battling within myself.

I was in the middle of my last final exams for my mechanical engineering degree. It had taken me five years to get to that point; far too long in one spot. We had a small break in the exam schedule to get some climbing in before going back to the study grind. I needed it; exams this year had been worse than ever. The previous summer, I had developed an anxiety disorder. It consumed me. I never knew when I was going to have another anxiety attack, and this left me with a constant weight of fear on my shoulders. I cannot understate that it truly crippled my day to day life. The stress surrounding my last year of school made them regular occurrences. I was at war with this disorder, and had to do everything in my ability to fight. Part of that was accepting that I needed a counselor.

This had been my whole year:

School Anxiety Climbing Counseling

The last two were my saving graces. I'd stepped up my dedication to climbing in the fall, continuing to push myself in an attempt to keep my mind distracted. My irrational rationale began to pile up. In one instance that dark autumn I had dislocated a bone in my foot. I refused to accept that I needed a break. I didn't have it in me to take one. "If it's all tight and snug in a climbing shoe the bone won't move around and hurt, right?" I said on the approach to the crag one day as I limped in. A few long weekends later, foot better but still bothered, I turned my car's engine and bumbled down eight hundred kilometres to Smith Rock with a blistering fever. I spent my entire first day sleeping in a puddled sweat. The next few days I fumbled through climbs in a haze before driving home a complete mess.

Climbing was helping, and I was able to find peace through it, but I had begun to bite the hand that was feeding.



PHOTO: Grasping. A blur of The Smith Rock Fever Haze. Photo by Nick Ducker P.s Check out John's biceps! They are even bigger now!

I should have started seeing a counselor years ago to deal with my depression. For years, I had kept telling myself I would be weak if I did go to one, that I would be admitting defeat. Mental illnesses just aren't something people talk about. But I had reached a dead end living this way. I *needed* to talk about it. Deciding to see a counselor was the best decision I have ever made.

"I dunno, sometimes I just like the personal suffering we willingly put ourselves through while out climbing. The rewards are just worth it," I said to my counselor in one of our sessions; she was curious why I even went to Smith Rock with such a high fever. She asked me a follow up question: "Rather than an unknown suffering that you can't control?" I didn't have an answer for that. I sat there in silence, letting the thought sink in.

Over Christmas break, I was on the approach to an ice climb with one of my main climbing partners, roommate, and best friend, Brendan. He'd got a little ahead of me, and I pushed myself a little harder to try and catch up. Messing up my breathing pattern, the endless thoughts and pain began to swell. My breaths grew shallower and shallower. And next thing I knew, I was sitting in the snow crying, trying to make sense of this pain. I stumbled up to the bottom of the climb where Brendan was twiddling his thumbs waiting for me.

He saw this all the time back at home, and carried on as if everything was normal. "Ro-Sham-Bo for first lead?" He asked as I was getting my crampons on. I won. I really didn't want to win. But I won.

Once I started swinging my tools, I got into the rhythm of peace that is so attractive about climbing. I found my breath, everything settled, and for a moment, I was free. I'd be lying saying we had a good day. It was cold, we moved slower than normal and communication was minimal. But we made it to the top, and I was able to keep my mind liberated from the pain for the rest of the day. I was able to pick myself up out of the teary snow, and be in the moment. A little victory in the war.

For the remainder of the winter, I ramped up my training. Every day of the week I was doing something;

Hangboarding

Running

Bouldering

Counselling

I refused to stop working. Climbing and obsession kept the pain at bay.

*And next thing I knew,
I was sitting in the snow, crying,
trying to make sense of this pain.*



I continued this pattern through the longest winter I'd seen in Kelowna, fighting hard to keep my head somewhere remotely healthy, and barely doing so. There were bad days, where I would wake up dreading every moment and every thought. Sometimes I was losing the battle. I went through the winter on this roller coaster of training, and anxiety, unsure of what the next day would hold.

Flash forward back to that rainy day in the spring at Skaha Bluffs. Driving down, I was already having one of those bad days. My mind was racing, the pain of the last year was swirling, and I wasn't able to settle it at all. On the approach, desperate, I separated myself from Brendan and Quentin, wanting to walk alone to try and calm my mind. I obsessed in order to escape. Fixated on my project, Dr. Seuss, I climbed it in my head again. While procrastinating from studying a few days prior, I'd written out a beta map for the crux boulder problem. 16 hand and 12 feet moves were all that I needed to do. I had trained my ass off the whole winter, and I knew each move was possible. I just needed to link them, and I kept falling on the 13th hand move. Once I stuck that, it would be over. I arrived at the base of the crag five minutes before the other two. My attempt to isolate myself and settle was futile. By the time they arrived I was holding myself in a ball struck by another anxiety attack. They sat with me for a while, doing what little they could, but we were out here to escape from the stress of our finals; to climb and have fun. This was our one day to get away, a precious commodity in that time of our lives.

So, they whipped out the rope and started getting ready. Brenden looked at me with a familiar smile. "Ro-sham-bo?" He asked.

I won.
Again.
Fuck.

I swear I only win ro-sham-bo when I really, really, don't want to. But, just like that day ice climbing, as soon as I got into the rhythm of my body moving, everything calmed down— until I was at that crimp again. You already know what happened:

FUUUUUUUUUCK!

That was the closest I had ever come to sticking the move from the ground. As I lowered, the anxiety was building its way up again. I wasn't sure if I had another burn in me. What more did I have to do? I was throwing myself at this climb, but it just wouldn't budge.

As I questioned my ability to try again, Quentin broke the ice and handed me the rope with a goofy smile on his face. "Someone's gotta get your draws, and I already sent this last fall, so I'm not going up," he said, almost as if he was challenging me. I tied in, almost reluctantly. I pulled through the midway crux and found myself beneath the boulder problem guarding the chains, again. There is a near hands-free rest before this final section so I hollered down to the boys, "you guys can tie me off if you want, I'm going to be a while." I spent a few minutes regulating my breathing patterns through techniques that I'd learned over the past year. I visualized every move I needed to do one last time, and then, I set off.

From the first hard move right off the rest, everything felt in control. I was able to breathe through moves I would normally grunt on. I hit every hold with precision. My mind was silent. Twelve moves in, one to go. I was staring at the final crimp.

Every try leading up to this I felt shaky as I looked at this elusive hold. But as I moved my hand, everything was steady. Rocking up, I curled my fingers onto the crimp, shuffled my feet around a little, and stood up into the chain clipping jug. An intense wave of emotion smashed into me.

I hadn't felt these feelings for months; *joy*. I was *vibrating* and *screaming*, in complete jubilant disbelief. I'd been fighting with my mind and body in a war for the past year, and I still am, but this was a battle I won.

Post script editor's note:

John originally told me this story in 2017. I remember specifically the story about crying nameless tears in the snow. I was seventeen at the time, and I'd cried those kinds of tears and told no one. Maybe you have too. Even in the three years since, the stigma surrounding mental health has drastically dissipated, but inside all of us—or at least me—is a personal stigma; feelings of shame, or that we are encumbering others with our emotional burdens. Samwise said it best: "Share the load!" I thank John for the courage he had in writing and sharing this piece, and even more so for seeking professional help. Cry your tears. Tell someone. And as Cormac McCarthy said, "Keep a little fire burning. However hidden, however small." Dare to hope. -Nat



PHOTO: Armed with bigger biceps, blue jeans, and the wisdom of enduring, John went on to climb "Dr. Seuss" bigger, badder neighbour: "Tale of Two Guys, 5.13c". Photo by Mason Tessier

Should I Stay or Should I Go

A glimpse from pandemic-stricken China. What do you do? In part one of two, Ryder Stroud asks that same question.

Part 2 featured in Rockpirates 5.

A Choose-your-own-adventure climb-cation in pandemic China

PART ONE By Ryder Stroud

Your VPN lights up green. CONNECTED.

You sigh with relief. One more time, you have connected to the real Internet beyond the Great Firewall. You look out the window. Motorized tricycles carrying produce zip across the dusty country roads. Tractors and trucks chug along with cargo bouncing around the back. You barely hear any Mandarin outside, mostly the local languages of Naxi and Lisu that dominate this mountainous part of Yunnan Province.

You open the tab for BBC News.

Reports coming out of Wuhan indicate that the city government failed in its initial efforts to contain the coronavirus. With the upcoming Lunar New Year holiday, tens of thousands of people left the city before officials could lock the city down. The doctor who first raised the alarm about COVID-19, Dr. Li Wenliang, an ophthalmologist in the city, was censored by local authorities. Now the provincial government of Hubei province is putting the entire city of Wuhan, a city of 11 million people, under complete lockdown. No one in... or out. Stephen McDonald, BBC, Wuhan, China...

You click on another link to the New York Times.

Major US airline carriers are already cancelling a majority of their flights to China, some as far out as April 2020 with no indication if regular service will resume in the foreseeable future. Some countries are even considering banning travelers from entering if their flights originate in China.

Shit.

You close the lid on your laptop with a sharp flick of the wrist and look around your room. Your gear is half-packed in your North Face duffels. A trad rack peeks out from the lid of your haul bag. You look down at the table. Your train ticket to Kunming, Yunnan's provincial capital and the nearest international airport stares at you next to your passport, which is open to the visa page.

You quickly snatch your phone up and look at flights on Skyscanner app for the following 2 days, almost twice as expensive as normal. As you stare at Skyscanner's results, your heart rate ticks up, and you turn off the screen. You pause, take a deep breath and pick up your passport, dropping it on the ground. You reach down, pick it up, and leaf through it to the visa page.

ENTRY: 2019-12-26, BEIJING DAXING
INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT PORT OF ENTRY

VISA TYPE: Z

VALID UNTIL: 2020-11-09

"I have the time. I could wait it out," you mumble to yourself as you scroll through WeChat, opening various group chats and reading through the Chinese characters the best you can.

"我听说很快就不会有进出的航班了！"

"I hear that soon there will be no more flights in or out!"

You throw your phone onto the bed and hurriedly pack the remaining gear back into your duffel bag. You heft all three bags, probably close to 120 pounds of gear and items for living, onto your shoulders. Under the massive load of gear, you strain down the narrow hallway of the guesthouse stairs, bumping into the old, uneven wood protruding from the walls. As you reach the front entry, you catch a glimpse of the guesthouse owner. You clumsily wave at her.

"You're leaving?" She asks.

"Yes! I think I am going to try to catch a train to Kunming." You stumble a bit as the weight of the bags throws you off-balance.

"OK, then you better be quick! Word is that drivers in town don't want to leave town now."

"Just for foreigners?" You ask, almost amused, since you have asked that question about "just foreigners" a thousand times.

"No. For everyone." She nods.

"Well, I think I am going to give it a try! Thank you for everything!" You wave one more time before pushing open the door and stumbling out to the street.

"Be safe! And good luck!" The owner calls after you.

"村子甚至在路中间筑起围墙，以阻止人们进入！看看湖南省的这个地方！"

"Villages are even building walls in the middle of the road to keep people out! Look at this place in Hunan Province!"

You stumble into the mid-morning sunlight, dodging some e-bikes and motorized tricycles that come zipping around the corner. Everything seems frenzied. People run in and out of stores holding piles of plastic bags stuffed with produce, eggs, and piles of random household goods. A few people throw confused glances towards you. You try to shrug it off. You are a foreigner with huge bags. Everyone stares. You spot a line of mini vans on the far side of the main street, over by a cobblestone parking lot. Men in jackets with indecipherable English brand names—mostly consonants—and business casual shoes lean against their cars with a cigarette in hand. You throw your bags down near the van in the middle of the line and approach one of the men.

“Hey, sir! Are you going to Lijiang today? I need a lift to the train station!”

“Nah, sorry. Too dangerous these days. Too much trouble.”

“But it shouldn’t be any trouble! I am trying to leave!”

“I don’t know if I can take you anywhere. You are a foreigner after all. I could get in a lot of trouble for this.”
The van driver takes one last, long puff of his cigarette before throwing the butt into the gutter on the side of the road.

The winter sun warms you despite the cold, dry mountain winds. You take a look around. While most people hustle past you on their way to their next pre-pandemic errand, you notice more and more people giving you fearful glances. This group of people hustles past you, some pushing their children along, so they do not stop in your vicinity. A few of the drivers towards the end of the line gather with their buddies, talking to each other in the local Naxi language and motioning in your direction.

“Listen, sir. Please, take me to the train station. I have no other way to get there!” You muster the best Mandarin you can. After practicing with Duo Lingo for eight months, you feel a tiny hope that you can hold your own when bargaining. The driver scoffs. “Ahhhh, I don’t know. The second we get on the highway, the traffic police are going to hassle us. If they see that you are a foreigner, they might not even let you into the city! It’s going to be a lot of trouble for me... There’s the toll fee, the gas money, plus all the extra trouble...”

“Fine. I’ll pay you an extra 100 RMB if you leave now. If we encounter any trouble, I have all my papers and a plane ticket already booked.” You lie a bit and show him a screenshot on your phone of your old plane ticket that got you into China. You know he cannot read it because it is in English. He sighs. He nods his head towards the car, and without a word, opens the trunk for you to load in your bags. You throw everything in and scramble into the passenger seat. The minivan creeps out of the line of cars parked on the side of the road. You stick your head out the window one last time as the main road in town disappears behind a cloud of dry season dust. The van hurtles down the winding country road along a river at 60mph. **You pass police checkpoints every dozen miles, and each time, your mouth goes dry as a stern police officer looks at your documents.** You half expect one of them to declare you a health risk and demand you go into quarantine.

Hours later, you reach the train station. The driver nearly falls over as he tries to lift one of your bags out of the trunk. “So heavy! What do you keep in there?!” He rolls the bag out of the trunk and it lands with a thump on the pavement. You hoist it upright. “Climbing gear.” You say, almost certain you messed up your Mandarin tones. “Hah.” He chuckles. “So much stuff just for one person to go outside? That’s crazy!” He closes the door of the trunk and you hand him the cash. The two of you exchange platitudes before he gets back into the van and drives off. The train station is weirdly normal. People have stopped giving you strange looks. There are no government loudspeakers blaring the dangers of COVID. It is... normal.

You look down at your ticket, then up at the station. Your phone starts vibrating in your pocket. A bunch of texts come through.

“You’re leaving? You don’t need to! You can stay here with us until this whole thing blows over. It can’t be more than a couple of months.”

A loudspeaker turns on and an automated announcement blares out over the plaza in front of the station. “Ladies and Gentleman, train K4602 with service from Lijiang to Kunming will be departing in 15 minutes. Please have your tickets and bags ready to board through gate 2 on the second floor.” You realize that train code is the one on your ticket. You look at the texts on your phone, then back to the train ticket, then back to your phone.

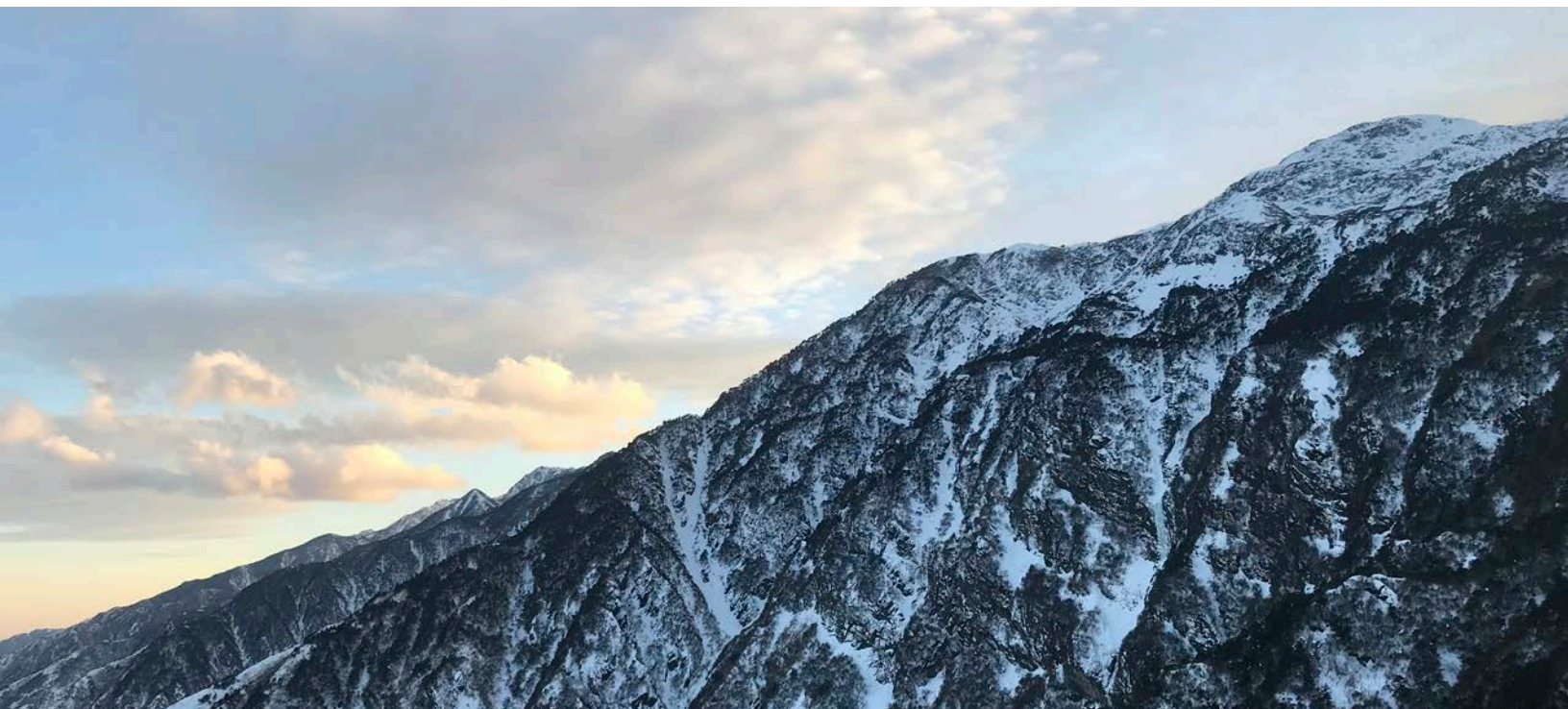
This is it. This is the big, coronavirus split. You have to decide to stay or go.

GO FLEEING THE STORM THAT HAS ALREADY ARRIVED BY RYDER STROUD

CREAAAAAAK CLUNK

I slammed the metal door leading into Dane’s century-old courtyard house. The thin metal shuddered and shocked me, even though I had closed that same door hundreds of times over the six years I had visited the place. I navigated around a big bucket of recycled beer bottles in the entryway before rounding the corner into the courtyard itself. Trash collection had all but stopped as the pandemic scared the locals in Dane’s village.

I looked up. The two mountain summits I had returned from turned ink black as the sun disappeared over the west side of the Cangshan Range. The windy season gusts that defined late January were already stirring up the forest around the house.





I peeled my mountaineering boots off my feet and threw them down onto the stone floor outside the bathroom. Clods of dirt splattered across the deck. I ran my hand through my hair, oily from a few days on the mountains that stood just behind his house.

Dane sat on a blown out, hole-filled couch on the adjacent side of the courtyard in an alcove, watching me decommission my muddy gear. The paper light hanging above him, already deformed from being whipped in the winter winds of multiple years, swayed in the cold breeze. I saw his expression, and had a suspicion he was about to deliver bad news.

“Uh, I don’t think anything will be open, dude.

“You’re serious? None?”

I sighed and looked down at my stomach through my sweat-stained base layer shirt. I could feel it grumbling for some sort of saturated fat. After days, many miles, and getting buffeted by gale-force wind, sustained only by instant noodles, the craving for

something massively unhealthy was overwhelming.

“The Dali government just declared a state of emergency. All of Old Town is closed.”

“ALL of it?” I squatted down and started petting Lucky, Dane’s and his housemates’ half-paralyzed dog. He had mantle pressed his way out of the courtyard and onto the deck where I was standing. I scratched him underneath his chin. His jaw slackened, and his ears flopped over in delight.

“Everything was dark when I went there,” Dane said, shaking his head. “You are welcome to make something in the kitchen here.” He motioned through the old stone arch that separated the courtyard from the kitchen.

Old Town, the bustling tourist center of Dali in China’s Yunnan Province was usually busy at all hours of the day. It was full of winding streets and alleys I regularly enjoyed weaving through, dodging tourist-



-traps on my way to some local restaurant or quiet noodle place tucked away behind some centuries-old stone houses. There always seemed to be something open, even if it was cheap, spicy barbecue whose grotesquely excessive chili seasoning would make for a grand and completely unwelcome exit after the following morning's coffee.

“There has GOT to be something outside of the Old Town that is open. Where are people in town going to eat?” I reached into my pack and dug out the keys to my van.

“You can try. But I’m telling you, since you’ve been gone, shit has been really weird. No village wants anyone coming in from the outside. No foreigner. No *waidiren* (ethnic Chinese who move to a new area in the country). Only people who are residents in the village. I’ll go with you. I just want to see what it’s like now.” He got up and grabbed his jacket off the couch. I turned towards the door. “Well, it isn’t that much time to get into Old Town in my van. Worth a look.”

My van lurched onto the G214 highway, the tiny lawn mower engine whirring away beneath the two front seats. The highway, 8 lanes in both directions, was deserted. The closer we got to Old Town, no new cars appeared. Most lights were off, save for the colorful, blinking LEDs that so many buildings in China are covered in. Except for me and Dane, there was not a soul out on the road. I slowed the van down to a crawl as we passed a line of restaurants that were normally packed with local diners. Every single one looked abandoned. Doors shut and locked and not a single light turned on in the buildings.

“This is fucking creepy.” I squinted through the windshield. “I’m ready for some zombies to pop out of an alley somewhere... like *28 Days Later*.” Some trash blew and skipped across the highway as I made a u-turn at the intersection for the main street of Old Town.



“I guess you should just... eat the leftovers and vegetables back at my place? It should be good. Locky made a ton of food.” Dane turned his head to look out the back window at the ghost town behind us as we sped away.

“Sure. But damn, we are going to be hungry in an hour.” I missed the shift, and the engine whined until the clutch engaged and we sped along the dark highway back to Dane’s house.

The next morning, we all sat in the courtyard of the house. The winter sun let us shed our early morning layers down to our t-shirts. Locky, Dane’s housemate, emerged from the kitchen with a pot of coffee and put it down on the table in the middle of all of us. We all sat in silence as Dane reached across the table and poured everyone a cup.

“You thinking of staying?” Locky looked over at me, squinting in the sun.

“Probably. It sounds like getting back into Liming will be a huge uphill battle, even with my papers. Sounds like they don’t want to let anyone in.” I sighed and stared down at my cup and watched the wisps of steam rise from the coffee.

Dane took a long drink out of his mug. “Well, then we should probably go do some supply shopping. Word is the police are going to close the wet market in Yinqiao. Our neighbor said she was going to stock up because the market is scheduled to close either today or tomorrow.”

“Guess we need to buy food for... weeks?” Locky said as he cracked off a piece of the loaf of the bread he made for his new bakery. His new venture was slated to open right as the world appeared to be closing down.

“Or we’ll just be living on your bread and some Snickers bars from the corner shop!” Dane chuckled as he got up from his seat to get his backpack. “Ryder, can we take the van down to town for a food run?”

“Yeah, sure.” We both grabbed the bags and headed for the door, stepping around the ghost wall and bottle bin that had not been removed since trash collection slowed from the increasingly strict lockdown.

We climbed into the van and headed down the main road out of the village. I rounded one of the narrow blind turns where the road hugged a few old houses.

“... the hell?” Dane pointed through the windshield. In front of us was a huge wedding party. It looked like almost everyone from the village was there.

Colorful flags were strung up all around the entrance of the courtyard. People brought low benches and tables out from the yard of the house and placed them on the side of the road, barely leaving any room for any vehicle to pass. I downshifted and the van slowed to a crawl. Smoke billowed from the outdoor kitchen the hosts had set up near the doorway. A wafting smell of fried pork entered the car.

“So much for coronavirus restrictions.” I peered out the window and looked at the locals surrounding the car. All of their eyes watched us as we slowly passed through the party, steam twisting up from the pork dishes the host had just delivered to the tables.

There had to be at least two dozen people all staring at us; *Two foreigners in a car in the middle of a pandemic leaving the village.* If people were paranoid about us before, driving right through three dozen of them all simultaneously staring at us **was going to make that paranoia explode.**

In an hour at the market, Dane and I had both loaded our 50 liter packs down with produce. Green onions and broccoli stalks stuck out from beneath the brain of my pack as I handed a local vendor some change for a big chunk of tofu. I lifted the bag, water dripping out from the sides. “That it?” I said, adjusting my pack as I walked up to Dane, who was buying a big wad of dried noodles.

“Turn around.” He motioned towards my pack. “I’m out of space in my pack. Let’s toss the noodles into yours.” He popped the clasps on the pack brain, throwing me off balance as he squashed the noodles into the top of the pack. I started up at the snow-dusted peaks above us and wondered if I would ever have the time to go back up there.

We headed back across the market square towards my car, not needing to do the traditional gentle elbow push to get through the normal market day crowds. The market was mostly empty. We passed a stand for a strawberry vendor. I motioned towards the huge baskets of ripe strawberries. “Well, if we are going to be stuck at home for a while, we might as well stock up on the good stuff.”

We arrived back at Dane’s house, stashing away all of the produce in the pantry while Locky kneaded dough for his next day’s bread experiment. Locky’s wife, Rio, walked in on the phone.

“... Yessir. My apologies.” She said, furrowing her brow and shooting me a worried glance. I placed the last of the onions in a bowl and gave her a confused look.

An irate male voice crackled from the speaker of her cell phone. His Mandarin was heavily inflected with the local Bai language.

“I recognize that van!” A man shouted. “He’s that foreign friend of yours who stays in his car! He shouldn’t be here! When did he arrive?” He agitated, and only getting more pissed.

“Well, sir, he arrived just a couple of da—”
“**WHY ISN’T HE REGISTERED.**”

“Sir, he was planning to go to the police station just now. No one was there when he first arrived since he arrived so late in the evening once everyone went home the day!” Rio’s tone was controlled, but we could all tell that she was increasingly worried about the man on the phone.

“The rules say he can’t be here! You should know better! During these times **NO ONE** is allowed into any village!”

“Then where can he go, sir?” Rio knew the rules were not quite what the man said. We all knew by that point that villages were going rogue and walling themselves off from the outside world. The news said the barricading was technically illegal, but it did not matter out in the mountainous countryside.

The mountains high, and the emperor is far away.

My favourite Chinese expression had turned into a source of dread.



The village chief was making his own rules, and Rio knew that posing logic to an angry, petty local bureaucrat would not get her anywhere.

“That’s not my damn problem! You get your friend OUT of town by the end of today, or I am sending the police to your house to remove him by force!”

Click. He abruptly hung up. We all stood in silence in the kitchen.

“Who was that?” I asked, half knowing the answer.

“The village chief.” Rio gave me an apologetic look.

“Shit. It must’ve been that wedding party we drove through.” Dane sat down at the table, staring up at the cabinet where I had just finished placing the vegetables.

“Wouldn’t surprise me. Seemed like everyone in the village was there.” The burning sensation pierced my gut. “I don’t want to get you in trouble with the locals. Ugh.. all I had to do was NOT drive through that wedding party, and everything would be fine.”

“It’s not your fault.” Dane looked over at me, running his hand through his hair and wracking his brain to find a way out. “How were we supposed to know he was there?”

“I mean, the whole damn village was there...” I shrugged. In my head, it was dawning on me that the single, stupid, mundane decision to get in the van and drive to town to buy vegetables was turning into a pivot point that would change what happened to me over the next month. Maybe even longer.

“But this is illegal! They can’t do this if you’re registered here!” Rio was indignant, even though she knew better than to fight the local village chief.

“Listen, I don’t want to cause trouble for you guys. I can be out of here after we eat.”

We moved our lunch out into the courtyard, sitting beneath noon winter sun. As I picked up my bowl and chopsticks, I looked around slowly, taking in all of the cracked roof tiles, old timber, and huge stone pavers that made up the old house. Houses like these were getting razed to the ground in Dali, getting replaced with big concrete boxes.

I wondered if the courtyard would even still exist the next time I visited. I had a suspicion it would be years.

THINK

I slammed the van trunk shut with the last of my climbing gear. I turned around to face Dane, Rio, and Locky. “Well, who knows when we will see you next. Hopefully sooner than later?” I reached out to give Locky a hug. Dane looked around at the villagers milling about, some watching us as we said our goodbyes.

“Yeah, I hope this doesn’t go on forever.” Dane gave me a hug and stepped back. “Best thing we can all hope for is that this thing blows over in a few months.”

“You going to go back to Canada before the spring?” I asked.

“I hope I can wait it out here. Josh, Rio, Locky, and I... we’ve all got a house here. Seems worth it to stay, boulder a bunch, and wait.” He sighed. “Hopefully there won’t be any visa trouble.”

“Alright, then. Be safe y’all. Hope to see you soon!” I climbed into the car, started up the engine and drove off towards highway 214.

The road was busier than when we had gone out to look for food. I intentionally avoided getting on the highway, worried that the traffic police would try to turn me back to Dali, since that was where my license plate came from. I knew that cops were trying to prevent people from moving anywhere outside people’s place of residence. I spent hours winding our way through the old mountain roads. Passing roadcuts of red clay and weaving my way through steep, forested hills that separated the valleys on the eastern edge of the Himalaya.

In every town I passed through, big red banners were tacked onto the sides of buildings.

抵抗病毒是您的公民义务。我们每个人都有责任帮助打败冠状病毒。

Fighting the virus is your civic duty.

Each and every one of us is responsible to help defeat coronavirus.

击败冠状病毒是一项全国性的斗争。每个公民都必须尽自己的一份力量。

Defeating coronavirus is a national struggle. Every citizen must do their part.

I half processed the Cultural Revolution-style messages as I passed beneath a green road sign.
Jianchuan. 5 kilometers.

“Well, here’s the first real test.” I muttered to myself and squinted in the afternoon sun and guided the van around the corner. A series of orange traffic police cones came into view out in the distance at the bottom of the hill. I could already see a dozen yellow reflective vests of the traffic police officers’ uniforms.

I rummaged through a pile of stuff on the passenger seat and my household registration from Liming,

a flimsy sheet of copy paper that looked like it would barely qualify as a legitimate hall pass in a middle school.

Half a dozen people were parked in the middle of the road, their car doors ajar. Each one of them was arguing with a different police officer. I flagged one of the unoccupied officers down.

“Excuse me, sir! I was told by officials in Dali I am not allowed to remain there. I need to return to where I registered.” I flashed the paper in front of him. He took it from my hand and gave it a once-over.

“Sorry, you’re not allowed in.” He said as he handed the paper back, almost immediately turning his attention away from me.

“What do you mean? I am just transiting Jianchuan on my way to Liming. I am not stopping anywhere here!”

He waved his white cotton-gloved hand in my face, shaking his head quickly.

“What’s the problem, officer? I can’t go back to where I came from, and the only way back to Liming is through here!” I tried to suppress the anger rising in my voice. Even though my Chinese was good and my appearance was Chinese enough to avoid most trouble in these situations, I knew I was walking right up to the line where I was going to be dismissed because I was foreign.

“Listen! This isn’t about just you!” He gestured over to the group of people arguing with the other police officers. “They’re not from here either. The government of Jianchuan city says no one from the outside is allowed within city limits. PERIOD.”

An awkward silence fell between us.

“So, do you know if I can reach my destination via the highway?” I said, looking back towards the car and trying to salvage enough face to continue the conversation. “I can’t tell you for sure. **You’re just going to have to get on the highway and find out yourself.**” He tilted his head, picking up on a conversation a different officer was having with another stranded driver. He walked off.

I swore loudly, banking on no one around me being able to understand what I was saying. I walked back to the car and slammed the door.

The highway was literally the only route I had to get home to Liming.

Otherwise, I was stuck on a country road to nowhere.

I picked up my phone and texted Dane.

Nothing good. No one allowed in. I have to try the highway and see what happens.

Good luck, bud.

I backed out of the lot, turned around, and raced towards the on-ramp. I sat in silence as my car shot across the highway. My stereo blared the Black Keys’ *Gotta Get Away*. The van’s tiny engine whined and struggled to maintain speed on some of the long inclines of the mountain highway.

Shangrila. Exit 221.

Driving towards Shangrila to escape a pandemic. Huh. I approached the toll gate. The place was nearly empty and the gates were up. I drove straight through. Luck intervened a bit. Maybe it was easier to get back to Liming than I thought.

I approached the crossroads for Shigu and Liming, the last major obstacle between me and home. The big concrete crossroads gate had been blocked off by police cars, with only one lane getting through to the other side. Cars were in clusters on the road, some making bad attempts to line up in the traffic cones the police had put in the road.

The van came to a stop in the mess of cars. Medical tents were set up on the side of the road with people in all white PPE coming in and out.

A young woman in a winter jacket and a clipboard in her hands moved from car to car, briefly conversing with drivers before almost reaching my van. She inexplicably turned around and headed back towards the medical tents.

“Excuse me!” I called after her. “I need to get through to go home!” I knew that my non-Yunnan accent would betray me as an outsider almost instantly.

“Sorry. Who are you and where do you live?” She turned around to face me.

“I live in Liming. Here is my household registration.” I handed my flimsy piece of copy paper to her. She took one quick look at it and shrugged. “Sorry. You are not allowed in. Locals only.” She turned around to walk away. I got more urgent. “Ma’am, please. I was just forced to leave Dali. I was just turned away from Jianchuan. This IS where I live! You can see that I have been here for months!” I waved my passport and paper in the air in the space between us.

We continued arguing for another minute. “You are not FROM here. I am sorry, but I cannot let you in. You have to be a local resident. That’s the rule.” She waved me away, just as the policeman had done a couple of hours earlier. My composure cracked. “Listen! WHERE THE HELL AM I SUPPOSED TO GO?” My anger started to show through, and inside, I knew that I had to commit to the indignant reaction 110% or else no one would listen to my plea. I would lose face and the checkpoint staff would wall me off. Some of the workers in PPE looked towards us. I could tell the woman with the clipboard shot them a short, embarrassed glance.

“These are the rules, sir. I’m sorry.” She tried to wriggle out of the conversation by performing her robotically memorized, bureaucratic lines.

“I know you are supposed to follow the rules!” I yelled. “I have a LOCAL REGISTRATION right here! This is the rule!” I held up the piece of paper. “What do you want me to do? Stay here on the side of the road for weeks?” I motioned to the ditch running past the medical tents. “I’ve been kicked out of Dali, I have been refused from Jianchuan, and I can’t get into Lijiang! Where do you expect me to go?” I made a wild, barely controlled gesture towards the road I drove in on.

“You’re going to have to explain to your supervisor why someone who went through the trouble to get the correct paperwork to register here is sleeping in his car on the side of the road! Come on! You work for the government! You should know the rules that the government literally just gave you! I am following YOUR rules, and here you are still telling me no!” I motioned towards the clipboard she was holding, suddenly realizing I had no idea what was attached to it. “I...” My resolve slipped, and my Mandarin brain lost its train of thought as I came down from my adrenaline high. My translated thoughts came to a screeching halt. I felt like I was character acting and I was returning from my character’s brain into my own. My eyes darted around as I desperately looked for something to latch on to in order to continue the conversation.

The woman with the clipboard stood silently, staring blankly at me. I had gone off her government-approved script, and she had no idea how to process my strange situation. She stared at me for a beat longer before blinking hard, as if she had been woken up from a nap. She motioned towards the medical tents.

“...just... go over there and get your temperature taken.” She averted her eyes to the ground. “If you pass... you need to talk to that guy seated at the table.” She motioned to a man with a thick winter jacket. I hailed a nurse, and her eyes widened a bit, seemingly assuming I was going to try to converse with her in English. “I just need my temperature checked.” I said in Chinese.

She half relaxed as she robotically lifted the thermometer gun to take my temperature. I weakly said “thank you” to the nurse and walked over to the man in at the table and registered. I clambered back into the van and drove off into the late day shadows stretching across the narrow country road for Liming.

I returned home and bunkered down in Liming in a house I was living in with my friends Mike Dobie, Ana Pautler, Raul Sauco, and Kat Xie. The house itself was a renovated courtyard house we lovingly dubbed the Coreshot House. The five of us had grown accustomed to a level of freedom and climbing that only seemed to exist in stories. Acres of unclimbed rock to develop and a tight-knit, family feel made it feel like we travelled in a time machine back to the days of the American *StoneMasters* in the 70s and 80s. But the freedom we had been so accustomed to was dwindling every time we looked at the news.

Days went by, then a week. What information of the outside world we got did not inspire any of us. Flights were getting more and more sparse. It felt like the world around our little house in the mountains, squeezed into a choke point in a mountain valley barely a half mile wide, was getting smaller and smaller. The feeling we were liabilities grew stronger by the day.

After an afternoon of climbing up in the highlands above the house at El Dorado Wall, we all came back into the courtyard, already dark since the winter sun disappeared from the narrow valley floor around 3pm. I could already see my breath as we walked in.

Raul and Kat dropped their packs by the stairs and walked up to their room. Baozi, Mike and Ana’s dog, yelped and hollered as he excitedly sprinted across the yard to meet us. He leaped up onto Ana. “Ooooh. Hi, baby boy! Did you miss us?” She laughed and ruffled his fur.

Almost as if he was waiting for us to arrive, our landlord, Mr. Feng appeared from around the corner that linked our courtyard to his. He was a polite man, always civil, but he always made it known what his feelings were about our behavior climbing in a place that was not used to foreigners in the area. We were a novelty to him and the locals, and this was a pandemic.



His Lisu-accented Mandarin greeted us as he strode across the courtyard.

“Ruide, Doubi, A-na.” He addressed me, Mike, and Ana by our Chinese names as he looked around at us. “I heard that you were up at the El Dorado Wall today?” He looked at Mike. Mike looked at me.

“Yessir. We were up at the wall today briefly. But we didn’t stay for long. We didn’t see anyone up there either.”

“Yes, I know. The neighbors up the valley already told me. Listen. You know that these are trying times, and some of the townspeople are concerned about your presence.”

I knew where this was headed. I sighed and translated to Mike and Ana, though they had already translated enough to make a guess.

“We don’t want to cause any trouble for you, Mr. Feng. But don’t the neighbors know that we live here? They know that we are the foreigners who rent your house and live here long-term?”

“Yes, yes. They do. But right now...” He sighed. “... it’s just not prudent for you or me to have the group of you wandering around the valley. You understand? Dealing with this coronavirus is scaring people. Most people aren’t even leaving their own homes now.”



PHOTO: Xiao Baozi, Mike and Ana’s dog, and coreshot house mascot BY RYDER STROUD

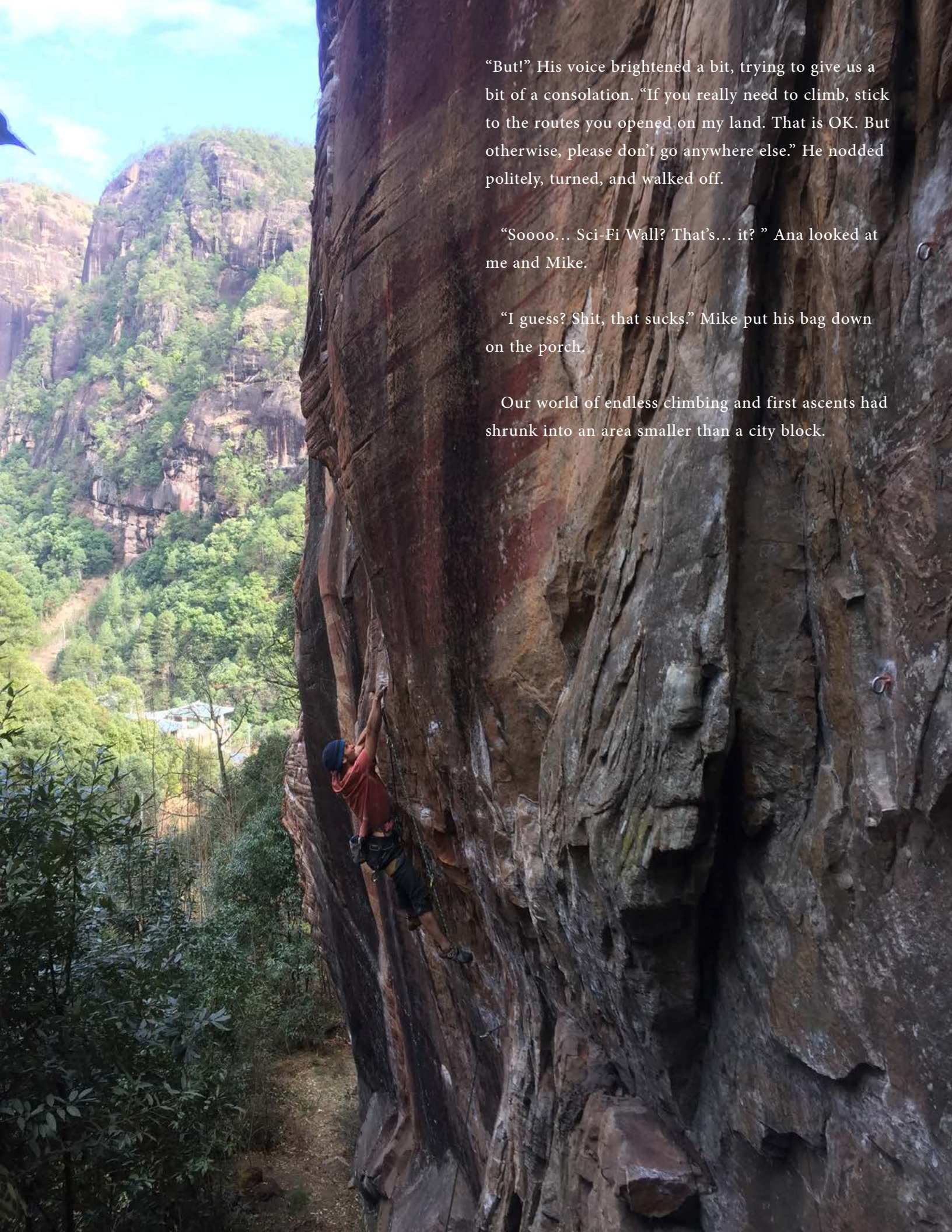
“Are we still allowed to be out on the roads? The roads are public, and we would not be near anyone’s land.” I tried to pull an end-run around these new rules. Perhaps if we could have his blessing to be out on the road, we could at least try to scout some new walls to climb when the coronavirus crisis was over.

“Yes, of course the roads are public.” He said politely but firmly. I could tell he had an idea of where I was trying to go with my statement. “But even if you are not near people’s property, they will still be concerned if you are moving around out in the village.”

We all tried to be cordial, but Mike, Ana, and I knew the underlying message: we were foreigners. We were liabilities, especially to Mr. Feng, who was the Communist Party Secretary of our village. Neighbors would fear we might carry the virus. Even though the virus originated somewhere in Wuhan, the rumor that the virus was a secret American military plot was weaving its way through Chinese state-run news and easily getting into the minds of the public. It was simple math: an unknown virus, some frightening news reports, and some foreign faces were all many locals needed to know to draw a conclusion. **We were dangerous, at least for the time being.**

“Yes, we don’t want to cause any more trouble for you.” I forced down the disappointment from my voice. We had multiple projects and a pile of gear cached at the base of the cliff. “We won’t go to El Dorado anymore until it is safe to do so.”





“But!” His voice brightened a bit, trying to give us a bit of a consolation. “If you really need to climb, stick to the routes you opened on my land. That is OK. But otherwise, please don’t go anywhere else.” He nodded politely, turned, and walked off.

“Soooo... Sci-Fi Wall? That’s... it?” Ana looked at me and Mike.

“I guess? Shit, that sucks.” Mike put his bag down on the porch.

Our world of endless climbing and first ascents had shrunk into an area smaller than a city block.

The next day, I went for a bike ride, hoping that staying strictly on a public road would arouse no suspicion.

About a kilometer up from the house I spotted a roadblock. Some locals had erected a railroad-style crossbuck in the road with some big pieces of dirty cardboard laid down on the ground in front of it. They had hauled an office desk to the curb, and four men milled about the checkpoint. One of them, a man wearing a military cap cocked sideways, sprayed the dirty pieces of cardboard on the ground with disinfectant mixed in a pressurized spray box on his back.

The checkpoint guards waved me down. I got off my bike. “Only locals past this point.” One of them said. My shoulders sank. I was done having this conversation.

“Sir, you know me. I buy things from your shop. I live in Mr. Feng’s house!”

“You just can’t enter. ”

“I...” I was done. I did not have any more fight left in me to do the same thing dozens of times over.

I turned around in silence and coasted downhill back home.

By the end of January, I knew it was time to go.

“What flights are you seeing?” Ana approached me in the frigid courtyard one morning. “These look like the last ones for a while.” I turned the computer around. “Lijiang... Kunming... Taiwan... then the US?” The rest seem REALLY convoluted and take twice as long.”

“Yeah, that’s about what I was seeing. Mike and I are thinking about going to Nepal for some trekking. See if that is long enough for this whole thing to get under control.”

“Now I have to figure out how the hell we are going to get... to an airport 400 miles away?” I laughed and opened my phone to Qunar, the Chinese version of Kayak. “Aren’t the trains running?” She asked.

“Yeah, but we would have to find a driver to get us to the train station... two and a half hours away.” I opened my phone and began scrolling through the contacts list. Call after call for local drivers ended in getting nowhere. No one wanted to leave the village. No one knew any rules about who could leave and who would be allowed back in.

Finally, I scrolled down to the bottom of my drivers contact list: Zhang Jianghua, The Official Climbing Driver of Shigu and Liming.

I chuckled at his self-appointed title. The man knew how to hustle. Jianghua lived nearly an hour and a half away in Shigu, the biggest crossroads town in the area. I knew I would have to give him the hard sell. I pressed the call button.

“Ruide!” Jianghua picked up almost instantly. “What’s up?” His Naxi-influenced Mandarin always had a little extra energy to it.

“Jianghua! Weird request. I need to be picked up in Liming to go to Lijiang. Do you think you can do it?”

“... ahhhh, well, I can give it a try. Word is that each village on the road between me and you has police stopping non-locals from passing through.”

“I wouldn’t call them cops... but...” I stopped and thought for a moment. “Wait, what do you mean? You ARE a local Jianghua! You still can’t get through?”

“I don’t know for sure. But it sounds like if a local town’s police don’t know you or you can’t show that your address is in a particular village, they’ll turn you around on the spot.”

“Jianghua, please. I have no other way out. Everyone in Liming is scared to leave!”

“Alright, I’ll try. 350 for the trip. I’ll call you tomorrow when I get close to your place. Mr. Feng’s place, right?”

“Yeah, that’s the one.” I found it funny that a local with knowledge of all the areas around me would still not be considered a local. **The coronavirus was upending everyone’s sense of who belonged in a place.**

The next morning, I sat out near the entrance of the courtyard, waiting for Jianghua. My phone buzzed.

“Ruide! I can’t get to you!”

“Wait, what are you talking about, Jianghua?”

“One of the villages after Zhongxing won’t let me through their checkpoint. I’m about 7 kilometers away from your house. You need to get to me out here if you want a ride out!

I swore and tore the phone away from my face. “I... hold on Jianghua, I’ll ask Raul if he can drive me.” I ran upstairs, and found Raul, who quickly agreed to drive out to the checkpoint. We loaded everything into the car and drove off, passing the entrance of the national park. I knew this was a one-way ticket.

Raul popped out of the van and talked to the local Lisu villagers manning the checkpoint. A couple of them waved at him. He returned to the car.

“The locals are OK with you coming in and out?” I asked.

“Yeah! I know a couple of those guys from Mr. Feng’s big barbecues he does for his neighbors. Sometimes it pays to know more locals.”

“Yeah... It does...” I finally started feeling my transient roots catching up with me. While I made local friends in the Liming area, I had not settled there the way Raul and Kat did. They knew locals. The locals knew them. It was a symbiotic relationship that allowed them to stay in town with much less hassle as the lockdown grew tighter.

We reached the checkpoint a few kilometers later where Jianghua’s van was waiting. The “barrier” keeping him from getting to us was a series of old pieces of found plywood, crudely nailed together into a long bar that crossed the road. A few traffic cones the locals likely poached from the traffic police sat in the roadway. Beside the road sat a blue, military-style pop-up canvas tent with the characters “Emergency Medical Tent” emblazoned on the sides.

Around ten local men milled around the tent, but all quickly came to attention as our car approached. They all seemed to be surrounding the one man who was holding a clipboard. We got out of the car and began transferring gear between Raul’s van and Jianghua’s van. None of the local men offered to help move the gear. They all stood silently. Their heads moving in unison like a herd of sheep as we ran around their flimsy barrier, hurriedly loading luggage. Jianghua closed the last of the gear into the trunk.

“Well, Raul. I’ll see you when I see you?” We stood in the middle of the road and gave each other a hug, made awkward by the fact we were both wearing enormous puffies.

And then Jianghua and I drove off, leaving the men and the tent behind in a cloud of dry-season dust.

We passed through Zhongxing, encountering what looked like three soldiers— or just three guys who liked wearing army colors— marching down the street. One in front was blaring patriotic tunes from a hip belt speaker as he waved an 8 foot-long flag across the road. The two men behind him sprayed the pavement with bleach.

We rounded the corner out of Zhongxing and emerged onto the road along the side of the Jinsha River, the river that flowed down through the Himalaya to the northwest and Tiger Leaping Gorge to the north. I rolled my window down , stuck my head out and sucked in as much of the mountain air as I could in 15 seconds, and I wondered how long my brain would retain memories of the smell. I watched the river water shine in the early morning light as Jianghua broke the local speed limit by a factor of three. My phone vibrated.

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I put my phone down, stuck my head out the window one more time, and stared back across the river.

Author's note, postscript:

On an interesting note, the village chief who evicted me from the village near Dali was arrested a couple of months after the incident. He was arrested on charges of price gouging for PPE, something the Chinese government had quickly made a crime in the early days of the pandemic lockdown. He was taken away by police and stripped of his position as village chief. We never found out what happened to him after that.

You can find Ryder's website, Itinerant Climbers Collective, [here](#), and his Instagram, [here](#).

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