



## AAC Publications

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### Stairway to Heaven

Climbing the Dreamy Ice Drips on Mt. Johnson's Mythical North Face

**Ryan:** "A Wild Ride to the Summit of Mount Johnson" reads the *American Alpine Journal*. Beneath the headline, a meaty account of Jack Tackle and Doug Chabot's first ascent of the Elevator Shaft in 1995.

I'm fresh off my first real alpine climb, Hallett Chimney in Rocky Mountain National Park. It's the first time I've sensed the distinct smell of crampons scraping walls of stone. I've found a new love, and I drool over every word in Doug's ghastly accounts of attempts on this mythical Alaskan route—broken hips, rescues, avalanches—weaving tales of grit, determination, and survival. But it is one photo that truly captures my attention: a great pyramid more beautiful than any mountain I have seen.

I linger on this page, studying Johnson's grand north face. The Elevator Shaft cuts vertically up the right side, three-quarters of the way across, but it's the rest of the face—everything left of the Elevator Shaft—that gives me shivers. The dreamy drips I know to be the future fall in near-vertical, undisturbed paths. I must know!

**Kevin:** I first meet Ryan in '97 in a bar in Estes Park, Colorado. After a few beers, it seems we both have a similar mindset for climbing, and we quickly make plans to get out in the Park. It's late winter when we gear up for the alpine classic Dark Star on Mt. Meeker. Alpine, big wall, and long trad routes are the topics of choice on our hike in. Ryan enjoys my kind of suffering, and he soon becomes my "go to" guy when I want to go big. Before long we start planning a trip to Alaska. Ryan doesn't know it yet, but I too have my sights on Johnson's nordwand.

**Ryan:** The headline in the 2003 edition of *Accidents in North American Mountaineering* still makes me cringe. "Rappel Failure – Inadequate Anchor." I remember Cooper shouting, "Oh shit!" Looking up, I fall back into darkness, spinning and sliding, faster now. The block that once held the anchor slams my shoulder, leaving a scar for life. I think it's Cooper's crampon. Then my ankle snaps, and I'm flying through the air for an eternity. "Should have gone limp!" We fly over the bergschrund, sure to have been our grave, and bounce down the blocks of ice and avalanche debris. Our rescuers are true Alaskan hard men. Eventually we understand that if it weren't for the 1,000-foot fall down our warm-up route on the Moose's Tooth, our main objective, Mt. Johnson, surely would have killed us.

Post-accident, time drifts and we settle into new lives, no longer selfishly ours. We go mixed climbing on small crags and link big, local routes. I trend toward being the cautious one in our partnership. And Kevin hates my badgering. But we've always been opposites attracted. He is the best climber I know, never afraid to take the sharp end, and for this I'll take our differences. One of us brings Johnson up every other year, but the timing is never right.

**Kevin:** With Ryan living near Redstone, Colorado, we develop a taste for dirty, soft sandstone, honing our mixed skills on chossy rock with sparse gear, reveling in ice picks pounded into dirt. In RMNP we are treated to years of thin and heady routes. Small victories come, and though we never lose sight of our big objective, we are immersed in families and careers. The Johnson project seems almost a fantasy.

Finally, in 2013 we are ready for something more. But Johnson still feels too meaty an option. We

choose Cerro Torre. We train all summer and purchase airfare for late December. Then, in September, all hell breaks loose in Colorado: Estes Park and the entire Front Range are hit with biblical flooding. No way in or out for days. With delivery of materials delayed, my building work shuts down, and the lack of income means I can't afford Patagonia. I'm now faced with an extremely difficult phone call. Ryan will be so pissed.

**Ryan:** I need to know we are going somewhere. After learning the painful way about no refunds on flights, I put a photo of Johnson's pyramid behind my computer's login prompt as inspiration. The image erupts onto the screen and my heart sinks heavy. The brilliantly sharp photo hides too much. I must know what is in that corner up high. What hides behind the sheets of white down low? Is it ice in that section? How big is that roof? I draw imaginary lines, realizing work will never get done until I have another adventure.

After the kids go to bed I search the Internet for grant opportunities. Kevin's wife mentions the Mugs Stump Award. I'd glossed over it, not feeling worthy of anything attached to Mugs' name—he is a giant in my mind, and grants like this seem reserved for modern giants. But the form is simple enough, so I take a shot and submit an application. My heart lifts as I take one last look at the screensaver, gently close the laptop, and drift off to peaceful sleep.

**Kevin:** It's just another day banging nails in the mountains when I get the call from Ryan. Mugs is shining down on us, granting access to our dreams! Waves of emotion flood over me—fear, excitement, apprehension—knowing we finally may step foot on this monolithic face. When Mugs says go, you go!

On our flight into the Ruth, the first glimpse of Johnson inspires and intimidates. Streaks of white lace the lower half of the face, leading to a huge corner. "Fuck! How could that still not be climbed?" The most beautiful face in the gorge, untouched.

**Ryan:** A crisp wind sends us gliding down the glacier, eyes focused intently on the pyramid in the distance. Dickey, Bradley, and Wake take their time passing to our right. Apprehensively confident, we yearn to be close to Mt. Johnson. A massive serac blocks access to the wall as we approach. We know its history. Seth Shaw is nearby. The serac calved onto him a decade ago as he stood below to snap a photo. We find a bypass to the left and stay clear of the monster.

We spend the day touring below the base over to the Elevator Shaft. The wall seems impossible. At home the photos made it look slabby. On the plane it looked steeper, but here? The first half of the wall is overhanging and undoubtedly taller than El Cap. Few lines present themselves; those that do look futuristically daunting. We fan the idea of an Elevator repeat, but wanting more we quickly turn—empty and defeated—back across the base of the wall. Amazingly, the wall tilts at a new angle from this direction and possibilities appear, one on each side of the great roof. Tomorrow we will see which way goes.

**Kevin:** All we want is to sink some iron into the gut of the beast. An unusually mild winter has left the north face in prime shape. Quickly dismissing our first option on the right, disappointment hovers as our attention turns to our second and only other option. Dropping from the left side of the roof is a shallow, left-facing corner, barely poking out of the snow—the only semi-distinct weakness visible amongst a sea of smooth slabs. We scurry over and around a few crevasses, surmount the final 'schrund, and arrive at the base.

I quickly grab the rack. Firm snow and rotten rock are the two ingredients on this opening pitch; Spectres and Peckers are the pro of choice. I belay as the corner feature disappears. Ryan follows and we study our next move. Chaotic snow blobs hang precariously below the roof. Just stoked to have started on the wall, we fix a rope and head back to camp. Pitch one, at M5, is an eye-opener. At camp we laugh at Jack Tackle's certainty: "No cracks up there, guys, no cracks." But I know it's too early to be cocky.

**Ryan:** Multiple snow mushrooms hang into space, blocking our way. I traverse, well protected, under the first blob and place a picket in steep névé before heading vertically between the second and third. I belly-ride the last 'shroom, bound for a blank slab out left, and thoughtful mixed climbing stretches me farther from solid pro. Suddenly, as if destined, a four-inch-deep corner, with ice barely thick enough for picks, hides perfect nut placements. "Hell yeah! We're in there!" I sew it up and delicately dance along micro-edges. We are past the great roof.

Our five-percent-chance-in-hell just jumped drastically. But the thought of the unknown above sinks to my gut and stews as we ski back to camp.

**Kevin:** Base camp has been kind, but we're down to our last rum. At 3 a.m. I'm amped and bursting out of my bag, trying to motivate a groggy partner. "Calm'er down!" Ryan's famous words erupt. "We've got a long trip ahead of us." Crawling out of the tent, I see two headlamps a few hundred feet up the Escalator on the east side of Johnson. Must be Jewel and Kim. "Yo, Ry! The girls are motoring up Johnson." I yell into the tent, hoping to create some urgency. "Um, Kev? Weren't there two headlamps up high?" Ryan asks. "Yeah, why?" I respond. "Now there's only one and it's at the base of the route."

We both assume the worst and go into rescue mode, first stopping to wake Jack Tackle and Fabrizio Zangrilli. I fear the gruesome sight ahead, but as we near the lone headlamp the sky brightens and we make out two figures moving upward. Just a dropped headlamp. We head back to camp, too mentally worked to head up our route.

**Ryan:** The morning of the false start, I sense it. Cooper's energy is revved. He's already rushing us. He is not present but lost in the days ahead. Paying attention to your partner's energy is paramount to survival. On the mountain I can feel Kevin's thoughts 200 feet down the rope; here in the tent they're more pressing.

Jack and Fabrizio join us at the headlamp. It feels surreal to have this moment with legends as we ski back to our tents, discussing mortality, family, and a general love of this life. Tension hangs in the air as we tiptoe around our chosen line. I can tell they're concerned about some nobodies attempting it.

Days later, we're back at the top of our fixed lines, and Kevin is traversing right across a frosty slab of deep snow, above the big roof, 100 meters above the glacier. The forecast is good for the next few days. This morning we woke together in sync, both of us calm. Today is the day. The anchor is solid, but protection on the traverse is forebodingly absent. I fight back thoughts of an avalanche and patiently wait for the rope to come tight. After this traverse retreat will quickly become a reckless option. Thankfully it's still early. The wall sheds its evening coat under the day's first rays, high above. Traversing together, I wonder if Kevin will find a safe belay, out of the way.

**Kevin:** I'm halfway through a 600-foot sideways wallow-fest when the shrapnel above begins to release. I find sparse pro and only occasional shelter before making it to the start of the milky smears we hope will give access to the upper dihedral. I find a belay under an overhang as the wall rains down on us, harder now. "Is this next pitch even doable?" I contemplate, as I bring Ryan across. I stick my tool into the névé above the Safehouse cave. It's sticky but looks like vertical snow for miles. If the debris slough stops we may have a chance. We brew up and wait.

**Ryan:** Sounds of tinkling, broken glass intermix with sliding snow. Sometimes something big comes down. The terrain out of the cave looks vertical, up endless white streaks, and I begin to calculate the sanity of the dangerous simul-climbing sure to come. But I hesitate to think of retreat. I feel safe.

While some climbs in our past have had similarities, nothing has truly prepared me for this moment. The entire rack, my pack for four days, bivy gear, and two ropes dangle from me, while pickets clang against my knees. It's all useless. I hope the angle eases ahead. Salvation, it turns out, is much

farther. Three and a half hours and 700 feet of vertical later, I search for a belay as Kevin comes into view. The rope, without a single piece between us, is distracting to look at, limply arching and pulling at its apex. Catching a glimpse of the wall above, I'm glad it will be Kevin's lead next—once I find a damn piece of gear!

**Kevin:** We've been simul-climbing for some time and I'm thankful for two things: solid sticks and a solid partner. I briefly fanaticize we'll come across Andi Orgler's drilled copperhead, a rappel anchor he placed while bailing off an attempt on this face many summers ago. We know he'd like it removed. But now the wall is encased in white and finding the wire is surely impossible. Our lifeline, which feels more like a death line, stretches beyond sight. Steel spikes are the only connection to the vertical wall. Focus!...it echoes in my head.

"Well that went well," I proclaim, as I finally reach the belay. "I think you should lead the next one too." Ryan gives a blank nod in agreement, and we brew for the next hour. The mood is somber, despite my attempt at humor. Both of us know we're about to be fully committed, if not already. Our only way out is to continue up this Névé Highway. I silently pray we won't have to simul-solo like that again. We sit in awkward silence until Ryan announces, "Let's do this!"

**Ryan:** A rope length away, I start down then up. If no protection is found on this lead Kevin will be forced to remove the anchor and our ropes will arch free from he to me. There's an overlap above and right, which may take a piece. Nothing. Tackle's voice rings in my ears: "No cracks, guys! No cracks up there, I bet."

Prior to the trip, I'd calculated our chances for both success and survival. Our history, with 17 years climbing together, shows a much larger ratio of Coop falls to mine, and here we know the leader must not fall. I rationalize that with solid picks I can hold any slip he may make while following. Turning slightly outward, but refusing to look, I yell down to Cooper to remove the belay and begin following. I trust he will not fall today.

Once again we're untethered to the beast. I hang onto six-inch-thick, vertical névé. Calves scream as I focus on surmounting the bulge just ahead, hopeful the angle will ease. But quickly I'm disheartened. I stop completely and cry for a few minutes. The névé remains steep, and now it's thinner and less consistent. With family back home I have crossed the line of sane climbing, and I'm upset for being so selfish.

Left, right, up, back, down, left, then right again. I dance in the direction of the most solid snow. Still no pro and we've been climbing together for a long time. It's getting darker and sparks fly as I swing. Roughly 600 feet out I finally spy some rock up and left. The route goes right, but I need salvation. A large snow mushroom hangs above, but that threat is less frightening than to continue on. A belay! Cams and nuts behind a flake, my first ice screw, and tied-off ice tools, all equalized perfectly. I'm scared and have been for too long. I sink onto the anchor and feel a wild concoction of adrenal juices flood my beyond-spent carcass. I dream only of sleep.

**Kevin:** Years roped up with Ryan instill enough confidence for me to unclip from the belay. I think of when we climbed Bridal Veil Falls in a single pitch and falling was not an option. This is no different, right? Continuing my mantra for the next three hours, I follow upward. It's dark by the time I get Ryan in my sights. Twenty hours in and I'm spent. I hope to hell there's a bivy.

Immediately I see the threatening mushroom directly above. There'll be no rest here. "Looks like only a pitch and we're in the corner," Ryan assures me. I grab the rack and head into the longest pitch of my life. I find good ice for 30 feet and my comfort rises, but then nothing but sn'ice and snow-covered rock, with protection every 100 feet or so. Finally, I reach the corner and the salvation of a protected bivy.

**Ryan:** I try not to doze off as Coop's headlamp drifts out of sight to the right. The night is dark and there's a constant hiss of spindrift and ice shards sprinkling down. Steep is still the angle. The death 'shroom lurks above. Eventually I flick on my light and rise to move. Calves come back to life and I sense he must be close to the corner.

Linked in simul-mode again, I climb into the dark. Debris bombards me, and I fear there'll be no bivy until the sun lights the sky. Eventually I find Kevin, burrowed into the corner with solid gear. We quickly make two one-person platforms. His is below, chopped into the slope with a do-not-roll-off edge. Mine burrows straight into the corner. I'm happy.

A few hours later, we rise in the warmth of the sun, below the corner we've studied so much. I quickly head into the maw. The corner curves up, out, and left in proportions I can't quite grasp, and so I don't look. After burrowing through snow, a steep slab propels me into an ugly wide crack stretching *too far*. Gear and helmet hang between my legs as I wiggle through the final constriction, a margin made thinner by my slightest exhale. Kevin ascends the rope on the outside, saving time.

**Kevin:** Ryan has wrecked his outerwear freeing the Shredder pitch, and I'm served up much of the same on the next. Wide, crumbly cracks continue out of sight. The climbing is sustained and I fire in most of our rack in the first 100 feet. "I wish we had more wide gear!" I yell down as my crampons skitter off loose flakes, my last piece alarmingly distant. Finally, after getting our only Big Bro to stick, I fight through a few sketchy moves, find an anchor, and fix the rope. We're now deep in the belly and I can't think of a better place.

**Ryan:** I'm tired. Kev had to leave his pack hanging at the crux. The belay is cramped and I'm anxious to get on. We are 50 feet from the end of the rock section that had worried us from base camp. Soon we will join the beautiful smear of ice we have come for.

As the corner steepens, I climb deeper into the gut of a huge chimney system, topped by unconsolidated snow blobs. "It looks like shit!" I yell down. Fear builds and I push back by hammering a micro-nut into the overhanging wall on my right. One saving grace: The beautiful vein of ice I long for, hidden since our approach, extends over a small bulge 20 feet to my left. If I can traverse, we've made the ice! We're certain this incredible flow, the one we came for, will link us to the summit slopes.

After making the traverse, I haul my pack as Cooper jugs and the sun sets on another day. Time is nonexistent at this hanging belay. Moments of sleep intrude as we brew water. I wake Cooper and ask if he is continuing. I'm too tired to care about his response.

**Kevin:** "Hell yes, I'm continuing!" The corner is locked in snow, but good sticks keep me moving. There's good pro for the first 40 feet, but eventually it craps out. I'm 170 feet out, in need of a bivy, when yet another dreaded snow mushroom appears, cloaking the corner. I claw its side and uncover a cave. Peeling off my pack, I throw it into the slot and crawl inside, finding a three-inch crack in the back. We call this spot the Hideaway Bivy.

After sleeping for a couple of hours, we wake to the dreaded sun baking the next pitch. Temps have been warm, over 40°F during the day. As Ryan leads the morning's first pitch, ice melts from under his crampons. We would have been shut down a day later.

**Ryan:** A constant drip bounces off my bivy bag and I move to the back of the cave away from the sun. It's our enemy now. Far below it's melting our base camp, begging the glacier to swallow it whole. The cook tent just fell. "Damn it's hot out! Nobody's getting up shit!" I yell, flashing a childish grin down to Coop. There are hard moves out of the bivy cave and who knows what above that.

The ice is wet and losing its bond so I race up, only stalling at the slushy bulges, pro near nonexistent.

This pitch, dubbed Névé's Nightmare, after Cooper's daughter Névé, will be the highlight of my climbing career. Above, I find a tight chimney and force my arm to the back, just barely reaching pro for the belay. Shivering deeply, I thank God as water rains on me.

**Kevin:** On better ice now, my lead takes me to the top of the flow, and after 100 feet I spy Ryan's "exit cracks." He thinks they'll lead us to the diamond-shaped snow slope below the summit. I've always thought the corner we're in was the way. At the belay we agree: The main corner will be better than run-out dirt slabs and flaring cracks. Unfortunately our snow-choked corner gives way to pure rock, and Ryan's back to trundling large chunks of stone before reaching the next belay.

My lead is next. Steep mixed climbing on better rock leads me to a snow ramp, and I follow it left to a giant wall of shit rock. After 180 feet I'm lucky to find a solid chunk of granite in this shield. The granite blob, welded in, is split by a crack just fat enough for a ball nut and my smallest cam. When Ryan joins me, I can't tell him enough how great this belay is. He's pissed it took so long.

**Ryan:** Kevin's belay is near the overhanging black corner we saw from camp, reaching up to the ridge. I don't dare look at the anchor he keeps bragging about.

"It's bomber!" I blurt, spotting a solid crack splitting the dihedral. I aid 30 feet up the steep crack and then free climb to a short snowfield leading to the ridge. "We're home free!" I yell down. "Caaaaw, Caaaaw!" resounds from below. The last piece of pro, a Pecker, seems fitting for the finale. Cooper follows, free climbing until he falls while pulling into easier terrain. He thinks it will go free at M7. We laugh at his cockiness and our energy, some 70 hours in now. Hanging at the ice screw belay just below the ridge, we brew up and take some celebratory photos, and then Kevin's off. "So...should I just go to the ridge and walk to the summit?" he asks, too soon. He calls down for the rack.

**Kevin:** There's one more buttress guarding the way. I bypass it with a short downclimb and long traverse into a snowfield. Even though the summit is close I'm wrought with fatigue and uncertainty. When I turn back and see the northern lights appear, they give me clarity and energy to keep on. We reach the summit sometime after 4 a.m. A storm blankets the horizon. It all seems planned.

**Ryan:** The mandatory summit photos won't upload to Facebook yet—dammit! I start down the south ridge. Looking back up at Coop, I think of all the adventures and of all the love, and hate, we've doled out. Complete opposites, we've somehow managed greatness, yet again.

Midmorning finds us back at the base of the wall. Paul Roderick flies overhead as we sit exhausted on our packs. Tilting his wing, he salutes our efforts or thanks God we're alive. The gesture is grand to us. We know he and Tackle are anxious for our return, and we are grateful to know someone is thinking of us, someone who understands.

Back in base camp flakes begins to fall, and we spend two days in a storm before we can fly out. Boredom brings reflection, and we contemplate our success and the path that brought us here. Mugs' ideals of boldness, purity, and simplicity sang to us all those years ago, when Kevin and I started climbing together. Now we steep in pride, having held firm to those ideals.

## **Summary:**

First ascent of Stairway to Heaven (4,000', WI4 AI5+ M6 A1), up the central north face of Mt. Johnson (8,460'), by Kevin Cooper and Ryan Jennings, May 1–May 4, 2014. Andi Orgler and Michael Rutter first attempted a direct route up the north face in July 1990 as a rock climb, but retreated due to blank rock.

## **About the Authors:**

Ryan Jennings lives in Carbondale, Colorado, with his wife and two children. He looks forward to his children seeing the grace in mountain heights, scenic rivers, and far-off places. Kevin Cooper grew up in the California rat race and is thankful he found a small mountain community in Allenspark, Colorado. Two daughters leave him scrambling to find the balance between family time and free time, but, he says, he has a very understanding wife.

**About the Artist:**

Leighan Falley is an Alaskan-born pilot and climber known for her piles of expedition sketchbooks. Her Mt. Johnson illustrations were created in the Ruth Gorge. See more of her work at [www.highcampartstudio.squarespace.com](http://www.highcampartstudio.squarespace.com).

## Images



"The Endless Neve"



"A Stairway to Heaven Through the Evil Face." Ryan Jennings and Kevin Cooper's 2014 route Stairway to Heaven (4,000', WI4 AI5+ M6 A1) begins in the lower left, skirts the large horizontal roof, then breaks right and climbs the prominent white streak for the length of the face, finishing on the final summit slopes. The Elevator Shaft (AAJ 1996) climbs the prominent gash second from right; the Ladder Tube (AAJ 2008) ascends the rightmost gash.





Kevin Cooper with the scope locked on Johnson's north face.



Kevin Cooper sets off. The next pitch would traverse left on snow mushrooms to breach the huge roof system.



Looking down from a 700' section of steep, unprotected névé'.



Jennings starts up the Shredder, the first of many pitches in a long corner system.



Looking out from the cramped nook of the Hideaway Bivy.



Cooper follows the quickly melting Névé's Nightmare pitch.



Cooper and Jennings below Johnson's north face, after the descent.



Ryan Jennings and Kevin Cooper's 2014 route Stairway to Heaven (4,000', WI4 AI5+ M6 A1) begins in the lower left, skirts the large horizontal roof, then breaks right and climbs the prominent white streak for the length of the face, finishing on the final summit slopes. The Elevator Shaft (AAJ 1996) climbs the prominent gash second from right; the Ladder Tube (AAJ 2008) ascends the rightmost gash.

## Article Details

Author	Ryan Jennings & Kevin Cooper
Publication	AAJ
Volume	57
Issue	89
Page	0
Copyright Date	2015
Article Type	Feature article