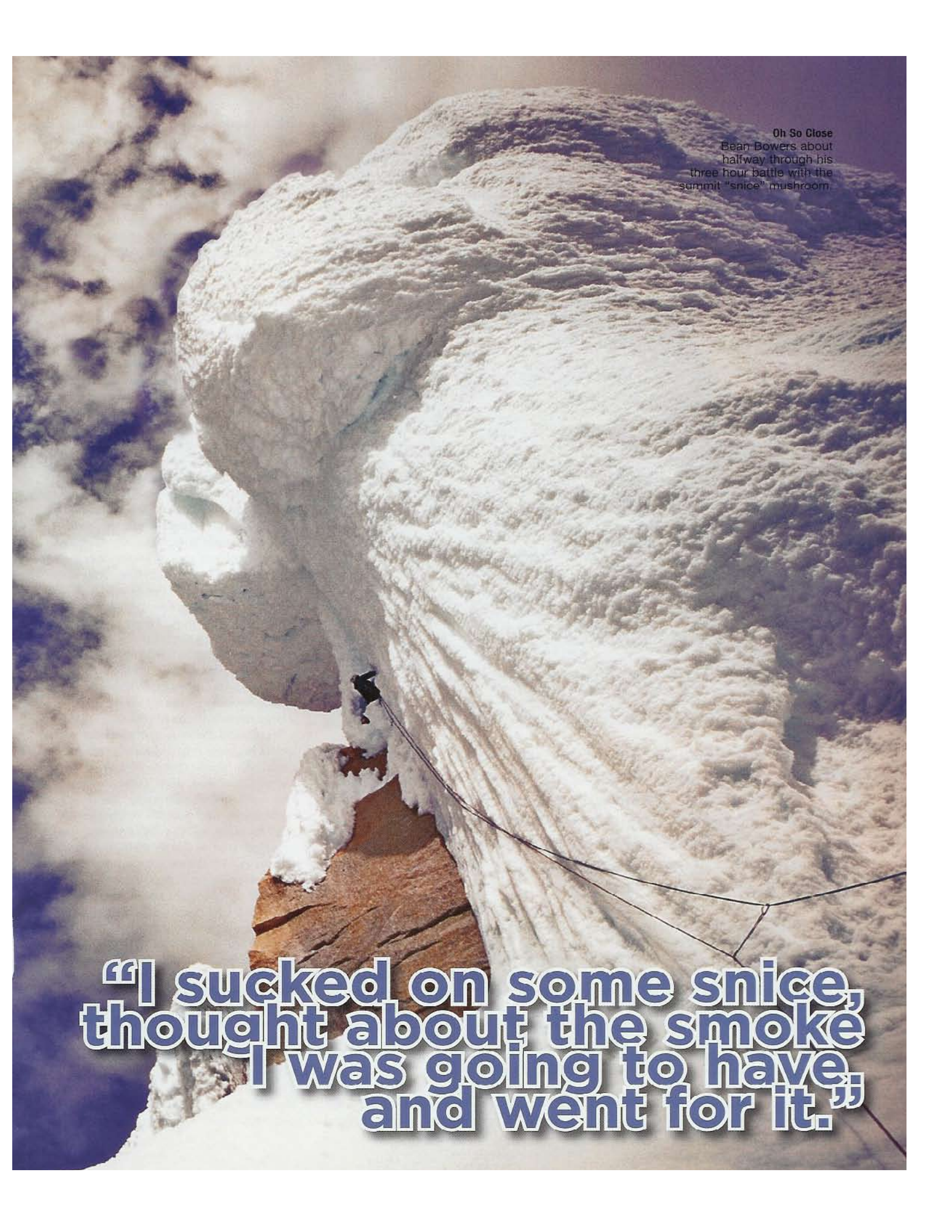


STORY AND PHOTOS BY JONNY COPP
(WITH VIGNETTE BY BEAN BOWERS)

Falling Short a Long Way

TAKING
THE
MIRACLE
WHIP



A high-altitude mountain peak, likely Mount Everest, is shown covered in thick snow and ice. The mountain's surface is rugged and textured with snowdrifts and ice formations. A climber is visible on a steep slope, and a rope is stretched across the scene. The sky is filled with white, fluffy clouds.

Oh So Close
Bean Bowers about
halfway through his
three hour battle with the
summit "snice" mushroom.

**“I sucked on some snice,
thought about the smoke
I was going to have,
and went for it.”**



(previous page)
Bean Bowers, just before the fall, tackling Torre Egger's summit mushroom.

(this page)
A rattled Bowers, moments after the whipper of a lifetime.

Bean Bowers had spent three hours battling the final pitch of overhanging ice on Patagonia's monstrous Torre Egger, touted by some as the "hardest mountain in South America." Two moves from the summit, Bean popped, and fell 100 feet. It was an excellent failure.

The first sensation was a sound like that of a passing train. When a locomotive approaches, the pitch increases as sound waves compress. When the train recedes, the sound waves stretch, like a climbing rope suddenly under tension, and grow deeper. When Bean's faint howl turned into a guttural scream as he was accelerated toward me at 9.8 meters per second squared, all I could do was wait for the train to pass.

This was my fourth trip to Patagonia. I had been through floods, hurricane-

force windstorms, starvation and mind-numbing fatigue in this special land—yet what sticks in my head is a small number of sharp, exquisite days that, no matter how hard I try to convince myself otherwise, seem worthwhile in retrospect. I had not intended to travel there in 2005. But there I was.

Don't Egger On

Bean's dusty pick-up had rolled to a halt in front of the Calafate Airport in Argentina. He had finished guiding several

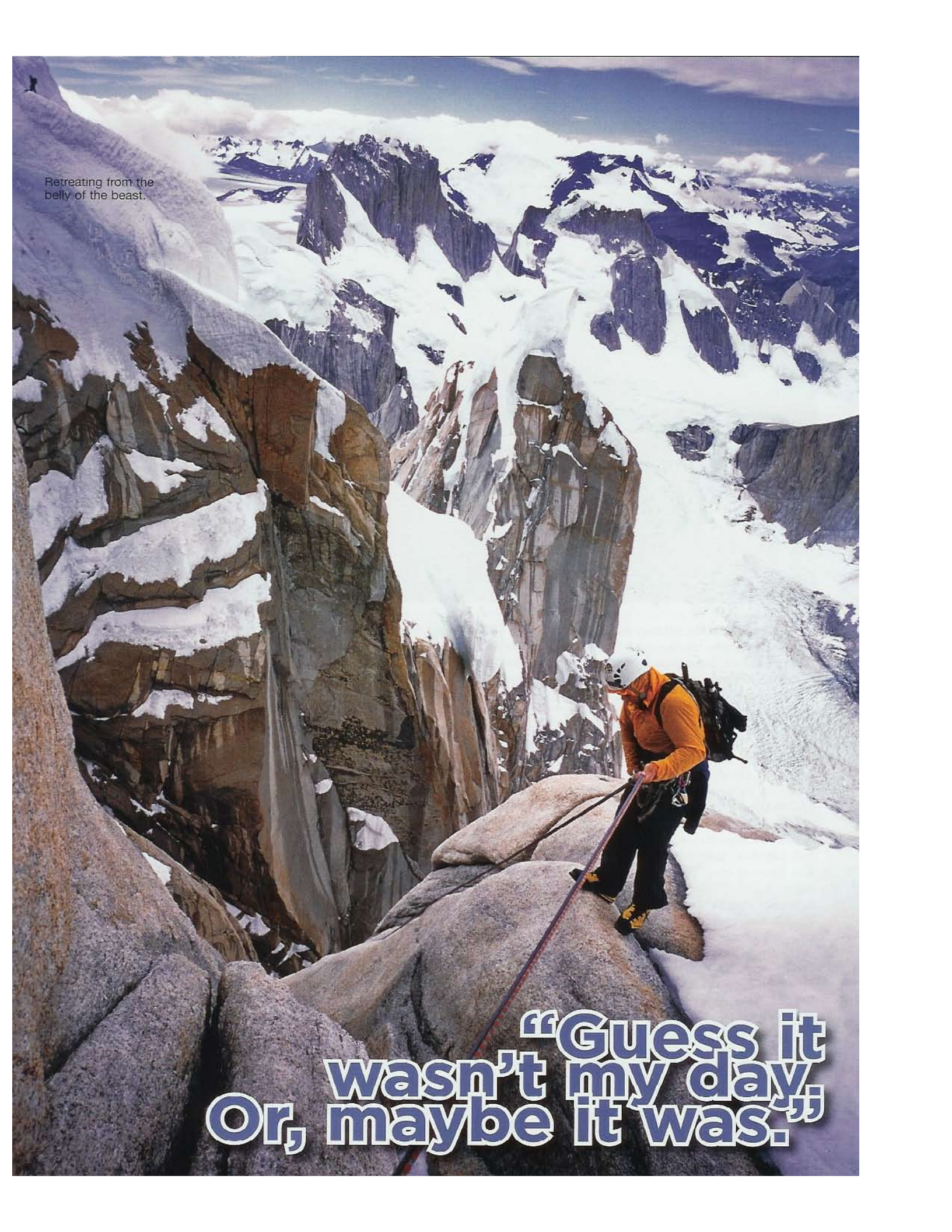
trekkers across the pampas of Patagonia and was ready to get on with some mountain climbing.

"Goddamn crybaby sonnova," he had ranted. "Expect ya to wipe their asses for 'em and ..." Like many a guide, he needed a break. The weather was improving, and Bean was not going to be stuck short-roping a client around a dry glacier during the only good weather in three months. His boss, mercifully, had taken over the last leg of the trip for him.

Since he was a kid, Bean has lived in the West's favorite mountain towns: Telluride, Jackson, Flagstaff, Bozeman. But he's always been on the wrong side of the tracks, so to speak, preferring the no-nonsense, do-it-yourself-or-get-out-of-my-face life to casual Fridays and retail therapy. We get along great. Since meeting Bean through a mutual friend last year, I've continued to be amazed by his ability to shift from his customary gruffness into courteous guide-mode. Bean knows efficient and safe travel in the mountains, and he's good at teaching it. He guides in Argentina and Chile, but it was the climbing that led him to buy a one-room house in the hamlet of El Chalten, Argentina. This small town, in the heart of gaucho country, is the launching-point for Patagonian expeditions. Though we hadn't yet climbed together, we share a similar mountain philosophy: climb alpine-style, travel light, commit to a project from the beginning and move up from there. It felt fitting, somehow, that we would first share a rope in mountains of this magnitude.

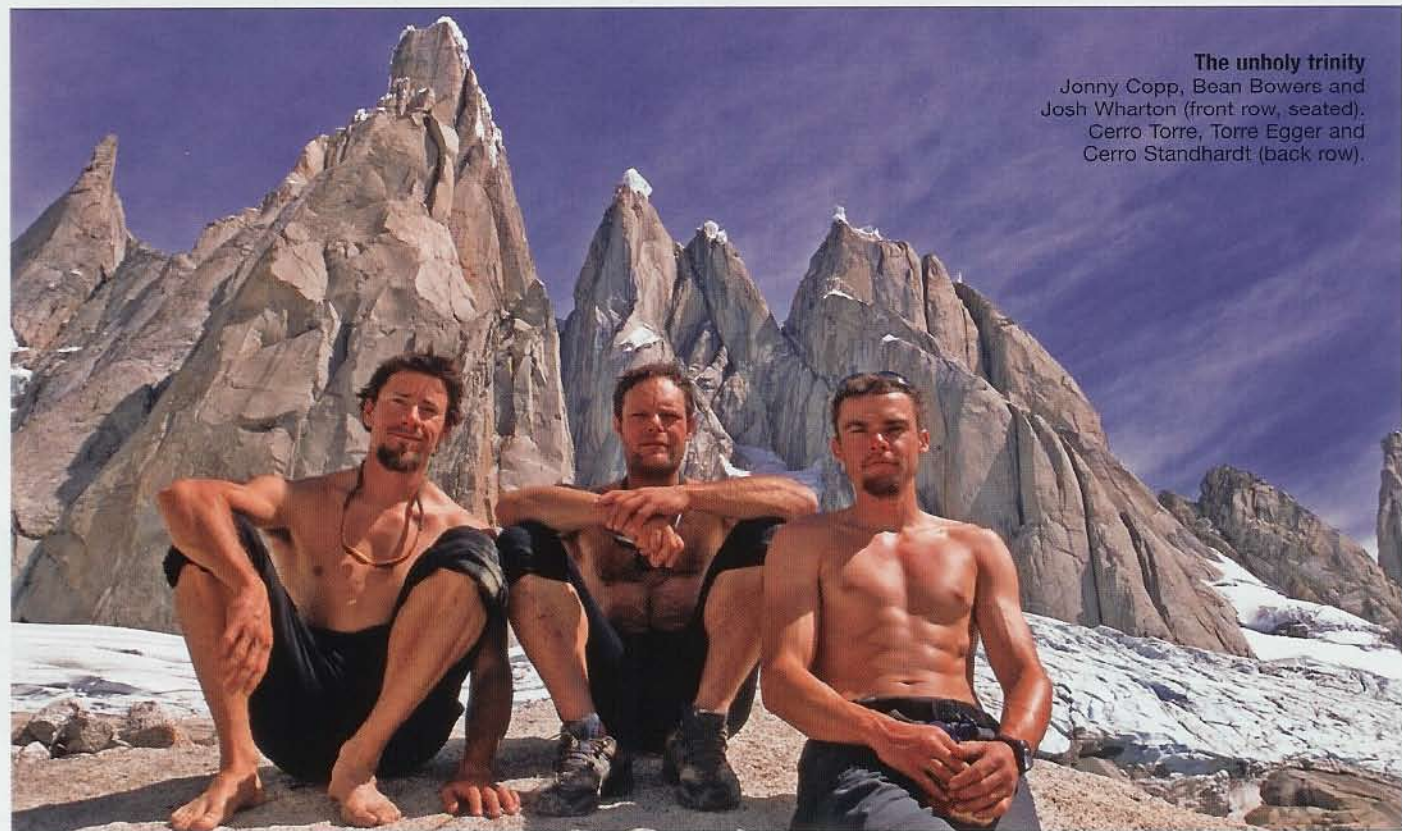
We loaded the bags and sped down the gravel highway into a clearing Patagonian dusk, the stark spikes of Cerro Torre, Torre Egger and their cohorts catching the final colors. Through the cracked windshield, and still 30 miles away, the key features of the towers and faces emerged: a snow patch, a pillar, a summit gendarme. We shared a few stories of epics past, pinpointing various minutiae on the horizon that brought the memories back. But what eventually took our attention was Torre Egger, over 3,000 feet of granite and ice jutting like a canine incisor from the Torre Glacier. First climbed in 1976, by Jim Donini, John Bragg and Jay Wilson, Egger had hosted only a handful of people and seen just one alpine-style ascent. We wanted to climb it, too.

The frenetic energy brought on by a weather window immediately took hold of us as we bounced into El Chalten. There would be no lounging around with the maté gourd. We rendezvoused with our buddy Josh Wharton, packed the ne-



Retreating from the
belly of the beast.

“Guess it
wasn't my day,
Or, maybe it was.”



The unholy trinity
 Jonny Copp, Bean Bowers and
 Josh Wharton (front row, seated).
 Cerro Torre, Torre Egger and
 Cerro Standhardt (back row).

cessities and started hiking. Bean, Josh and I, bolstered by the Innsbruck weather report¹, set out from Bean's house to attempt Torre Egger in single-push style.

Josh, the youngest of our trio, had left Colorado a week before me. He is the most motivated and talented climber I know and, at 26, has already completed a lifetime's worth of impressive first ascents, from the Great Trango Tower's *Azeem Ridge*, in Pakistan, to *Pecking Order*, in The Northwest Territories, to hard sport routes on his home crags in western Colorado. We have shared many a last food bar together, hollered "ROCK!" countless times at one another and spent cold nights huddled closer than friends of the same sex should. Josh had already hiked the 18-mile approach a few times in the past week and was amazed that humans actually trekked for "fun." Bean and I, after only a day's approach, fell easily into a slanderous camaraderie with Josh, laughing that we couldn't even associate the *it-doesn't-have-to-be-fun-to-be-fun* theory

with this slogging. For us, it was a means to an end.

We hadn't totally lost the love of the journey over, say, the destination. Our advanced camp below the peaks was most of a day's hike from town. We would sleep a few hours there and then continue atop hard, morning snow to the base of the Torre. On the way in, beech forests gave way to loose terminal moraines that meandered onto the blue ice of the Torre Glacier. We carried only a light rack, ice gear, two ropes and a few days' worth of food, so moving over the variable terrain was pleasurable. But the journey didn't really begin until bluish headlamp light was bouncing off the steepening icefall at 3 a.m., until gloves pulled straps to tighten crampons, until my only light source popped off my head and bounced down into darkness. I shook my head and laughed to myself. Not wanting to upset that precarious balance between motivation and reason, I didn't say a word. Josh finally caught me. And, with a grin I know too well, he didn't say a word.

In the darkness we threw rock-paper-scissors. I won. Josh came in second. Bean, quickly calculating that third place meant taking the final block of leads, including the horrifying summit mushroom, let out a brusque grunt. At first

light, squinting to discern features at the base of the east face of this half-mile-tall tower, we re-racked and set off, simul-climbing mixed terrain. From a distance, the prow we were now on appeared monolithic. But up close, features that looked like flakes and seams grew into chimneys and leaning pillars of stone. Navigational decisions through this suddenly 3D puzzle became critical.

After we'd gone non-stop for 10 hours, numbers quickly became a theme, a way of describing our setting, the weather, our condition and speed, even our emotions. We were three-quarters of the way up the tower. I had led the first 20 pitches. Now Josh reached and stemmed above us with the two ropes trailing down behind. The time of day (3 p.m.) meant more snow-melt and mandatory wet chimneys and offwidths. Josh caught the brunt of one waterfall and, as wind velocity increased, began losing precious body heat. By the time Bean and I joined him at the belay, he was shivering; then he went dangerously calm. We had minutes to make a decision.

We gave Josh our warm clothes. Bean shivered, too, and lit up a ciggy. We all stared blankly at the stone, then at each other, then at the sky and back again. It was hard to swallow; we were going down. *(continued on page 101)*

¹ Due to the lack of good weather information available for Patagonia, Thomas Huber had employed a meteorologist in Austria to provide periodic forecasts via satellite phone. No climbing decisions were made in the 2005 climbing season without first consulting the "Innsbruck Report."

Those first few pitches of granite passing on the descent felt like a slow-motion fall. Humorless and simply reacting to a situation, we set anchors and slid down our ropes. Torre Egger was the ultimate conditions-dependent testpiece—not necessarily the hardest mountain, but tough and unpredictable. To climb it, we would need the fickle and harsh Patagonian weather to comply, we'd need to be through the waterfalls early in the day, we'd have to climb the majority of the route in daylight for speed, and we'd need a cold snap to freeze solid the final ice mushroom. As the fourth rappel coursed by, I glanced over at Bean with a disquieted expression and a slight nod. We were simul-rappelling off one Stopper and one carabiner when, suddenly, we tightened our grip and swung toward each other. Josh, above us, was warming up a bit and eating some food. “We haven’t given this thing our best, have we?” Bean asked.

“No” I said. “We haven’t.”

Climbing For Numbers

Josh, Bean and I lowered to the best ledge we could find—just big enough to sit on—and had taken a vote, considering Josh’s improved condition. We’d quantified our motivation into numbers between one and 10, with one being absolute desire to go down and 10 meaning full commitment to try for the summit. The mean number was exactly 5. Mathematically, we were neither going up nor down². So we sat, jumped around, laughed and shivered all night without a stove or sleeping bags or water.

We started up again in the dark around 4 a.m. Josh, having dried out, decided to re-climb the five pitches he had led the day before. What would have been 5.12 became 5.10 A1. The light sifted in an hour later, our surroundings morphing slowly from a grainy black and white to Technicolor. Paper-thin verglas had replaced the waterfalls of the day before, and the climbing was technical, with traverses and pendulums. Josh pulled up on loose spikes of rock hanging out of the cracks. Bean and I followed, delicately climbing side by side, with the two tiny backpacks.

The mountain was changing by the minute. Climbing for numbers gained a

new meaning. We were constantly “doing the math,” assessing meters left to climb, sun and temperature rising, snow and ice melting, and hours of good weather remaining. Then, Bean stepped up for the third and final block of leads. We were all in this together, but Bean’s losing the rochambeaux 29 hours earlier meant he alone would solve the last unknown variable: the mushroom. As his burly frame left Josh and I at the belay, he grumbled something. I hadn’t caught what he’d said, and I didn’t see him again for three hours.

Please see Bean Bowcrs’ vignette on the next page.

A Call to Laughter

Bean’s fall ripped my anchor and yanked me 15 feet up the face. When he impacted into the ice bulge with a thud, we were counter-balanced, almost eye-to-eye, hanging off one ice screw buried in the mushroom. Half a second later, a soaring load of snice pummeled him. As I peered into the soaking mass of an apparently dead Bean, I saw movement. Then I saw an expression of exhaustion, then, miraculously, anger and a slight cynical smirk. I tried to stop myself from laughing, but couldn’t. I laughed loudly, very loudly, like the air in my lungs wasn’t enough and I wanted more. It wasn’t a funny laugh, or a nervous one. It was something different, a call to miraculous, monstrous things. I looked back at Josh, below on the rock at a TCU anchor; he was speechless. Without a second thought, we knew it was time to go down.

During the rotten and precarious descent, about 12 hours in total, checking each others’ systems again and again, testing anchors, route finding, etc., we came to a consensus. We would never try this mountain again. Yes, we had fallen short. But the idea of going back for the final 20 feet almost felt blasphemous—as if the reason we came here was to confront and conquer. Maybe it was, to some extent, initially. But as we walked away from Egger, I felt as rewarded, if not more so, than I have after successful summit days in this range. Bean was alive—we all were, including this mountain—and that felt substantial. What’s more, for a few intense days in February, we had tried our best.

Jonny Copp specializes in putting himself and his partners at risk by tackling imposing routes while simultaneously looking for the perfect photo.

² Upon reviewing this article, a friend of Mr. Copp (and statistician) noted that a mean vote of “5” indicated not collective neutrality but rather an average desire to descend the mountain. The announcement of this miscalculation was met with a blank stare and an agreement to not tell Bean.