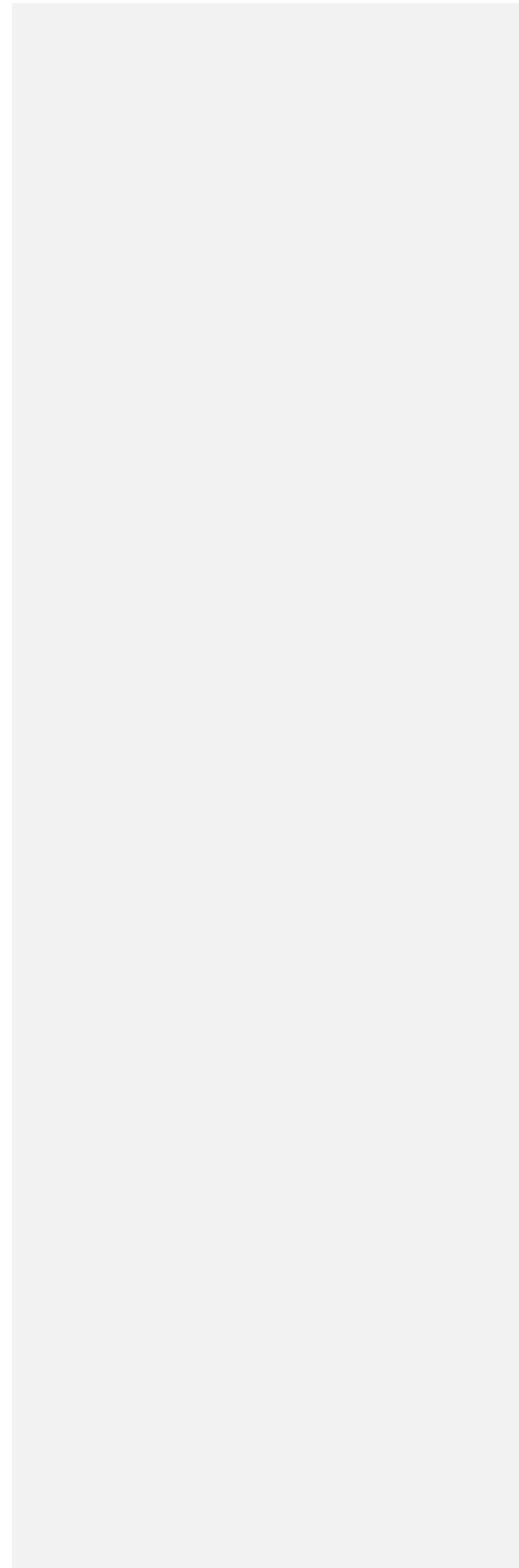


Dreher

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Edelweiss
Chipper Dreher



“That’s edelweiss. It grows in the mountains, above the tree line. Which means he climbed up there to get it. Supposed to be the mark of a true soldier.” -Captain Nixon, Band of Brothers

There exists a flower in the European Alps more culturally significant and sought after than any in the world. One so rare that few will actually have the chance to witness it blossom in its endemic habitat, hoping instead to propagate or plant it themselves in an ordinary garden.

Known as the Flower of the Alps, Edelweiss (*Leontopodium alpinum*) is a woolly Alpine perennial known for the hairy, white bract flowers concealing a bright yellow, seed-bearing center. The tomentose leaves are covered with thick whiskers which serve to protect the sturdy plant during the extreme elements and can take up to a few years to gather enough resources just to sprout above the ground.

They bloom only in the late summer months, specifically between July and August until the thick Autumn snowfall kills the aerial portion of the plant and lulls the roots into a dormant sleep to last the entire winter. In full bloom, the daisy can grow up to sixteen inches and is a significant provider for mountain pollinators like bees and butterflies, providing a reward for their arduous conditions in the highlands. It provides a refuge to other small critters and invertebrates who may use the thick leaves as shelter and protection from predators. It is the ultimate indicator of biodiversity on European mountains; a healthy population is the sign of a healthy mountain so to speak.

The flower is a cultural phenomenon. Early European cultures viewed it as a talisman of good luck. It was seen as a sign of eternal love and purity of spirit which, considering the circumstances in which it grows, makes sense. It is a symbol of resilience. Pure, limpid white

leaves protect delicate yellow blossoms through ice, snow, frozen soil, low sunlight and anything else that which Mother Nature might throw. It is a protector and safe haven for the small, nervous inhabitants that dare to brave the high altitude. Beautiful and tough as nails, it is a rugged, divine species. Perhaps it should be no surprise then that humans have picked it close to extinction.

Today, spotting Edelweiss in the wild is exceedingly rare. It is considered an endangered species and picking the wildflower is a crime in most countries.

However, that doesn't stop many from trying.

It has been seen as a sign of true courage for a climber or mountaineer to pick the flower as they only grow in dangerous, extreme climates, typically above the tree line. It was mentioned in *Band of Brothers* when a dead German with a white bulb pinned on his lapel is found by Easy company. They marvel and appreciate the man, a brief moment of humanity in the midst of a brutal war.

I became aware of the plant very early in my life. I have been obsessed with the perennial since my viewing of *The Sound of Music* when I was a child. One of my favorite songs of all time, to this day, remains *Edelweiss* sung by Bill Lee and Charmian Carr. The song first occurs in a very moving scene. Captain Trapp, a very closed off and severe disciplinarian, has been emotionally unavailable since the death of his wife. He finds out his new governess Maria has been allowing his children to prance and sing around Salzburg, engaging in what he deems foolish and silly behavior.

In reality, Maria has just allowed them to act as children ought to be able and for the first time since the death of their mother, they are given a much-needed respite from the intense structure of the Trapp daily life. Unaware of this fact, Von Trapp takes his anger out on Maria

and orders her to return to the Abbey from whence she came. An Abbey with which she is already on thin ice.

However, he notices that music has gracefully returned to the house for the first time in many years; something he used to love very dearly. Eventually, after hearing the children sing a rendition of *The Sound of Music*, he changes his mind and allows her to stay. The children then encourage him to sing a song for which he used to be known to sing, *Edelweiss*.

Each time I hear it, chills flood my body and roll glissading down the length of my spine. It is a special moment. He chose beauty over the easy, downward cycle of suffering and the words of the song stuck with me like a chronic itch, never to be scratched completely. It is a beautiful tribute to the flower and the deeper symbolic spirit represented in so many Bavarian natives.

I had to see Edelweiss personally. I wanted to feel that beauty of which the von Trapp family sung.

Luckily, I ended up in just the right place: Germany.

Garmisch-Partenkirchen

The mountains of Germany are misunderstood. While alpinism and modern mountaineering as we know it began in the playground of these peaks, Germany's sect of Alps are seemingly scoffed at in the climbing community. No summit is more than a few hours work to the top, the conditions are much easier and softer, the infrastructure more efficiently designed and scaled.

It would seem that the gentle, lofty peaks of the Deutschland are consistently belittled in favor of the haughty, supercilious French cathedrals or the spindling, fibrillated spires of the Italian Dolomites. Admittedly, if one is looking for a true climb, France, Switzerland, Austria, will pose the highest degree of difficulty. Mount Blanc, Matterhorn, Dom, Monte Rosa, Lyskamm all eclipse the entirety of any given Bavarian peak.

However, it is the opinion of this man that German mountains are some of the most dynamic and interesting to be found in any sect of the globe. It is the perfect playground for one beginning their journey into alpinism.

A veritable training course of Klettersteigs, ledges, shale fields, fording and roping that whets an ordinary, inexperienced novice into a sharpened pioneer who may now perform the most incredible tasks in the most perfunctory of manner. It is a first-class education regarding the respect one must have for a mountain and the earth in general.

One learns how a great range of factors like diet, meteorology, equipment, wind, mental status, UV range, the tread of a boot, breath work combine to form a subtext to any climb that ultimately influences the success or failure of one's attempt. With the skill gained in the

highlands of the German landscape, a true explorer is born and may find they have a confidence hereunto other climbers may not compete with.

These are abilities for which a Florida boy could only desiderate in a state without so much as a hill. Climbing was something only done in a gym under the supervision of a pretentious teenager who wanted only to mock your shoes and claim he could send El Capitan if he wanted. I had never actually considered true climbing a reality for me.

It is here that I found myself gazing fixedly again toward the Zugspitze massif, dreaming of the day I may find myself surmounting the mountain and looking down upon the direction of my current shadow.

These are moments that still heavily imprint into my stream of consciousness and are felt deeply in my memory. A song, a picture, a similar smell or breath of wind all can unlock in me memories of this climb to the top that is not unlike a Manchurian candidate rising to the beat of a trigger word to do the bidding of a power larger than oneself.

The Beginnings

The story begins long before the day of our ascent. I had made a few climbs prior with a coworker named Kemper. We had very similar styles and mentalities which created an immediate bond of trust, a necessary factor in an environment where personal safety was of utmost importance. From the beginning, we knew that the Zugspitze was going to be the ultimate goal for that season and had begun training on lesser mountains to condition ourselves. The peaks of the Wank, Kreuzeck and Kramerspitze, as well as frequent trips to the local Boulderhalle all formed the foundation of our alpine resumé and quickly aided in our abilities.

Earlier that Spring, I had come across a man at the Irish Pub in Partenkirchen—IPUB for those acquainted. He was, on the surface, an intense, bearded man with an icy stare. One that made a person choose their words carefully around him for fear of unlocking the frenzied, caged animal that seemed barely tucked away beneath his North Face jacket.

I had heard of him before and all I knew was he had the reputation of being a fierce mountaineer who seemingly touted more conquests than Reinhold Messner. I was in awe of him and a bit hesitant to speak. But more than anything, I was curious to pick his brain and, hopefully, avulse information to make me a better pioneer.

We got to talking and, after having a couple beers, it became clear that he was actually quite friendly. He had that all too familiar German persona of hard exterior and jubilant, agreeable interior. Every German I befriended was so very similar and it is such a big part of why I love them so much. No fake, saccharine Southern hospitality. Only a protective shell and then a true, dear companion.

We spoke for as long as time would allow. He boasted that he had completed all three routes to the Zuggy in a single day. Starting with Höllental at 0300, he ascended in record time, took the Bahn (cable car) down and then began on the next route. Rinse and repeat once more. It was a firsthand lesson on reconsidering the true capabilities of a human. While he said he took a nap after the second ascent at the Münchner Haus before beginning the last push, he still managed to climb a cumulative 8,907 meters in a single day. Those climbing 8,000-meter peaks (considered the 1 percent in mountaineering) typically will break the expedition down into days or even weeks. While this isn't a true one-to-one comparison admittedly, when considering the sheer vertical rise, it is nevertheless one of the most impressive feats of which I've heard personally.

He corroborated that Höllental is the hardest prevailing method of getting to the top. He chose to start there in the morning to preempt the exhaustion that would occur if he had chosen it later down on the road. We ended the night with more advice and another drink or two before parting with kind words, upon which I biked home through the cold, placid streets to ponder about the details of my future ascent. The streetlights whizzing past, blurring and contorting to a single thread of brilliance among the dark winter landscape while a world of possibilities began to bubble within me.

I must now take time to describe the route that we would be attempting to follow to better portray the elements and state of mind that we would be undertaking.

There are three established routes to the top of Germany: The Reintal Valley from the southeast, the Austrian Cirque from the west and the Höllental gorge from the northeast. In terms of difficulty, the Höllental is the most extreme and requires actual climbing gear and equipment such as crampons, hiking poles and via ferrata cables while the other two are much easier and

will typically involve only a bit of scrambling, being straightforward, strenuous hiking more than anything. I never attempted the Austrian route. The Reintal is the longest and still quite demanding but remains non-technical, a test of endurance more than technique.

I wanted all the credibility of completing the toughest one and—more importantly—it was a longer bike ride to reach the trailhead on the Austrian side or to the ski stadium which marks the beginning of the Reintal. I hated biking more than was absolutely necessary, I still do. Therefore, the Höllental was cemented as our choice.

Another such route to the top is technically the Jubiläumsgrat, the ridge (translated literally as Jubilee Ridge) which connects the summits of three of the tallest German mountains: the Alpspitze, the Hochblassen and the Zugspitze. These peaks combine to form the spires of the basin which the razor-thin Jubiläumsgrat gives continuity. If we started by climbing the Alpspitze, a much easier affair, we could simply loop from there to the Zuggy.

This ridge is still, to this day, my white whale. I have every intention of completing it in the coming years as it is considered the most dangerous hike in Germany, if you can even call it a hike. However, we would not yet be attempting this traverse as it requires even more experience and equipment than the Zugspitze and, in this particular season, we had neither the experience nor the equipment necessary. We had desire but it stopped there.

Our route

The Höllental attempt begins as a stunning gorge, a location popular for day trips and less serious, but still rigorous, hikes. One will stoop through man-made caves dug into the carapace

of the mountain and cross chain-linked bridges over the ravine to marvel at the sheer force and baronial effect of such tremendous rushes of water.

Once atop this gorge, a large abode, the Höllentalangerhütte, will await them. Offering comfort and hot meals as well as overnight lodging. The shelter is also typically a place for those attempting hut-to-hut hiking as an alternative to tent or rugged camping. I'm fairly certain classic camping is still technically illegal in Germany. Regardless, H2H is a great way to get lost in the mountains for days or even weeks at a time and comes highly recommended for even the most basic of adventurers. For us, this hütte marked our first fork in the road.

To the left begins the ascent to Alpspitze, straight leads to the Hochblassen and a right will mark the true beginning of the Zuggy. A sign is posted at the lip of this trail, warning that gear, specifically crampons, are absolutely necessary for the trail. The sketchy, melting giant at the base of the vertical face will require it. The sign also omens to go no further upon the trail because it is exceedingly difficult to turn around once started. The words aren't written unnecessarily.

The pilgrimage, past this point, will last for about three hours and will involve scrambling over a couple less-exposed rock faces and traversing up large, portentous couloirs before arriving at the cirque of the entire upper basin. This section resembles a large toilet-bowl with scree fields and moraines directing water, rocks and refuse down to the valley below, snaking and funneling through the various conduits and channels before spitting out at the bottom in the Höllental torrent. The rocks seen up there will drift slowly downwards and be, one day, be found in the creek many Grainau residents love to smoke their cigarettes next to.

Once through the fields, the looming Höllentalferner glacier lies in wait at the bottom of the east face of the Riffelwandspitzen peak and Zugspitze wall. Eclipsed by the rock and

untouched by the sun, it is the last major obstacle one must face on the ground before beginning the sheer ascent of the face. From there, the climb begins. Once strapped in, climbers will inch and edge their way up the vertical face for nigh on three hours. Facing crumbly rock, sudden drop-offs, rusted and degrading metal footholds, and extreme weather changes, this section is the most technical and terrifying of the entire ordeal. This is where the majority of helicopter rescues will occur and becomes the truest test of character.

Near the top, the terrain will finally begin to flatten out as one scrambles their way around rock towers and bird nests. The walkway becomes adorned with plaques, some dedicated to the mountain's first conqueror, Josef Naus and his crew, some to those who have lost their lives on the mountain.

Eventually, a corner is rounded and those have made it this far may catch a glimpse of the large gold cross that delineates the true ceiling of Germany and Avalanche Peak.

This is the path Kemper and I were set to begin. The day was September first.

*The Mountain***0430**

I awoke to the blare of my phone alarm and the smell of coffee in the pot I had programmed to be ready in the morning. Folgers from the PX. My bag had been packed since noon the day previous so I had very little actual prep to do in the morning besides dressing myself. I am not a morning person so I rely on these tricks to stay alive.

The contents of the bag (that I borrowed from Brendan) were as follows: PETZL via ferrata ropes and harness, micro-spikes, PETZL helmet, two-liter camelback pouch, hiking poles, an extra water bottle, mini first-aid kit, two boxes of raisins, two apples, beef jerky, a bag of cashews, and a flask of Jameson.

Seeing as this was my first time packing with the intent of an intense climb, I definitely could have done a much better job. Realistically, I packed like an ape. Why I thought an entire one-pound bag of cashews was necessary is beyond me, yet such was the reality of my situation. Kemper had much the same equipment in his bag but with two peanut butter sandwiches as an accessory, rather than a bag of cashews.

The bag I had borrowed had enough support and never felt overwhelming, especially on some of the sketchier bits of climbing. In the end, I ended up begging, borrowing, or stealing most of the equipment needed for this climb; I considered that an extension of my true adventurer spirit. Brendan's loan to me was a discounted Black Diamond Trail Vista backpack that I'm pretty sure he found at the base thrift store. I think that's where most of us at Edelweiss found our treasures. Either way, it clung to me like Saran Wrap the duration of the climb and for that I'm extremely grateful.

I was enrobed in discount hiking pants from Mountain Warehouse, a wife-beater (pleaser), a dri-fit shirt from a 10k I ran a few years earlier, a gaiter and my trusty off-brand hiking boots that I still wear to this day. While I admittedly looked quite homeless and unprofessional, I nonetheless felt the part of a ruthless vagabond explorer and had a serene calm about me as I grabbed my bag and tossed the rest of my coffee.

My roommate Luke was talking in his sleep; I wished him sweet dreams as I marched out the door.

Kemper and I met at the bike racks and mounted up for the twenty-minute ride to Grainau, the municipality that hosts the Höllental gorge trailhead. I did not yet have a bike at this point in my life (it had already been a year and a half), so I cruised around the rack until I found one unlocked and made a mental promise to bring it back safe so long as I weathered the journey myself. As I would find out halfway through my hike, the bike belonged to Allison. While scrambling up a ledge, I got a call from her asking if I had taken it that morning; I reluctantly had to affirm her belief. What I neglected to tell her was that I forgot to lock it up at the trailhead and it might very well be stolen.

For those who have never experienced a bike ride through Garmisch-Partenkirchen's backcountry, I can only describe it as a religious experience.

The Hammersbacher Fußweg is a large valley snaking its way through the Wettersteingebirge mountain range, it is green against a backdrop of gray. There are cows and open prairies drifting among an entire microcosm of crisscrossing gravel and paved trails hurried on the way to their destinations.

There are vast fields of the richest chartreuse verdure spotted with deep-brown log huts built as winter storage for animal grain and farm equipment. Goats ramble along the sloping

sides of the hills closer to the Kreuzeck and sputtering creeks flow from one of many rivers slanting down from the mountain glaciers to intersect the cow pastures. Paraglider's drift overhead on sunny days and moonlight shines brightly on the crisp Autumn nights.

Any excuse to go for a bike ride or a casual walk in this open field is taken immediately. It is a beauty that feels hallucinatory. The deepest, most resplendent colors mingle with the scent of an unadulterated air and healthy farmland to delicately activate the olfactory senses—giving the impression that it an oil composition accidentally stepped into rather than the present reality.

We rode through the winding, paved trails by the light of the moon, no sounds to interrupt the peace other than the occasional rush of a creek or low of a cow. The prominence of the mountain cirque grew nearer to us and the streetlights of Grainau became visible before long. Eventually the outskirts of the city extended its arms to greet and envelop us in the quiet of a serene slumber which so many residents were enjoying. The night became absolutely silent; no noises audible for another five minutes save the pitter-patter of our bike tires as we rode along the uneven cobblestone streets.

We began to hear that for which we had been listening. The intense rush of glacial water that came billowing out in roaring crescendos as a result of its journey more than 2,900 meters downward. The Hammersbach torrent flowed beneath us as we crossed the bridge and reached the official trailhead for the Höllentalklamm. The damp, misty air suffusing our clothes and exposed skin, we locked up the bikes (at least Kemper did) and sat for a moment to listen to the flux of the water before looking at each other and nodding.

It was time to begin.

0500

By the time we take our first step, we are right on time—a rarity for me. Our goal is to have a start early enough to avoid most of the intense sun and heat as well as beat the traffic to the top. There would likely be many others making the same journey today as well. It was September 1st, the season was drawing to a close and everyone else who had also put off the hike until the last second would likely be joining us. Oktoberfest was beginning soon so tourists had already begun to flood the area in anticipation.

The Höllentalklamm begins with an intense elevation gain. We cross the water a few times on rickety, wooden bridges that feel akin to a ladder placed over a crevasse by Sherpas before the trail veers off into the forest for the next few hundred vertical meters. Not one month before, a few hikers had died on these very bridges as intense flash flooding brought water lines rushing high above them. They were swept out into the valley and recovered a few miles down the winding river. The destruction from these floods could still be seen in some corners of the hike as downed trees, bushes and rocks were clumped into corners where the water had laid them to rest.

Past these bridges, the path requires switchbacks over damp, crumbly rock before reaching more stable footing far above the white-water. Within a few minutes, any morning chill still residing in my body was stomped out by the intense workout. I began to break a sweat.

We followed these switchbacks and began quietly talking and telling jokes to take our mind off the pain. I don't think have Kemper and I ever had a serious conversation once in our lives; it becomes a pissing contest of who can make the other laugh the hardest. But, more importantly, it's one of the biggest factors in my trust and admiration toward him. We both know

how to buckle down when needed, but in the grind we can be silly and relax while speaking about nothing. You need the yin and the yang in a hiking partner.

The jokes began to flow and it felt like the steep gradient was no more intense than walking through a prairie. I believe this is something of utmost importance to have when undertaking a feat like this. I believe, however, that if I ever shared the jokes we told on that mountain, we would both be sent to prison without the possibility of parole.

The trail began to taper off and become less extreme so we stopped for a quick water break before continuing toward our first landmark, the entrance of the gorge. The sun is still not up so we rely on the use of our headlamps to guide us along the increasingly narrow path that leads directly to the edge of the rock face. The drop to the left is an immense one as we get closer to the stone wall, probably 300 meters straight down, but the trail is so wide that this is of no concern. Yet, anyway.

Upon nearing the grey monolith, a series of manmade, wooden switchbacks await the traveler to carry them to the gorge entrance and hütte. During the summer business hours, this hütte also sells small bites as well as water, tea, beer and wine and is a beautiful lookout over the Valley of Hell etched into the limestone. If one squints, the edge of Garmisch city limits can be seen as well. This particular morning, it was too foggy to see more than twenty meters in any general direction so it was a moot point for us.

Seeing as it was still only 0530, we were able to bypass the entrance fee for the gorge and we pass through the silver, revolving gate without an issue. We are in the Höllentalklamm after only thirty minutes of moderate hiking. We are making great time.

0530

Commented [CD1]: Flesh out

There are two gorge hikes in Garmisch, the Partnach and the Höllental.

The Partnach is gentle, sloping and, honestly, overcrowded. It starts at the opposite end of the Wettersteingebirge; toward the northern Partenkirchen city limit, near Kaisenbad and the old Olympic stadium. It is the most accessible of the gorge hikes and easily the most popular. Take one look at any trip guide to Garmisch and you'll likely see Partnach at the top of the list. It is a winding, gently sloping route carved through the base of eighty-meter-tall limestone walls.

Visitors crawl, hunch and shuffle through the tight, cramped pathways while being met with mist spraying from all directions. The gorge eventually opens up into a great canyon; a bit of sunlight visible only from the slit above while no direct rays reach us at the bottom. A bit further past the gorge is also the beginning of the Reintal Valley. This attaches most of the mountains in the Wettersteingebirge into a cohesive path and is a good place for most basic mountaineers to begin.

However, we were no basic mountaineers.

First explored by Adolf Zoeppritz in the early 1900s, the Höllental is a series of stairs and steel cable bridges carved out and strung up in a damp, meandering labyrinth of rock. Water drips over the path and slips down the side of the walls into the limestone path, splashing soddenly onto the heads of passersby.

The cold, soggy air curates a dank atmosphere that brings the morning chill right back to my spine. It is completely dark while we navigate the tunnels and stairs; a dissonant feeling brooding within us as we know the water is rushing right below our feet but we are unable to see any direct evidence to that effect. All we can do is put one foot in front of the other and rely on the light from our headlamps to keep us in the right direction. It is fortunate that there is only one

right path—I would have been lost in a heartbeat. Our boots continue to collide with the iron mesh bridges and ring out sharply, even amidst the roar of the water.

The air smells moldy and stale, stalagmites and slags dangle precariously from the ceiling as we duck and navigate around obstacles and further into the caverns. We are unrelenting and push faster. We snap a couple blackmail-worthy photos of each other to laugh at later and document our time spelunking.

With luck, there are no slips, trips or falls and the enormous cavern begins to open up wider and wider before we can sense the sound of the water is beginning to dim. It takes us only thirty minutes to reach fresh air atop the gorge and find ourselves in a gaunt valley, level with the creek only moments away from its race through the gorge.

Once again, we are ensconced in a thick quiet; a blanket of dark, heavy liquid sheathing us from the outside world. It is still pitch black and we haven't passed a single soul yet. It must be a slow day on the mountain; I figured we would pass at least a couple people before now but we haven't seen any sign of humanity since the very beginning of our trek.

Headlamps still burning strong, we continue.

0600

The next landmark for us is the Höllentalangerhütte chalet, an oasis for weary travelers lost in the morass of the Wettersteingebirge. Situated in the heart of the lower basin, it typically will be a launching point for any number of hikes or climbs. Available for overnight stays, day trips, or just a quick beer, it is the Mecca for community and travelers ebullient on their journeys. We heard they serve breakfast there and were anxious to find out.

Still lost in the darkness, the hike creeps typically along without much ado. Listening to the dull crunch of the gravel trail underneath our boots, we begin to question the series of cow hoof prints that are starting to mottle the dirt and grass. We see heaping, ochre scads of dung littering the path—the steam still fluttering from the piles and enticing the flies hovering above—leading us to ponder how a herd of cows reached this altitude. We never found out. While we heard the loo of the herd many times and the tinkling of the bells piercing the heavy silence, never once were we able to make out any discernible outline of an animal.

The gradient of the sky had begun to transition from black to blue by the time we were nearing the chalet. We were already closing in on the top of the hill upon which the Hutte rests.

A deep fog had been resting atop us for an undefined period of time and, according to the radar, was set to last the entire day. We were literally within the cloud cover after just two hours of hiking and they were not soon to depart. It seemed they would be our fluffy, low-visibility companions for our journey. Even though the sun was finally peeking out, visibility would not be improving; we would be in the blind until we returned to the valley.

It could be both a curse and a blessing, depending on the person reading. Curse for Kemper and me, as we wanted to see the fruit of our spoils—looking down upon the plains from which we rose and witness the magnitude of the mountain that we were climbing. A blessing for

anyone scared of heights who doesn't have to see the vertical drop just inches from their soles. My dad probably would view it as a blessing; he's scared just being 6'3".

As the dark blue sky began to imbibe with hues of white, we rounded the last hill and took in the pastoral sight of the Höllentalangerhütte standing before us, marking the end of the first third of our journey. Patio tables empty and standing raptly at attention, umbrellas drooped solemnly at ease over the banister, a solitary light burning inside the house. Not a creature seemed to be stirring, not even a mouse. Devastatingly, we saw no evidence of breakfast when looking through the downstairs window and so resigned ourselves to the meager food we had packed.

0630

Stowing our belongings on the table, I unearthed the beef jerky from my pack while Kemper took to his peanut butter sandwich like a rabid dog in the throes of fury. It was frightening to watch.

Neither of us much wanted to sit for fear of icing out our legs and being unable to stand again so we stood and observed the fork in the trail above us, contemplating what the future might hold. The next third of the hike was set to be the least eventful, in theory. It was a fairly straightforward portion according to Alltrails and so we reckoned we might hike it as fast as possible to beat the crowd (what crowd) to the summit. We were full of ego and spirit without any idea of what we might be in for.

And boy was I in for it.

Tossing aside my finished apple, we checked our gear and did a quick inventory to assure ourselves everything was accounted for. This was, in reality, our last chance to turn back. With the exception of a costly helicopter ride, there weren't any easy ways back down from this point on. With the manner in which the Höllentalklamm was set up as well as the typical heavy foot traffic, this climb is meant as a one-way route. From the top, one can exit through a different path or the Zugspitzbahn, but scrambling back down the same way up is not an option.

Of course, no one had told us this. Things are a lot easier when you don't know the stakes you're playing for. We figured we were in for just a few more hours of moderate hiking before having a leisurely lunch and returning back down.

Once again, I was from Florida. Dangerous climbs didn't register with me as I had no experience I could really draw from. All the preparation we had done never felt dangerous or risky up to this point. Yet, I still thought I knew what climbing was.

We placed our packs back squarely upon our shoulders and clipped the middle straps, settling the equilibrium and assuring they would not move during the future climbs to come.

We nodded at each other and started back down the path, stopping at the sign on the right to notice that it demanded anyone continuing further have crampons ready for the glacier.

Neither of us, by official standards, actually had crampons. We had spikes.

A small distinction, but an important one. Crampons are much longer and deeper and fishhook into ice to make glacier travel or ice climbing a thing of ease. They might look evil but are incredibly nifty. Rather than sizes, the spikes will come in a range of "points" typically ranging between ten to twenty, twenty being both the safest and most aggressive shape. With the right crampon, one doesn't even have to take off their gloves to put it on—they can just step in, clip to their heel, and be completely safe. With basic, twelve-point, step-in crampons, walking across a glacier is almost easier than walking on concrete.

I had shitty, strap-on micro-spikes and Kemper had what looked like a bike chain he wrapped around his shoes. In short, we did not have the tools we needed. We had cautious, walk-around-town-in-the-fluffy-snow crampons on. In short, we had a dangerous misunderstanding of the tools necessary to safely hike a glacier.

However, like always, neither of us really figured it would be that big of a deal; Kemper even went so far to say that he heard stories of Germans who did it in their tennis shoes. Looking back now, I think he was lying.

We took one more moment to read the sign and then we were off.

One hour passed uneventfully. More vertical elevation. More jokes. More stumbles and trips. More signs of cows.

The sky now completely lit yet so filled with fog it would have been an impossible task to determine which direction was which. I recalled accounts from avalanche survivors detailing how, once buried, they were completely unaware which way was up and which was down. Was that going to be me today?

We were surrounded by a blizzard of clouds and so were marking our progress only through the Alltrails GPS as we couldn't see more than twenty meters or so in any direction. In actuality, our path was skirting the Southern ridge of the mountain system right before it rose above the tree line.

We hiked along glossy, rolling hills and through lonely, empty prairies; my mind marveled at the fact that an ecosystem like this should exist in so high an elevation. We were surrounded by large fields of the greenest grass, yellowish-gray rock strewn amongst the expanse. Seemingly untouched by the hand of man and scarcely a bird call to echo through the lonely desert, it was as though I was hiking through a snow globe. Surrounded on all sides by great walls, unburdened and devoid of living creatures—it was my first true moment of peace.

Truthfully, if I was able to remain there for all eternity, I would. Unexplored areas utterly bereft of human interaction have always appealed to me and the halcyon of this garden of the gods touched me for life. As if by magic, for a brief few minutes, the clouds parted and the entirety of the plateau unfurled before me. I stared dumbfounded in wonder at the mountain prairies laid out.

I decided I'd like my ashes scattered there whenever I should pass.

Nonetheless, the clouds soon returned and it was time for the trek to continue. We reached the top of the knoll and found that we had backed into what seemed to be an impassable wall. At first, we saw no flares upon the rock to mark the trail and thought possibly we had run afoul of the designated path; however, our GPS signaled we were in the right spot and we knew we had followed the beacons closely to this point.

After some observation of the rock face, we finally saw it. Quite a bit up the rock, the familiar red paint slashed with white could be seen printed against the mossy, green limestone and we quickly comprehended the reality of the situation: we were going up.

0830

I liked watching *Free Solo* as much as the next guy and felt myself a pretty competent climber, but an unexpected climb up a twenty-meter rock face was not quite what I envisioned my day looking like when I woke up that morning.

I expected supported, aid climbing—not scrambling free solos to the top. I expected the infrastructure to be better and more developed to avoid something like this but unfortunately I was incontestably wrong. This was the first major shock today, but it wouldn't be the last. Obviously whatever I had thought to expect was not going to happen. This was the real deal.

It was not quite a sheer face; it was in between hiking and rock climbing. There was no real, tenable exposure but I still was vastly unprepared. No more than a sixty-five-degree gradient, it was feasible for someone who was just decently in shape. But that didn't matter; it still was an electrifying jolt to my system.

With any million-mile journey, it starts with a single step. With that climb, it started with a single handhold.

Slowly, we worked our way over the craggy, knotted boulders and squeezed ourselves in contorted positions to chimney up the rock. All was well until we reached a position where a bit of height was required to reach the next handhold. We were hooked in a position about five meters over the previous landing and, if we fell, we would likely survive but it would require a helicopter to evacuate us back to safety.

To continue, we had to reach a hold that protruded out of the chimney feature and into the boulder above. I was below Kemper and we both had four points of contact with the rock to level ourselves in the chimney, slowly inching our way higher. A veritable snail pace of using our hands to push the columns on either side and slide our feet up before wedging our boots against

the walls to increase the position of our hands. Just like Santa Claus trying to escape out up the fireplace.

He had made it virtually to the top when we reached the crux of the problem, we would have to make a very exposed move and grab the outside lid of the chimney before climbing out. The move seemed so exposed and treacherous. Kemper tried to swing out and find the hold but couldn't grab on. Then he tried again, to no avail. Almost losing his footing, he stopped and regrouped, breathing heavily. We both, still wedged in the chimney, began to discuss finding a different way if necessary.

Eventually, he decided he was going to make one last attempt. Blindly arching his hand around the top of the rock, he swung out wildly and, luckily, arrived flush with his target. From there it was a matter of using that hand to leverage out and push off with his feet until he was able to scramble over. He disappeared from sight and I assumed that to mean he had survived. Then it was my turn.

Luckily, my arm is quite a bit longer and I had no real trouble swinging around the rock to pull myself up above the ledge. After a few seconds, I found myself standing with two feet on the ledge overlooking the chimney.

Once completing this move, the rest of the scramble was very straightforward and simple. We walked away from the rock esplanade, feet once again on terra firma--a grey dirt path directing through a field of green. We were much higher now than before; trees no longer disported their friendly, pendulous limbs or provided their merciful shade. We were very close to the base of the mountain walls and didn't have much further to hike before reaching our first, official via ferrata.

Before the start of the ferrata lies a rocky knoll upon which travelers may don their harness and ropes while they gape at the view below them.

By this point, the lower basin was completed and one may look straight down to the gorge and fields below while the city limits lie much further in the distance. The fog is broken again for a bit and we are able to witness all of this and astound at the progress we have made. We must now go straight up insofar as to reach the upper basin, rock fields and glacier. The hard work is still ahead.

0900

We don't stop to rest or eat; we take a quick sip of water from our Camelbacks and put on our equipment while storing our poles. He takes the lead, clipping in and gripping the rock to start. This ferrata is much easier than what we had just made it through, a huge relief for our weary arms. It takes around thirty minutes of sketchy iron rods, crumbly rock and vertical elevation before we reach the spot this ferrata is most known for.

Stretched across a sheer, vertical face is a horizontal line of steel rods hammered into the mountain for one-hundred meters, a metal cable snugly held firm one meter above. Each black rivet is no more than two feet from the previous, with the occasional bent or broken pole sloping downward and facing a heart-rending 200-meter vertical drop. Put simply, three-inch railroad spikes driven into the mountain are all that separate us from certain death in the valley below. Much further across the mountain we can see the next patch of firm rock but we will have no footing besides rivets until then.

Shortly before we are able to make any real progress, we are surpassed by two German men. Now these men are terrifying for two reasons: they are neither out of breath or even slightly winded and, worse, they aren't wearing any protective equipment.

They must obviously practice on this mountain with some frequency because they outpaced us in a matter of minutes and were quite jovial, talking and laughing amidst Kemper and I's struggle. They asked if they could pass us to continue ahead on the horizontal rivets and, of course, we didn't want the lunatics following close behind so we agreed. We stepped down and unclipped, allowing them to walk across the thin poles first and be the guinea pigs.

Without even stopping to consider the danger of their actions, without any harness or rope, they throw their feet out to the vertical face and catch the first spike with ease and grace.

They get through five studs before they even begin to grip the steel cable attached above which Kemper and I would be soon holding onto for dear life. I sat there flabbergasted. It was a good lesson in humility. However good I thought I was, obviously I still had a long way to go before I was a true mountaineer.

The pitch is actually quite manageable and, so long as the fear of heights does not affect us, we should be fine. The fog is thickest here and visibility is less than five meters, meaning that below our feet is a sea of white precluding us from any true concept of what might lie under the spikes. It is strangely comforting but it still felt in a way as though we were treading water in the middle of a deep ocean—blind to any predators or danger or distance.

This final stretch of cable soon ends in a narrow gulch, feeding straight up for a few meters before plateauing to a very pleasant and momentary respite. We clamber to the top finally and the first pilgrimage is completed. In reward, we are greeted by a stunning view of the crater from which we have climbed.

The fog again breaks as though the hiking gods have a cruel sense of humor. A small respite in the clouds for us to taste of the humbling environment before it is once again snatched away within a veil of damp gray mist. However, the brief glimpse inspires me greatly and I feel my first real sense of accomplishment thus far. The sun shines brilliant, golden rays upon the rock faces adorned with the dotted patches of emerald grassland. We can directly trace the trail, a river of silver running through a forest of green and it is an impressive sight to me.

One feels very small standing on that first ridgeline looking upon the fathoms of distance between the current perch and the protracted expansion of grassland.

1000

We turn around when the fog regroups and resets. Looking up, we can see a shale field with a steep gradient ahead of us; grey lees scored by the abrasion of ancient glaciers line the path like Ancient Greek pillars carved for Mount Olympia. The loose scree gives way to another short scramble of hard rock, not steep or exposed enough to warrant a rope or via ferrata but sharp enough to pucker my insides and force cold sweats upon my forehead and spine. It is mercifully short and edges toward a brushy thicket where I stop abruptly.

This is my first real chance to inspect a patch of wildlife “off the beaten path” for my true reason for this climb: edelweiss. We are now at least 1800 meters up and in the ideal biogeographic zone rich in environmental factors that particularize their residency here. Obviously picking the flower, by German law, is “illegal” but I will admit in that moment I ruminated with all the wrong intentions.

Surveying the grass, my hands sifted through individual blades of grass, between rocks, along the branches of the thicket and down among the roots. It was all to no consequence, this clump of greenery was barren of the white Easter eggs for which I searched. I would sadly have to continue my search atop the next valley or rocky face, any opportunity that presented itself to me. I refused to go back emptyhanded.

We grip the great interstices etched into the wall and saddle our way up over into another dirt trail, one that is similar to the countless other kilometers of paths that we have walked already but which turns steep and craggy very quick. We pass sporadic meadows of green, becoming sparser with each step. Once again, I branch off from the main trail quickly while Kemper stops for a quick break and investigate the clumps of grass, straining my eyes for a

glimpse of the woolly, white thing staring back at me. In response, mountebank eggshell wildflowers only laugh mockingly at my abortive attempts while they sway in the breeze and whistle with the wind. I am once again disappointed in the utter lack of Edelweiss. Was the blooming time wrong? Did I misunderstand what early fall meant? From all research I had conducted, this was the perfect opportunity for me to find my prize. Was it possible that Captain Nixon was lying? Maybe it was wrong to base so much of my journey off one quote from a TV show but I just felt that it had to be true. The grassy knolls might just be the wrong place to look in which case I reset my expectations and denied the disappointment bubbling within, returning to the trail. For a spell, success felt tangible. Yet still I continued to trudge onward, beggarly and resentful, without my flower.

1045

The dirt trail continued to rise sharply. My legs felt dangerously close to being too fatigued to keep going and the fog, which prevented us from comprehending how much further remained of this portion, made this the most demoralizing moment of the entire trek. We had covered over 1500 meters (5000 American feet for those playing at home) of straight elevation gain in our four hours on the mountain. The last ten kilometers of which had involved intense switchback hiking and my legs were pumped.

“We are only about two clicks from the summit, as the crow flies,” Kemper continued to repeat. Knowing it drove me crazy, he would repeat *as the crow flies* as often as he thought feasible without being thrown off the mountain. Anytime I asked for a distance check, it was always the same fucking answer. I could have killed him.

I had taken only one real break this entire journey. Admittedly, this is due mainly to my ultra-competitive spirit, especially in these situations—I did not want to stop for fear someone might pass us and make better time. I didn’t just want to climb the mountain; I wanted to conquer it.

But in this moment, those thoughts eluded me as each breath in and out pierced my lungs while my heart pumped a staccato beat of misery. The steep hill never wanted to end. One step. Then another. Just one foot in front of the other. Breathe in, take a step. Breathe out, take another. It became a slog. I wouldn’t look up for fear of a demoralizing distance still to reach. How much further could it possibly be? I braved a look, which carried an obviously unfortunate answer: no end in sight.

Only the fog held in its grasp the answers to the true distance we had left, nothing was observed save more loose rocks skittering and clattering down upon us as we plod up and up and up. It felt as though we were poor animals stuck in a plasket of quicksand, each step forward an agony consummating a quick demise. The deep mist that isolated our journey served as a muzzle and manacle. Prisoners to the mountain we were; subject to its capricious whims and malicious sense of humor before being directed to the courthouse where mother nature served as judge, jury and executioner. Habeas Corpus waived, the weather and landscape alone determined our verdict, unhearing and unconcerned of personal input.

Like all difficult things in life, eventually it will pass. Life will go on; time will continue to tick and all wounds will heal. So it goes with the mountain. The gradient became less severe and finally outright leveled itself to a manageable degree. We stood and licked our chops for a second, insufflating our lungs with air. Here I thought the hard part was over—come to find out we had just finished the easy bits of the hike thus far. An ordinary, decently healthy individual would be capable of all that we had just accomplished, as humbling as that was. At no point where we ever truly in danger, exposed, fearful or felt our skills challenged on a technical level besides that one via ferrata (which still was pretty simple). While yes it was tough hiking, especially for a simpleton from Florida like me, it was merely a question of cardio. Having proved ourselves capable of this challenge, the technical bits began.

Without knowing, we had arrived in the scree field. Brief Roches mountonnées peeked their abraded faces above the loose rock, the jagged lees dropping sharply and colliding against the plane, a backdrop of white rock poxed by mossy lichen against the silver quarry. Limestone pavement, carved by the millenniums of glacial erosion, formed brief walls and castle turret

features, as though protecting the massive basin from intruders wishing to seek harm. It was an obstacle course of jagged walls and cliffs on our way to the toilet bowl basin.

It recalled to me the story of the foundation of the Münchner Haus. The Wehrmacht situated a cable car station (soon to be Münchner Haus) on one of the three summits and destroyed another, the original tallest peak in Germany, for a potential Nazi flight control station in 1938. Ground was never broken and logistical infrastructure never determined as the Nazi party began to direct resources toward other avenues (you know what), and so the tallest mountain in Germany was irrevocably stunted and altered, leaving only one summit of the three remaining. One that was noticeably shorter and now sits lonely as a survivor of patricide of its German sons and daughters.

The turrets gracefully allow us to continue as we traverse the narrow trail and gradually exit the steep couloir into a truly open expanse. The first of the entire journey, a veritable desert that owes its topography to the fact it is an enormous cirque in this Alpine massif. As if on cue, the fog gods decide to play their tricks on us and cut through swiftly and decisively. We are left with a complete view of the basin in which we sit. We are the stains in the giant toilet bowl. Far in the distance, I see that for which I have the most trepidation and excitement: the Höllentalferner glacier.

My breath is taken away. From where I sit, it looks innocent. A brief, white landing strip nestled cozily in the protective walls of the monoliths above. Then, the true scale of what I see hits me and I genuinely, for the first time, grow worried. It goes straight up. It is massive. I reckon it is an absolute minimum distance of four football fields (or soccer pitches) from head to tail. The white tract is speckled with small black pinpricks, seemingly slowly contorting and twinkling, as though a reversal of the stars in the night. I realize those dots are people.

“Surely we don’t have to walk across it.”

“No man I think that’s us.”

“There’s no way. It’s got to be another glacier or patch of ice we actually hike across.”

“I don’t think so, Alltrails is leading us right there, it’s the start of the next via ferrata.

Maybe there is a way around it but I’m pretty sure that’s the way through.”

“Well— it’s been nice knowing you.”

“You’re going to be fine you coward,” Kemper yells at me.

I turn my attention back to the situation in which we seem to have found ourselves. It felt like we had entered into a lobster trap, maybe the turrets we passed weren’t protecting the mountain but rather giving a warning. I wondered if we had entered through the gates of hell and just missed an etching of Dante’s quote: “*Abandon all hope, ye who enter here*”. The name Höllental suddenly gave way to clarity and comprehension, this really was a valley of hell. One passes through these turrets to begin an odyssey from which they cannot turn back. The mountain stood ready to fight and Kemper and I sure had one coming to us.

1145

The scree field didn't always look so deserted and empty. The Höllentalferner glacier once covered the entire area of the basin as recently as the late Nineteenth century according to folklore. When Josef Naus ascended the peak in 1820, he mentioned the size of the glacier. Gradually, as with all glaciers in Europe, and really the entire world, it has continuously shrunk over the past century to less than a third of the original size; it now sits at only sixty-one acres.

This mercifully, is unlikely to change very drastically in the coming decades. This particular glacier is known in Germany as a Lawinenkesselgletscherfed, a glacier that is continuously fed from avalanche snow. It doesn't rely as much on the weather as other glaciers in the area; it simply feeds on the tumbling, rushing mountain avalanches. It is also shaded by the dual spires of the Riffelwandspitzen and Zugspitze, blocking the sun from the West and the East. Being shaded and continuously fed like a baby bird, it can survive almost indefinitely. While a minuscule ice shelf by most standards, it is still quite dangerous to climbers as many avalanches feed directly to it and the snow can settle over crevasses, creating snow bridges. In turn, the deglutitious ground will open up and consume hikers and climbers in a method not dissimilar to the great fish swallowing Jonah for three days and nights. Only a helicopter can pull someone out at that point, so long as hypothermia doesn't get there first.

The glacier is a survivor; it is scrappy and acrimonious of spirit. Unfortunately, while it is safe for the time being, it is still but a ghost of the original ice plot that once resided in the bowl. A graveyard of loose shale and tumultuous boulders is left in its dying wake.

Theoretically, this should be the easiest section to navigate. How hard could it be to walk through a bunch of rocks for a while? After what we think we have seen, this should be a warmup.

I encourage the reader to picture themselves on the beach. The ocean has been swam, the nap has been taken, the sandcastles dug. It is nearing the end of the day; the hot sun has beat down upon the burnt bodies unrelenting and callously for an entire afternoon and one can feel the blood pulsing in their head as the heat has drilled deep like a parasite into the base of the spine. Where is the car? Well of course, it is all the way back in the parking lot. The parking lot that is at least a quarter mile inland. In the haze and the misery with the migraine building, the umbrella must be put up, the chairs stowed, the coolers hefted on the shoulder and all trash retrieved. With all this extra weight, one may finally move forward.

And where does the path lead? Any beachgoer knows, it is through loose, coarse sand. Over prickly, superheated dunes. The loose sand seems to make every footstep more disagreeable than the last, seeming set toward engulfing the leg rather than supporting. That trudge, that weakened march, that denounced, horrible reality; that is what we faced in that moment magnified exponentially.

The path begins very stamped and civilized, a hard gravel crunching under our dragging boots as we take the first steps into the devil's lair; an even, solid footing to entice us forward. We begin to notice loose rock seemed to encroach on the trail more and more. Suddenly there is less than half a meter of width to the trail. We take what we can get, but it becomes clear nothing will be getting any easier. To the contrary, it seems the trail is intent on pulling us out to sea like a forceful rip current only to dump us in the middle with no assistance or bearings. The slim line

we follow comes to a complete halt soon thereafter, only a couple hundred meters within the cirque. It is up to us now. The trail is gone and we aren't even halfway there.

Stopping for a bit, we notice there are the familiar red paint gashes brushed sporadically on the larger rocks, giving us our only clue that we were essentially relying on our own instincts to traverse the toilet bowl. Kemp and I decided to divide and conquer. The easiest method seems to skirt the edge of the canyon along the base of the rock so we follow this route to varying degrees. He goes straight up while I try to run parallel and slowly ease up to the line he wants to set. With that in mind, we begin walking.

This was not our greatest idea. What we fail to consider is the running stream of rocks and scree that will be set forth, tumbling down and deluging to the center with each step we take. I feel as though I might slip to the center as the ground grows more unsteady by the second, shoes sinking into the macadam and larger stones and seemingly stuck in motion. Kemper keeps hollering down to me to watch out as the rockfall *he created* continues streaming down by the minute, each torrent flooding from our steps and therefore unavoidable. My chosen path begins to zig-zag as I care less about a direct line and more about what footholds seem more stable than the others. I hear my partner yelling obscenities from above like the voice of an angry God. The glacier in the distance shines brightly in the reflection of the sun and still feels as distant as it was when we began the journey. It is unbelievably slow going. The landscape changes and morphs with each passing second, other hikers have now joined abaft and it feels as though a race has begun.

My path eventually collides with Kemper's and we are only a few meters from the wall to our right. I would not actually recommend blazing a trail this high up to any travelers looking to follow in my footsteps. The gradient is way steeper being this close and we are walking

perpendicular to a never-ending couloir, unable to ever feel level. In our heads it seemed logical—in practice it was an unintelligent move leading to a supremely beleaguered route. Going down, however, was definitely not an option anymore. We were going to have to clumsily trudge and crawl our way forward if we wanted to make it out.

The way had been chosen for us and we no longer had any input. Perilously, we follow the ridge and try to ease our way back down but to no avail. We were hundreds of meters above the center of the cirque. The crevasses and snow creeks sitting in the center seemingly waiting for us, a couple of crocodiles looking up below the dock, patiently waiting for their next meal. The small rocks began to grow larger, each slag resembling the size and shape of a school textbook. An evil accoutrement to the footpath as each one wobbled precariously and threatened to break ankles and send us toppling to the doline at the foot of the glacier.

I noticed gratefully the ice finally appeared closer. I began to observe specific lines and crevasses hewn into the frozen face and felt a sense of relief. The path angled sharply downward, leading us to curse the valley before treading carefully among the jugged rubble of scattering stones. Down and down, we went. The pain in our chests conducted down to our knees and ankles as the force of the load weighed heavily upon our poor, sodden joints. My quads were Jello and my calves were pudding.

I reached the nadir before my brain could comprehend, but thankfully our journey further into hell was complete. We had made it to the base of the ice. Going down is always worse and more dangerous than going up, a fact I garnered rather quickly from my experiences on mountains.

The foot of the glacier was only a few meters away. A slight incline led us to what I like to call “the changing room”. It is a quick bit of solid, flat ground before the beginning of the ice

cap that I observed to be the area where all hikers began to fit their crampons, lace up the harness and re-clip their cables for the upcoming Klettersteig. It is, more importantly, the very last bit of stable ground until the summit. At no other point will we have an opportunity to stop and rest until we reach the top. We, however, did not know this and threw on our PPE with reckless abandon.

For the first time the entire day, we were joined by a small mass of people and were not alone to pursue our journey any longer. It was as though we reached the line to summit Everest and now were subjugated to the traffic and whims of others and, as such, we wanted the biggest head start we could get.

For the attentive reader, they will remember that I briefly discussed my micro-spikes earlier in the stead of true crampons. There are a few reasons why I chose this particular accessory for the day, none of them good. I didn't want to buy true crampons; I heard from a friend that they weren't even really necessary and a friend had an old pair of spikes he was willing to lend me for the day. How hard could it really be? It's just a small patch of ice, I believed. Let me clearly enunciate: that was wrong.

I have made many costly mistakes in my life but the choice of these over true crampons was truly almost the final undoing of my life's story. I will elaborate. Spikes are typically for everyday use like walking through snowy suburbs or icy roads. Potentially even casual hiking to a certain degree. Cheaper, flimsier and less sturdy, they are not intended for actual glacial traversing nor are they intended as a lifesaving device. These are the exact opposite of what one scaling a mountain requires and, ironically, it is exactly what I chose.

The spikes are very easy to install. The apparatus consists of a strap-on rubber frame to fit around the boot, the "soles" were interspersed with short, quarter-inch metal nails with which to

dig better into the ground. Not enough for a steep slope but enough for a daily walk unless I walk flatfooted the whole way up. I stretch them around my boots and take a couple short, practice steps to better understand how they grip. It seems competent— on level ground I must reiterate—and so I take my first step onto the ice shelf.

1200

Toward the beginning, the frozen glacier is buried tenderly beneath a brief layer of shale and rocky debris. Pockets of ice peek from under the grey slab but are summarily buried as a whole and, as I step into an adulterated compound of silver and white, each crunch resounds thoroughly in my ears as the stones and ice commingle. The stones give good traction for the spikes and the hiking is easy.

The mountain is perfectly still, no noise emanating from any organic sources. While I had been listening to music for the first half of this climb through a single AirPods, for this I took my headphone out. Khruangbin was replaced by the crackle of the iron on our feet sinking into frozen tundra and the heavy gulps of breath with which to occupy our ears and, upon stopping, it seems time itself grinds to a halt—a stillness that could only be fabricated by the cessation of earth’s revolution around the sun. It shouldn’t be possible for life to be this serene and muted.

Unfortunately for the folks enjoying this pastoral landscape, this silence was soon to be broken by outbursts of indescribable vulgarity from the mouths of Kemper and me. We were only ten meters onto the Höllentalferner when the fun really began. The ice began to grow steep. Very steep. Our spikes began slipping and refusing to catch in the ice.

For the first time in twenty-three years, I was actually fearful for my life. Truly, indescribably fearful. I was surviving solely due to my own merit and, while I had done this before, the danger was acutely pronounced now. More than merit though was the luck on my side. I was doing something incredibly dumb by going on without the proper equipment.

I had chosen not to carry an ice pick for the day. While I knew it was recommended, I felt that my hiking poles would serve me well enough and aid through any sticky situations. I was aware they were not the strongest poles and were unlikely to support my entire body weight but

pride and arrogance barred me of the superfluousness of any more tools. I made the wrong choice. I had decent spikes but no pick. Kemper had no real spikes but he had the good sense to bring a pick. We were a Machiavellian sort of balanced.

Each movement of my feet lasted an eternity. I would do my best to stamp a foothold into the glacier with my sad, puny spikes and, simultaneously, force my two poles into the unforgiving ground as deep as it would allow before using them to pull my body weight up. The ground was so treacherous that I didn't dare trust the tread of the Mountain Warehouse boots. My body weight leaning completely forward, solidly parallel with the rising glacier. While this helped with my center of gravity, it didn't do me any favors for digging the micro-spikes into the slippery ice.

This was the way I walked for minutes. A foot, two poles, pause to breathe, repeat. Foot, pole, breathe, repeat.

There is no correct path to choose on the glacier. No one step superior to another. No line to follow. No red flare to inform the right direction. The only requirement was not to step on a crevasse. Littered every few meters, another drop-off awaited like a gaping mouth. Hiking in the late summer typically guarantees no mischievous snow bridges, therefore the glacier today is just wearing the danger on its sleeve. We see most of the crevasses, or at least we think we do.

Massive strike-slip cracks loom ominously, strewn and slashed, while smaller pothole-esque crevasses dot the rest of the area. It is a minefield, each step leading to a veritable free ride back down through the Höllental. I cautiously peer into a crevasse that lies next to me; I can't see the bottom. Only a light blue quickly transitioning to black. I look back, Kemper is much further down, directly beneath me. It seems he is following my line. He shouldn't have.

Avoiding the huge crevasse on my right, I veer to the left. I walk almost directly into another hidden right in plain sight. It is angled down, almost as though it was meant to catch ignorant climbers like me. It has the allure a Trumpet Pitcher might have on a common housefly and I hear it calling to me, beckoning I take one more step. I stop and realize I'm trapped between two giant crevasses.

Quickly analyzing the situation, I realize there are only two options. There is a narrow ledge between the two carnivores, perhaps a single meter wide which I could tightrope walk. A single slip would absolutely lead to my demise. There is no question—one of the caverns would see to that. However, this tightrope walk would only last three meters or so and was a very handy shortcut so long as I didn't slip when I was above them either. My other option is to down climb to Kemper's general location and skirt the left crevasse. While it might seem safer, this is not a very good option either. Down is always worse than up. On my sad excuse for crampons, I would likely miss the step and slide down indeterminately.

It seems there is only one way.

I say a quick Hail Mary before I begin and yell at Kemper telling him of my mistake. "Be ready to catch me if I fall."

"Your fat ass is going down the hill if you slip, good luck but you're on your own."

Cold sweat arches down my spine. My heart beats an arrhythmic rhythm. Breath seems not to find my lungs, instead getting stuck in my throat. My hands sweat profusely and gripping the poles suddenly becomes a difficult task. Here goes nothing.

First step onto the ledge, I refuse to look anywhere but straight forward. I dig my pole into the ground sharply. The first step sticks, I feel secure in my footing. Time for the next one. Using the right supporting foot, I move my left forward and once again burrow with the pole. I

grasp it from the very bottom as though a pencil, the top 80 percent of the pole wobbling above while I eke out any extra leverage possible. The left foot does not feel as firmly implanted; I don't know if I may trust it but I have no choice. Tenderly transferring my weight, I stand on the left and make another right. A success. Already halfway there. I risk a quick glance to the side; the rushing of water can be heard dimly in the very depths. Instant death guaranteed, I put it out of my mind.

Using my right foot, I push off. I know something is wrong immediately as I gear up for the next foothold. I wasn't as supported as I thought and my right foot gives way, sliding down a few inches before mercifully catching on a small rocky patch. My body goes flying forward, left foot perched half on the ledge, half in the cave below. My left pole flies out of my hand, skittering down below on the ice before planting itself ten meters down on a rock while my right hand catches the ice at the perfect angle, allowing me to essentially hang from one hand and foot. Left hand now spread across the bare ice to steady myself, I stop for a while to catch my breath. I have four points of contact again, my right foot bearing the brunt of my weight while I regroup. I look back and see the orange and blue hiking pole sadly slung on a bare grey rock, just another piece of detritus on this littered landscape. I shout to Kemper and he notices the pole. He is still in a position to retrieve it but he is having extra slow going. He slowly directs his path toward the sad pole lying down below. I can't imagine the trouble he faces with even less grip on his feet. He is usually the fastest, most nimble hiker and climber but I notice he is going unnaturally slow this time. I don't have the capacity to worry about him right now though—they will dig two graves if I don't get out of my situation.

Once again, I feel the need to remind the reader this didn't need to be this difficult. If we had simply brought the correct tools, this would have been a cakewalk. All the while we

struggle, we can see Germans pass us by as though on a casual stroll. Hands behind their back, you would think they simply meandered up the mountain on their lunch break. I am furious they make it look so easy; I see a kid no more than twelve feet in the distance laughing at us. If I wasn't so scared, I might have laughed as well. Right now, I just focused on staying alive.

Back on the ledge, I calm down and control my breathing. I notice the area I had tried to step in seemed packed tighter than the surrounding areas and so made a mental note to avoid it. With only one pole, the traverse is actually quite a bit easier. I had no glove but I decided the icy pinpricks needling into my hand were better than being dead and so used my fingers to dig into any slight crimp attainable while my right hand drilled another hole into the ice above. I tested my right foot, it was good. Gingerly moving my weight, the left foot is brought forward away from the crevasse and back up onto the patch of ice. It sticks. My next foot stays as well, five more feet until the landing strip is over. With three points of contact at all times, I ease myself up again. Then again. Then one more time. Finally I step above and over the crevasses and through the tighrope. I'm safe, sort of. If I slip back down, I'm still a goner. But the immediate danger is over.

The penultimate issue to navigate on the glacier is another small strip between two massive crevasses. Wedged very near to the base of the wall, the sheer rise of the wall of the crevasse is around twenty meters towering above a denticulate, toothed grouping of smaller crevasses below. Painted grey by the grime of the mountain and consistency of the rockfall, it overlooks the entire glacier and seems a fitting crux for such a deadly environment. This narrow segment which all hikers must face is luckily, more horizontal than previous areas. It resembles walking on a fixed ladder on Everest; safe so long as one is able to keep their wits.

The scabrous path then, again leads directly uphill to the tip of the glacier. The tramp up is overshadowed by the large pit waiting at the bottom. Slipping here is, again, an unsurvivable situation. We can see the wall approaching quickly, mere meters away. The ground is still very tender and unstable, but we must now wait for other climbers to remove their crampons for the last major obstacle of the glacier—the marginal gap.

The Höllentalferner glacier, while more stable than most European glacier and predicted to outlive a great majority of them, is still a living thing. It breathes, it shifts, it moves and, most importantly, it slides every year. It is no longer pinned directly against the wall of the mountain, rather, it is continuously pushing away. Millimeter by millimeter, it rebuffs the Wetterstein limestone to focus instead on its own pilgrimage down the mountain. Each season, mountaineers must contend with an ever-growing cleft between the edge of the glacier and the beginning of the rock before beginning their ascent up the steel cable.

I stand and wait for a while as other climbers hook into the steel cable and actually jump from the ice to the wall. I would also have to make that jump in a bit. Eventually, Kemper meanders his way up, slowly and cautiously. After an eternity, he makes it through the final narrow strip between the crevasses and we are together again. He hands me my missing pole which I am able to stow away in my pack while he catches his breath and we wait in line for the beginning of the Via Ferrata to clear of climbers.

We, as yet, have no words for the glacier. Both of us are a bit rattled from it but we can only put it in the back of our minds and try to continue. Standing at the base of the rock on the tip of the glacier, we watch as climber after climber goes up and over the face. I try not to think about how I will be dangling over a crevasse myself in a moment.

Finally, it clears up and we take our place next in line. I was never very good at the rope climb as a kid; I hadn't even really gotten into rock climbing until the last couple years or so. This part combined both.

It was the ultimate rope ascent: a thirty-meter, two-inch steel cable stretched from the base of the wall to a ledge far above, steel horseshoes bestrewn far above into the rock as the occasional emergency foothold. At one time there may have been footholds all the way up, but now only a few remained and of those, most were rusty and dilapidated. When we get closer to the rim cleft, it jags up into a sharp, icy precipice where we stand before a straight drop-off into a dark abyss below, mere centimeters away from my feet. The gap between ice and wall is about a meter, the steel cable hanging limply over the edge of the ice before rising directly vertical and vanishing into the nebulous fog. It was like the story of Jack and the Beanstalk, climbing a rope directly into heaven to discover a land unknown.

There is no point in clipping into the steel cable with our harnesses, at first. If we fell here, it would be too far a fall to survive. A slip only results in a cascade into the gap, a fleeting last glance at the world before wedging into a permanent frozen necropolis. The frozen coaxial sticks to my bare hands as I grab and step on the berm. I reach my right foot across the chasm and pull hard with my arms and throw my left foot against the bulwark. We leave our micro spikes on for this part, just in case. It feels safer that way somehow.

I am completely exposed, perpendicular to the wall as I walk slowly up toward the stratosphere. A chill begins to set in, we are at least 2500 meters above the surrounding earth now and the air begins to grow thinner and more damp. Each footfall scratches against the rock as an orotund nails on the chalkboard sensation reverberating in my ears while I rise higher and

higher and feel my hands growing tired and achy. I begin to feel myself growing tired but continue up the mountain, praying I don't fall and take Kemper out with me.

The gossamer speech of other climbers below grows dimmer while we near the top. Despite it all, this rope climb is actually quite easy and gives us little trouble, a battle of wits notwithstanding, and we reach our ledge after a couple minutes of climbing. It probably felt cooler than it looked.

The first recorded ascent of the Zugspitze was, as noted, first accomplished by Lieutenant Josef Naus more than 200 years ago. Born to a judge in Bavaria, Naus rose from a family of modest means to Second Lieutenant in the Bavarian national army, completing several tours in service against Napoleon's European conquests in 1814.

He was later made a First Lieutenant within the Royal Topographical Office where he began to make discovery forays into Bavarian-Württemberg before sketching out some of the first official surveys for Bavarian maps. When tasked with creating a Werdenfels map, Naus and his assistant Maier, led by Partenkirchen guide Johann Georg Deuschl, began to lead ascents to the West Summit. While the first was unsuccessful, the second route along the Western ridge via the Schneeferner glacier proved more fruitful and the morning of August 27, 1820, marked the completion of Naus and company's trek to the peak.

Leaving behind an alpenstock and piece of cloth as proof, they descended quickly as thunderstorms began to lay siege to the group and finally returned to their base, a shepherd's hut in Partenkirchen, by three in the morning. Naus submitted his maps to the official Atlas of Bavaria, submitting his spot in pioneering history.

While unofficial maps had been found as early as 1770s depicting routes to the three summits, Naus's survey became the gold standard for the Wettersteingebirge as well as a great many other Bavarian mountains and were considered outstanding.

Naus's latter life was again marked by success, eventually rising to the rank of Major General, commanding the fortress of Ulm and eventually leading the Topographical Bureau as well as Main Conservatory of Bavaria. He was a legendary figure, exploits reverberating throughout history and leaving an indelible impression upon the mountain and country.

I considered the scope of his headspace as I walked sideways up a mountain, pulling myself onto the ledge at the top. With no infrastructure, no path, no guarantee for success, how could one still make the decision to ascend? How could he even begin to know where to start? I was struggling enough as it was with the assistance of infrastructure, stamped paths and civilized signage. The trio then had a compass and a rough idea of the North Star. Yet still, they were determined enough to make history and do the world a service by mapping out the lands they witnessed. I made a promise that I would carve out my own piece of history one day.

1300

Hazy. Trancelike. Hypnagogic. Surreal. Tiring. Soporiferous. These are words I found in a thesaurus today. These are also the most appropriate words to describe the next few hours. Whatever amount of time scheduled for a normal hiker to slog through this Klettersteig, I reckon it's a period Kemper and I might have doubled.

We were exhausted, to put simply. It was now at least one, we had been going nonstop for a full business day and still had the most arduous hurdle in front of us. This rock climb is not necessarily difficult, nor is it particularly straining. It becomes a war of attrition. How long can one continue to climb iron rivets, steel cables, rocky outcrops before they call it quits? It is a browbeat.

One pitch at a time; it is the same cold metal and bare rock, glistening with dew from the fog and carpeted with malachite tufts of wispy moss. We hear only the clicks of our carabiners as we fasten and refasten them upon the ropes and navigate the frozen handholds.

Each minute is an eternity. I am completely unaware how long it took regarding the completion this section. We were regularly passed by other clumps of climbers, having to hug the mountain and dangle from the wire to allow them to move past, having to come within inches of their bodies and feeling the breath of their open mouths on my neck while they snuggled next to me to reach for the next stud to grasp. It was humiliating to say the least. It was a situation that always began the same absurd way; the climbers would stop for a moment to respectfully give us the option to keep moving. When we stopped or, more often, refused, they would point ahead as the universal symbol for "Can we pass?", to which we would invariably acquiesce and allow

them to invade the sanctity of our space before watching them disappear into a nook in the mountain and leave us and our wheezing bodies to peace once again.

We stopped continuously. I would eat beef jerky and nuts from my pocket; Kemper had a cigarette or two. Still another hour remaining. The slog awaited.

Each ridge line we crossed promised to be the last, we knew the corner would have to round and finish somewhere. The corner of the München Haus was in view and loomed ever closer, serving as an encliridion for our progress, but it recalled to me the mirage of the Wyoming Rockies glimpsed in the distance during the long haul out of South Dakota. Always visible, yet seemingly never growing any closer.

The situation felt desperate after a certain point. We had spent two hours climbing and still felt as though nothing had been accomplished. To our left marked a drop-off no less than one-hundred meters down to the Höllentalferner which, if I might add, already felt like an eternity ago. Footing felt unsafe as the cable stopped and we unhooked to free solo around completely exposed eskers and sharp, jutted limestone crags. Nothing felt secure and, after a certain time in this environment, it begins to addle my state of mind.

I feel nervous and erratic, exhausted and fatigued, ready to simply lie with my back wholly supported by solid ground.

It feels as though things begin to level out; the route becomes more of a stair step than a ladder and becomes manageable with only my legs rather than all fours. We round a spire with an ancient, bronze plaque mounted near the top and a long, wooden stick rising into the air as though signaling a shrine. Written on the burnished metal was as follows:

“Am 17 Juli 1982, Durch Blitzschlag tödlich Verunglück:

(On July 17, 1982, fatally injured by lightning:)

Gerhard Spitzer GEB 1.12.1940

Ingebord Arnold GEB 24.5.1950

Günther Paulina GEB 6.1.1958”

In the moment, without the phone service (or the will) to open up Google Translate, I assumed they were some great climbers who had great accomplishments written in the history of the Zugspitze. It wasn't until much later upon arriving home and translating what I saw did I comprehend—these three climbers had died upon the mountain in a lightning strike and were forever immortalized upon the rock thereafter. The youngest was only twenty-four years, just a year older than me at the time, the reliquary was another great example of German spirit. Rather than hide the event or sweep it under the rug to keep alive their eco-tourism industry, an eternal altar was erected to honor their commitment to bravery and exploration.

In 2024, four days following the forty-two-year anniversary of the accident, an eighteen-year-old was struck and killed on the summit by another bolt after ascending via the Zugspitzebahn. It is simply a harsh reality of climbing among the clouds but still rather terrifying to imagine being stranded among the rocky heavens while enveloped by electric bolts zipping faster than the speed of light. I hope he earned a place on the shrine as well.

It is a brilliant example of the following fact: nature is unforgiving. Regardless of the framework erected by a self-described civilized people and the laws established to comfort logical and rational minds, all life gears itself only toward the mercy of the elements. Flora and Fauna comport to the path of least resistance, armed in the knowledge that one must accept the elements as part of survival and bend with the capricious whims of the weather or risk sure

annihilation. This is the method of evolution which has carried all species to this point and the driving factor of any living being.

Hurricanes will continue to raze cities, tornadoes will rip foundations of their homes, tsunamis to blanket entire geographies, volcanoes to destroy civilizations yet still, existence continues. Adaptability is the tolerance and acceptance of these risks. Anyone or anything still alive has learned to adapt.

Admittedly however, I am glad I didn't know what this sign meant when I first glanced at it. I was already aware of how easily I could die up there; I didn't need one more reason. Upon passing this mausoleum, we felt we had turned a corner. Our only goal was to finish traversing the narrow ridge line upon which we walked. The path was wider than it had been in hours, the safety rope felt sturdier and the slope was negligible. We were again covered in a thick mist, rising well above the cloud line. No sign of greenery met my gaze. It was as though I was climbing a stairway into the sky. On either side of the peak, the cliff dropped precipitously to the fog below, barring our vision but spurring our imaginations to the horrors below.

My breathing was ragged and irregular but the glimmer of hope that had begun sprouting within soon began to envelop and ensconce my entire being, wrapping me in a radiant beam of joy and pride.

A glint of gold pierced through the shroud. We walked closer and, surely, it came into a view. The tall, gold crucifix. The brilliant, shrouded light upon the peak of Mount Sinai speaking down unto us. The unmistakable idol of the entire journey; the apotheosis of hard work and dedication perched on the pinnacle of Germany. Standing on the tip of the Eastern summit, we finally realize the end is in sight and our exhaustion is flung away with reckless abandon. It is time to cross the finish line and make our final stop among the clouds.

To our right, we view the Münchner Haus and the Zugspitzbahn arriving from its 1,000-meter journey originating at the base of the mountain, near Lake Eibsee. The thick, sultry scent of Goulash and crackled, oven roasted Schweinshaxe emanating from the 2962 Café felt especially ravishing and inviting, beckoning us to finish our journey so we may partake in the sinful gluttony we had been craving since our first piece of beef jerky.

We began to circle around the last spire, holding onto the steel rope with our left hands while our noses led us up further. Again the fog enveloped us and visibility was nonexistent but for once, this actually served as a blessing.

Typically, when one arrives via the Bahn to the peak of the mountain, they will exit the fenced enclosure to set foot on the rocky outcrop and climb twenty semi-exposed meters to the summit. Typically, it is an unfair mixture of those weary travelers who spent the last twelve hours in turmoil finally reaching their end destination with a family of four dressed in jeans and “I love Deutschland” T-shirts cheating their way to the top and taking a picture as though they were rugged adventurers. Typically, this line will span from the Haus to the summit, creating a choke point for access to the cross and barring those who deserve the recognition from their prize. Today however, the weather is too poor for tourists and the line nonexistent. We reach the last ledge and come face to face with the monolith. No line of tourists sits in wait, it’s just us.

My mind doesn’t compute what I am looking at. I feel depersonalized. I feel stressed. My body has been through physical trauma beyond what it has seen ever before. Everything feels like a dream as Kemper and I slowly saunter closer, fearful it is a mirage and may vanish if we approach too quickly. It is true, there it is right there. We get within reaching distance and stretch our hands out. Sweaty, callused hands find cold, smooth steel greet them in return.

I close my eyes and grip with both hands. The first event of my entire life I consider truly worthwhile is nearing its finale and two halves of my brain begin to emerge—one is incredibly joyful and proud; I have just accomplished a feat that maybe 1 percent of the entire world has ever been privileged to complete and I survived. I did not panic or lose my wits. Everything was carried out as a result of my composure, strength and mental abilities.

1400

The other half of me bellows in emptiness. It is already over, who knows when my next opportunity to prove myself may come along. I fell in love with the Zugspitze over the year and a half of staring marvelously at it from the ground and shortly would be forced to vacate my position as King of the Mountain. We would now greet each other as friends and equals when I sat on my balcony looking up. The Zugspitze was alive but so was I.

While it will live longer than me and continue to inspire generations of trekkers like me, I left my mark upon it and may be remembered as a lucky conqueror of the mountain, a humble pilgrim in search of immortalization on the rock. The journey was complete and my future on the mountain was to come to the same fate.

I never found my Edelweiss, but I believe I found something greater up on the mountain. I found a self-peace and confidence in myself that I had never felt before. While I was disappointed in my lack of foraging abilities, I was in Germany finding a love for life. I found a friend in the people, in the environment, in the job that I worked. I understood in that moment. This search was not fruitless as I believed. It had led me to where I was. I was happy, contented by my new exploits and sense of purpose. Edelweiss is not a tangible, palpable apparatus; but rather, an identity. A corporeality of trials and triumphs, enduring spirits and the eventuation of free will, never to be broken or trampled upon by man or beast alike.

1430

Kemper and I asked a climber who shared the moment with us to take a picture to commemorate our journey and to use for our Hinge profiles. This accomplished, our time on the summit was done. We had finished.

Our legs felt extremely heavy as we lumbered down the man-made staircase etched into the ridge connecting the Haus to the summit. Our feet fell upon corrugated metal as we opened the aluminum gate of the enclosure and shambled up to the silver, slick foundation of the complex.

The world seemed to pass in front of my eyes without consequence as I felt the stubborn hand of exhaustion holding me tightly nearby. The platform on which the Münchner Haus lies is quite wide and well-equipped for the thousands of yearly tourists who frequent the hotel in the sky. The second floor is home to the observation deck and access to the overnight beds; the first floor contains the Panorama 2962 Café, vestibule for exiting and entering the cable car and pathway to the mountain itself.

We climb to the second floor via the stairway overlooking the Eastern Austrian landscape and stand looking out upon the valley. The deck offers complete views in all directions, but we prefer to stand upon the Western edge to gaze upon the leaden mass that is Garmisch, Grainau and the Summit. While mostly obscured from view, we can peek down upon the mountain ledges we climbed upon just a few moments ago and appreciate the actual scale of the rock we just conquered. It seems impossible that we rose to the top so timely. The mountain fog returns after a few minutes of clear visibility and our report card vanishes once more into the mist, denying us from viewing our achievement any longer.

A new impulse cuts through the fatigue: hunger. I hadn't had a real meal since dinner the night previous, a dinner which I was too nervous to do much more than feebly pick at before pushing aside completely. Quickly, we rush through the dark, tinted doors labeled 2962 and are slammed with sensory overload. The cuisine of four different countries Italy, Austria, Switzerland and Germany combine to furnish a buffet of mythical proportions with tantalizing scents of fresh pastries, thick stews, heavy slabs of meat and roasting coffee welcoming us into the massive cafeteria.

I picked up my tray and thought deeply for a second, reading and analyzing the specialties written on the black chalkboard behind the food counter before coming to a sound and decisive choice. Walking up, I found a pale, roundish man wearing a white chef's coat and sporting a black mustache. He stood behind a great, stainless steel stock pot and poured bowls of the finest stew on earth—Hungarian Goulash.

Great poets, novelists, artists may all find their inspiration in a bowl of Goulash just as easily as in a café. Songs should be written, paintings should be hung, sculptures should be sculpted about the beauty that can be found in that brown, sluggish liquid. The depth and richness of that flavor paired with the French loaf found itself a great companion in me that day.

I brought the huge steaming bowl to a seat facing directly the window overlook and took my place, spoon in one hand, bread in the other and ate ravenously; not looking up even to meet Kemper's terrified glances. Fearful of being eaten too, he remained quiet and worked on his Haxe and potatoes and we quietly ate next to each other while staring out the pane to the misty world beyond. Goulash finished, I decided I was not satisfied. I returned to the line, this one marked for desserts and returned to my seat shortly thereafter with a rectangular slice of apple strudel dolloped with a scoop of vanilla bean ice cream, as well as a dark, simmering Americano.

1500

We had been on the mountain for ten hours but for the first time, I was content.

Adrenaline emptied, belly filled and body aching, I began to grow tired. Nothing left remained except our descent. Ordinarily, one would ascend, stay the night in the ancient hotel next to the café, and then descend the following day. We had no such plans; I had to work the next morning and it was a club night for the people of Edelweiss, one that I planned on being at.

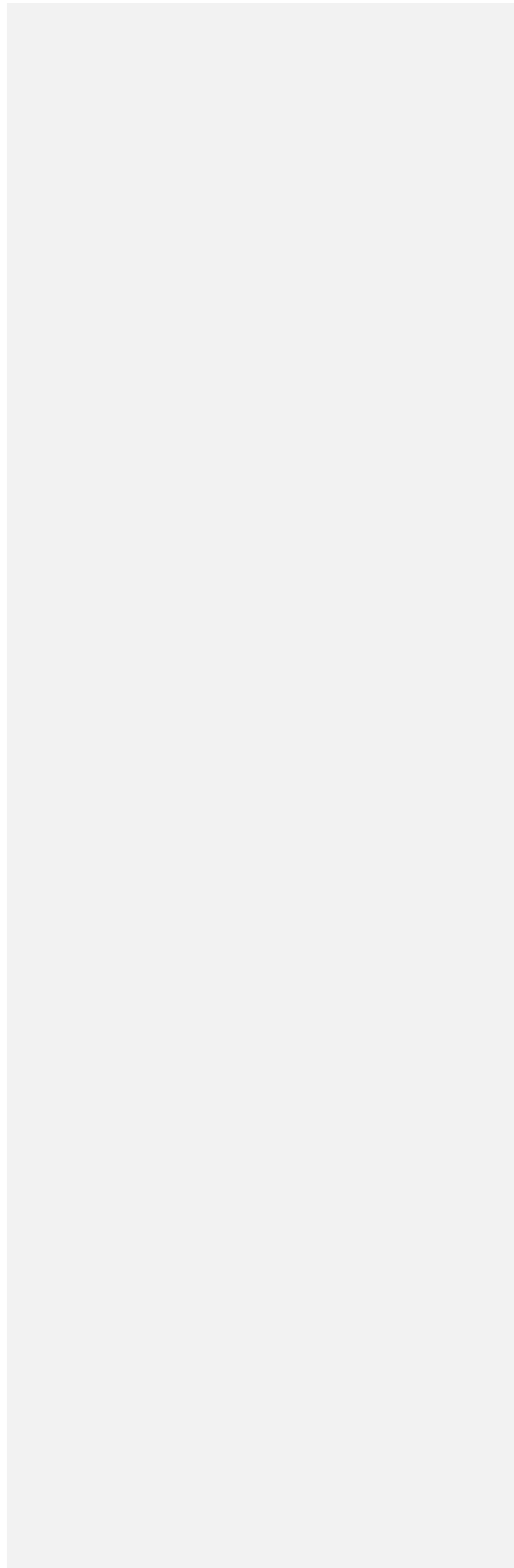
So, it had been decided before the hike our descent would be relegated to the Zugspitzbahn. We entered the station and bought our one-way tickets, queuing in lines guided by aluminum stanchions for the return of the car.

Slowly, it appeared out of the clouds and begin to draw closer to the station, grinding to a halt and filling the large gap in the platform that existed just moments previous. We entered and stood directly in the middle, looking down upon the large glass panel separating us from an untold drop. Before long, we hear the shouts of the German conductor approving of the passage and jerk to movement, seemingly free-falling as the cable car descends a height of over 2500 meters in a span of three minutes. Freddie Nock tightrope walked it in ninety. I didn't know which was more impressive. All other thoughts slowly slipped away and eluded me, only one remaining.

We were headed home.

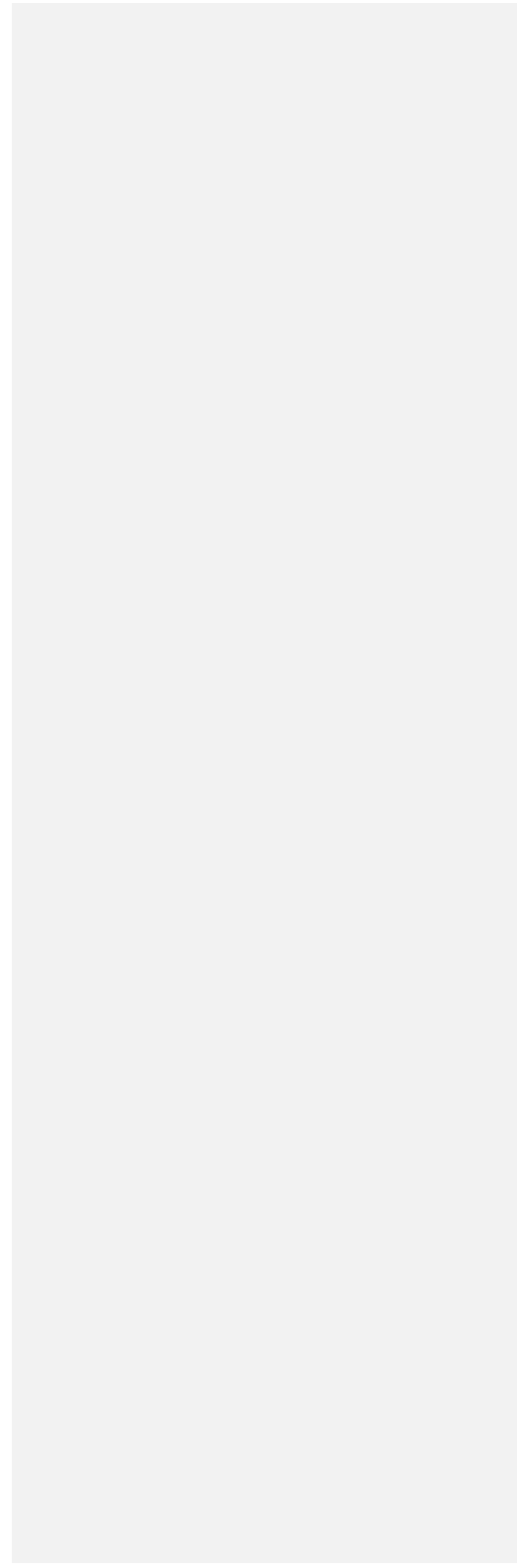


traversing the shale field



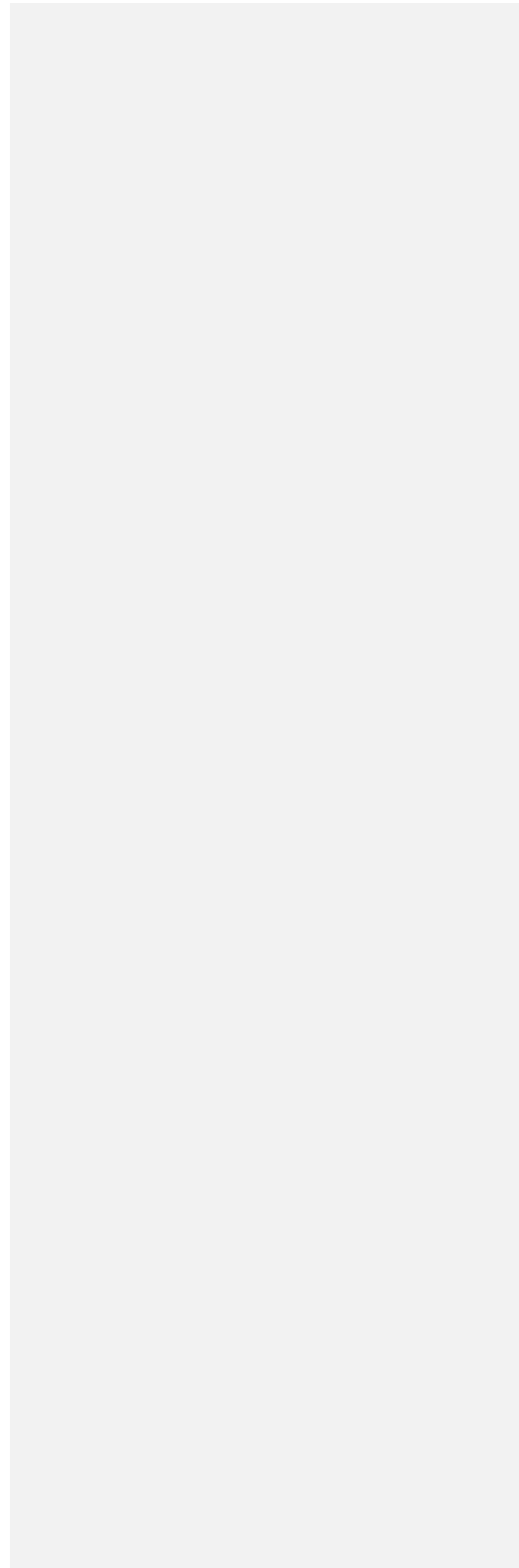


Höllentalklamm early in the morning



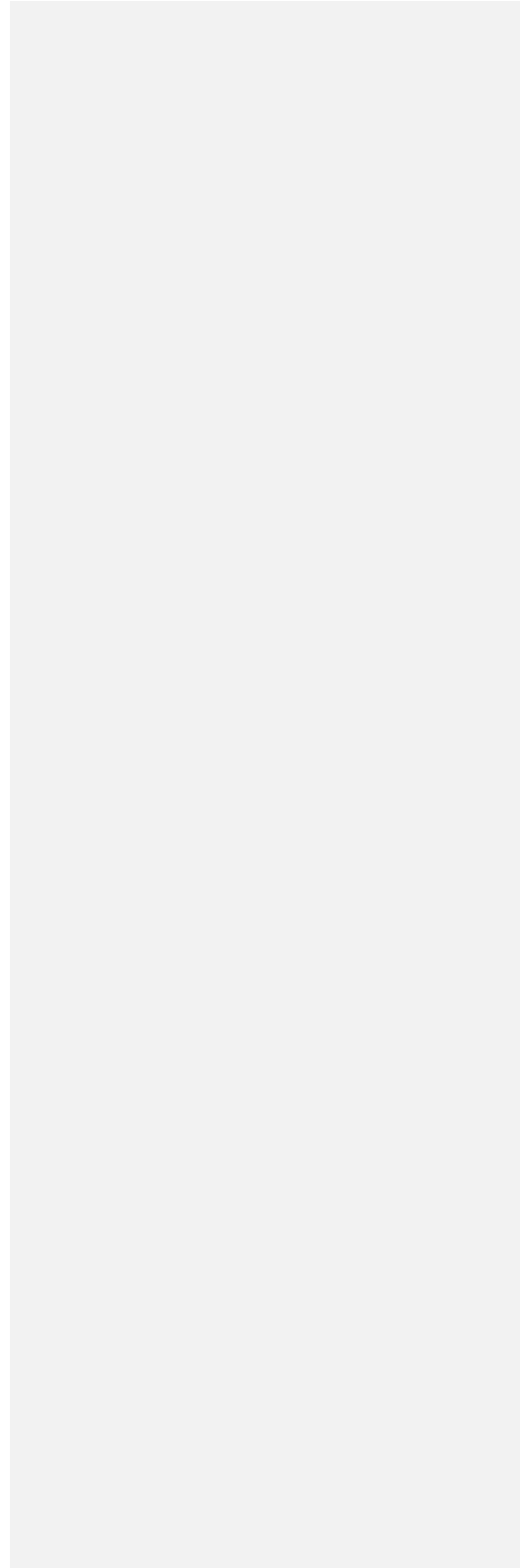


view of bottom valley before the first via ferrata



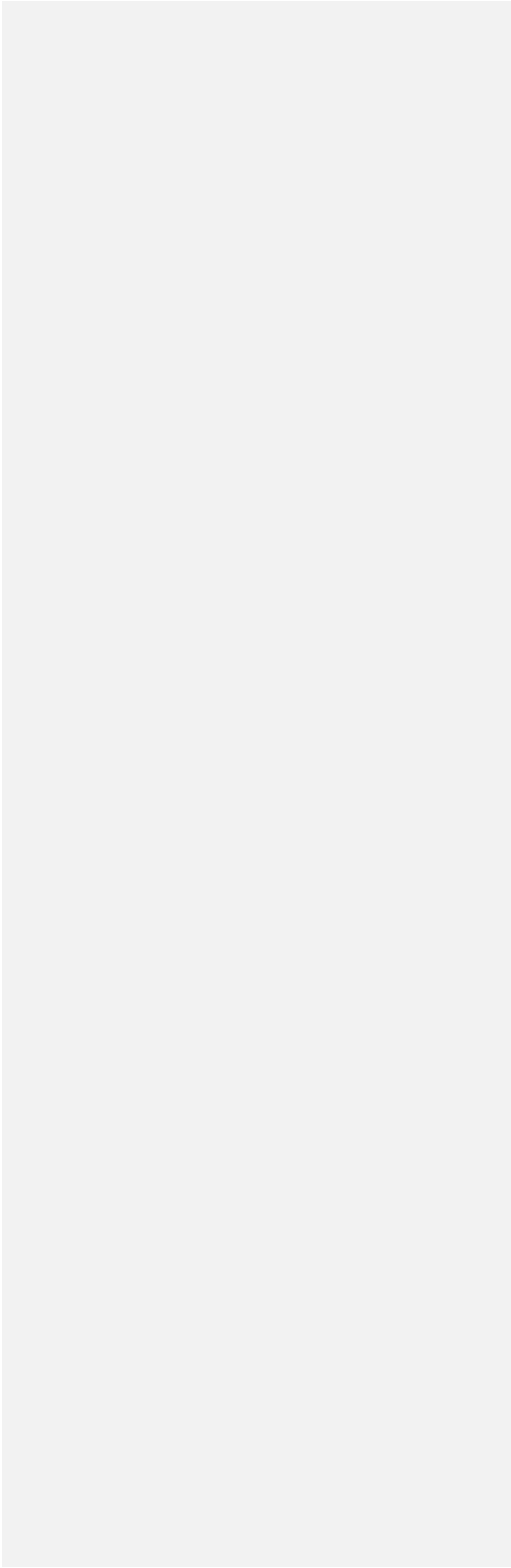


horizontal spikes above vertical cliff



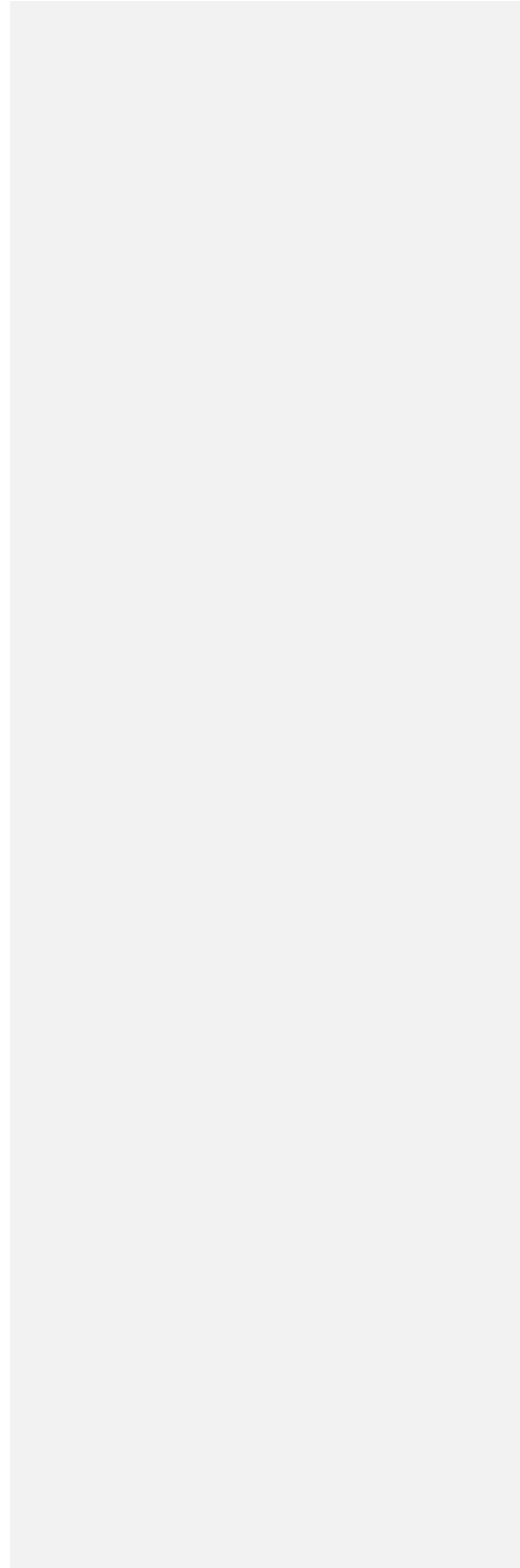


view atop the first ferrata, cloud and fog smother the valley



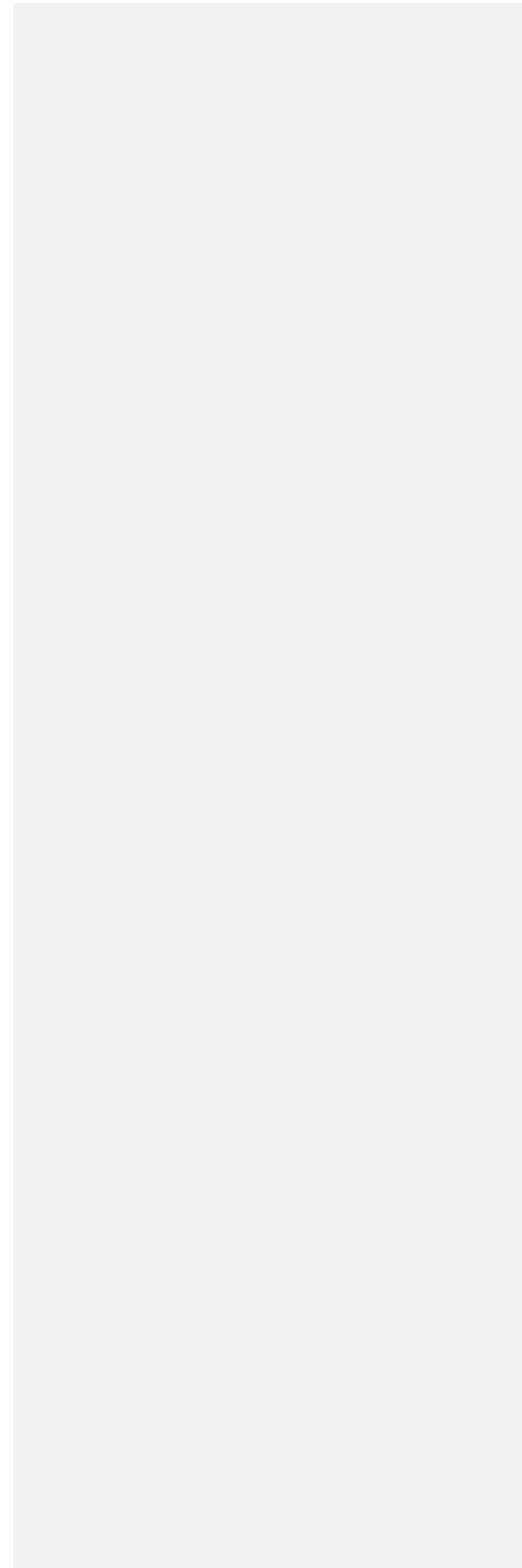


halfway across the cirque, Höllentalferner looms in the distance



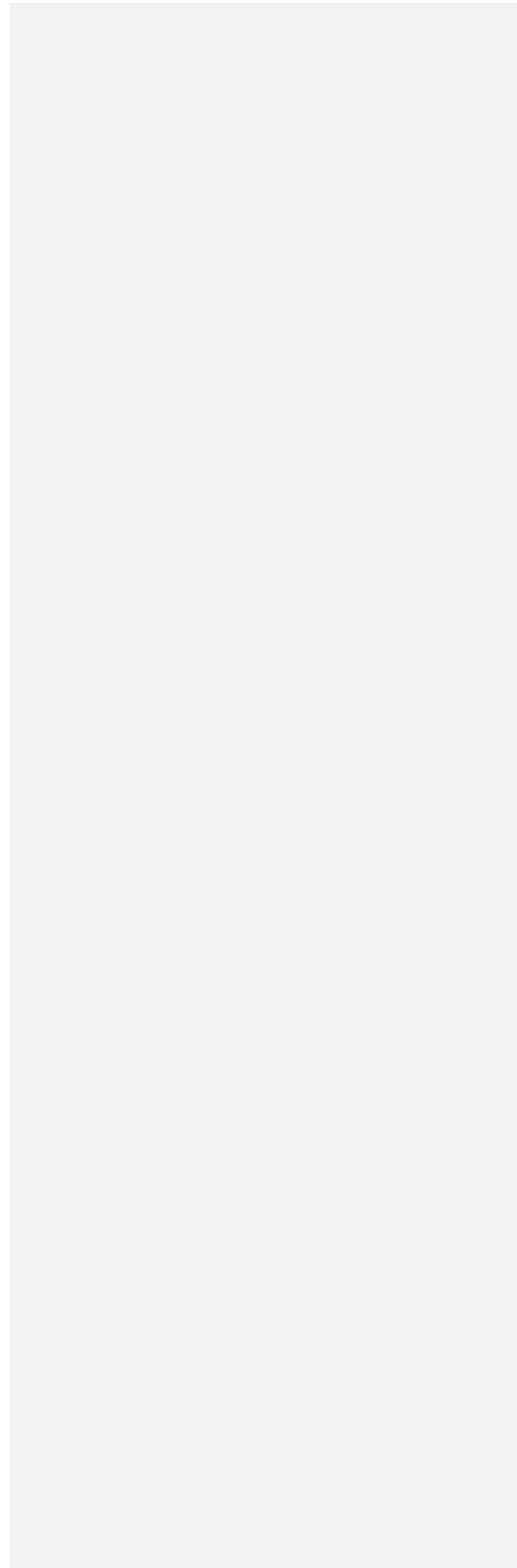


Kemper takes the higher line in the scree field, dropping rocks on me constantly



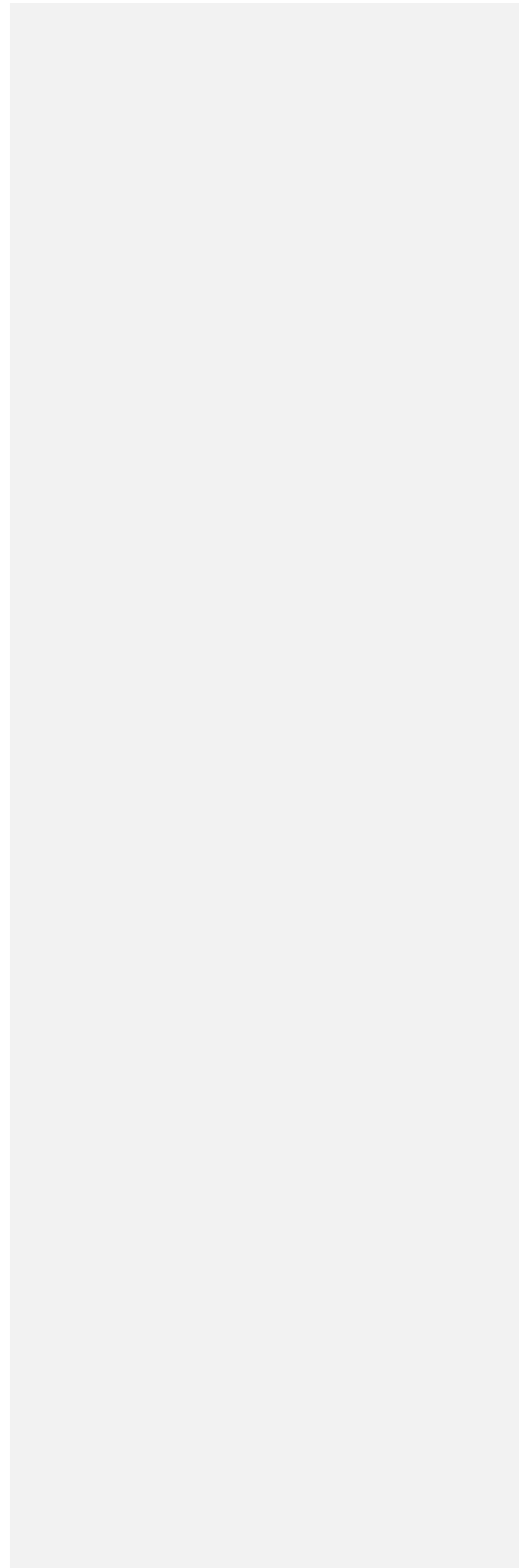


Shortly before I lose my pole and nearly fall to my death. visibility was incredibly low in this portion of the climb



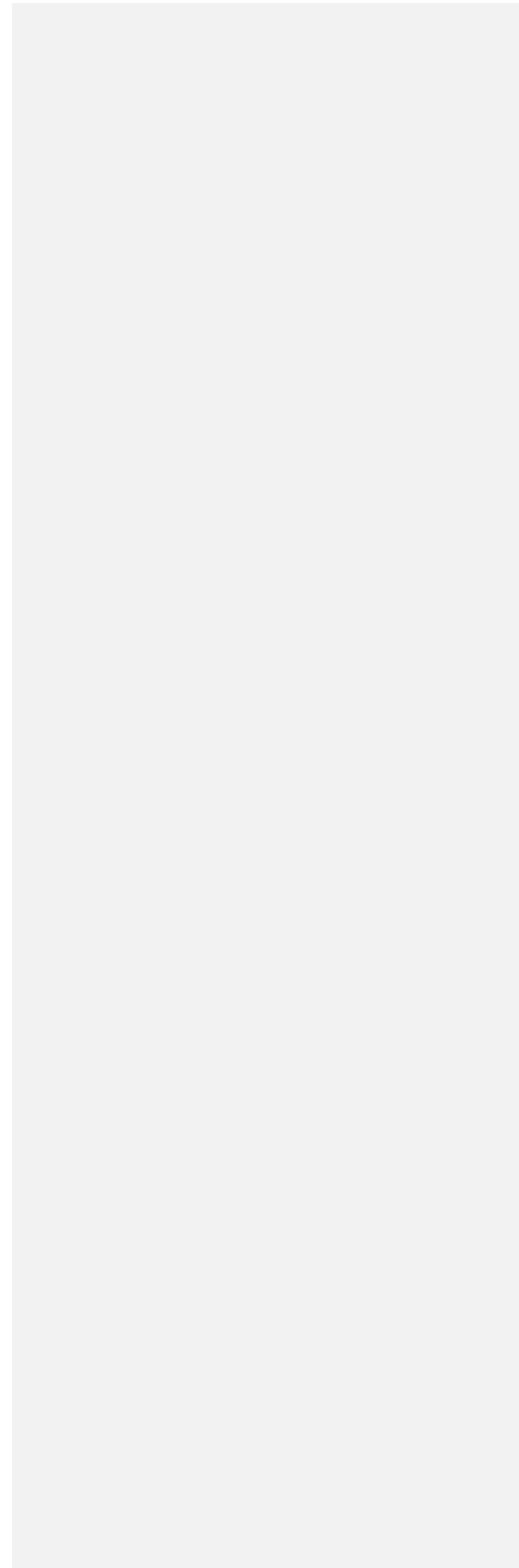


One of the last crevasses to avoid before the marginal gap





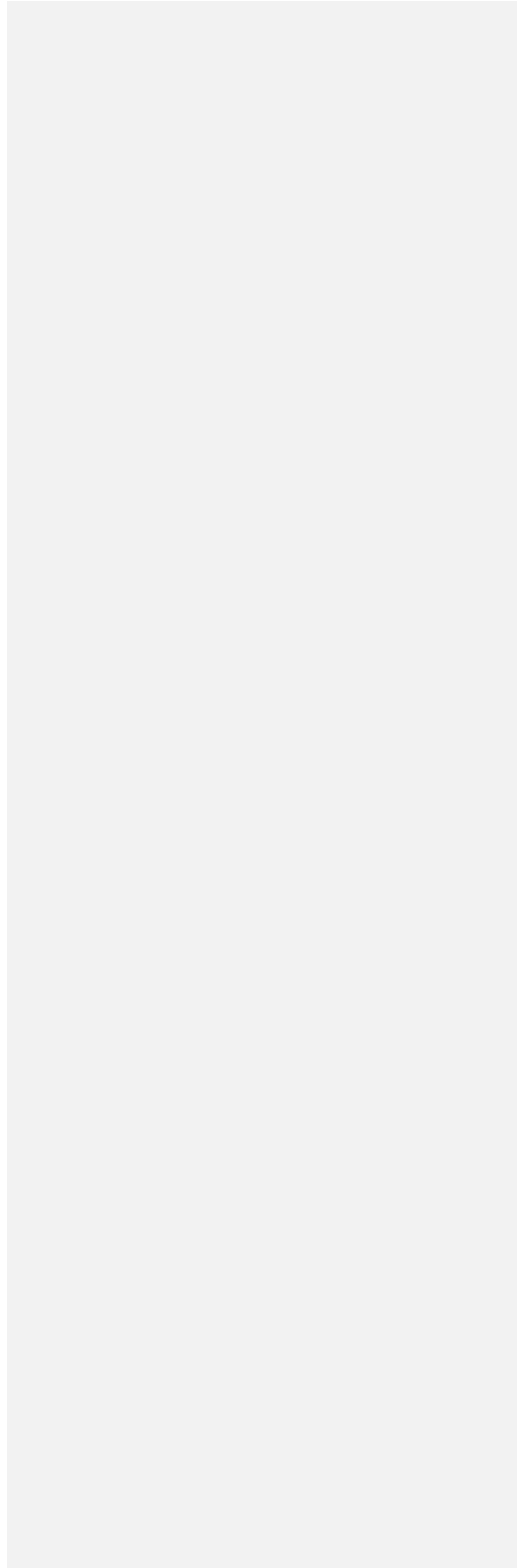
View from the changing room





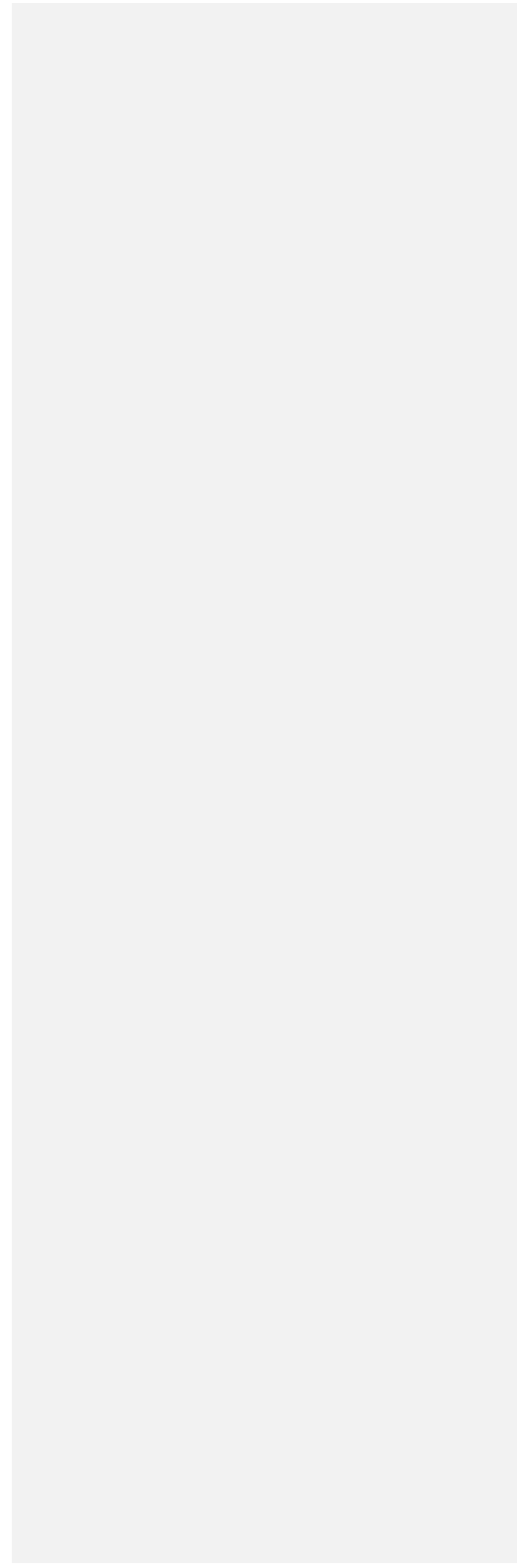
deep

Crevasses blocked the path constantly



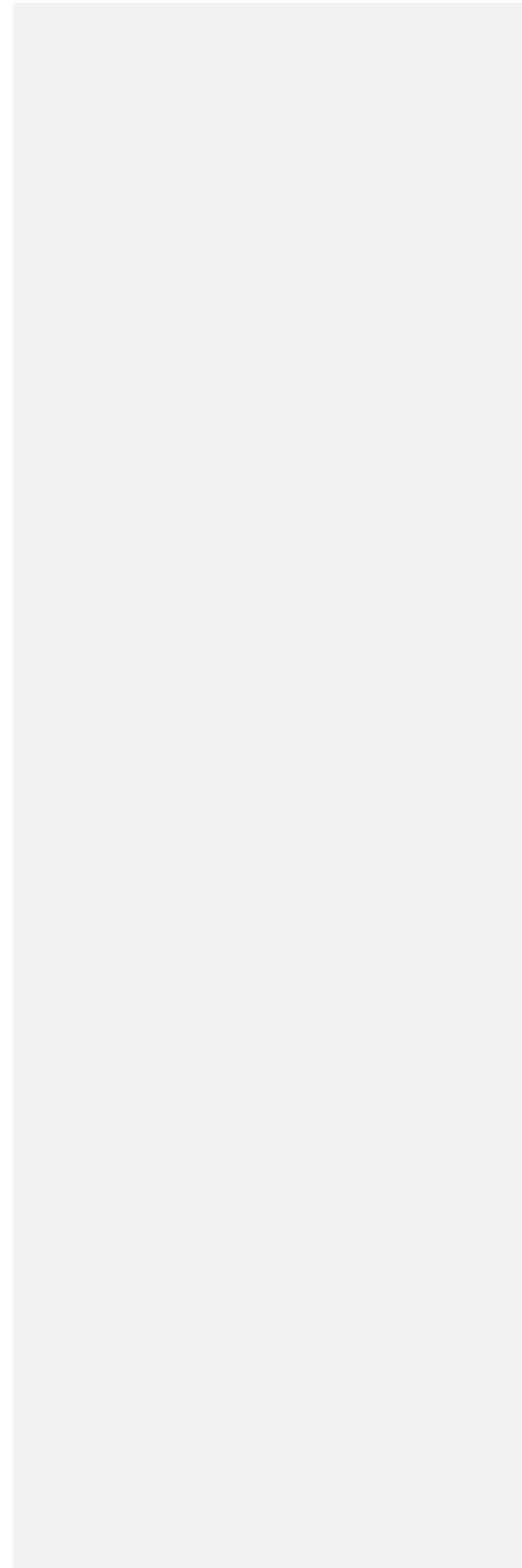


I stood like superman over this crevasse just to see what would happen





Lead up to the Höllentalferner

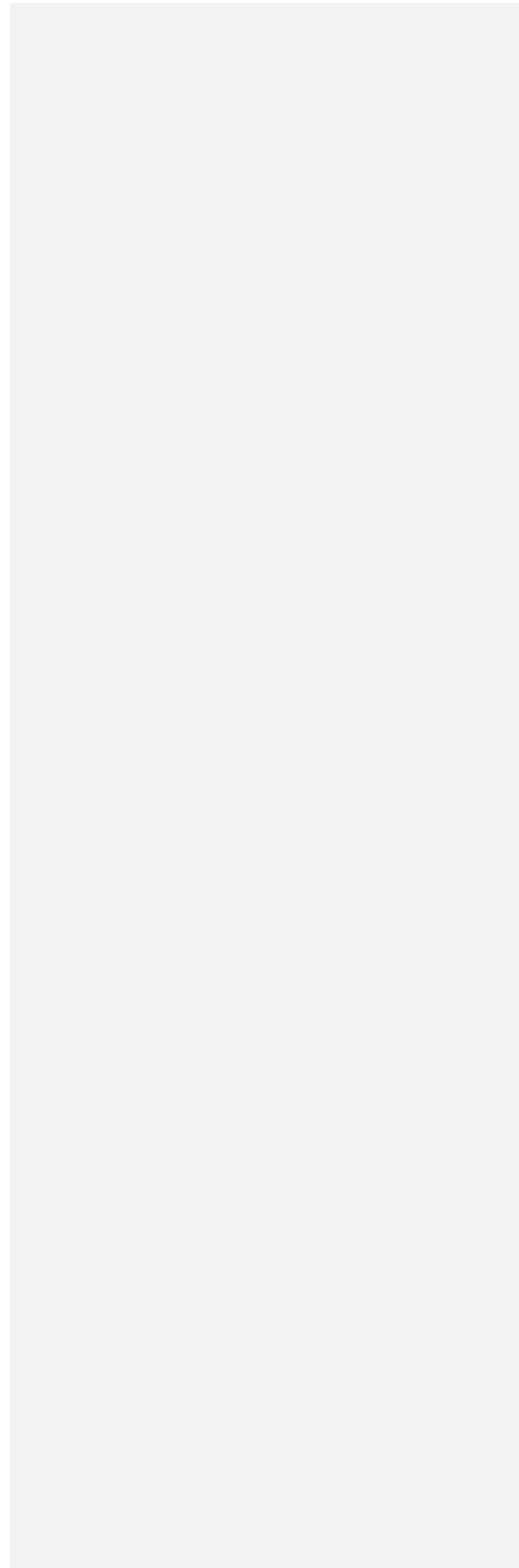




The rickety ladder halfway up the second via ferrata



View of the Münchner Haus from the summit





Summit

