



# A VERY LONG LIFE

By Joe Stock

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CHRIS TUMBLED. AND TUMBLED. HE JUST KEPT falling, along with a mass of boulders and tangled rope. He fell past me, and then for another 100 feet, down the icy face of Mt. Cook, as I watched, helpless.

He came to a soft landing on the ropes, our weight counterbalanced on a single ice screw. From where I stood on my frontpoints, I could see blood streaming down his face.

Some communication and downclimbing revealed Chris was okay—he just had a twisted knee and a massive red laceration around his eye. But as we traversed the Linda Glacier and stumbled back to Plateau Hut, we could feel our fortress of invincibility starting to crumble.

A few months later, my climbing partner, Dan, was avalanched to his death in Fiordland. Then a falling block of ice broke my leg in Colorado.

At age 22, I realized I could die in the mountains. The thought terrified me. Alpine climbing suddenly felt out of my comfort zone—like steep creek boating or hard drugs. The juice was no longer worth the squeeze. So I quit.

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For 10 years before those accidents, I powered my climbing with the naivety of youth. I climbed—and lived, for the most part—without fear. Conquering danger where others couldn't was my ticket to rise above the masses, to hold my head high.

Not too many generations ago, taking risks meant survival. Fight the saber-toothed tiger or die; impress good mates or your bloodline fades away. That instinct remains part of the human psyche.

After those accidents, I was done with crises. I tried careers in hydrology, writing, and photography. It didn't work—something was missing. I still craved the kind of danger that meant the difference between life and death.

Then I found guiding.

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Whomph! Whomph!

The snowpack screamed warnings over the raging wind. But only Elliot and I could hear them. We were guiding six Belgians. They had seen the steep spines of Southcentral Alaskan snow in Teton Gravity Research films. They had to have a taste—conditions be damned. Our low-angle skin track and mellow descents weren't in their nine-day plan.

"I don't think you understand. We want steeper skiing," one of the Belgians volleyed.

Months of emails and phone calls relaying how "Alaska is different than the Alps" had missed the target. Explaining a wild snowpack—and the beauty of walking close to instability without touching it—doesn't translate well across languages, over ethernet cables and phone lines.

Later in the week, wind abated and snow stabilized. Elliot and I were able to set the Belgians free in the steepest chutes of their lives. They thanked us and apologized for a bit of shortsighted impatience.

Imparting years of experience mitigating consequences is a heavy task. Sometimes it's easy, like when clients watch rockfall destroy the Grand Couloir on Mont Blanc (again). Other times, when the hazard is lurking below a subliminal layer of powder, teaching people about it is nearly impossible, but compelling and heady in its own right. Now, I think, I thrive more on assessing danger than facing it.

Still I struggle. During the summers, when I'm guiding in Chamonix, I'm surrounded by some of the best technical American guides. Insecurity taps at my brain: *Why isn't the Grand Jorasses your goal? Why don't you pump laps on the Matterhorn?* My passion and curiosity for mountain travel are stronger than ever. But there is more. I want to die of old age. I love being with my wife. I owe it to my friends and family. And understanding the mountains—more so than gambling with them—is a problem I can work on for the rest of a very long life. «