



Scripts.com

Steep

By Mark Obenhaus

John Muir said it really beautifully.
He said, "Go to the mountains
and get their good tidings. "
What he meant is
that there is so much out there
that you can receive from that environment.
We receive these amazing feelings
when we're up there
and we feel so strong and
sometimes you do bring those things back.
And it's special.
It's like you've been blessed.
I'm not sure what that is right there.
Ice or rock or something. Yeah.
Nice though. I like the deep of it.
I'm sure the snow will be good in there.
Magical.
It's got a nice start.
The snow looks perfect at the top.
You know, not too steep.
Get a little few warm-up turns
before we drop into this thing.
I didn't choose my life in the mountains.
It just happened.
I tried to become a normal person
and have a normal job, but that didn't work.
As soon as I got out of jail, I went skiing.
As soon as I got out of broken legs,
I went skiing.
That's where I had to go
to make it all right again.
The rest of the world is total chaos.
We're mountain people. This is what we do.
This is how we live.
The risks are very high.
But I think most of us have decided
that the risk is worth it.
For me, as soon as the winter stops,
I get a week off.
I'll start dreaming about skiing.
This concept of just strapping
these boards on your feet.
You know, if you actually sit down and think
about it, it's like, "What a concept. "

You know, that's great.
A couple of 2" x 4"s on your feet,
sliding down the mountain.
You know, how much fun is that?
The idea is simple.
Ski where no one thought to ski before.
Ski the backcountry, away from the resorts
and the rules and restraints
that go with them.
Ski where the sport of skiing
can still be an adventure.
A simple idea, but 35 years ago,
only a handful of people saw
big, wild mountains as a place to ski.
One of the first who did was Bill Briggs.
Skis are appropriate on mountain sides
and all kinds of mountainsides.
In June 1971, Briggs,
a skier and mountain guide
from Jackson Hole, Wyoming,
became the first person to ski
from the summit of one of
America's greatest peaks, the Grand Teton.
The idea wasn't, for me,
that I would be the only one
that would ever do this.
My idea was everybody
should be doing this.
At the time nobody was,
but this is something...
It's too much fun to pass up.
The Grand Teton,
it really is an iconic mountain.
You drive into Jackson Hole
and the first thing you see is
that gigantic, jagged thing
looming up there,
and it looks like it would be
tough to climb, let alone ski.
And in 1971, the concept of skiing
those kind of mountains
was very far from even
most skiers' point of view.
There's nobody out there with signs.

There's no ropes. There's no signs.
There's no patrolmen.
There's nobody, like,
taking care of you on the slopes.
It's not a ski area. You're on your own.
You know,
you have to make decisions on your own.
Bill Briggs skiing the Grand Teton
was so far ahead of its time.
No one had even come across the idea that,
"Oh, hey, let's go ski that big rock
"with a little bit of snow on it
and call it a ski run."
What Bill Briggs did
was open people's minds.
People in Jackson told Bill
skiing the Grand was impossible.
There were avalanches and falling rock.
Sections were too steep.
He would have to ski along cliffs
that dropped off for thousands of feet.
The smallest misstep could be fatal.
And Briggs was climbing and skiing
on a surgically fused right hip
that caused him to limp when he walked.
If there's no risk, there's no adventure.
I think adventure is a great part of life.
For me it's, "Why am I living?" You know?
Gee, it's to have some adventure.
Before dawn on June 16th,
Briggs, and three friends he had convinced
to help him climb up the Grand,
left their camp at 11,000 feet
and began the push to the top.
The route Briggs planned would
take them up the Stettner Couloir,
up the avalanche-prone snowfield
on the east face
along the Petzoldt Ridge
and then the last few hundred feet
to the summit of the Grand.
I expected those guys to break trail for me.
Breaking trail is physically exhausting.
So I get up to the top of the Couloir

and I find they are all right there
and they say, "We can't do it."
Oh, that means I have to do it.
They took one look at the top of the Couloir
and it's a thousand-foot drop, and sheer.
And that was just too much.
Well, at that point I didn't want to quit.
At least I was going to see
how far I could go.
I think the biggest thing
is that he was alone.
You have this internal dialog
up there all the time.
You don't have your friend to talk to.
"You think we should go around
to the left a little?"
Or, "Boy, it's getting steep now."
You know, that's all in your brain.
You can't relay it to anyone else.
And it's fall-you-die terrain.
Where if you get avalanched, you'd be gone.
It's tough when you're alone.
His friends watched Bill pull himself up
onto the steep, snow-covered east face
of the Grand
and disappear from view.
No one saw Bill Briggs
when he reached the summit of the Grand.
No one saw him begin his ski descent.
No one saw him fall
and recover just below the summit
or ski the high snowfields.
Hours after he left them,
Bill's climbing partners waiting below
witnessed an avalanche tear past them.
They are sure that I was in it
and I had gone off this precipice
down a thousand feet.
"Well, that's Briggs
and he's finished, right?"
Well, I drew a big turn
and I ski right up to my friends.
And they turn around and,
"Where did you come from?"

They didn't see me come through that at all.
They figured I was dead anyway.
And, all of a sudden, I reappear.
Bill descended more than 6,000 feet on skis.
It took him almost five hours
to reach the valley floor.
When I got to the bottom, I'm really tired.
I'm really physically beat
and...
Overjoyed.
I did it. Okay?
Man. This is...
This is the biggest thing I'll do in my life.
There were no witnesses
to Bill Briggs' achievement.
But the next day the proof was still etched
in the snow.
The editor of the local paper flew
with Bill around the summit.
She took four photographs.
And one of them was just a classic.
The beauty of the mountain,
enhanced a bit by human contact.
It was fabulous.
I don't know.
You dream up
what you want to accomplish
in your life and...
I don't know that many people get a chance
to fulfill that.
What that was...
I had at that point fulfilled a dream.
Totally.
I knew that someone had skied the Grand,
but I didn't know
what the Grand looked like.
So it just sort of, "Oh, yeah,
somebody skied the Grand."
And it was, you know, big news.
But I didn't really know what it was.
Doug Coombs was a teenager
growing up in Bedford, Massachusetts
when Bill Briggs skied the Grand.
The quote in his high school yearbook said,

"There is no such thing as too much snow. ""
Even when I was just a little tiny kid,
I would try to ski every day.
And where I live I could even
go skiing in my backyard.
My parents would flick the light on
and I'd ski at night.
You know, I could just go down
a little hill in the backyard.
It was flat as a pancake,
but it was icy because it was New England.
And I would just skate like a fiend
from the neighbor"s house
and then come down
through the other neighbor's house
and by the time I got to my house
I could do some turns.
No one ever said to me,
""Don't go off the trail. ""
We were off-piste skiing
when I was seven, 10.
I just didn't think of it as that. I just thought
it was going through the trees.
And then we'd go down riverbeds
and things like that and jump off waterfalls.
I just thought it was normal.
I grew up skiing maple trees in Vermont,
birch trees in Vermont.
Sometimes we weren't even on the ground.
We were skiing branches
and calling it good skiing.
We weren't even touching the snow.
You're not skiing the ground,
you just ski the trees.
If someone said you have to ski
at a ski area for the rest of your life...
Well, I could maybe do that when I'm 80,
but I can't do that now.
Every mountaineer and every skier
realizes the mountains are
a living, breathing thing.
Where's that chalk? Breathe.
When they're not happy, or just pissed off,
they're blowing, you have to read that.

You can't just say, "I'm gonna do this, "
even though they're telling you,
"Not today. "
That's when you get in trouble.
Being able to feel what the mountains
are saying to you is huge.
They're alive. You know, they're totally alive
and they'll make you more alive.
You know, or they'll make you dead,
you know, if you don't read them.
You know, there's always bad luck,
and I don't know
where bad luck comes in,
but it's definitely there.
When you're always in that element,
the vertical world,
either skiing or climbing,
moving through the mountains,
not just being in them,
but actually moving through the mountains
and with the mountains, you're only a guest.
And you don't know
when your time is up as a guest.
I'm just a cheater. I've been out there
a lot longer than most people
and I just keep doing it
and doing it and doing it.
When I go out, I become more alive.
And that's probably the endorphins
that everyone talks about.
And I guess the more you produce,
the more you want.
And so I think I have been
producing a lot for a long time
'cause I want them all the time.
I just love skiing.
I like the gravitational pull.
It's not a natural motion for the human body
to stand on two planks and slide.
When you ski steep terrain,
all it takes on a 45-degree slope
to just launch into space is
a small tweak of your quadricep muscle.
And if you pop off that snow,

you can sail 20 feet
down the hill with very little effort.
You can almost get a feeling of flying.
You get up to the 50-degree range
and it starts to become
difficult to control yourself.
There's so much gravity pulling you down
that you get to a point
where you can't overcome it anymore.
But anything that produces
this much joy in people's lives
is worth a certain amount of risk,
physical risk, emotional risk, whatever.
But how much risk it's worth
is an open question.
Nowhere in the world are
the risks and rewards of a life
in the mountains revealed more clearly
than in the French valley of Chamonix.
Chamonix is the birthplace of alpinism.
It's the motherland.
In the "70s and "80s,
it was always kind of held up as
this shining, larger-than-life destination.
It was like, "Oh, Cham, Chamonix."
And it was almost mythical.
You would aspire someday
to go ski in Chamonix.
The mountains are big. They're wild.
They're unbelievably aesthetic.
There are spires everywhere.
I mean, you cannot go there, whether you're
a skier or whether you've never seen snow,
and not be inspired by the landscape.
It will just blow your mind.
You know, in Chamonix,
there is a lot of people.
They come here
from everywhere in the world.
American, Swedish,
Norway, Australia, New Zealand.
There's a lot of very good extreme skiers
from everywhere in the world.
And they come here for the same things.

You can see if you go in the bar after 6:.00,
everybody was going crazy.
After a powder day or something, it's...
It's... You can feel the energy.
They have the same spirit.
So it's very special.
When you're skiing in America,
you're skiing in little,
controlled snow parks.
And everywhere is safe. You go
and you can't really get into trouble.
And in Europe, the ski areas are
basically access to the big mountains.
I mean, they put lifts,
you know, as high up as they can.
They wanted to put a lift
to the top of Mont Blanc.
So you get into a whole different level of
trouble over there.
Chamonix is one of those places
in the world of skiing
where every time you go there,
there is some chance
that you will leave in a body bag.
So this makes it
a little bit higher-intensity spot
than most places that you go to.
It's the place.
You're not a big mountain skier unless
you've skied Chamonix.
In the valley, you know,
the life is not easy when you are down.
When you are in the mountains,
it's very simple.
You have to do something right.
There is no way to do something wrong
because you die.
You know it's very risky, but you go,
because it's every day a new adventure,
a new story. It's magic.
In the 1970s and "80s,
extreme skiing became a sport
here in these mountains
around Europe's highest peak, Mont Blanc.

Europeans watched films of men
like Patrick Vallencant and Anselme Baud,
as they climbed and then skied
some of the steepest,
snow-covered faces in the Alps.
Patrick and I were more than friends.
We were like brothers.
We were always in control.
If we hadn't been...
Yeah, what can I say?
We'd be crazy.
And this is how the first viewers
of our films thought of us.
They thought we were insane.
But that wasn't it at all.
Of course, we were always
very afraid.
The one who's not afraid is crazy.
He's a dead man.
But we never panicked.
Like Jean-Marc Boivin
used to say,
you can either live your
life like a lamb,
or live your life like a lion.
We have a choice in life.
There was no shortage of
lions in Chamonix.
There were many skiers
attempting descents so extreme,
they appeared almost suicidal.
They were the early visionaries.
They were the people who were showing us
what could be done.
In the States,
Bill Briggs' descent of the Grand is
sort of the singular, crystallizing moment
for American big mountain skiing.
But there were dozens of people
doing stuff like that in Chamonix.
A whole series of people who were,
you know, pioneers and legends.
This whole string of people
that kept going steeper and steeper

and bigger and bigger.
You had people who were living and playing
in these mountains kind of
looking out there going,
"Well, what else can I do on skis?"
Even the deaths of men
like Vallencant and Boivin
did little to slow the pursuit
of bigger and steeper descents.
Extreme skiing is a way of life.
It was my way to become a man.
Stefano de Benedetti, like the others,
was drawn into the unskied world
around the Mont Blanc massif.
During the 1980s, de Benedetti made
some of the most extreme ski descents
ever attempted.
Some so dangerous,
they would never be repeated.
When you live in touch with the mountain,
when you spend most of
your time in the mountains
your vision changes completely.
And after three or four years,
I could see the possibility to ski
where nobody saw it.
In 1984, a film was made
about de Benedetti's attempt
to ski the east face of the Aiguille Blanche
on the Italian side of Mont Blanc.
A face so steep that it held snow
just a few days a year.
Imagine the line. The simple pen
stroke between base and summit.
It makes for an
unrepeatable experience.
Perhaps only in these
moments am I truly aware
that this is my mode of
expressing myself.
That this is my mode of speaking
to the others of freedom.
When I was sure it was the right moment,
it was the beginning of June.

I started from the bivouac
at 4,000 meters in the night.
And I climbed all over the mountain.
When you wake up at midnight
and you cross a glacier with stars
in the black and you start climbing
these big walls
with avalanches, with seracs,
you feel you are a very little thing
in a big universe.
When I reached the top, I knew
that it was possible to ski.
I knew that that day
I would find my perfect moment.
And I did it.
In the perfect moment
I was so concentrated,
there was no space for other thoughts.
When you want to make a turn
and you are at the top
of a steep vertical wall...
I mean, when you are in the situation
that if you fall, you die,
everything changes.
You think very much about turning.
You think very much about where to turn.
And you do all this in a very special way.
You act like a different person.
You act with all yourself.
You are making
a completely different experience
and in some way
you are discovering yourself.
This is the magic of the mountain.
You can accept to die for this.
You don't want to die.
But to live so close
to the possibility of dying,
you understand
what is really important and what not.
And this makes you a better person.
It's probably the highest moment
of my life because in the perfect moment
I was, or I felt to be, a little Superman.

Let's go into this clearing here.
In the mid-1980s, extreme skiing,
the way of life that emerged
in the mountains around Chamonix
found a follower in a young skier
from western Canada named Eric Pehota.
You know, back then I didn't have kids.
I didn't have a wife.
It was me, me, I, I, me, me, right?
You know, you just keep stepping it up.
You just wanted to keep pushing it
and see how big and steep you could go,
without killing yourself.
You can see the log and slosh
right there, right?
Yeah.
It's the ultimate paradox,
the closer you come to dying,
the more alive you feel.
And that's so true.
You know, if you just sit around
on a couch and watch TV.
How can you appreciate that cold beer,
or that nice, big, hearty steak
and this and that?
But you eat soup, and live in a cold,
icy environment for two, three weeks,
and, man, you get back,
and that's the best burger
you've ever had in your life
and the coldest, warmest... Doesn't matter,
that beer could be piss warm,
and it'll be the nicest beer
you've had in your life.
I tell you that right now.
Can't breathe, eh?
We should get back to the truck.
Okay.
It's my life, right. You know,
it's something I've done all my life.
And I pass it on to my kids.
Pehota, like Vallencant,
like Baud, like de Benedetti,
risked skiing

where no one had skied before.
During the 1980s,
Eric was the first to ski dozens of peaks
in the coast range of British Columbia,
including the first ski descent
of the highest peak in the range,
Mount Waddington.
I've lost a few friends,
really close friends, you know,
almost like blood brother-type friends,
in this kind of life
I guess I've chosen for myself.
But, you know,
I guess I've learned to accept that.
When you ski big mountains
in an uncontrolled environment
and on a full-time basis,
you're going to see death
and you may succumb to it yourself, right?
Pehota's closest friend
and frequent ski partner
was a skateboarder and skier
named Trevor Petersen.
Petersen died in an avalanche
in Chamonix in 1996.
But in the 1980s, he and Eric were inspired
by the partnership of Patrick Vallencant
and Anselme Baud.
Trevor Petersen was a big influence
on my ski mountaineering.
He had a really magical psyche
for the mountains.
And he had this gift of just getting me
psyched and pumped as well.
Trevor knew quite a bit of background
on the French extreme skiing.
He had a book.
I think it was written by Anselme Baud
on first descents in the French Alps.
And Trev started filling me in
and showing me pictures and, you know,
I was just awestruck
at what these guys were doing on skis
and I said, "I want to do that."

In the "80s, Trevor and Eric basically pioneered ski mountaineering in western Canada. They were the guys who put down most of the first descents, who taught an entire generation of western Canadians what could be done in their backyard. They just got after it in ways more so than anybody did in the States and created a body of ski work that is really unprecedented. Me and Trevor always kind of had the same goal. We seemed to focus on the same thing that was the big objective in the area, the big peak and the big run. Maybe not the raddest run in the range, but just the big peak and the line off it. We were both driven to do that. I think that's kind of how we became really close. To share that moment with somebody and you know, work towards a goal and then achieve that goal. And to actually share that with your best friend is, you know, a feeling that, you know, I can't really describe. It's just such a great feeling, really. In the early 1980s, few American skiers were even aware of the kind of skiing taking place in the mountains around Chamonix. Most American skiers had never heard of extreme skiing. In 1988, that began to change. Steep skiing in big mountains found an unlikely American pitchman. His name was Glen Flake. I grew up in South Lake Tahoe, which was considered kind of a rat hole of a place to be a snow skier. You know, I was definitely an oddball.

I was an outcast.
Like anybody else, you grow up raising Cain
and sometimes you get caught.
Few people would have guessed
that a former juvenile delinquent
with a criminal record would become
skiing's most recognizable icon.
Everything I have in my life is
from skiing, everything.
Every dollar I've ever earned is
from skiing, every dollar.
That's it. It's what I do.
Glen Plake's star began to rise
in 1988 when he appeared
in an unconventional,
irreverent ski movie called
The Blizzard of AAHHH's.
Okay, if you thought skiing was skiing
and there was a certain sameness to it all,
I suggest you buckle your breakfast seatbelt
because what we're about to show you
is something called extreme skiing.
It lacks only a disclaimer
that you not try this on your own.
We assume your sense of
self-preservation will tell you that.
Extreme skiing is virtually outlawed
in this country,
where insurance companies
and promoters fear the worst.
So these days extreme skiing
is centered in France
where the concept of recovery
for ski injuries is laughed at.
Out-of-bound skiers have
no sanctioned competitions,
but most arguments advance
veteran Scot Schmidt as America's best.
Lately, though, he is being challenged
by newcomer Glen Plake,
the man with the Mohawk.
He now lives in France
where he earns a living
by wearing a point-of-view camera

to make ski movies like this one.
It's called The Blizzard of AAHHH's.
Glen Plake, Scot Schmidt,
good morning, guys.
-Morning, Bryant.
-How are you?
I'm not going to let this pass
without comment, did you dress for us?
-Yeah.
-Did you?
-Did it for my country.
-Let's talk about the lake.
Oh, okay. So, talk to me
a little bit about injuries, guys.
I mean, how many
and what kind have you had?
I've had three broken legs.
Broken when I was five,
broken when I was like 17,
and then just broke one again
two years ago.
Before you started doing all the weird stuff.
No, I've been doing
the weird stuff the whole time.
-Do you do everything to extreme?
-Yeah.
The Blizzard of AAHHH's was
the creation of filmmaker Greg Stump.
Stump was unhappy
with the state of American skiing.
They wouldn't let us film in America.
We had been kicked out of every ski resort
because we were jumping off stuff
and skiing out of bounds.
And we were like, "Screw it.
"Let's go to France
where we don't have to get any insurance,
"where they've got better mountains. "
So we just all booted it to Europe.
Glen Plake joined skiers
Mike Hattrup and Scot Schmidt
in what would become the most influential
American ski film ever made.
They came to Chamonix,

the birthplace of European extreme skiing.
But The Blizzard of AAHHH's
bore little resemblance
to the extreme ski films
being made in Europe.
The skiers in Blizzard
were in Chamonix to play.
We were just having a good time, you know.
We were out cruising around.
We were making a ski film and skiing hot.
We were just good skiers
out ripping around.
And I think it showed. You know?
It looked like these guys were having
a fun time. That's cool.
The skiers in Blizzard were having fun.
But they were also courting danger.
I had never seen a glacier before.
I had never seen
lifts that took us
to those types of places before.
You know, I mean, I knew what
a crevasse was, but I had never seen one.
You know. I'm from South Lake Tahoe.
You know, I grew up skiing Heavenly.
Yikes, this is kind of wild.
It was our introduction
into the big mountains.
It was awe-inspiring
and intimidating at the same time.
And that was all captured on film.
One run in Blizzard
that resembled the kind of skiing
that the European extremists were doing
was Scot Schmidt's run
from the top of the Aiguille du Midi.
This one here is called the Couloir Poubelle.
It's about 47, 50 degrees.
It's a 200-meter shot.
-Scott, you want to try to ski it?
-Yeah, I'll ski it for sure.
Two, one...
Steep.
Blizzard really made skiing seem

like a dangerous sport,
more like surfing than golf, for instance.
I mean, you know,
there's this mountain that can cream you.
There's doubt there.
There's risk there. There's...
If you do something wrong,
the consequences could be fatal.
It was just light years away from the typical
American ski experience in the "80s.
People went berserk
and it just caught on like wildfire.
You know, you ask people where they were
when they first saw Blizzard of AAHHH"s
and most people can tell you
where they were.
It's like JFK getting shot
or something, right?
I mean, obviously not
something that monumental.
But, for a skier, the people that are fans,
they'll tell you where they were,
what house they were in, what town,
what they were doing, how old they were.
They know right where they were.
I was at my high school living room
and that movie had a real big impact on me,
just like it did for everybody else my age.
From that moment on, I focused
on being a professional skier.
And, you know,
I basically went back and told my dad
that I'm gonna go be in ski movies.
And he's like, "You're out of your mind."
I'm like, "No, I'm gonna do it."
You're just on the edge of your seat,
watching this thing, the whole time.
And then they get to go to Chamonix.
And they get to ski these lines
that nobody has ever seen before.
At least none of my friends,
nobody in the States, I mean...
It was just so eye-opening
and mind-boggling what they were doing.

I've probably watched it over a hundred times. I mean... I think we burned through at least two VHS tapes when that came out with my friends and I watching that. Blizzard was the first ski movie to come out after VCRs were widely adopted. And so it was the first ski movie that you could watch over and over again. It brought Chamonix into your living room. It brought Chamonix to you in a much more personal, intimate way. American skiers were looking for their own Chamonix, a place to create their own style of extreme skiing. In 1991, the port town of Valdez, Alaska was famous for one thing, the massive oil spill that fouled Prince William Sound. But one feature of Valdez was overlooked. Valdez is the gateway to the Chugach Mountains. A vast, uninhabited wilderness that receives as much as 80 feet of snow a year. The mountains are literally blanketed in snow. In 1991, the town got the idea to promote the Chugach as a helicopter skiing destination by staging an annual event called WESC, the World Extreme Skiing Championships. One of my sponsors had read about this extreme skiing competition and said, "We'd like to send you there. " And I said, "Sure, I'm in. That'd be great." And they said if you don't win, though, you're going to have to come back and paint the building. And I didn't realize they were just joking on that, but I was thinking, "I don't want to paint that building."

Yeah. Coombsy.

So at WESC in 1991 you have the best skiers
and the toughest hills in North America.

-What's this guy's name?

-Doug Coombs.

Doug Coombs comes in, he's got this gleam
in his eye, this grin on his face.

And he skis everything
so much better than everybody else.

Stronger, cleaner, crisper,
makes it look easy.

There was just absolutely
no question who won.

-What do you have to say, Doug?

-Yeah, Doug!

Thanks, Valdez.

Doug won WESC in 1991 and again in 1993.

But it wasn't the competition
that drew Coombs and his wife Emily
back to Alaska year after year.

Well, when he came back,
he just said, "Em, you got to come.

"You got to go to Alaska.

It's just unbelievable."

He was just, you know, on fire about Alaska.
So we all went.

We'd all sort of found
this ultimate part of skiing
that we'd all dreamed about,
but never really imagined.

I mean, I had never imagined any places
like Valdez ever existing.

Just the vastness
and the enormous variety of terrain.

That's what attracted me the most.

It looked like a lifetime to ski.

And I said, "Oh, I love that."

It truly is, I think,
the best skiing zone on the planet.

And I can't believe it was only 15 years ago.

Like, why didn't someone find that
in the '80s and bring a helicopter up there?

It was like this gold field
in Alaska that just lay there

for hundreds of years,
but was never discovered.
The snow in Alaska is unique.
In the Chugach,
wet snow falls and sticks to everything.
Then cold, dry air comes in from the north,
pulling the moisture out of the snow.
What's left is light, soft powder
that sticks to even the steepest faces.
The velvety texture of snow in Alaska is...
There's no other.
Alaska's all about the velvet, that feeling,
the way it feels brushing up against
your legs and your thighs and stuff.
You don't get that
anywhere else in the world.
In the Chugach, the light surface snow
can slough off and follow the skier down.
It's like being on a giant wave at the ocean
and the thing's just tickling your back,
same thing up there.
You know,
the wave's about to crash on you,
but if you keep skiing hard
and you keep skiing the right way,
it's going to be there,
but it's never going to get you.
And that to me is the ultimate. I just loved it.
Doug was really one of the people
who pioneered literally
hundreds of runs up there.
And to think that you could actually ski
down these things,
you know, before anybody had done it,
is pretty phenomenal
because they are really steep.
Doug found the place
that he was meant to be.
It was the place that he had been...
Maybe he didn't know it,
but had been looking for his whole life.
It was the right place,
the right time and the right guy.
The helicopter pilot who took Doug

and his friends into the mountains
was a Vietnam veteran
named Chet Simmons.
I'd strap on my pistol,
put my helicopter on like a jacket
and go out into the wild unknown.
And it was great.
Things like this haven't happened
since the cowboy days.
I mean, you know,
you get on your horse, put your gun on
and go out and fight some Indians.
Well, I'd go out and fight some mountains.
You know, when you start skiing in
that kind of terrain up there,
you've got to have some sort of,
something going on in your brain.
Maybe it's a little bit of chemical imbalance
and Chet had that.
All of us had that.
He had a great eye for ski lines.
He knew what we wanted.
He would be flying up and he'd say,
"I don't know why you guys haven't tried
that peak yet. "
And we'd look at it
and just get shivers up our spine.
And then we'd look at him
and he'd already be flying at it.
And you knew you were going to ski it.
Chet was a Vietnam vet pilot
that had been shot down 13 times
and he would come into these LZs,
landing zones,
and he would kind of look at you and say,
"You know, I'm not nervous at all."
He says, "Nobody's shooting at me."
We were the first, like, the pioneers,
and in Alaska pioneers are a big thing.
Nobody had been to these peaks.
Nobody had skied them.
Nobody even thought about it yet.
That first run I took in Alaska
was life-changing.

I've never been more scared than the time when the helicopter took me to the top of the summit and I'm looking at this unbelievable peak below me going, "Wow, we're going to ski this? Is this safe? Am I going to die?" I just thought, "Well, either I'm going to die on this run "because it's going to avalanche, or it's going to be the best run of my life. "So I'm just going to do it. It's worth it. " And I skied down and it was just effortless and just got to the bottom and it was like, "I can't imagine that I just did that. "You know, I would love to just do that again. " So we did. No one could tell me where I could ski, what I could ski, when I could ski. Any of those rules, thrown out the window. That was a really big freedom and I think that freedom led into all those first descents. You know? There was nobody telling me that lifts close at 5:00. We made it happen because we couldn't get enough of that kind of skiing. The combination of endless lines that hadn't been skied before and just the adventure in this great snow. It's where the craziest times of the early '90s went down in skiing. In 1995, Doug and Emily launched Valdez Heli-Ski Guides and together began taking paying clients to ski in the Chugach. The goal was just to keep skiing with our friends out in the mountains. And that's the only reason that we did it. I mean, that was our plan, was to take other people's money so we could go skiing in the greatest place in the world. We just started out really bare bones

and it was just for the pure excitement
of being able to go skiing
in these big mountains
and to share the terrain with each other.
She knew how I thought
and we wouldn't even have to talk out there.
Somehow we had some kind of
telepathic communication.
I don't know what it was, but it just worked.
I just felt very comfortable
with Doug in the mountains,
that was where we were together.
That was what I fell in love with,
was Doug in the mountains.
Skiers from all over the world came to be
with Doug and Emily in the Chugach.
They took them to the tops of mountains
where no one had ever been before.
You've gotten out of the helicopter,
and you are just afraid
to even stand there
because it's just so completely intimidating.
And there's Doug, you know,
so casual and so calm about it.
It's just completely crazy. Completely crazy.
It's beautiful, but crazy.
We took heli-skiing to the extreme level.
It was amazing because we had the funds
from our clients to go further
and further back.
It was big-game hunting,
basically, up in Alaska.
Everybody has to ski Valdez once.
When you have a guy
from Kansas skiing 50 degrees
in perfect snow,
I mean, there's nothing like it.
He'll never forget that for the rest of his life.
Valdez became the North Shore of skiing.
Just like Maui is the North Shore of surfing.
You go there when you're
at the highest level of your game.
It's the total Mecca.
I can still visualize almost every

single first descent, every run I've done.
If you just transported me there
by a magic transporter on top of a peak,
I would tell you exactly where we were.
It would be no problem.
That's how vivid the memories are.
Doug Coombs put
Chugach heli-skiing on the map.
Like Chamonix a generation earlier,
skiers now make the pilgrimage to Alaska.
Showing up in Alaska for the first time,
everybody says
it's a mind-blowing experience,
it's an eye opener, all that stuff.
And it truly is,
because it's not like riding lifts
and skiing, you know, 1,000 vertical.
It's a different program.
And it's real.
That's real big mountain skiing.
Shane McConkey became
a big mountain skier
performing for the cameras in Alaska.
Standing on top of those peaks in Alaska is,
to me, one of the coolest feelings
that I've ever had in my life.
It's all up to you at that point to,
like, take care of yourself.
And it's a pretty cool feeling,
knowing you're about to do
something dangerous,
and about to drop in.
It's... It's really addictive.
Guys like Shane McConkey started
doing things in the mountains in Alaska
that they couldn't do anywhere else.
You couldn't ski the backcountry
in Jackson Hole that way.
You couldn't ski Aspen that way
or Squaw Valley, even, that way.
It's too short. You don't have enough room
to go big and to go that fast.
But in Alaska, all of a sudden your canvas
is five times bigger, and steeper,

and the snow is better
than it is anywhere else.
Alaska expanded the idea
of what is possible on skis.
And a new generation of skiers,
many inspired by The Blizzard of AAHHH's,
are coming here to make
their mark in ski films.
Ski films nowadays
are all about high speed,
huge air, showmanship,
style, explosiveness.
You know, just taking it to the mountain.
Chris Davenport won the World Extreme
Skiing Championships in 1996
and has been performing
in ski films ever since.
The ski filmmaker wants
to shred the mountain apart
and show off their skiing for the camera.
And when I'm in a ski film,
I'm trying to make as few turns as possible,
because I want to make it look
just death-defying.
I want to make it look exciting
and I want to make it look like somebody
just lit a firecracker in my pants
and I'm trying to get down
the mountain as fast as I can.
When you get up on top of a ridge,
and you've got a perfectly
smooth curtain of snow,
almost like a shower curtain
hanging down with maybe a spine
or a flute of snow,
it's like you're a kid in a playground.
Hopping from one side
of the curtain back to the other,
or on a pillow or catching a small air.
You know, your slough's going to the right.
I'm going left.
I'm going to cross underneath
my slough and let it go off a cliff.
And you're just kind of thinking to yourself,

"How can I choreograph this run so it's just playful and fun?"
When somebody makes it look fun on film, you say, that's cool.
That's what I want to do.
And it inspires your skiing.
Ingrid Backstrom was discovered in Squaw Valley, California, by filmmaker Scott Gaffney.
Ingrid is special in that she's a guy with a ponytail in the manner she skis.
I saw this woman ripping Squaw and you'd be sitting on a chair and a guy would be like,
"Wow, that guy rips. "
And then I just kind of sit there like, "I know that chick. Yep, she rips."
Ingrid's very first run in a ski film was in 2004.
She traveled with Matchstick Productions to Bella Coola, British Columbia, with skiers Shane McConkey and Hugo Harrison.
The first line of the day was... Hugo said, "Oh, I skied this line last year, I wanna go back to the Harrison Motel and ski it again."
The first thing that happens is Hugo drops into this line that he's skied, you know, probably five times.
And all I can see is Hugo just cartwheeling out the bottom.
So I'm up there all by myself kind of like, "Hugo, who never falls, just took the hardest crash I've ever seen anybody take."
And, you know, it kind of got me a little nervous.
I could see the helicopter firing up down in the valley and just really supercharged energy.
The helicopter gets closer and they give their little wave or their foot kick that says, "We're ready. "

And at that point I don't even know,
I think my brain probably shut off
and I just dropped in and went for it.
This is what you dream about skiing.
I just remember skiing out the bottom
and it was so fast that it was just a blur.
But it was
one of the most incredible feelings ever.
She comes charging off the ridge,
whack over the rocks,
and like four turns down to the bottom
at like 50 miles an hour.
I caught maybe the first turn from the heli.
And then we were sitting up there
just dumbfounded because she was gone.
We were just like, "All right,
that's gonna be
"the next big mountain skier chick
right there for sure."
She's good.
For me,
like the beginning part of my season,
I'm just like everybody else.
I'm at the mountain hiking for my turns.
But then, you know, the film season
starts coming in around January, February,
and it's off to heli-land.
Seth Morrison has made the big mountains
his place to explore
what a skier can do in the air.
Seth Morrison is a cat.
He can control his body in the air
and on the snow as good as anybody ever.
He is a light wiry guy
who's incredibly coordinated,
incredibly athletic, could probably excel
at any number of sports,
but he's a skier.
He has redefined what's possible on skis,
redefined the style of how to do it on skis.
He is a legend.
No one can stick a landing exactly
where he wants to quite like Seth can.
You take these risks

because it's the ultimate, man.
It's all about the powder
and just the experience
of being out in the mountains.
Flying in the helicopter
is the other half of it.
Getting dropped off on some crazy peak
where the heli
just has to like come in sideways
and just stop and hover and let you out.
That's like the best landing ever
when it's just room enough
for you up there.
Deep powder.
That's all that matters.
When you get one of those runs
that everything goes right,
where you ski the steep fresh pow
and nail your air
and everything is perfect,
you know, like nothing's better, you know,
flying through the air off a cliff just...
We're always looking for that next thing.
We're always looking for something new.
And at this day and age,
it's hard to find those things.
But they're still out there.
Right on. You guys ready?
-I am, yeah.
-Very nice and early.
Dude, what trick are you gonna do?
I'm not sure. Still thinking about that one.
You'll figure it out
when we get out there, right?
It's a beautiful day.
Good wind.
I don't think I'm an adrenaline junkie,
but I sure do love those kind of things
that give you adrenaline.
What are you gonna do?
Possibly a flying squirrel of some type.
For me, it's all about trying new things,
something I haven't tried before
but I think that's possible.

"Hey, what if we do it?" "Hey, totally, dude, we should try it this way."

-All right.

-Yeah, dude, have a good jump.

-Yeah.

-Enjoy.

Awesome.

Triple gainer, yeah?

It's all about getting creative and original with different ideas and to do fun stuff.

Everyone else is going, "You're crazy.

You've got no fear," stuff like that.

But I don't see it that way.

-Yeah, Shane, nice one.

-Ready, set...

Watch out for that porcupine in the landing area.

See you.

With the addition of a parachute to my ski gear,

I'm looking at these mountains with totally different goggles than all the other skiers.

There's a lot of lines that are really aesthetic, really cool-looking lines, that you can't do

because it ends in a big, giant cliff.

Well, if you throw a parachute on your back and you have some BASE-jumping skills, you can totally ski those lines.

For most of us it's a stunt.

It's completely crazy and kooky, but for Shane it isn't.

I mean, if you have that ability to BASE-jump,

and you have the ability to ski some of the steepest, most radical things around, putting the two of those together makes complete sense.

It makes total sense. Why not?

I got to ski a line a couple years ago in Bella Coola

that was a big, open powder field, really nice snow

that came, that rolled over

and then came down into this choke
with ice on one side and rock on the other
and then it opened up again
to this big, slanting ramp
that ended in a massive cliff.
Above that ramp was
like a flat spot with a kicker.
You know, I got to ski that powder field
down through the crux
and then boom, off the kicker. 500-foot cliff.
And that was amazing.
You can't do that without a parachute.
Complacency is what gets everybody.
Accidents, deaths, problems,
you know, whatever, you know.
And I find myself getting
complacent in places.
Like when I was in Alaska
for year after year after year,
I was setting off class three avalanches,
six-foot fractures,
four-foot fractures,
going 1,000 meters, 3,000 feet.
Oh, darn it! Too bad I ruined the mountain.
You know, let's go on to the next slope,
but, you know,
you're looking down there at 50, 60 feet
of snow that you could be buried under.
And it's like I almost got numb to it.
Something in the back of my mind just said,
"Why don't you just step back
and take a look at all this?"
And so I left Alaska.
La Meije is the peak that looms over
the small French village of La Grave.
La Grave is like Chamonix 50 years ago,
a wild, alpine world
with a lift to take you there.
It's where Doug Coombs and his family
now spend part of each year.
Well, we fell in love with France
and La Grave partly for the chocolate
and the red wine,
but mostly for the mountains.

The power of the mountain
and the mystique of La Meije.
And we were just drawn to it.
It's very raw and wild and it has moods,
ups and downs. But we thrived on that.
Everyone said it was
the last frontier of wild skiing.
You know, it's ski sauvage, as they say.
I instantly felt like I belong there.
That was fun.
Okay, let's go to town,
we'll go to the bakery.
We'll go buy some bread.
Wanna go to the store?
You can instantly get off the lift here
and get in the most amazing,
dangerous situations of your life.
You can go from sipping a nice cafe au lait
to almost killing yourself in five minutes.
I mean, to be able to have that freedom
of just wandering off the mountain
and getting into this wild spot right away.
You know, right from the restaurant,
it's like no other, no other, and I love it.
One, two, three, four, five.
Ten.
-Eleven.
-Twelve.
Fourteen.
-Fifteen.
-Fifteen.
Seventeen.
I haven't been slowing down very much.
A little here, and a little there, but...
I don't know how Emily puts up with me.
I think my wife is super tolerant.
She must think I'm just a complete kook.
She always calls me that. But I don't know,
I think she's the most tolerant person
in the whole world.
And to make me stop doing something
that I love, she knows it is not possible.
On April 3, 2006,
Doug Coombs died in a skiing accident

in the mountains above La Grave.
He fell to his death trying to reach a friend
who had slipped and fallen off a cliff
while skiing the Polichinelle couloir.
We never questioned our life.
The other people might have, but we knew
that the risk that we encountered
was worth every bit of it.
He knew and I knew,
you're never above the mountains.
Mountains have always had the last say.
Mostly they give,
mostly the mountains just give you
incredible amounts of pleasure.
And sometimes they swallow you up.
I just can't imagine a better way
for Doug to have gone,
even if it was too soon.
You know what they say
in the mountains around here,
all the birds, all the blackbirds,
that's a dead person.
And there's a lot of birds
in the mountains here.
And they're all blackbirds.
That's their spirits flying around.
That's the rumor.
And there are a lot of deaths here,
because the mountains are so intense.
They're so gnarly, they're so big,
and they can be so friendly one day
and so mean the next.
I remember being really shocked
when a friend died skiing.
And then the next friend died skiing.
And then the next friend died skiing.
And you're like, I don't know what it is,
it's weird, you just become numb to it.
It's still terrible, and you don't like it,
but it doesn't make you stop.
I hate seeing people that I know die,
but I know it's gonna happen.
I think that's just part of it.
It's like saying you know someone

who's died in a car accident.
You know, what's worse, a car accident,
or falling off the mountain?
I don't know,
I think the car accident's worse.
At least when they're falling off the
mountain, they loved what they were doing.
I was just getting ready to tell him,
if he runs into any of my family out there,
to steer clear of us.
Let's jump right in to that real quick
and take a phone call from Andrew McLean
calling from Iceland.
-Good morning, Andrew.
-Top of the morning to you, trail master.
Top of the morning to you, sir.
How's the weather in Iceland?
Well, the weather in Iceland is a lot
like our last trip to Patagonia.
I woke up and I wasn't really sure
where we were.
It's dumping snow, a total white-out,
and we're camped on a glacier.
It's kind of like deja vu.
I'm kind of wondering
what we're doing here.
Okay, Andrew,
for people that aren't familiar,
you were up here doing a little skiing
and decided Iceland had not been skied
a whole lot
so it was a great place to take off to.
Yup, so the skiing terrain up here
is phenomenal.
What we're doing is called
ski mountaineering.
And that's where you hike up
and then ski down.
And we're specifically looking
for steeper slopes
like couloirs and slopes
that are above 40 degrees.
And there's no shortage of them up here.
We can't see them at the moment,

but we know they're out there.
But just kind of reading some big,
thick, fat books and waiting it out.
Andrew McLean is a throwback.
He calls himself a "ski mountaineer."
Like Bill Briggs, like the first extreme skiers
around Chamonix,
his passion is simply to climb
steep mountains and ski down them.
No helicopters,
no starring roles in ski movies.
Just Andrew and friends exploring
the remote corners of the world on skis.
I've never really taken skiing that seriously.
I've always just looked at it
as kind of like a hobby and, you know,
I'm going to get a real job and a real career,
and, you know, get with the program.
But what always happens is, you know,
I'll have the opportunity
to kind of get with the program
and then there will be like a ski trip.
And it will be like, well, you know,
I'll do the ski trip first
and then, you know,
I'll get with the program.
You know, 20 years later, you know,
it's like skiing always takes precedence
over getting with the program.
At some point you just have to realize like,
well, okay, you know, maybe this is,
you know, more of a full-time thing,
and I should just accept it as it is.
It's my destiny.
Ski mountaineering, I look at it
as kind of between-the-cracks exploration.
All these mountains,
people haven't been into them.
They've never been skied.
They've never been explored.
You can be a modern-day explorer.
And it may not be as significant as going
to the moon or the bottom of the ocean,
but from just a common standpoint

it's a great method
to get out and explore the world.
Andrew McLean has explored
remote mountains on seven continents.
This is the peninsula of the Giants
on the north coast of Iceland.
This is where Andrew and two friends,
Matt Turley and Dylan Freed,
have come to climb and ski.
I like doing steep skiing
and I like doing remote skiing,
and I like doing
complicated, technical skiing
which could also be considered
dangerous skiing to some people.
It doesn't seem that dangerous when
you have been doing it for a long time.
It seems almost commonplace.
But taking a dangerous situation
and kind of figuring out how to do it safely,
that's the ideal.
Andrew McLean,
he's the real extreme skier in the bunch.
He's going on these trips
that are a million miles away from anything.
You're skiing 55-degree slopes.
You slip up, there's nothing there
to save you. You're done.
There's not very many people out there
pushing that envelope and for good reason,
because many of the people
that have pushed that envelope,
they're not with us anymore.
Andrew McLean continues that tradition
of skiing the ultimate extreme.
Having friends die and seeing friends die
and being involved in accidents
definitely does give me pause.
When I was involved in my first
avalanche fatality, I just was like,
""That's it, I'm not skiing anymore. ""
But I think I'm a slow learner.
You know, I just rationalize it.
I have what's called creative rationalization.

I always think,
well, you know, this was an accident.
It happened because
of these foreseeable circumstances
and those won't happen again.
But it's always something else that happens.
This was Andrew's 15th day
in the mountains of Iceland.
Holy crap.

-Dylan, you okay?

-Andrew!

-Andrew, Dylan.

-You okay?

-Dylan, you okay?

-Yeah, I'm all right.

Holy...

Holy shit!

Oh, my God.

Oh, my gosh.

Wow.

I'm very glad to be alive.

Glad you're all right, Dyl.

There, Dylan.

-That was cool. Full value, huh?

-Oh, man.

If I really want to avoid being caught
or dying in an avalanche,
it's not the idea of just scaling back
on my skiing activities.

It's more completely stopping.

I know it's dangerous, but if I give it up,
what's the future going to be like?

Is it just going to be sitting at a desk job?

You know, you need to figure that
what's going to take the place of that.

Where are you going
to get the same adventure
or same excitement out of your life?

It's just something about mountains
that really appeals to me
on a very basic DNA level.

I'm just a mountain person.

Those of us that want the risk
and want the challenge

are going to do it one way or another,
whether it's in the mountains
or it's on a racetrack
or floating down the river.
This should be a common thing
for man to be doing.
I think we get a little bit too safe
in our lives these days.
I had a romantic vision of the mountains.
The mountains represented something
different from a mass of rock.
To me the mountains were the possibility
to discover life and discover myself.
It's a different world.
It's extreme. You risk your life.
But if we decide to live this way,
it can give you
a lot of pleasure and emotion.
And that's what you need in your life.
I'd be lying if I said I was never scared but,
you know, I think the risks are well worth it.
Gliding down a slope with such peaceful
and graceful ease, no resistance.
Something I've done all my life
and I want to continue to do
to the day I die.