

By Chris Birks

Chris Can't, Chris Can

Sioux Falls was my breaking point. Stranded on the expressway at 2 a.m., kicking our flat tire. I was ready to surrender. Chris Scott, my climbing partner, was unfazed.

"No big deal," he said. "I've changed flats before." He snapped into action like an Indy pit crewmember. As he worked by the glow of my headlamp, I realized I hardly knew the man I was spending the worst week of my life with.

Four days earlier, we had been moving up the south side of the Middle Teton Mountain in Wyoming's Grand Teton National Park. The trip took me a year to plan. It was my obsession.

But at first, I had no climbing partner. I met Chris through his former girlfriend. He and I climbed together at the gym and hit the local crag once or twice. He was a bit impulsive for me, but we never argued on route. When I suggested the trip, he said it would be fun to climb a mountain.

I wondered if he still felt that way as we reached the saddle between the South and Middle Tetons. The higher we climbed, the deeper the snow. The last pitches ahead of us looked bad. Doubt crept in as we ascended.

"I don't know about this," I said quietly, "that looks like a lot of snow." We were in the wrong boots and the thought of a fall at 12,000 feet terrified me. But Chris trudged higher, leaving me further behind with each step. An hour above the saddle, I'd had enough.

After some coaxing, Chris agreed to turn around 800 feet short of the summit. After all, this mountain was *my* dream, and he was just there for the climb. I tried to console myself, but disappointment set in at base camp.

"At least we still have a few more days of climbing," Chris said, zipping up the tent door.

But we wouldn't. It was our last day in the mountains.

The next morning, the World Trade Center was gone. That was it, trip over. We hustled to the car because I just wanted to be with my family during the crisis. Chris, who is single, didn't want to leave the mountains.

"I'm still on vacation," he said. Once again, I was the one pushing to quit my dream trip.

"Let's just drive to Casper tonight." I reasoned, "We can make up our minds from there." But every flight was canceled, and our only recourse was a 1,500-mile car ride.

In no time, I had mentally planned the entire trip, down to the smallest detail. I fretted and worried. Chris asked, "Where do you think we can get some food and beer?"

As we crossed Wyoming, listening to the only station on earth, I stared, quiet as we sped by countless cattle farms. Chris knew I was dreading the trip.



Chris Birks, left, and Chris Scott train at North Wall in Crystal Lake, Ill.

Seh C. Jovan

"Don't worry about it," he said. "We'll be fine. This isn't that bad. I think I can keep driving all the way."

I felt better as we entered the rolling grasslands of South Dakota. I tried to describe the virtue of the nothingness, amazed that a place that looked so boring could be so wondrous.

"It is kind of nice," Chris said, squinting.

We hit Sioux Falls just after dark, tired and hungry, so we stopped at a restaurant before pushing home. We were on the road for five minutes, preparing for the final leg when it happened.

"I know that sound,"

Chris said. I knew it, too. We had a flat.

Yet again, outside forces had spoiled my careful plans. As I watched Chris put on the spare, I continued to dread the detours we faced.

"Don't worry, we'll be fine," he said, locking the lug nuts in place.

I took the wheel, peered into the night and pulled back on to the road. I was sure we wouldn't make it. Tensions began to surface. I imagined the lug nuts flying off. I imagined the engine overheating. I was ready to explode. When I turned to Chris to vent, he was sound asleep.

I was angry. How could he nap? But then it hit me: Nothing bothers Chris, and that is exactly what I like about him. I play it safe; he takes chances. I plan; he rushes in. I say stop; he says go. Together, we make a complete climber.

Mountains are dangerous, and the people that climb them have to be both aggressive and cautious. If you are too reckless, you will die. If you are too worried, you'll never leave camp. On that boring stretch of road, I found new respect for the man I thought was careless and realized the source of our friendship.

We hit Albert Lea, Minn., as the sun rose on our third day of driving. Chris awoke as we pulled into town. While the tire was being repaired, I resolved to quit planning so much and to deal with whatever came up.

After that, the silence of our ride turned to laughter. All those gas station burritos caught up with us, and the car smelled like a dog kennel. We laughed ourselves sick like eighth graders.

"What died in the back seat?" I asked, as Chris pretended to search.

The miles rolled by more easily. I was actually happy to see a traffic jam just outside Chicago; we were almost home. By now, we were goofy. The week's tension was drowned in a sea of black humor and four-letter words.

"See, I told you we would be fine," Chris said as we passed the Chicago city limits. And he was right. We were.

Chris Birks is a journalist in the northwest suburbs. He is slowly learning to take more chances. He and Chris Scott still climb together and plan a return trip to the Tetons.