RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Psychovertical

Andy Kirkpatrick

Contents

About the Book

Words like boldness, adventure and risk were surely coined especially for Andy Kirkpatrick. As one of the world's most accomplished mountaineers and big-wall climbers, he goes vertically where other climbers (to say nothing of the general public) fear to tread.

For the first time, this cult hero of vertical rock has written a book, in which his thirteen-day ascent of Reticent Wall on El Capitan in California – the hardest big-wall climb ever soloed by a Briton – frames a challenging autobiography. From childhood on a grim inner-city housing estate in Hull, the story moves through horrific encounters and unique athletic achievements at the extremes of the earth. As he writes, 'Climbs like this make no sense … the chances of dying on the route are high.' Yet Andy, in his thirties with young children, has everything to live for. This book – by turns gut-wrenching, entertaining and challenging – appeals to the adventurer in all of us.

About the Author

Andy Kirkpatrick has climbed the hardest routes in the Alps and has mountaineered around the world, including Patagonia in winter. His film *Cold Haul*, about his and Ian Parnell's ascent of the Lafaille Route on the Dru, won first prize at the Graz Festival. He is a popular climbing journalist and his website *www.psychovertical.com* receives thousands of hits every month.

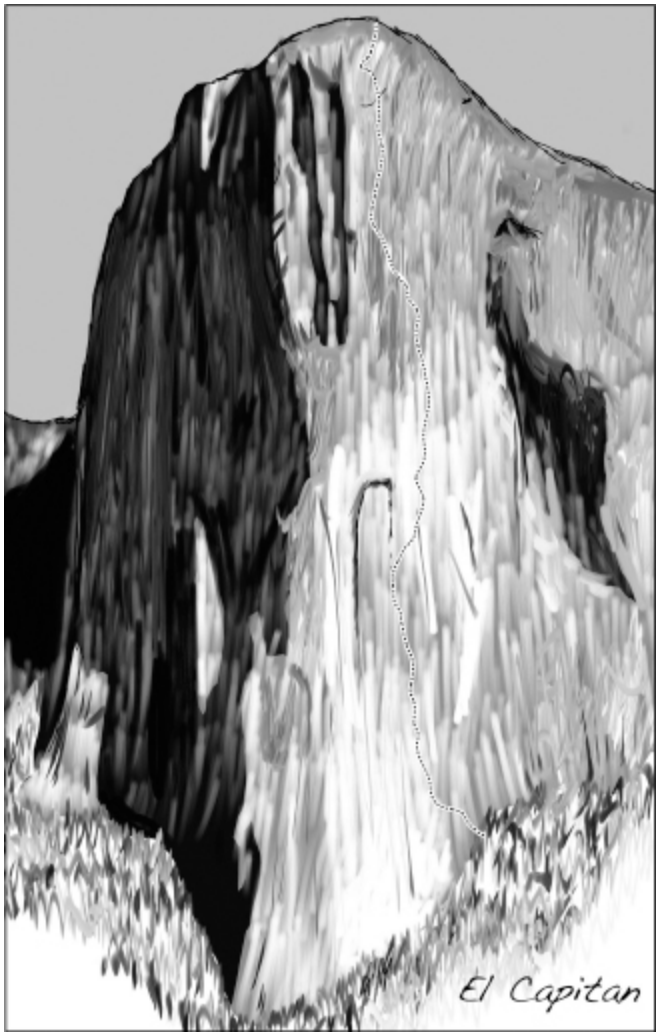
Psychovertical was awarded the Boardman Tasker Prize 2008.

PSYCHO VERTICAL

Andy Kirkpatrick

arrow books

To the patient people who helped gather up the words that almost escaped me


El Capitan

List of Illustrations

All photographs, maps and line illustrations are by the author, unless otherwise attributed.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Mandy, who unlocked many doors, and helped me discover who I could be – and for being my toughest critic. And for giving me Ella and Ewen, gifts that will take me a lifetime to unwrap.

To my Mum, the strongest person I've ever met. It's a shame people don't write books about people who climb real mountains every day. I finally get what you mean about the world being my oyster.

To my Dad Pete, who gave me my thirst for adventure to begin with – one of the greatest people I've ever known. The older I get the more I understand.

To my brother Robin (you're a real hero, not the wimp I've made you out to be). I just want to say sorry for pushing you in the docks that time (and all the other stuff … like the fish tank). To my sister Joanne who has climbed her own mountain to become the type of teacher every child deserves, and to another teacher, Mr Peterson of Villa Junior School, who took the time to see between my spelling mistakes.

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Lastly to all my climbing partners, who I expect, if you bump into them and ask about their role in this book, will tell you that every fall was half as far, and every near-death experience was nothing to write home about. Don't believe them, they're all in denial, it was always worse. But it was always more fun than it sounds … wasn't it?

Prologue

I sat alone in the small white room, my attention drifting from the snow that built up on the windowsill outside to the two test papers on the desk in front of me. I fidgeted with my pencil, chewing the end until my lips were speckled with red chips of paint. My mouth tasted of damp wood. The wind rattled across the corrugated roof of the building. The sound of air being sucked under draughty doors and past ill-fitted windowpanes grew loud, taking my concentration away with it.

Time was running out.

Although this was an exam I had sought out, it felt no better than all the others. I felt small, awkward and stupid. The first paper had been easy, but the second had turned my brain into a thick slow glue as the numbers fell from their places, lost upon the page. Even though the room was cold, I was feverish with that familiar panic which I had thought I'd never feel again. It was as if I were back at the school I had hated. An old self-loathing returned, but I pushed my brain to form some answers out of the murk.

None came.

Drifting out of the storm, we trench through deep snow until we come to the edge of the loch, its surface frozen beneath a winter blanket. My partner takes a bearing and shouts into my ear that it isn't far. The buttress above

comes into view for a moment as the cloud spins away from its summit.

We have left the car in the dark, woken early by the wind buffeting it on that empty high mountain road. Groggy with the long journey north from England, we had dressed while still in our seats, fighting like Houdini to pull on boots and salopettes in our confined quarters – neither of us really wanting to venture outside until the last possible moment. The early start has proved useful in the long approach through the deep snowdrifts. With luck it will allow enough time to climb the route.

We recheck our bearings, wanting to avoid the avalanche-prone slab to the left of the loch, and gain another quick glimpse of the wall when the cloud thins. It is steep and covered in rime ice, which clings to the rock just like ice clings to the inside walls of a freezer. It offers an equivalent security.

The conditions are far from perfect, but this is Scottish-winter climbing. Here you just climb routes as you find them, not as you'd like to find them. It has been pointed out by a visiting Slovene climber that here in Scotland we 'ski on the grass and ice-climb on rock', but at least today the rock looks wintry enough. Stuffing the map away and pulling on goggles, we take the easy option and set off across the loch's creaking edge.

I turned the paper over and looked up at the snow, lying thick as a bed on the sill. I had a few minutes left until the examiner was due to return, but I knew from experience that it would take more than time to get these answers right.

Teachers always said I was lazy, that I lacked concentration or was a slow learner, then went on to label me as having some kind of learning disability. The schools I went to were filled with 'problem children' and I was just one more. I remember learning in biology that the brain

has two sides. It came as a bit of a revelation at the time. It seemed to explain why sometimes I felt slow and stupid, one of the school's stigmatised, remedial kids, while at other times I felt bright and intelligent, capable of producing drawings or solving puzzles that were beyond the others. Most of the time I kept the dark side in the background, concentrating on what I was good at, but at school that wasn't easy when the narrowly focused world of school subjects gave you almost no way of shining.

The route looks hard. A tenuous mixed line up a steep wall and arête, it is a classic rock climb in the summer, but now, with a coating of ice, it is one of the hardest climbs on the crag. I visualise the moves, how I'll link up those rounded horizontal cracks and vertical seams, digging through the wall's thick winter coat of rime for secret places in which to twist and hook the picks of my axes.

I've wanted this route for a long time, storing in my head every scrap of information I can find. Although I can't spell the name of the routes, or the corrie we are in, I can list everyone who's tried them, what else they've done and why they failed.

As I step up to the base, I remember the discouraging words of a climber who has failed on this route twice: 'You'll never climb it, there's a really long reachy move on it – you're too short.'

Flicking my picks into the hard cold turf that sprouts in patches on the climb I close my eyes and visualise the route as a puzzle, the pieces jumbled in the snow. I see the first piece and start to climb.

The examiner opened the door and asked me to stop.

I looked out of the window feeling sick and empty.

At school my worst nightmare had been the times table. The teacher would start in one corner of the classroom and go around, making each child stand up at their desk and

say the next figure. As the moment snaked nearer, the blood would drain from my face as my heart beat faster and faster. I would feel hollowed-out and sick. The dark half would scramble any thought as I struggled to calculate an answer. Finally, on shaky legs, I would stand and speak. I always got it wrong. The other kids would laugh as I sat back down, thankful the ordeal was over.

Totally immersed in the climbing, my brain is powered up and energised, working to its full potential, its limited memory freed from all those confusing hoops it has had to jump through in the real world. Up here everything is real. No numbers. No words. The only calculations are physical, the only questions how to progress and how not to fall off.

Winter climbing is 10 per cent physical, 90 per cent mental. If you're good at jigsaws you'll probably be good at this sort of climbing. It's simply a frozen puzzle, your tools and crampons torquing and camming the pieces to fit – and like a jigsaw, the moves are easy. It's just finding them that's hard.

The examiner picked up the sheets and asked me to come to his office while he marked the papers. Seeing I was pensive he chatted about the storm as we walked through the old Victorian building.

It wasn't leaving school with few qualifications that mattered to me or to anyone else; it was leaving with the belief, created by society, that these things really mattered. At sixteen I thought I had been graded for life. The only skill that I knew I possessed was my ability to be creative. This initially manifested itself in painting and drawing, but, like anything that comes easy, I had no way of knowing that this was any kind of skill at all. I found it hard to get people to take me seriously when they found I couldn't remember my date of birth or the months of the year. I was always

fearful that I would be found out, that people would dismiss me as thick or stupid. Yet slowly, as I grew older, I found ways around this by trying to avoid any contact with words or numbers.

I left home and moved into a squat near the city's university, and slowly I began to mix with people who could get things right, people I had never met in my remedial world. It was like meeting people from another culture, and yet I found we weren't that different – and that in some ways I had skills they lacked, or maybe even envied. I slowly learnt that I had to tag abstract words or numbers with images for reference words, and that way could bypass the sludgy part of my brain. My party piece back then was trying to remember all twelve months of the year, and get them in order, something for the life of me I just couldn't do. It was only at that point that my new acquaintances made me see that this and all the other things that once did matter meant nothing at all. One night at a party someone said my linear brain function was perhaps a sign of dyslexia and maybe I should be tested, just to find out what exactly was wrong with my brain – and that's how I found myself doing this one final test, wondering if, at nineteen, it no longer mattered.

* * *

I get to the place where the other climbers have failed. Two spaced, flared, horizontal cracks, the gap too wide to span with my axe. I hunker down on my tools and try to solve the problem.

Hammering my axe into the crack at chest level, I mantle up on it, palming down on its head, straightening my arm, one crampon point scratching near its spike, the other crampon latched around a corner. It feels as if I'm about to do a handstand. I blindly scrape away the thick

stubborn hoar with my other axe, searching for a secure home for its pick. There is nothing.

I think about backing off, about failing, but I'm not sure I can. I imagine the good nuts set in poor icy cracks below and feel committed to the move, as I blindly scrape for something to hang. With my arms cramping, I'm forced to commit to laying away off the rounded arête, the teeth of my pick skittering and skating around until I pull down hard and trust it, wiggling my other axe out as I slowly stand up straight, my body hanging on tenterhooks.

I try not to shake too much.

I take a deep breath and look for the next piece.

The first test paper had comprised a hundred complicated cubes, with four options of how they would look opened out. The other paper had been covered in words and numbers. The boxes were easy and I had wondered if I'd been given this by mistake. Then I had come to the other sheet and the lights had gone out. Feeling like an idiot, well aware I hadn't done well on the second sheet, I sat and watched him mark the answers, ticking them off as he went.

Reaching easy ground, easy in comparison to what it took to reach it, I race up a hanging corner, sacrificing protection for speed. I pop up onto a narrow foot ledge, a grassy escape route into an easier climb on the left. I hesitate. Above, the wall looks compact and steep. It would be so easy to avoid what waits there. Plenty of possible excuses. The dark. The storm. I look down at my partner Dick and think of the hollowness of giving up now. I know he doesn't care as long as I get a move on.

With a nut placed at my feet I boulder out the moves above the ledge until I'm committed. I can see where I'm headed: across the wall to a ledge on the arête. Sweeping away hoar as I go, I try not to think about getting pumped

as I scratch until I find one good tool placement on round edges, crampon points poised on sloppy holds that look like flattened chicken-heads. Matching tools together I look down at my partner far below as he tries to stay balanced in the wind, his flapping red jacket barely visible through the blown snow. The two ropes arch, plucking out questionable protection, but the big one stays put. There should be great fear, there should be great doubt, but all I see is possibility.

The teacher looked up from his marking and removed his glasses. ‘Remarkable. You’ve scored 99 per cent in the spatial test. I’ve only ever had one other person score so high. He was a headmaster. As for the other test … I’m afraid you only scored 16 per cent.’

My overwhelming joy was quickly crushed: the second test was much more important to real life. Being able to recognise what boxes look like opened out would get me a job in a cardboard box factory.

‘You’re a classic dyslexic,’ he said. ‘One side of your brain doesn’t work as it should, so the other half compensates.’ He told me the symptoms of dyslexia and my pieces finally fitted.

Lateral thinking gets me below a small ledge. Holding my breath on nothing foot-holds I tickle at a frozen tuft of grass with my pick. The pick bites with a dull, shallow thwack. With time running out, I blindly swap feet, then hang off one tool as I bring the other across to join it. I feel the dice roll. Will they rip out when I pull?

My brain does some quick calculations and says no. I do. They don’t. I’m there.

I mantle up onto the arête. I’m so aware of everything around me: the snowflakes blowing across my face, the line of sweat rolling down between my shoulder blades, a twist of frozen heather emerging from the snow, the wind, the

darkness, the cold. My body is hot, my brain burning as I suck in the speeding snow. The next thirty feet is unprotected. If I fall I'll die, but there is no time for melodrama; this is where I have always wanted to be. I think how strange it is that brain power can get me here, yet it still fails to do so many other things. I know now that all things are balanced, but on the mountain such details no longer matter. There is no need for words here. With the pieces together I can see the picture. Who needs to know its name?

Hooking both axes onto a flake I pull off the ledge and head into the darkness.

The doctor showed me to the door and handed me a brown envelope containing my results. 'Andrew, with a score of 99 per cent you should find something you enjoy that involves three-dimensional problem-solving, something creative, where you can turn these things into an advantage.' I shook his hand and I said thank you, then walked home through the snow, wondering where such a strange gift would lead me.

All rising to great place is by a winding stair.

Francis Bacon

RETICENT WALL VI 5.9 A5

8 BEAKS
10-12 KNIFEBLADES
10-12 THICK KNIFEBLADES
15 LOST ARROWS
6 ANGLES
100 COPPERHEADS
ALL HOOKS
2 SETS NUTS
2 SETS OF MIKRONUTS
3 SETS OF MICRO CAMS
3 SETS OF CAMS TO 4"
10 RP HANGERS

Hard work kills horses

THE TAXI CAME at 6 a.m., beeping twice. It was a Sunday morning early in June 2001, the beginning of my journey to solo one of the hardest climbs in the world, certainly the hardest climb of my life.

And my life was falling apart. I was running away.

I'd lain awake on the settee most of the night waiting, my mind a mess; in part this was the usual jumble of worry and doubt about the climb, and in part it was the presence of darker clouds, the worry of what it meant to be sleeping down in the living room alone while my wife slept upstairs.

Did she sleep?

All night I'd tried to order my thoughts, put things in perspective, get my life straight in my head before I left. It was impossible. I thought about writing her a letter, to try to explain why I was going, why I was so compelled to climb. But I just knew those words would be transparent and wouldn't come close to how I really felt. No words could explain why. Nothing I could say would make her understand. There was no sense to it, only the absurdity of travelling halfway round the world to climb a lump of rock.

You don't have to go.

A pendulum swung within my thoughts, its point rising and falling, one moment making me feel invulnerable, the next draining away all my self-belief, making me just want to stay here forever with my wife Mandy and my daughter Ella.

How can you leave them?

It would be easy to tell the taxi to go away, to creep up the stairs and slip into our bed. I could hug Mandy and whisper that I wanted to stay. For once she would know that I put her first. I could still be here when Ella woke up. See her smile.

But what about tomorrow?

You have to go.

I lay and imagined myself lying in a pool of my own blood, shattered bone sticking out of me at crazy angles, slowly dying on the climb, imagined the feeling of loss, knowing I would never see them again, their world shattered like my body.

What will you find there that will justify risking everything you have here?

The taxi beeped again.

I wished it was still dark. In the night I would often feel the most level-headed about climbing hard routes. Getting out of a warm bed to go to the toilet, I would stand naked in the dark, shivering with cold, knowing all I wanted to do was get back under the covers with the woman I loved. The thought of being anywhere else, sleeping in a snow hole, perched on the side of an icy north face, or forced to abseil through the night would seem ludicrous. Pointless.

You sound like her.

There is a point.

I could think of no rational reason for climbing anything. I just knew I had to do it.

The climb is the question.

I would be the answer.

I was about to leave, and travel halfway across the world to solo one of the longest routes on the planet, a climb only a handful of people had ever dared to attempt, one which had taken one of the greatest climbers in the world a staggering fourteen days to solo. I knew the route was out

of my league. I knew I could die, or worse, yet I slept alone on the settee.

You might never come back.

The taxi beeped once more.

I stood up and, already dressed, began lifting the huge vinyl haul bags that held my climbing gear out of the house and to the taxi. Each one was the size of a dustbin, made from indestructible material designed to line landfill sites and adapted to withstand being scraped against rock for miles of climbing. For the next few weeks they would be my only company. Half carrying, half dragging them out of the back door, I went round the side of the house to where the car waited. The taxi driver got out slowly and helped me lift the first bag into the boot, then pushed the second one sideways onto the passenger seats in the back.

Each bag was the size of a small person. It weighed around fifty kilos and contained the equipment I'd need for my coming climb: ropes, karabiners, slings, pegs, nuts, storm gear, sleeping bag, my portaledge (a folding bed used to sleep on vertical walls), and a hundred other vital items, a decade's worth of accumulated climbing equipment.

The bags were hard to lift and painful to carry. They had to be moved in relays unless I could find wheels, whether

taxi, bus or trolley, but even when I felt my knees were about to buckle or my vertebrae compress down like an empty Coke can, I enjoyed carrying them. Pain like that is simple, honest, and feels invigorating as muscles and mind are pushed beyond their norms. Carrying stops you thinking.

The longer you go without thinking the better it feels when you experience it again.

Each bag made the car sag further, and the taxi driver's eyebrows rose as his wheel arches dipped towards the gutter.

'You might need another taxi, mate,' said the driver, kicking his tyres with concern.

'Only got one small one left,' I said, as I nipped back down the alley to my house.

I walked through the back gate, past Ella's frog-shaped sandpit and small red scooter, and in through the back door of our tiny Sheffield terraced house.

My last bag lay on its side surrounded by Ella's toys.

There was one more thing I had to do. I crept up the steep narrow stairs and slipped into her bedroom. She lay on her side, her thumb in her mouth. Perfect. Nothing in my life seemed to fit together properly any more, my marriage, work, climbing. Nothing but her. She was the only thing in my life that I didn't doubt.

But even she wasn't enough.

You have to go.

I wanted to kiss her, but knew if she woke up I wouldn't be able to leave.

I spent a lot of time wondering what she would think when she grew up, if I were to die climbing, and I thought about it again now: the selfishness of what I was about to do, risking my life once more, and in turn, risking her life and future. Many climbers, or people who do dangerous things, give it up once they have kids, but for me her birth had come at the start of it all.

At that time, people made judgements about me as a climber and a father, often asking me how I could do it. I didn't know, all I had was excuses. I'd said that you shouldn't sacrifice who you are for your kids, but I wasn't so sure. Wouldn't it be me sacrificing them for what I wanted? But I knew that if I didn't, I wouldn't be a person worth having as a father, and in a way that was why I was here now, about to set off on another climb. The more I tried to quit, the more the pressure built inside me.

What if you never see her again?

I told people I didn't want to die before she was born, just as much as after she was born. But the truth is dying is never in any climber's plan.

She made sense, but she also made what I loved even more senseless. Mountains don't care about love.

I wanted to stand there forever. I could. But I wouldn't.

I crept out of her bedroom, closed the door, and turned to see the stairs leading up to our bedroom, where Mandy probably lay awake. She would be angry with me, leaving her again to go climbing. She wanted so little: a normal life, a normal husband. I couldn't give her that, but we were both stubborn and we'd been together for ever. We didn't quit, so here we were. Still fighting. We also loved each other.

I knew she would be lying in bed hating me now, yet wanting me to climb the stairs and say goodbye, or even to say I'd stay – not because she was weak, but because she loved me.

I was about to solo a climb so hard only the best had attempted it, a route I doubted I could do. Yet in that moment the thing I most feared was climbing those stairs, climbing up to face her and say goodbye.

What if you never see the baby growing inside her?

I went out to the garden and tried to compose myself, not wanting the taxi driver to see I was upset. I was everything I despised.

They will be better off without you.

As I'd done so many times before, I opened a box in my head and placed the feelings inside, closed the lid, and moved on.

'Where to?' the taxi driver asked as I sat next to him and clipped in my seat belt.

'The station, please.'

We drove down the hill, and through the empty streets.

'Where you off to?'

'America, to a place called Yosemite.'

'Oh aye, I've heard of that. Are you a climber, like?'

'Yeah … sort of.'

'Are you going by yourself?'

'Yes.'

'Isn't that dangerous?'

'No,' I lied, 'just more work.'

'You want to be careful with those bags of yours, they're bloody heavy.'

'Oh, they're OK, they keep me fit.'

'No mate,' the driver said, looking at me with concern, 'remember, hard work kills horses.'

Bird rock

I WAS HANGING in space, my fingers clamped tight, holding on, above a new and startling world of light and sound. People often ask me how long I've been climbing and I suppose it all began here. It was 1971 and I had just squeezed my way out of my mother.

The doctor held me above my mum, my tiny untested fingers wrapped around his and hanging on in terror, something that is often mistaken as strength.

'My, Mrs Kirkpatrick,' said the doctor, dangling me before her like a zoo keeper dangles a baby chimpanzee in front of a TV crew. 'You have got a very strong baby here. He's as strong as an ox.'

My childhood was full of high places, of holding on, hanging, swinging, and falling, and so it's no surprise that as an adult I would be drawn towards the heights and a life off the horizontal.

My first high place was a hill named Bird Rock, a mountain carved in half by some geological fluke, exposing a limestone face set in a valley not far from our house, and visible from our tiny garden. It always seemed strange and exotic, always there on the horizon, mysterious, its summit seemingly inaccessible amongst the more pedestrian rolling green hills that surrounded the Welsh village where I grew up. I'd seen films like *King Kong, Tarzan* and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Lost World*, where strange rock

faces yielded prehistoric lands and lost species. I wondered if Bird Rock was the same, its craggy face perhaps hiding dodos, pterodactyls and giant eagles that would have to be fought off.

I was five and it was my first mountain, and my dad always promised that when I was a little older we would climb it together.

My father was a mountaineering instructor in the RAF, based at a Joint Services camp in the Welsh seaside town of Tywyn, running courses for the army, navy and air force. That is the perfect job for a sadist: running poor recruits around the hills in the rain, making them shimmy across greasy ropes above ponds of vile green liquid, pushing them to near hypothermic death in foaming rivers, all in the name of training. My dad threw himself into the job with gusto, thinking up increasingly devious ways of scaring and stretching recruits in the outdoors, always setting an example by going first. I can still remember creeping into my parents' warm bed on dark winter mornings, as my dad got up to take a load of recruits down to the sea for an early morning swim, his face grinning with the craziness of it all. You could say he was very pre-health-and-safety.

He was pretty unconventional for someone in the RAF in the 1970s. Rather scruffy and prone to bend the rules, he never went too far in his long career, generally being placed out of harm's way in the outer reaches of the RAF: mountain rescue teams, officer development, and outdoor education. His only advice to me growing up, apart from how to tie knots, roll kayaks or light a stove, was 'Only work hard when people are looking.' No doubt this tongue-in-cheek approach didn't serve him well when it came to making air chief marshal, but fundamentally all he wanted to do was just go climbing.

He was charismatic, a fantastic story teller and a great 'people person', which is probably why they didn't just boot him out. These skills trumped a pair of well-ironed trousers