

In the summer of 2020 my friend Noelle dragged me up the Red Dihedral on the Incredible Hulk. I'd started trad climbing that summer and my brother and I were relentless. We climbed almost every day and got on my first alpine routes. With a bunch of days flying up many of the 5.10 multipitch routes around Bishop, I felt like I was ready to crush the Red Dihedral when Noelle proposed the trip. This was going to be our first time climbing together.

We drove up to Bridgeport the night before and camped on some dirt road. I woke up right at 4 a.m. to my perfectly timed alarm, maybe even a few minutes early just for good measure, and looked over to see Noelle in the front seat of her car looking impatient. Ahh... We were supposed to leave at four, not wake up at four. No matter, I briskly packed up and we were off in just a few minutes. We started our hike by getting lost in the campground for an hour in the dark. We wandered around for a full hour, with Noelle increasingly frustrated and embarrassed. Eventually we found our way back to the car, restarted the trek through the campground without getting lost, and a few minutes later we were on the trail in the meadow. For those who don't know Noelle, she is an absolute crusher and all-around amazing person.

She took the first pitch to warm up, blazed past a party that was already off route and taking multiple lead whips (don't ask), and then fired the amazing dihedral pitch like a champion. It was amazing! What followed was an absolute beatdown. Turns out all of the "crack climbing" I had been doing was slabby trad and I didn't actually know how to crack climb. I couldn't even tell you how many times I had to hang on the rope. At one point I fell, weighted the rope, and then dropped a bit. I assumed it was normal but turns out I blew a piece in the anchor. Yikes! Eventually I made it up the pitch totally destroyed, handed over the gear, and Noelle sped off again. We had a fantastic snack break on the nice ledge at the bottom of the splitter 10a pitch and this time I took the lead.

Well I still didn't know how to climb crack so shortly thereafter I lowered off a piece and let Noelle take the pitch. Again, she crushed and flew up it. I followed and again, I couldn't tell you how many times I had to hang. I was totally stumped on how to climb a crack. It hurt my feet, I didn't know what to do with my hands, and there wasn't any slab to quest out onto! I showed up at the belay destroyed again and Noelle led the rest of the climb to the summit. Totally epic! I was having so much fun just watching her absolutely float everything and then get totally shut down trying to follow. To this day it is one of my favorite days out and we love chatting about it

when we get to hang out!



I now had the goal of coming back and leading the pitches that so stumped me.

This past summer I was chomping at the bit. Too many night shifts, not enough climbing. I needed adventure. The weather looked stormy in the Sierra, but only in the afternoons. Or after 10 a.m. Or maybe 9 a.m. It wasn't the most promising. Adam and I saw this and instead went to Cal Dome and minorly heat stoked out on Sands of Time in direct sun and 100-degree temps. I had to clip into the anchor of the first pitch because I thought I was going to pass out. Adam was destroyed. But then the rest of the route went into the shade, we rallied and sent. It was epic. But I had a couple more days before I had to be back at work and was still frothing. I thought of all the epic Hulk stories, Bob and Dale racing the storm up the FA of Positive Vibes and getting off at 11 a.m., Croft's windy onsite solo of the Red Dihedral. So inspiring. I called Peyton, my snowboard buddy turned psyched climber, and he was up for trying to race the storm. I drove down the morning after Adam and I got back from Cal Dome.



From the Bridgeport shell station we were horrified to watch an impenetrable wall of rain and

lightning tearing across the hills a few miles west. But we had faith in the nice mornings before the storms roll in, and were excited to finally climb together for the first time. We drove through the rain and by the time we were at the trailhead the storm was behind us and the weather looked great! The hike up was lovely and we ate dinner to an amazing sunset. The roles would be reversed from my climb with Noelle. This time I would do all the leading and Peyton would get to have his most epic day of top-roping ever. We were psyched.

We were up early and started up the climb by 6 a.m. in hopes of beating the storm. This time I felt amazing on the Red Dihedral pitch. The hand jamming was absolute glory, the position was amazing, the air crisp and chilly. I was totally cruising where before I had been crushed, and I was sharing the rope with a rad dude! The stem-transfer crux was phenomenally airy and I took the time to really savor the exposure. I felt so accomplished! I thought about how inspiring Noelle had been for me and how amazing it felt to return and feel all the progress I've made! Peyton struggled up the pitch, exactly how I had with Noelle. He was totally stoked and just as inspired as I had been, already planning his return to send once he gets better.



By the time we were on the ledge below the splitter 10a hands pitch the clouds were rolling in and I was feeling the pressure to get up and off the climb before the storm hit. I reracked and flew up the pitch. I didn't rest, didn't chalk up, and spaced my gear well. It felt amazing. I felt like exactly the kind of climber I want to be, confident, competent, and in an amazing place with a rad friend. I was really proud to be up there and come back to succeed where I had struggled so much years before. I thought about how much fun I had had with Noelle and how much she had

inspired me. I belayed Peyton up and again, he struggled just as I had and doubled down on his vow to return.



With the storm more and more threatening I led off as fast as I could. The clouds were rolling in, it was raining just a mile or so away, and I could hear thunder a ways off. It was disconcerting but we could only go up, preferably over the summit but also to the rappel line. Just a short pitch from the top of the route it started raining. The feeling was very distinct for me. I knew I should be more anxious, but I was eerily calm. It felt like cognitive dissonance. Once Peyton was at the belay the rain soaked the rock and our morning weather window was now fully closed. All thoughts of the summit were now out of the question and we were going to rappel the entirety of the Infinity Gauntlet. I led a super short pitch to the 11th belay station of that route and we took a short moment to gather ourselves. We donned all our layers (including rain jackets), I drank the rest of my water, ate snacks, and had a little pep talk. "We know how to do this. Everything is the same as normal, we just have to do it all right. No rushing. Double check everything. We are going to get down safely." I thought of my heroes and all the climbers who have died rappelling.



By now the rain was coming down in sheets, and on the first rappel I couldn't find the next anchor. I was swinging around in the rain, more than a thousand feet up when the loudest crack of thunder either of us has ever heard split the sky. There was no sound except for the thunder. It filled my brain. It was fucking terrifying. A massive scream roared out of me without any thought. It was one of the most fucked up things I have ever experienced. Eventually I found the anchor, got off rappel, and Peyton came down. Then our rope got stuck and no matter how hard we tried we couldn't get it to come down. I gave Peyton my puffy jacket, set up an ATC ascender and inched my way up the rope. Man, that system is slow, especially on a soaking wet rope in a storm. I juggled halfway up our rope and was able to flick it out of the crack it was stuck in and rap back down. We pulled the rope and continued. It took us four hours of rappelling to get down.



The experience was completely outrageous and incredibly intense. Every rappel the ATC would wring the water out of the rope and soak our crotches. It felt like we were more soaked than if we were underwater. After each rappel we would comment that it felt like we couldn't possibly be more soaked than we were, and each rappel we would get more soaked than that. The thunder had ceased but now every crack was a creek and we were totally surrounded by clouds. We rappelled and rappelled and rappelled. As we got lower on the wall the creeks flowed more and more rapidly. I flaked the rope into a puddle because it didn't matter, it couldn't possibly get more wet. Every rappel we double checked everything, backed up everything, tied knots in the rope ends.

But it was also beautiful to be up there in the storm. I've never seen water flow down a wall, gaining strength as we descended, following it down. The clouds swirled around us and danced with the wall. Watching Peyton rappel down made him look simultaneously badass and tiny. The weather in the mountains was putting on a show and we were there in the center of it as witnesses. I was amazed and awed to be there, too consumed and focused with the task at hand even to wish I was somewhere else, maybe back in the tent. I was also glad Peyton was with me. That guy is solid. He never once complained, and we fully trusted each other.



As the wall became more ledgy the creeks were now raging. The rope got stuck one more time and Peyton put me on belay and I climbed one of the 5.7 pitches in gloves and approach shoes up a creek. Handjamming in a glove with water flowing over it was something I observed with a thought of "huh". I unstuck the rope, rappelled down and we continued. We did a few more rappels, and just as we touched down to earth the rain stopped, the clouds parted, and the sun came out.

The clouds flowed around the mountains, Kettle Peak was shrouded but poking through. We looked down on the tops of clouds below us in the valley. We stopped on a boulder and took off our wet clothes to dry off in the sun before it went behind Kettle Peak. I pooped in a ziplock bag, not having a wag bag. Once we were in the shade, we hiked down, broke camp, and hiked the rest of the way back to the cars.



For weeks after it felt too heavy to write about. I would start an uninspired paragraph and go to sleep. It was hard to describe when friends asked about it. I really wondered about my motivation for going up there on a day with that much rain in the forecast. I've been developing the attitude that if you want to send, you kind of have to go for it. I don't want to wait until everything is perfect, especially now that I don't live in Bishop and work a big-boy job. I believe that conditions are good more often than people give them credit for, and with effort and perseverance there are incredible experiences that can be had. I am willing to try for those days, even if it means getting shut down or being told that it isn't going to work out. We had the entire Hulk to ourselves on one of the most beautiful days I've ever had. I feel like now is the time and life is about going for it, whether that is in climbing, a really good relationship, or something else. I don't want to wait around for the conditions to be better or something to change. On top of all that, I really crave intense experiences. I would rather try something epic and fail than something mediocre. But at the same time it really felt like this climb was us probably flying a little too close to the sun. Our wings didn't melt, but I felt the company of Icarus up there.

