SOUVENIRS

After seven harrowing weeks gunning for one of the most striking lines in Pakistan, the north ridge of Shingu Charpa, the author comes away with a surprising gift.

By Kelly Cordes

CLOCKWISE THIS PAGE

A view across the Nangma Valley, Pakistan, from the team's first bivy.
Photo: Josh Wharton

Fire in the hole! basecamp warmth.
Photo: Kelly Cordes

Oh taxi! logjam on the drive in.
Photo: Cordes

FACING PAGE

Vegetation and sparse pro on day one.
Photo: Cordes

Josh Wharton hitting a swimming hole outside of Skardu.
Photo: Cordes

"Dude, you're definitely AMGA-ing the anchors," Josh tells me at my little perch, 1,000 feet up the north ridge of an obscure heap called Shingu Charpa, in the Karakoram.

"Sorry, man," I say, flashing back to my guiding days. "I'll make 'em sketchier and faster."

This route could clean up to be mediocre one day, I think. Then again, if I only wanted perfect stone and great moves I'd stay home, where the shizzle fo ba dizzle bling-bling yo—or something like that. Jagged rock spires and snow-capped peaks, some clean and untouched, others guarded by hanging seracs, rise from a labyrinth of glaciers in every direction. All of it tumbles downward—sometimes before our eyes, always at a geologic pace—into glaciers, into rivers, into valleys. I set off again up slabby, runout faces and flared cracks packed with earth, like a dirty and less-protected version of Lumpy Ridge, the granite crag outside my home in Estes Park, Colorado.

But soon, maybe one-third up the route, I slow to a crawl and flounder, hack, wheeze. The sun bows behind an ocean of mountains as I sag forward and spit another chunk of throat-cheese laced with blood. Done. Falling rocks occasionally zoom by overhead. *No more*, I promise myself. Not now, not ever. I don't care that we just got here—day five of 37 in the valley. We're going home. I'm going to sit on my couch, watch TV, clip bolts and get a real job.

After traveling halfway around the world to the sweltering heat and utter mayhem of Islamabad-Rawalpindi, and then enduring a 20-hour drive on the KKH (Karakoram Highway)—the hell incarnate of roads, a single-lane dirt highway carved into mountainsides, complete with disintegrating edges that drop hundreds of feet into voluminous rivers, and home to the world's most maniacal drivers—Josh Wharton and I reached Skardu, Pakistan, the send-off city to the mountains. After a mere and relatively pleasant six-hour ride in a Jeep crammed with our gear, food, a couple random people and four scrawny chickens, and then a two-day trek, we reached the towering walls of the Nangma Valley. Shingu Charpa's 5,000-vertical-foot north ridge dominates the spectacular valley and rises to a summit somewhere around 18,500 feet.

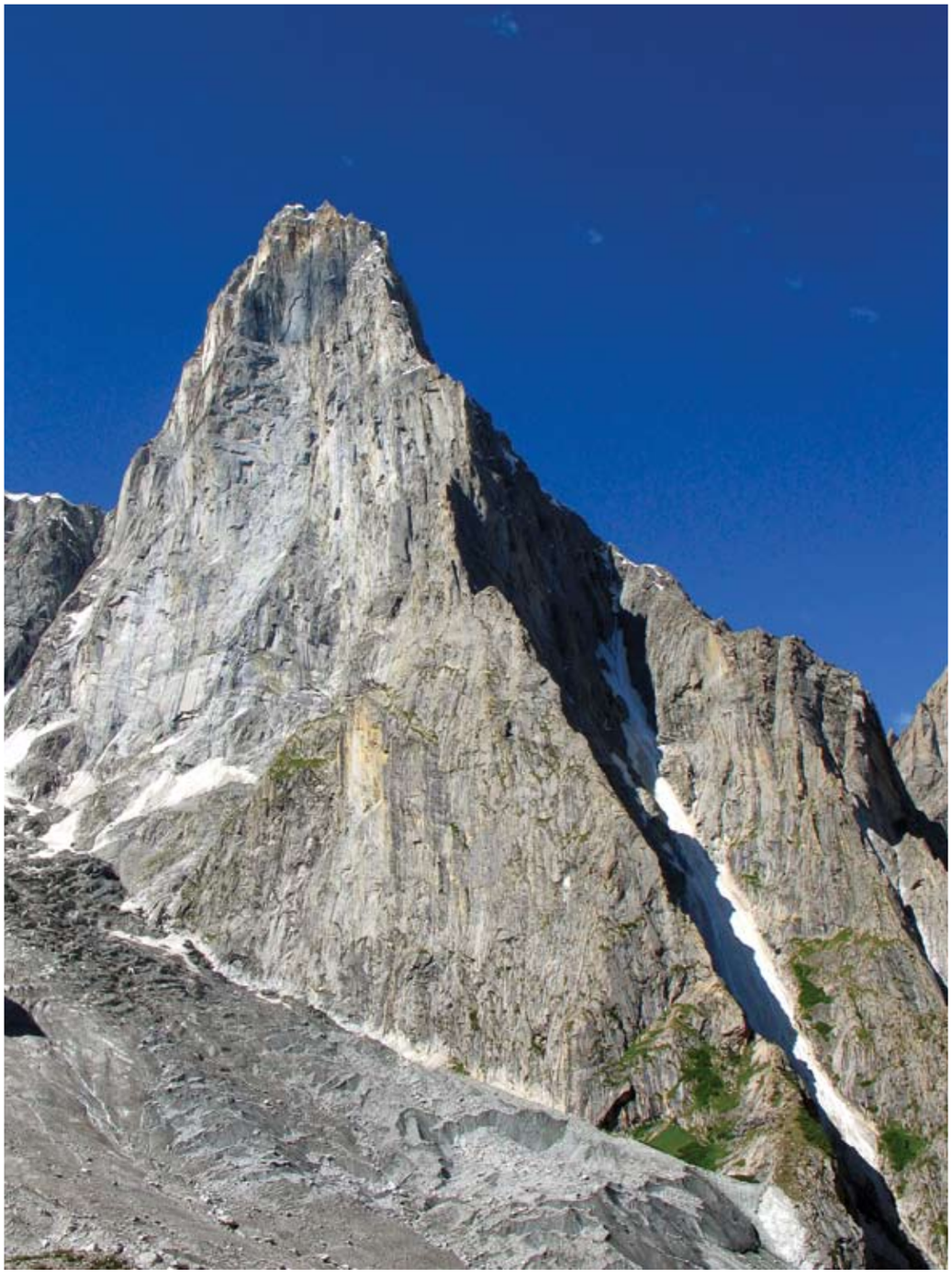
Jagged rock spires and snow-capped peaks, some clean and untouched, others guarded by hanging seracs, rise from a labyrinth of glaciers in every direction.

Like many others, we'd first seen the jaw-dropping, unclimbed line in the opening pages of the 2001 *American Alpine Journal*. Several strong parties attempted it in the following years, and all came back saying not-so-great rock, closed cracks, but a proud objective nonetheless. Fortunately, neither Josh nor I feel burdened by an abundance of prudence.

During our first big route together, in 2004, Josh and I had hucked ourselves in super-light style at what had been called the biggest unclimbed rock line in the world, the southwest ridge of Pakistan's Great Trango Tower. It rises 7,400 vertical feet from base to summit. We had barely succeeded after four and a half days, the final two without water. Our route, the *Azeem Ridge*, was for me the climb of a lifetime. It left me silently reminiscing, gazing off like some druggie burnout, except that it was all real and I wanted more.

I love the total package of alpinism, the way big routes in remote places demand my best—physically, mentally, emotionally—in a way I haven't found anywhere else. I don't give a shit about the single hardest move, but that's just me and I must be getting old at 38. We all find a way to get our fix.

Though Josh and I are different, we share a willingness to fail and, as a result, climb well together. Josh, lanky at 6 feet, 170, is six inches taller, 30 pounds heavier, and 10 years younger than I am, and comes from a rock-climbing background, while I learned on ice and glaciated peaks. He's quiet and thoughtful, while I babble. He's also an indisputably better climber—bold, strong, and one of the best all-around-



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Cordes fixing a core shot on the descent.
Photo: Wharton

Shingu Charpa, with the sun-shade line showing the north ridge rising from the bottom.
Photo: Wharton

Cordes starting pitch 40.
Photo: Wharton

facing page

Basecamp in the Nangma Valley.
Photo: Cordes

ers in the country—and refreshingly devoid of egotism. I like his objective outlook and refusal to take himself too seriously. He climbs with me because my low IQ makes me easily persuadable, a good trait for an alpine-climbing partner.

On Great Trango, we cracked jokes even as we went thirsty, hungry and scared. In retrospect, it seemed magical, and that's the blessing and the curse of those experiences. Unless you resign yourself to the rocking chair, soon nothing compares and, as if it were a drug, you want more. Naturally you push harder, perhaps against diminishing odds, in hopes of recreating or topping those experiences. But maybe that's too outcome-oriented, too simplistic. Either way, here we were, back in Pakistan for another go.

Josh paces, and I piss away our weather window in base camp, taking a seven-day course in antibiotics and enduring uncontrollable coughing fits. I don't know what's wrong. Meanwhile, three Ukrainian hardmen—drawn here for the same line on Shingu Charpa—snag the first ascent of the north ridge, coming in from the descent gully one-third up and continuing to the summit in four days, freeing most of it and descending on day five.

Although it's cool not to care, our egos wanted the FA. On a deeper level their success makes us consider why we are here, what we are after. The Ukrainians pushed hard, they deserved the route, and somehow their success doesn't bother us as much as I'd have thought—not nearly as much as the one Ukrainian who hung at the otherwise idyllic base camp, spending all day wandering around with binoculars dangling from his neck, clad only in tighty whities, sandals and a beach hat.

The weather holds and, finally, I feel better, *inshallah*. Meaning "if God wills it," inshallah is the most common word in Pakistan, used for everything from

hopeful wishes to "so it goes" acceptance. I go on an acclimatization mission, like I should have from the start, and back in camp we repack our gear, analyzing, discussing, and ultimately hoping we guess right on what to bring—inshallah. We've got the pack down to probably 25 pounds, just right for our chosen climbing approach, disaster style. Far superior to alpine style, big-wall style, capsule style, siege style, wank style or spray style, disaster style means no real food, just dry stuff and fuel for making water; skimpy ice gear, since we're sure the white stuff up high will be soft snow; and no sleeping bags, since from our warm basecamp it is easy to be brave.

The next morning we head off, but dark clouds roll in and we retreat from the base. Rain pours down the rest of the day, and it continues for a long time. I blew it.

The routine grows old fast: sleep 10 or 12 hours, eat, nap, read, eat, walk, nap, eat, talk, read, sleep.

I've heard about camps where rich people pay exorbitant fees to do nothing but get massages. The staff confiscates cell phones, disallows computer usage, and forces the overstressed, important executives to relax. That's how I feel, except for the executive part, and Josh won't give me a massage. More rain. Massive blocks of stone, some office-building-sized, shed from Shingu's flanks and echo throughout the valley. Josh and I talk about the usual—climbing, the world, family, women and relationships. We both have girlfriends of four years, cool women with whom we co-own our homes and feel solid.

Back home I work part-year (perfect) for the *American Alpine Journal* and fill in the gaps with freelance work. One regular freelance gig entails writing catalog copy for gear companies—you know, the romantic and sappy, put-the-reader-there-in-a-wonderful-place blurbs surrounded by photos of beautiful people. Only despite my love of laughter—especially at my own jokes—I'm a cynic deep down. I've got the voice down and everything:

No Expectations Sweatpants. Dream low and plan to fail—nothing says "ambition" like a good pair of sweatpants and at age 37, still living in your parents' basement, sleeping till noon and playing Doom all day, you need something as soft as you are. You'll never get up the route anyway, so slide into these power-lounging sweats, expect the worst and you'll get to be right or pleasantly surprised. Made from unwashed recycled pajamas.

The Azeem Ridge was, for me, the climb of a lifetime. It left me silently reminiscing, gazing off like some druggie burnout, except that it was all real and I wanted more.

Another week passes. Bummed, I lie in my tent and read. Take a nap. Look at the stupid barometer. It rises a milli-bar—*yessss!* Look out the tent an hour later. Dark clouds, shit. I feel like a weather-directed manic-depressive. Get up, take a piss, walk around for five minutes. Think about doing exercises for my train-wreck spine, which was surgically reconstructed and fused last summer. Rain starts falling, damn. Return to the tent. Repeat.

I used to battle with fear and laziness on big routes; now I think I'm just lazy. Almost like I want the shitty weather to continue so I can lie here with my apathy until we go home. Except I know that's pathetic and I'd hate myself later. But right now, more rain falls and I don't have to worry about it. Sweet.

"*Shandar!*" shouts Sarfraz, our assistant cook, at the explosion that is the daily lighting of our campfire. Shandar means excellent, rad, beautiful. Ghafoor, our cook, guide and dear friend, and Sarfraz spend every afternoon gathering enough firewood to build enormous white-man's fires, usually pouring Kerosene directly onto them while lit. Josh mentions to Ghafoor that maybe such an enormous fire isn't necessary each night, and Ghafoor looks at Josh as if he's speaking French. We contribute by hucking a fuel canister into the fire—with each passing day, Josh and I need fewer canisters. Shandar!

Relaxation camp gets old, and our boredom descends into daydreams of playful sandbags. We'll go home and tell Dean Potter that there's a spot between Shingu Charpa and Amin Brakk where he could rig a *one-million-foot* slackline and that *everybody* in the region owns a movie camera. We'll tell everyone that the bouldering in the Nangma is mint, splitter, sick! All the tick marks are in place and the villagers love techno. We'll tell everyone that the north ridge of Shingu Charpa is the best free climb in the world.

More compulsive glances at my stupid barometer, another campfire—yes, shandar—and another 10 hours of sleep. Every night we make weather predictions, but now Ghafoor just chuckles and shrugs his shoulders. Josh asks Sarfraz, who runs his English together like a three-legged race, if he predicts good weather tomorrow.

"InshallahSirMaybe!" Sarfraz says. We all burst into laughter and head to our tents. We awake to more rain.

During the daily spell of decent weather I do my back exercises and hack-version of yoga while Josh heckles. *Shut up, Josh. I'm being one with the goddamned universe.* Also, I like to write. I'm no Bill Shakespeare, but I keep a journal.

"Hey, I have an idea," Josh says one day while I'm in something-or-other-yanashana pose. "You're into yoga, and journaling," and he puts his hands to his sides, tilts his head and makes a ridiculous cheery face that brings to mind the "Orange Mocha Frappuccino" scene in *Zoolander.* Together we declare, "Yournaling!"

"Dear Journal," Josh starts in with a soft voice. "Today, my hamstrings felt supple and kind. They were supportive and caring to my inner child." He tells me I should move to Boulder and open a series of Yournaling studios. Do some yoga, write how it felt in a journal, play some hippie music, strip naked and twirl around the room. Maybe even lead Yournaling trips. It would be the new fad. Seriously.

Squalor Slacks. From the beggars of Calcutta to the stank of Rawalpindi's Raja Bazaar, our new Squalor Slacks keep the filth away while you're finding your chi and Yournaling among the indigenous peoples of the world. Our proprietary Porcupine™ fabric deflects dirt and leaves the grubby paws of the clutching homeless with a sting they won't soon forget. Comes with a stack of "Go to college, get a job, and make something of yourself!" cards printed in 15 different languages.

Four weeks in base camp and we've run out of things to talk about—two climbing bums only have so many interesting stories. But a flash of brilliance strikes when I remember that Josh *hates* hiking, walking or anything of the sort unless it gets him to a climb. Carrying a pack sucks, too, but everybody knows that. Neither of us has ever understood things like lying on the beach.

"OK, Josh, for two weeks straight, would you rather hike the Appalachian Trail or lie on the beach?"

"Jesus. Which beach? And can I learn to surf?"

"New Jersey, right by all the cotton candy and boardwalk crap. Crowded, people like beached whales, no hot chicks. No surfing, either—you can splash around and frolic in the sand a little, but you've got to put in a solid eight hours a day lying there. And at night you stay in a place with no TV or bar, like a shitty campground."

A contemplative look crosses his face, and Josh stares into his clasped hands and turns to me. "Which

part of the AT, and what's the weather like? And how big is my pack? Can I run the trail?"

Stars emerge everywhere, and we go to bed excited. Inshallah, we're climbing tomorrow. A thunderstorm of biblical proportions strikes at 3 a.m., with booming rockfall reverberating throughout the valley.

In the morning, our two chickens are gone. No feathers or blood; nothing. The yak herder in the stone hut across the river thinks a snow leopard took them, all of which he pantomimes—he speaks only Balti, while Ghafoor and Sarfraz speak Urdu, Burusheski, and a couple other tribal languages. Even Josh and I, however, understand the Monty-Python-like display of the yak herder sitting on his haunches, making claws and baring his teeth, acting out chicken death by snow leopard.

More soggy days and, like losing a grip on a relationship, I feel it all slipping away and it burns. Josh and I have the first fight—even argument—of our friendship, a result of our both being dickheads over something stupid and, perhaps, our frustration. Even if we don't get up this thing, we want to fail trying.

Blue skies fade to black on August 18, and infinite stars illuminate space above the Karakoram with such magnificence (shandar!) that my mind short-circuits trying to comprehend it all. I always remember the nights. Backlighting casts shadowy silhouettes of the overhead giants onto the valley 2,000 feet below, where we see Ghafoor and Sarfraz's campfire. The weather briefly cleared the night before, and with five days left we have one last chance.

Random rumbling throughout the night echoes off the walls and, curled into a ball at 15,000 feet, I know that the higher we go, the worse, the colder, each bivy will be. To save weight we brought only space-blanket bivy sacks—but in the "one night at a time" psychology game, the discomfort is nothing. Cold, sure, but it's basically a rock climb and you can endure most anything for one night when you know you aren't going to freeze to death. And then another night, well, that won't be fun but by then we'll be nearly finished. A third night, if all goes to plan, will be the final night of sleepless shivering and we can deal since it's the last one. If we get strung out and spend more nights out, well, then we'll suffer a little more.

We rise, eat and pack, and Josh sets off like a rocket. It's his day to lead since we knew this section would have the hardest climbing. He masterfully frees everything—22 pitches up to 5.11+, some with serious runouts and rock that, at times, looks like someone took one of those foam-insulation blowers and sprayed it with cow shit.

After sketching up a 50-foot ice slab to finish the day, we realize the inadequacy of our disaster-style ice gear—two sets of ultralight aluminum crampons with one pair of light boots, one pair of low-top Gore-Tex sneakers, and one real ice tool and another half-sized tool that looks like a kiddie toy.

Cordes on the summit ridge. With just one pair of real boots between them, they had to call it quits not far from where this photo was taken.
Photo: Wharton

Even if we don't get up this thing, we want to fail trying.

Doubt nails us. The white summit ridge is probably also ice, and we're obviously unprepared. We know we aren't going to make it; we should just start rapping. But we find a small, rocky perch, and as the night passes and cold seeps inside, I start to shiver, then control it—turn off my brain and spoon closer to Josh. Throughout the long night, we silently arrive at the same conclusion. At dawn we rise, flake the ropes and keep trying.

It's my day to lead, and dry rock soon gives way to snow and ice that I climb around in my rock shoes. Then I switch to ice gear, then back to rock shoes, and after seven pitches gain the lower-angled summit ridge. I suddenly think we're in there—the white stuff looks like snow! And it is, for maybe 70 feet. Then, it's a dusting over bare ice. After freeing 4,500 vertical feet of rock, we're sketching on 50-degree ice—practically a hike with proper gear, but planning is part of the game and we fucking blew it. It feels like we brought a knife to a gunfight. Josh simul-climbs some snow behind me in the sneakers and finishes jugging bulletproof ice, feet skating like crazy.

He gasps, pauses, then looks at me and says, "If I have to simul-climb this, I'll kill us both." He offers me the sneaker setup, but I decline and continue up two more pitches of rotten mixed ground to an icy

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After seven weeks in Pakistan, I can only say being home feels good. We're so privileged.

sub-summit. Some 500 horizontal and maybe 200 vertical feet of snow and ice separates us from the main summit. Fatigue grips me, the sky darkens, and I figure that continuing gives us a 50-50 chance of taking the joke out of Disaster Style. Forty-five pitches from the very bottom of the ridge, not one worth climbing at the crag, and we come up short. I leave one of our two ice screws and start the rappel to our last bivy for another cold night.

Failure Vest. When clouds enshroud you and your testicles shrivel into your abdomen, face it, you're weak. Either that, or make an excuse about the "end of the difficulties" and how you were basically there anyhow. Don't worry, you'll still look like a hardman at the coffee shops in our latest double-backed fleece vest with our exclusive self-spray-resistant face.

The next afternoon, August 21, I stand unclipped on a sloping ledge, my hand holding down a cord slung over a rounded block while Josh makes the final rappel to the glacier. Ghafoor scrambles across the rubble-strewn glacier to meet us, like he always does. He hugs us and brings drinks, food and a huge smile. Twenty minutes later the skies unleash.

They say the best climbs are the ones you barely got up or barely didn't, but barely succeeding feels a lot better than barely failing, and now, more than ever, I realize just how much we got away with two years before on Great Trango.

That night as I lie in my tent, fatigue so overwhelms me that I can barely feel the fused vertebrae in my back, but my fingertips kill, my swollen hands throb and I can't sleep. I turn off my music and stare at the ceiling. My mind finally quiets, and all I hear is the rain pattering off the walls of my tent.

Soon we'll be home in our comfortable lives, where we'll regret not pushing just a little more. We should have tried harder.

"Ohhhh, sir, I think email not working in Skardu," Ghafoor teases me, with Josh egging him on and all of us laughing in back of the jeep. I can't wait to hit the internet joint, unreliable as it is, to read all the emails from my girlfriend—that was our communication plan.

In Skardu, I kill time sleeping, being bored and trying to control the runaway scenarios in my head. One day we're wandering through a field toward some boulders when a man carrying a hatchet suddenly approaches us. He's middle-aged and lean, wears traditional Pakistani garb and speaks zero English. We speak no Urdu or Balti. Through animated and insistent sign language, he clearly expresses what he wants, and we're on his land so we don't argue: We must sit down with him and his grandchildren, who he summons to serve us fresh apricots from his fields.

Josh calls his girlfriend daily, even though the phones in Skardu only work half the time, and while they're psyched, the "what if you get dumped" issue we joked about earlier in base camp looks real for me. Every call home gets me the machine, and there's almost nothing—certainly nothing good—on email. I don't even know if she got the flowers. I shouldn't be surprised, I guess, but I am. I feel like I've been punched in the stomach.

The Alpine Bachelor Shorts. Stuck in third-world limbo with a pit in your gut that isn't giardia means one thing: You're being blown off. Made of 100 percent organic burlap, these shorts rub you roughly, calling to mind a marriage quip courtesy of Jim Donini: "Why not just find a woman you hate and buy her a house?" At least now you'll have plenty of time to watch pro wrestling and enjoy PBR in cans with your climbing buddies, since these shorts repel rainwater like alpinists repel women. Comes with a bouldering pad and Asian symbol tattoo kit in case you wise up.

Every imaginable emotion runs through my head and, no matter my wishes, nothing will speed up time. It's tough to be a whiner, though, when you look around the mountain villages and see the hard lives people lead—and, in spite of all that, how kind they are—and realize just how good we have it. By the time we connect through Heathrow and have our toothpaste and water confiscated to keep us all safe, I'm not thrilled, but inshallah. Everything dies.

I'm standing in line at the bank or something—I can't remember—on a late-summer Monday in Estes Park. Got a million day-to-day mind-numbing things to do after getting in late Wednesday night, sleeping Thursday and climbing Friday. I've ridden my bike here, since it's gorgeous out and there's no parking anyway. After zipping in and out of traffic, I crack up at the image of American drivers, in their bloated SUVs, trying to survive on the KKH. Tourists clog the sidewalks, waddling around buying souvenirs that they will forget about upon leaving town, wolfing down ice cream and stopping traffic to video the elk eating grass. Just getting across town feels like an exercise in Disaster Style, but for once, none of the summer madness annoys me. After seven weeks in Pakistan, I can only say being home feels good. We're so privileged.

The clerk summons whoever's next and I pull out my little list of bullshit things I have to do today before yoga class. I grin, shake my head and curse Josh, that bastard—I'll never again be able to take yoga seriously after Yournaling.

When I'm off in the mountains festering in rain and snow, getting sick, getting shut down, getting weaker by the day after training all year, I often wonder what the hell I'm doing. All I want is to be home, clip bolts, road trip and chill. But soon the comforts grow stale and feel empty without some contrast. Even cragging, as much as I like it, gets old. It's fun while it's happening, but by the next day the feeling has faded and I can't even remember the names of the routes I climbed.

As I shuffle forward, my mind drifts. Scenes, unrelated to objective successes and failures, float through my head—Thunder Mountain and Mount Hunter, Nevado Ulta and Jirishanca, Great Trango and Shingu Charpa. I drift to the villagers with whom we can't communicate through a single verbal word, but who welcome us into their homes; the high alpine air, and the way it smells and feels on my skin; the way my ass gets kicked so badly I swear—and I mean it every goddamned time—I'm done. And before I know it I'm thousands of feet up some otherworldly face and looking down to a glacier that winds and bends through mountains scattered in every direction, so dramatic I can't comprehend them, like trying to understand stars and space and infinity, and not just the view I have, because you can get that from a photo or an airplane, but …

The guy behind me taps my shoulder and points to the clerk. Oops. I'm next. As I reach forward, the clerk notices my hands, still cut, scuffed, and scabbing.

"Souvenirs," I say.

Kelly Cordes' attempts—and there has been at least one—at a mainstream lifestyle have all ended with him getting lectured about working too little and climbing too much. He is a contributing editor for Rock and Ice *magazine.*