

# H U T T O W E R

A few brain cells later, I had created a kind of chimney in the curtain. Delicately, I back-and-footed my way up to a rest. It was too steep to climb with a 'sack on so I carefully removed it. I looked down, if I fell off I was looking at a 20-footer on to a ledge so I punched a hole through the veil and threaded it. Then I grabbed the rucksack and put it under the thread to 'strengthen' my 'protection'. Ahead of me was the stopper move. I had to swing on to the veil, standing on snow of uncertain strength, and then make my way to the top of the veil on snow ice of dubious quality. I reached up and took a deep breath. 'Please, please', I said as I swung the axe, 'I really *need* a good placement right now'. The sound the axe made as it bounced off the Alaskan granite brought back memories of home. CHONNNG. I tried again. CHONNNNG. It was a bit like the chimes of Big Ben on the *News at 10*. Three hours later, my clothing damp with snow and sweat, I had completed the first pitch.

Now pushed for time, we rushed the changeover and I made the schoolboy error of not eating anything at the belay. Twenty five feet of steep climbing later and I had the low blood sugar level blues. I slumped exhausted on the steep ice, feeling about as effective as a Robin Reliant duelling on a hill climb with a Porsche 911. I looked down at James. He was 25ft below me... "James, I am just completely knackered," I shouted down to the Irishman. "I'm going to have to come back down and eat something." Some sketchy downclimbing, two GU sachets later and a big gulp of water later I was back at the highpoint and feeling completely re-energised. This pitch was another test of the ability to climb in marginal conditions and both me and James were thankful of our misspent youth climbing Scottish routes in challenging conditions.

According to James, there was a lot of snow pouring down the gully. Both from spindrift avalanches (late afternoon snowfall had commenced) and the gallons of snow that I was tearing out from the gully to try and find something solid: "Most of it," he said later "was express to my neck." At the top of the hard climbing on the second technical pitch, the line kicked back and I ran out an entire rope length to what we later named 'The A2 belay'. This consisted of a 'Will I? Won't I?' mobile Rock 8, two tied-off pegs and a couple of hammered axes to back things up. The terrain ahead looked challenging. Above our heads, a huge six feet deep snow mushroom bloomed out of the right side of the gully like a big wart. And to the left of it, another veil of overhanging snow.

I punched back the veil of the snow to reveal a square cave that sloped back into the cliff. "Look," I said, hardly able to believe my luck, "this is a gift; we can belay in here." Sitting in the enclosed box room of the cave, things felt a lot better. Okay, so it was already quarter to six, but the col, we were sure, was just above our heads. "At seven o'clock," I said looking at my watch, "we turn around." I punched out more snow and I began to feel a bit more at home. "Look," I said. "Just like that route on Ben Nevis." An overhanging chimney capped with big blocks; an Alaskan version of the exit from the cave pitch on the crux of *Darth Vader*. My arms were feeling the strain of the last two pitches. This route would have to be climbed with aid or not at all. I drove home a good peg into a block that was wedged into the chimney and James took in the red rope until it was bar tight. I then placed a Rock 4 above my head. Green was snapped into the extender and with some help from James I pulleyed up high on the rope. I took a deep breath and wished for névé at the top of the overhang. "Okay James," I said. "I'm

James Mehigan, who is simultaneously completing both a barrister pupillage and a PhD in social policing, ski touring on the Ruth Glacier. The routes here are not high: you don't need to acclimatise for routes in the Ruth. However, we needed time just to get our heads round the sheer scale of this gigantic gorge.

