

his life in his hands

Alex Honnold routinely climbs some of the world's toughest mountains without a rope. He's that confident, and that good. But is anybody really that good? Inside the life of the world's most extreme climber.

BY JOSH DEAN
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imagine

if the prevailing narrative about your life was that you were professionally suicidal, that the thing you had dedicated yourself to doing—and loved more than anything else—was going to kill you, perhaps soon, and that it definitely wasn't a matter of if but when. That's basically what it's like to be Alex Honnold, a 28-year-old rock climber whose fate is exacerbated by the fact that he's really the first climber to rise from the margins of this lonely fringe sport to become a "kind of" celebrity.

Honnold will readily admit that he's not the strongest or most technically gifted rock climber in the world, but he happens to be extremely competent and cool-headed. He has, according to the mountaineering veteran Conrad Anker, "really strong hands," but it's a steel-trap mind that sets him apart. An ability to subsume fear is a quality that all climbers must possess, Anker notes, but "Alex is off the charts." This enables Honnold to climb in a way that most people, professionals included, think is sort of crazy—that is, without ropes or other climbing aids. It's known as "free soloing" and is a pursuit attempted by only a very tiny group of humans, especially when it's done on the kinds of towering rock faces where you tend to find Honnold, plodding along as calmly as if he were 10 feet off the ground.

Honnold has been famous in the climbing community since 2007, when accounts of free-solos in Yosemite National Park signaled his from-nowhere arrival as a rare talent, but the myth went mainstream in October of 2011, when CBS' *60 Minutes* brought his story to the millions of American homes that didn't follow niche adventure sports. Honnold's climbs are "so remarkable that it defies belief," CBS correspondent Lara Logan said, before sprinkling on some breathless melodrama: "The penalty for error is certain death."

Honnold politely disagrees. His view is that he has every intention of living to a ripe old age, and so he only free-solos routes he's certain he can handle. The one he did for *60 Minutes*—up the face of the iconic, 1,600-foot Half Dome in Yosemite National Park—"is not that hard." The way Honnold sees it, he climbed that route numerous times with ropes and never fell, so why should it be any different once the rope is taken away?

"Is he crazy? Is what he's doing unsafe?" asks Hans Florine, an experienced climber who, with Honnold as his partner, shattered the speed record for the 2,900-foot ascent of the

famed "Nose" route of Yosemite's El Capitan last year. (They used safety equipment, but only a bare minimum.) "I say this: When your dad gets on the ladder to put up Christmas lights, is he crazy? That's the same with Alex."

And yet, among the world's elite climbers, very few choose to free-solo big walls for the simple reason that shit happens. Every once in a while, dads fall off ladders. So even if there are numerous climbers who are technically as strong, if not stronger, than Honnold, and who probably could free-solo all of the routes he's done, nearly all of them still prefer the assurance of a rope, just in case.

That's fine, Honnold says. It's all a matter of perspective. "I see stuff and I think it's rad and I want to do it," he says, meaning free solo. "Most people look at the same thing and think, 'That looks fucked up!' Fair enough."

there's

an old cliché about climbers that they all live in their cars. Alex Honnold is the biggest and best-paid rock climber alive. Guess where he lives: in his van.

This van, mind you, is nicer than most of those you'd find in a Yosemite campground. It's got a bed and built-in cabinets, plus power and wi-fi, courtesy of solar panels in the roof installed by one of his sponsors, the panel manufacturer Goal Zero. And it's not entirely accurate to call it his permanent residence, since Honnold spends much of his year getting paid to travel the world and climb.

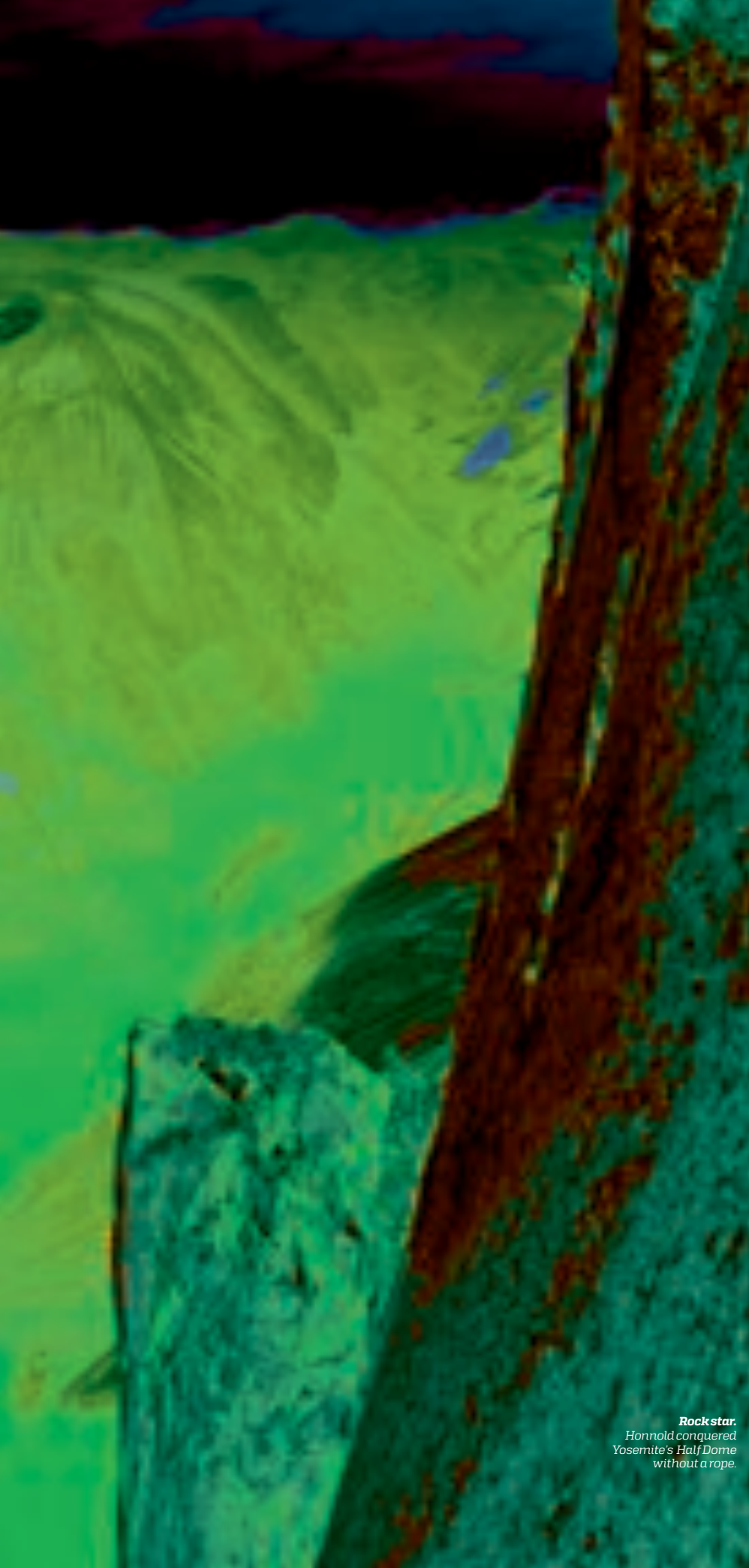
Last fall, however, he went on a long semi-vacation, dividing his time between Berkeley with his girlfriend, Sacramento with his mom, and Yosemite for sporadic but mellow impulse climbs. "Basically, I'm living in a three-hour pyramid of those three places,"

he says, between forkfuls of vegetable omelet at a Berkeley restaurant. About a year ago, Honnold gave up meat, partly for health, but also to lessen what he calls his "impact" on the planet. The biggest difference he's noticed has been a healthier conscience, though he's also gotten fewer colds. Climbers are opportunists when it comes to food; they can't really be picky when they're in the field, and calories tend to come most often from snack bars, which are easily carried in pockets.

Honnold is a modest guy, with a mellow manner. He has a long face and large ears, with short but shaggy black hair, but his defining feature, without question, is his hands. The palms are normal enough, but the fingers that stretch out from them are anything but: Each one is sausage-size and swollen as if attacked by a swarm of bees. The skin, from years of gripping rock, is calloused and leathery. Imagine an Olympic sprinter's calves compared with your own, and that's about the difference between Honnold's hands and those of a normal human being.

His recent hiatus from ambitious climbing "missions" (his preferred term) was Honnold's first in four years. "I was just all burned out," he says, referring mostly to the kinds of ambitious climbs—free-solos of big walls, or record speed attempts requiring extreme focus—that he had been undertaking with regularity. So he slowed down—sort of. "I just had no interest in trying to be rad...I'll put it that way. I just didn't have the fire for it. If you looked at it objectively you wouldn't think it was a break, but it felt like one to me," he says, before explaining that "last week I spent 16 hours on Half Dome." In those 16 hours, he completed the first-ever one-day ascent of the Excalibur route on El Capitan. You know, down time.

Earlier in the summer, he and his friend Cedar Wright, also a professional climber, had completed an accidentally epic adventure in which they climbed all 12 of California's 14,000-foot peaks over two weeks, traveling between peaks by bicycle. They rode from trailhead to trailhead, then hiked in and attempted the hardest possible summit routes, climbing without gear. In total, they biked 750 miles, hiked more than 100 miles, and climbed more than 120,000 vertical feet of Sierra Nevada peaks. "It all culminated in the worst



“I’m pretty good at recognizing, ‘Now I’m scared and will set that feeling aside.’”

trip of our lives,” Honnold says. The worst part was easily the biking, because neither had ever had to pedal that much before. In particular, there was a 9,000-foot bike ascent of White Mountain, which Honnold describes as “among the worst experiences of my life.” By November, though, with Honnold’s aches soothed by the soft-focus lens of time, the trip had become something of a proud war story. Wright, who had filmed the entire ordeal, released a short film titled *The Sufferfest* that was financed by Clif Bar, another of Honnold’s sponsors.

Being a person who supports himself only by climbing is basically unheard of; there is no road map for such a career, and Honnold seems to embrace the freedom to draw one for himself. He climbs when he wants, where he wants, with little fanfare. He’s paid plenty well by his sponsors (The North Face, especially) to live a comfortable life, but he doesn’t need much, so he recently set a goal to give \$50,000 a year to a foundation he set up that will support mostly environmental causes. Honnold lived on \$8,000 a year before he was sponsored, and even now he’s comfortable on \$15,000, which is a lot less than he actually earns. (He won’t disclose his yearly income, though he confirms that it’s in the ballpark of “six figures.”) The most luxurious thing he’s done with his money is purchase solar panels for his mother’s house.

And yet, the checks keep getting larger. Honnold will receive the largest payday of his life—“by far”—if his next big mission comes to fruition. For the better part of a year, he and his friend Peter Mortimer, founder of Sender Films, have been plotting to have Honnold free-solo one of the world’s tallest buildings, Taiwan’s Taipei 101. But Honnold says such a bold, Vegas-style stunt isn’t about the money. It’s about the challenge, the fun (“because it’s there!” he says), and hopefully he can raise the profile of the sport, which has precious few followers. Climbing is an obtuse undertaking, after all, performed in the wilderness, and regular people—those without the right gear or binoculars—just don’t get it. Climbing a building, on the other hand, translates easily, argues Honnold. “Anyone who is mainstream is like, ‘Skyscraper!’” he says. “They get it.”

Honnold scouted buildings all over the

Rock star.
Honnold conquered
Yosemite’s Half Dome
without a rope.

planet before settling on the world's third-tallest, which has 100 stories and is 1,474 feet tall, not counting the spire. Initially, National Geographic planned to televise the climb live in prime time (in partnership with ABC), and had even begun promoting it, then backed out.

One hang-up was the matter of safety measures. Of course, Honnold would prefer to free-solo; naturally this made the network nervous. He says he was willing to compromise and take minimal precautions if the building management insisted, but that only good ideas were acceptable. When producers suggested he wear a parachute, he laughed. The building is built in sections, with overhanging balconies, so a chute would be useless. "I was like, 'Have you guys seen the building? Carrying an eight-pound weight that isn't actually going to increase my safety—that's not helping anybody.'" So the project sits temporarily in limbo while Mortimer chases a new partner, most likely from Asia. And when the time comes, Honnold says he'll be ready.

"It would be the biggest climb in terms of media and importance to my career," he says. "But it's sort of the least important in terms of climbing fitness and everything. I've scouted the building. I know I can do it. I'm physically ready. If they overnighted me to Taiwan right now I'd do it tomorrow." The idea has been floated, in fact, that he would maybe have to do the climb twice—so both the East and West Coasts could view it live—and he thinks that's probably a good idea. "If we finally get through all the freaking hoops I'd much rather climb it twice than once," he says. "I think I prefer that. But maybe it would be better for me to do evening and then the next morning so I get a little rest in between."

To see his words in print, it's easy to imagine Honnold as some arrogant adrenaline addict. In reality, he's the opposite. He's confident, sure, but he's also calm and quiet and methodical. Professional climbers see routes as problems that can be solved—routes in bouldering, a subset of the sport, are actually called "problems"—and Honnold can feel so certain because he's already solved the problem. The holds are there. He knows how to conserve energy, and where to put his hands and feet. So, what's the big deal?

The only part of the idea that gives Honnold pause is the packaging. He's dismissive of the notion that climbing a building live on TV is somehow co-opting his sport; rock climbers can be quite spiritual about the "purity" of what they're doing, to the degree that some call it art. Honnold isn't one of them. Though he's not naive to the allure of spectacle, he's wary of over-exploiting the "death-defying, circus" aspect. That's why he insists on working with Mortimer, "who makes things a little sensationalized," Honnold says, but not so much that it makes him uncomfortable. "He's a climber. He gets it. He's not going to be like, 'Alex Honnold, throwing the dice on yet another risky stunt!'"

one

place you're likely to find Honnold when he's hanging around Berkeley is the Iron Works, a climbing gym in the industrial hinterlands on the city's far western edge. It's part of the same chain as the gym where he got his start in Sacramento, at age 11, when his father read about its opening and took him on a lark. At the time, Honnold played no organized sports, but he loved climbing. Over the next six years, he went to that gym at least five days a week, but it wasn't until he dropped out of UC Berkeley after his freshman year that he actually climbed outdoors.

These days, a gym is merely utilitarian, a place for Honnold to refine technique and stay limber while on break between missions. He'll show up, climb the hard stuff, then quickly lose interest. If it's crowded, he'll sign a lot of shirts.

Climbers tend to be lean—the more weight you carry, the more you have to pull up by your fingers—and Honnold is slim but not overly so. He's 5'11" and anywhere from 155 to 161 pounds. Fall being a semi-quiet period, he's gone up over 160 by bingeing on one of his weaknesses, cookie dough, but he says that weight has never really been a concern of his; in truth, he has no interest in getting overly thin. "With a lot of stuff I'm doing, the 30-hour pushes in Alaska, or the bike trip, you can't be twiggy," he says, squeezing out the last dollops of almond butter from a snack-size package.

Honnold often points out that plenty of climbers are stronger; a superhuman athlete like Chris Sharma, for instance, could tackle far more physically challenging routes, and there are probably a few wall rats hanging around in any of the big-city gyms capable of handling super-complicated problems, but that's also not the point of Honnold's climbing, or his resulting fame. He's more than strong enough to handle anything on the world's big walls, but what makes him unique is his mental strength—he isn't fazed in the slightest by height or affected by fear, at least not in any kind of normal human way. "He's incredibly dedicated and genetically predisposed to being a great climber," says Tommy Caldwell, a climbing great who sometimes partners with Honnold.

"It doesn't matter to me if people think I'm crazy. I just thought free soloing was cool."

"The thing that sets him apart is that he's very bold. There have been bold climbers in the past, and really good climbers. He's the first of this generation to put both of these things together."

During a good gym workout, Honnold will climb all of the expert-level routes in the gym, and his posture on the wall is one of great comfort. He's methodical, stalking the holds like a tiger on the hunt. In terms of movement, he looks more like an orangutan, with long, rubbery arms that seem to contort and almost dislocate; when he moves, it is in slow motion, never overexerting himself. A good climber doesn't rush, and even when Honnold is straining, he appears relaxed, to the extent that if you had a camera focused only on his face and chest, you'd be hard pressed to tell if he was rock climbing or sitting on a couch.

"I get scared just like anybody else," he admits, later. But survival in Honnold's game is all about beating back the adrenaline. "I'm pretty good at recognizing, 'Now I'm scared and I'll set that feeling aside for a minute. My breathing is way too fast. I can tell that my technique is falling apart. Shit's going bad.' And I'll put that aside and focus on what I'm doing." As he told *60 Minutes'* Lara Logan: "If I get a rush it means something's gone horribly wrong."

The gym's hardest section is closed for the afternoon, so after an hour of practice, Honnold is done. "Should I do some training?" he asks, walking to a wall to do a few minutes of "campusing"—which is a climbing-specific exercise for strengthening fingers. (Picture pullups, using only your fingers.)

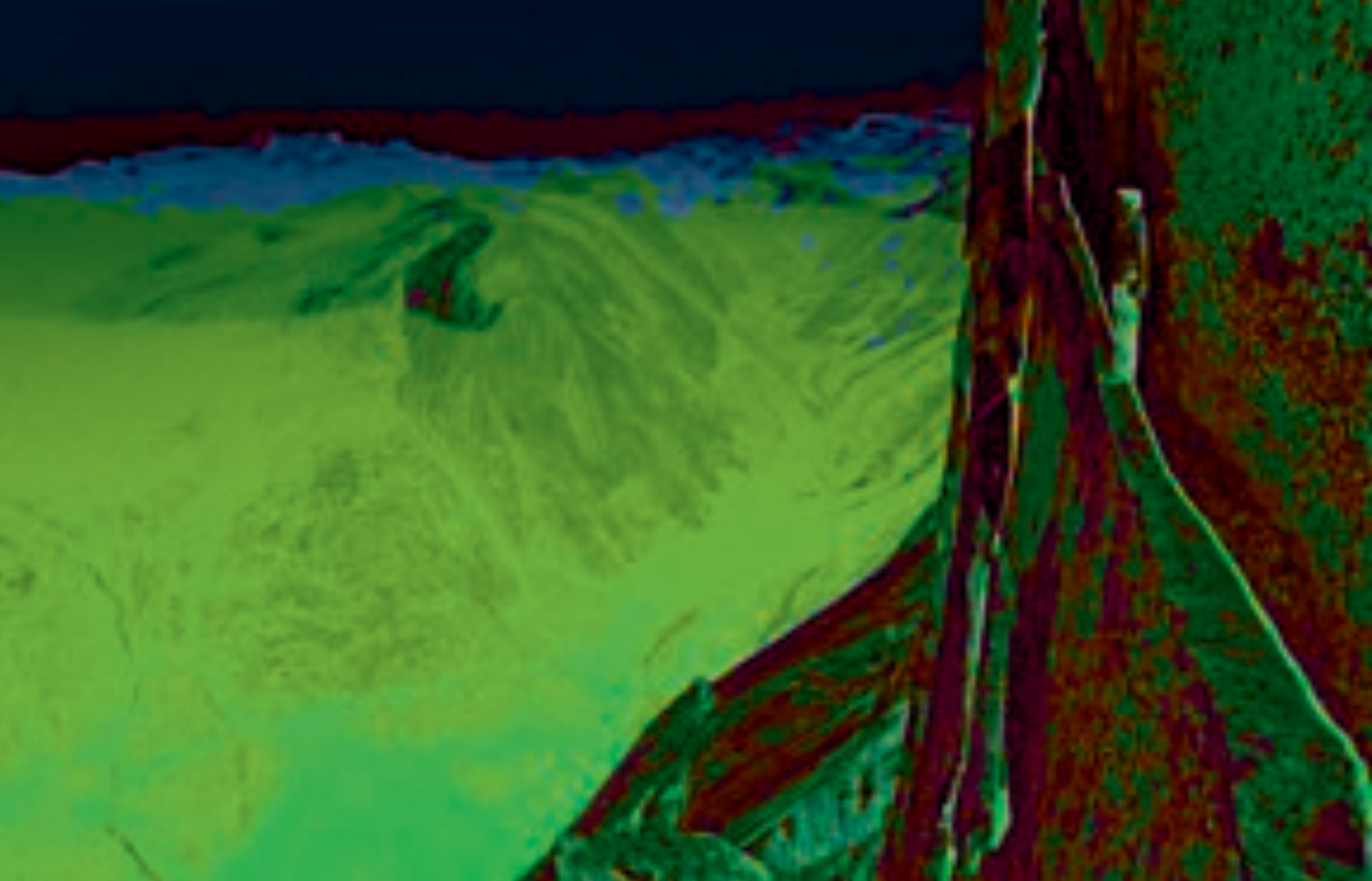
He describes his training as "pretty free form." On a typical day, he might climb in the gym for 2-3 hours, then bike a couple more. "I always aspire to run more, but I don't really do it much." That said, he entered and finished a 50-kilometer trail race last fall, wearing approach shoes, with no training. "Apparently you can do it without training," he says. "But it hurts a lot."

Honnold considers the various workout machines in the gym, muttering reasons for why he doesn't feel like doing any of them.

"That's the thing about being self-coached," he says. "Maybe I should be doing more? Maybe I should be doing less?"

Obviously, I reply, it doesn't appear to be holding him back.

"I don't know that," he says. "Maybe I could do more. Maybe I could do harder stuff."



Man on a Ledge. Honnold takes in a 1,700-foot view of Yosemite.

the

only way to train for climbing buildings is to climb buildings, and that's easier said than done when your goal is to scale skyscrapers that stretch halfway to the moon. So Honnold must make do with what's available. Recently, he was visiting a friend in Boulder, CO, so he scaled the tallest building in the county. "You'd be surprised that no one notices," he says, as we pedal up a hill onto the campus of the University of California on bikes. It's 7 p.m. and pitch black, but still many students wearing backpacks walk the dimly lit passageways with purpose as Honnold rides around scouting facades. "Look out for fun stuff," he says, veering right and around the back of a rectangular building that probably looked modern in the 1970s, until he finds a quiet spot with minimal foot traffic. I hear the muffled sounds of Cal's marching band practicing off in the distance. The air smells thickly of eucalyptus.

He stares up at a large overhanging concrete beam. If he could get to it, it would be large enough to tap dance on. "I might just go up to that beam and frolic a bit," he says.

Suddenly, students pour out a back door; a class must've ended inside, and it gives Honnold pause. He gets back on the bike. "The thing is, I just need to suck it up and not feel bad," he says, giving voice to the debate that's going on inside his head. "It's hard not to feel bad." What he means is that it's difficult not to feel weird when you're surreptitiously scrambling up public buildings. It's probably illegal, too. "But Taipei 101 is harder than this," he exclaims. "And taller!"

At least 94 stories taller than the biology building he takes a look at next. It's six stories and built in rows of blocks with inch-deep crevices between them. Nearly every window is lit and lab work seems to be taking place behind most of them, but they're also four or five feet apart, so there are large columns of facade that would allow him to climb without being spotted from the inside.

"Doesn't this fill you up with a little bit of excitement?" he says, pacing. I've yet to see the man who calmly climbs cliffs with no rope anything but calm, but he seems surprisingly nervous. "It seems quite scary," he says, noting that he hasn't brought climbing shoes or chalk or anything

else that might help. He has no idea what the top is like. "With most urban stuff, I have other people goading me on." Here, he has only me, standing quietly.

I'd hoped I might see him climbing for real, and we considered taking a day trip to Yosemite. "That would be pretty boring for you," he'd said. "Climbing is kind of a terrible spectator sport." The most compelling, up-close shots from *60 Minutes* were taken by Mortimer and his crew, who had spent hours rigging. Logan and her producer sat in lawn chairs on the valley floor, staring up at a cliff face wondering which dot was Alex. Instead, I watch Honnold slip into a dark spot between two shrubs, grab the building's side, and commence scrambling. Within minutes he's three-quarters of the way up and I can only make out his shadowy figure when he passes by a window. At the top, he grabs onto the metal roof, shuffles from side to side on the top crease, then begins his descent. I can only barely make out his progress from where I'm standing, pretending to look like just another

student fiddling with his iPhone, but I feel butterflies developing as he begins down-climbing. What if he slips? Oh, God, what if I kill Alex Honnold? Am I loitering too obviously?

A minute later, he's back on solid ground. "That was exciting," he says. "That was scary!" He's flexing his wrist. "I got pumped. And I learned another important lesson: I've got to take that shit seriously. I gotta stack the odds in my favor."

Even though this building is relatively low, with good, consistent holds, it has proven challenging to climb in street clothes, after dark, without scouting, and with no gear. It was physically and mentally stressful. "The whole thing's uncomfortable," Honnold says. "There were people in those windows." He'd been close enough to two of them to see that they were screwing around on Facebook.

"The whole point of doing this is that I ride around thinking, 'Dude, that'll be easy!' Then I do it and it's a little harder than I thought." A similar thing happened when he traveled to Taipei to practice on the tower. Though individual sections were technically simple, the sheer volume of repetitive steps was fairly exhausting. That was valuable intel.

Probably the most famously perilous episode of Honnold's career was when he stalled out 1,400 feet up on the first-ever free-solo of Yosemite's Half Dome in 2008. It was the climb's most precarious section, and he had been aware of it, but he froze when he came to a slab studded with bolts put in so that climbers could actually ascend it. The only way to make it without using those bolts was to use a foothold that Honnold didn't entirely trust. "I could've pulled on the bolts," he explains. "I could've cheated but I also wanted to finish the solo." So he took the step, the small leap, and his foot held. "It wasn't a huge moment of terror, like I thought I'd fall." But he also caused himself unnecessary stress by not fully preparing. "I went up without rehearsing because I thought it'd make a better adventure. Then I got there and realized it was a little harder than I thought."

LATE IN THE MORNING OF MY FINAL DAY with Honnold, we take the BART commuter train into San Francisco, then ride our bikes through a steady rain to a bouldering gym in the Dogpatch neighborhood. He wants to get some more practice in, and also make good on a promise he's made to film an interview for a documentary about a famous and influential climber named Tom Frost.

The film's director, a climber himself, seems a little in awe of Honnold, which is something I've grown accustomed to seeing in Bay Area gyms. He asks if Honnold, best known for

climbing alone, really prefers to climb that way, or if he's just as happy climbing in pairs, the way the sport is typically done.

"I prefer a partner," Honnold replies. "It's fun to have a friend up there, to work as a team, but there's definitely something powerful about going solo and having this experience. It's just you up there, alone."

One of the pioneers of free soloing, Peter Croft, explained the appeal of going alone, without gear, as "leaving behind all the distractions—rules, equipment, people—and being able to concentrate solely on the climbing." He compared the feeling of ascending a giant wall in just shoes as something like the fabled runner's high, "but to a much more intense degree."

Croft says that Honnold has taken free soloing to new heights "not because of any one climb but because he's done it time and again. He appears to thrive on going big."

In fairness, it's an oversimplification to speak of Honnold as only or even mainly a free soloist. Free-solos of big walls are just a small part of his regular program. He climbs very often with partners—this year he'll be heading out on an expedition in Patagonia, Argentina, with Caldwell—and with all the normal ropes and gear. He'll occasionally free-solo without scouting, but he almost always tries a route with safety gear first. His philosophy, if you force him to sum it up, is pretty simple: to have fun. What that means depends on the day and location. "It's the overall experience," he says. "Having an adventure."

That will be the aim in Patagonia, certainly. When I ask if this trip is for a film, he gives me a look like I've asked a dumb question. "There's no way to get the cameras in position. We're two of the only people in the world who can handle that terrain," he says. "You go on the trips just to send the gnar."

Honnold has now climbed all over the world, in some of the most dramatic locations imaginable—South Africa, Thailand, New Zealand—and his favorite place is the most familiar one, Yosemite. Because he can always make a route more difficult, or free-solo something that has always required ropes, the potential at any one location for him is vast. He doesn't have to embark on arduous treks into remote ranges to find new rock faces.

I ask him if he would consider the kinds of adventurous expeditions that his climbing friend and North Face teammate Anker does, like deep into the Himalayas.

"I have no interest in going somewhere that's logistically hard to get to, and stricken by terrorism," he says, "when Yosemite is virtually the same kind of climbing and it's right by my house and has good cell service."

Here, in the bouldering gym, the director asks him to address the fairly common assertion that he's setting a bad example for young climbers coming up in the sport.

"It doesn't matter to me at all if people think what I'm doing is crazy, or that I'm a bad influence," Honnold says. "Everybody does his own thing. My original motivation to solo was just that I thought it was cool."

Anker dismisses "all the moralizing" about Honnold and his climbs that he sees online, from people who suggest he's not a role model. "If someone chooses to do something that's a passion, more power to him."

Hans Florine, who runs a climbing gym, says he definitely notices a Honnold effect—young climbers who admire Alex's feats—but so far, he hasn't spawned many imitators. It's hard to imagine, though, that there isn't another kid out there who Honnold has inspired, just waiting to show up and blow minds.

"For sure there will be at some point," Honnold says, but he's not holding his breath for a sudden rush of competition. "For the most part, people get up to the base of a huge wall and they are like, 'This is fucked up. I don't want to do this!'"

It's hard to talk to Honnold about what he does without returning, again and again, to the risks. To any outsider, especially to an outsider who doesn't climb, the simple fact of the matter is that climbing a 2,000-foot slab of granite without safety ropes looks completely crazy. It may be technically simple, but any number of things could go wrong. Last year, Honnold was besieged by silverfish insects about 1,000 feet up the south face of Yosemite's Mount Caldwell. They crawled through his hair, over his face, and into his ears. He just ignored them and pushed on with his vertical ascent.

"Most soloists don't die soloing," he tells me. And the ones who have died, he says, were mostly in freak accidents—one was taken by a rogue wave while climbing in coastal Ireland; another was rope jumping. The perception that it's going to kill him, he says, is "super misleading. No high-end soloist has ever fallen off of hard stuff. It just sounds good for media."

When I suggest to Caldwell that Honnold really doesn't believe that what he's doing is dangerous, he chuckles. "You just nailed it, what makes him special," he says. "He thinks it's no big deal. And it is a big deal. It's dangerous. And that's why other people aren't doing it." Caldwell says that the things Honnold free solos are "well below his ability level" and that "Alex is one of the most talented climbers I've seen in my life, but I worry about him all the time."

For Honnold, though, it's all quite simple.

(feature)

