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The top of a mountain is no place for an agoraphobic. Nor is the top, or bottom, of the world. The horizon stretches further from these places than anywhere else. To stand at them is to take in as much of the Earth as it is possible to see without leaving its surface. For that reason, I find that it moves you closer to the planet and, somehow, to whatever else there might be that is bigger than us. It takes an effort of the will to embrace all that, maybe even as much as it does to reach these places in a physical sense. Well, almost.

Strange, then, to be able to say that my journey began with me curled up in a small room suffering from agoraphobia. I see that room now as a tunnel that led from my previous existence as a professional rugby player to the brilliant whiteness of mountains, wildernesses and the unknown. It was terrible in that room, wrestling with the fact that my rugby

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career was over, trying to control the fears that had always been in attendance but now rose up and threatened to drag me down.

Fear had informed every move of my playing career. When I started out, winning was the most important thing, and the accompanying fear of losing, but as I matured (in other words, lost a few times) it became the fear of making mistakes, being dropped and, worst of all, letting down my team-mates. What a terrible waste of energy, I realised in that room, now that it was all over. How restricting, to let your horizons close in like that. What's the point of being scared of something that you're not going to do because you're scared of doing it? Be scared by all means, but only of the challenges you have resolved to take on.

No sportsman knows how he will handle the end of his playing days. Not many will even think about it. I had entertained the idea from time to time, but never for long. It was too terrifying. Besides, in a contact sport like rugby, if you think too much about that sort of thing you lay yourself open to doubt and vulnerability, and that can bring about the end in itself. I found it better not to think. Everything is laid on for you: an elite environment, a vigorous routine to live your life by, a direction and a purpose. All you have to do is to focus on the next session and the next game.

If only it could last for ever. Sometimes it feels as if it will. But the end must arrive some time – and it could be the next session, it could be the next game.

Sure enough, my time came suddenly and without argument. I was left with no choice. And, as it turned out, I handled it very badly, shutting myself away in that room for

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twenty-one days. The only time I went outside was for an operation on my ruined shoulder.

It was a cold and unfamiliar room in the small two-bedroom house my parents were renting in Newport while they were renovating their new home. When I'd moved out of my previous house a few weeks earlier, I had taken it, the room at the back. Little did I know it would become purgatory to me, a kind of halfway house between the life I had led and the one I was about to lead.

I remember the room well. Its bare walls were smooth and white. The bed on which I lay was white. The fitted wardrobe at the foot of it was white. The only window looked out on to the side of the steep hill on which the house was built. When I ventured to look out, the houses on the next street up seemed to gather round and peer down at me, so I tended to keep the curtains drawn. On the floor, my bags overflowed with kit, the trappings of the only life I'd known, all of it now so suddenly redundant.

What did I do in there for so long? Nothing. At least, nothing constructive. There was a lot of fear and self-loathing. Towards the end, I started reading a book. I also had a laptop with a painfully slow internet connection. And there was, and still is, a tattoo on the inside of my left arm. Together, those items would haul me out of the state of agoraphobia and depression I'd fallen into. Until they did, though, I passed the time enduring the emotions and thoughts that visited me, scanning the perfect walls for a crack to slip into, or just a blemish to identify with.

My shoulder was painful and incapacitated, so that it woke me every time I rolled on to it. A few days after my operation,

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it was time to take off the sling and begin the rehabilitation exercises they had issued me with, but I couldn't bring myself to do them. What was the point? My career was over.

My parents would check on me every now and then. I knew they were deeply worried, but they didn't pander to me or try to force me into anything. They let me be. Just knowing they were there on the other side of that white door was the only comfort I held on to throughout the twenty-one days, even if I wasn't able to let them in emotionally. You could say that, despite my thirty-one years, there was precious little difference between me then and the teenager who won't come out of his room. My predicament might have been more serious, the emotions more intense and the thoughts darker and scarier, but on a superficial level the reaction was indistinguishable.

I couldn't have seen that, though. When I feel vulnerable I do tend to withdraw. Things were bad, so I retreated into the proverbial cave. And I didn't want, or couldn't have, anyone in there. Mum and Dad knew that.

What I can see now, although I didn't grasp it at the time, was that I had subconsciously associated the end of my rugby career with the end of everything. That was why I had never dared confront the idea. It was like a dark shadow lurking in the back of my mind. Just ignore it. Next session, next game. You're indestructible, remember.

When I returned to Wales for the start of the new season in 2007, I was more focused than I had ever been. Maybe too focused. Maybe even desperate. I had lost a sense of perspective. It felt as if my whole career as a rugby player, which means my whole life as an adult, was converging on this two-year

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contract I'd been offered by the Dragons, the Welsh region centred on Newport, my home town.

I was desperate – yes, that is the right word – to play for Wales again. I'd won the last of my four caps in 2003 and since then I'd played elsewhere, first at my beloved Leeds, then for one difficult year at Perpignan in France. Now I was returning. I'd turned thirty a couple of weeks before the season started. Age has never concerned me, but maybe that milestone heightened the sense that this was it, my last chance.

To begin with, I played the best rugby of my life. My coach, Paul Turner, told me the Wales coaches were talking to him about me. There were no autumn internationals that year, because of the World Cup, but it seemed I was back in the thinking of the people who mattered. I almost forgot about the shadow in my head.

Then, a knee injury on Boxing Day put me out for a few months, and so began the downward spiral that would lead to the room in my parents' house a year and a half later. I'm no stranger to injury, and each time I've come back stronger, but this one felt different. Deep down, I knew my body and my mind were not right. I've always been a terrible invalid, but now I seemed to be panicking, too. As I strove to regain fitness, it was as if I were gasping for air whenever I thought about the precious days and weeks ticking by. This hadn't been the plan; this was not why I'd come back.

That injury was just a precursor, though. In the second match of the following season, a home game against the Llanelli Scarlets, I was crouching over a tackled player trying to win the ball when I was cleared out from the side by one of the opposition. I felt a searing pain in my shoulder. I would

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later find out that I had suffered what's known as a subluxation, a partial dislocation, and in this case the head of my humerus had knocked a chunk of cartilage away from the socket.

The idea of injury striking me down again was unthinkable. No way. I hadn't yet won that fifth Wales cap, and this was now year two of my campaign to earn it.

I played on for the rest of the game and the rest of the month and the month after that. I've never minded pain. Truth be told, I've been known to thrive on it. I'm not a masochist, but I like to feel I'm pushing myself, and sometimes that means it hurts. Besides, if you play professional rugby, pain is something you get used to.

But, if the pain was just about bearable, my range of movement was deteriorating steadily, so that by the end of October I couldn't lift my arm above shoulder height. That was more of a problem, as was living with the unhealthy dosage of painkillers. I had a scan, which revealed the extent of the problem. The piece of cartilage that had been knocked off had been floating in the socket and, because I'd played on, it had chipped away at other areas. So by now I had quite a few bits of cartilage floating round and an area of the shoulder joint where it was bone on bone – hence the restricted movement.

My panic had been growing again as the mobility of my shoulder worsened. Now I was back where I had been the year before with my knee. This time I needed an operation. Geoff Graham is one of the leading shoulder specialists in the country, and we soon got to know each other very well. He scheduled a procedure called microfracture, whereby they drill into the bone, which stimulates the growth of fibrous cartilage.

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Fibrocartilage is never as strong as hyaline cartilage, which is what joints are made out of, but this has become a popular procedure among sportsmen. It was tried and tested on knees but less so on shoulders. If I wanted to play on, however, it was my only option.

When I came round, Geoff told me the operation had gone well. But he also had to tell me that the situation was more serious than he'd thought. I was feeling groggy because of the anaesthetic, but I doubt I would have taken in what he was saying, whatever my clarity of consciousness. I honestly can't tell you what the cause for concern was because I just didn't want to know. I listened to everything he said and accepted it on an intellectual level – then I must have locked it away in a cellar of my mind.

What drives you in a sport like rugby isn't intellect. I have been known to overthink things, but I am a man driven by the heart. If you lived your life by intellect alone you wouldn't play rugby at all. You wouldn't smash each other up on a Saturday afternoon. Or, if you did, you would surely have some serious issues!

For all the analysis and preparation, it pays not to think too much in a sporting context – and especially when you daren't confront the thought in question. I had no time for concerns about my condition. I'd always been indestructible. I would be fine.

I played again towards the end of February, and it was OK. By this stage of the season, with the Six Nations under way and then the knock-out phases of Europe and the cup, games are irregularly dotted throughout the calendar. I played in our one game in March and then again in the next at the start of

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April. Something was not right, but I couldn't put my finger on it. Those occupational pains were there. Nothing new about that, but maybe there was something qualitatively different about them now. Maybe Geoff's words were festering in that cellar of my mind. Or maybe I was just haunted by a premonition of the end.

On 26 April 2009, a Sunday, I played in our home game against Connacht. I can't actually remember how it happened. I just remember the crack, the crunch and the grind. I could hear it as well as feel it. And I knew. It had gone again. With five minutes to go before the end of the match, I walked off a rugby field for what would prove to be the last time.

I organised an appointment with Geoff as soon as I could, which ended up being the following Wednesday. Dan Martin, the physio at the Dragons, accompanied me. I remember odd little details, like noticing as we walked in that Geoff drove a Subaru Impreza, which seemed a bit 'boy racer' for a leading orthopaedic surgeon. If only I could remember as clearly the details of what he said to me in his clinic, after I told him what had happened and shown him how immobile my shoulder had become again, but I think it went something like this:

'I feared this would happen. Your shoulder is irreversibly damaged and will only get worse. It's going to impact upon the way you live your life. My advice to you as a medical professional and as a friend is that you should stop playing.'

He said it as if he were speaking to a ten-year-old. We knew each other pretty well by now, and he wanted to make sure that I heard this and heard it properly.

I had nothing to say. I'd gone. I'd been lifted out of myself,

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and I was somewhere else. It's grief. I've lost family and friends, and receiving this news was the same feeling. I didn't argue, I had no questions, because it was what I knew. I'd feared this moment for so long. That dark shadow in my head came out to claim its dues. Well, it's got me now, was all I could think.

In order to have any kind of quality of life in the future, I would need another operation. Once outside, I agitated with Dan over how quickly I could have it. For a moment, I instinctively believed that the operation might save my career. In the car park, we discussed it. I would have to wait until the off-season for the Dragons to be able to process it, so Dan suggested I did it on my own medical insurance, if I had any. I did, I remembered. I had a policy from a previous club. Right, let's get this sorted straightaway. Find the policy number. Make arrangements.

I bounded to my car, but this burst of decisiveness was short-lived. I pulled out of Geoff's clinic in Cardiff. Almost immediately, I knew I shouldn't be driving. When you're in shock you go into a kind of trance. You stare at something and yet stare through it; your focus is out. I turned on to a side road and tried to compose myself. What the fuck is going on, I said to myself. This was not the plan. This was *not* the plan.

I rang Dee Clark, the Dragons' team doctor, who was so much more than that to many of us. She recognised the fragility behind all that machismo in a testosterone-rich environment and understood the importance of pastoral care. I told her everything. As ever, she was perfectly level-headed and explained that I needed to get my policy number off Bupa. That was something to focus on, so I rang them.

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I'm not sure I'd ever used the policy before, and I'd moved so many times since it had been opened I didn't know what address it would be registered under. The conversation took a surreal turn as I sat in my car and recited the addresses of all the places I'd ever lived, a kind of whistle-stop tour of my now-former career, with the Bupa guy sitting in judgement.

'41 Madrid House?' I said.

'No.'

'How about 23 North Lane?'

'No.'

When we'd finally found the right policy, I rang Geoff's secretary, Helen, to give her the number. Then, when I'd composed myself, which was probably about half an hour later, but seemed like days, I drove home and told Mum and Dad.

My parents were as shocked as I was by the news. They knew I'd been hurt, but it was not exactly for the first time. Mum and Dad had lived every twist and turn of my career as if they'd been playing, too, so it was the end of a significant period of their lives as well. They remained strong and, most importantly, there for me. I don't know if I would have made it through the weeks that followed without them. Not that I let them in or allowed them to help, but they were physically there, and the constancy they provided and represented was the one thing I clung to as everything else fell away.

I must also have told my mates Kev Morgan and Sonny Parker because I do remember the following Friday night. Kev suggested we go out for a couple of beers in Cardiff. We went for a pizza and ended up in a nightclub. I completely wrote myself off and behaved in a way that embarrasses me even to

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think about, let alone write down. I hope I'm not a dick when I'm drunk – I'm pretty sure I'm not – but I was that night. In the club, I fell into an argument with a group and threw a drink over a girl. When the bouncers came to throw me out I tried to fight them, as if they were the cruel world itself. And I did it all one-handed.

As well-known rugby players from the area, the three of us knew the manager, and he knew us. Kev told him my news and he took me into his office. And there, in the manager's office in a nightclub in Cardiff, I gave in to my emotions for the first time. Among the boxes and crates, I broke down and wept.

He let me return to the bar, where I sat on a stool for a while, not wanting to go home. I was a thirty-one-year-old living in a spare room at his parents' house. I would soon have no income, and I no longer had the ability to practise my only trade. The illusion of security that comes from being an elite performer had just been put out as if by a switch. I didn't know where to go.

So I went round to my ex-girlfriend's house. I hadn't seen her for weeks, but I'm sure this did not make me the first drunk on hard times to do something silly. After sleeping in my own vomit on her bathroom floor, though, it was clear that our relationship was now every bit as finished as my rugby career.

My reclusiveness began then. The embarrassment of that night out was the superficial trigger, and it was very real, but in came many other emotions, so strong and well-formed that they must have been building all the while.

I was angry, so angry. Fuck Geoff. What does he know? When have I ever listened to a consultant anyway? I've gone against the advice of all of them. Why shouldn't I again?

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Because, in my heart, I knew he was right, which led to the frustration. I wasn't ready to retire. I had so much more to give, so much more I wanted to achieve.

Which led to the embarrassment. I hadn't accomplished what I'd set out to do. I hadn't played for Wales again. Everyone at the club knew that that was the goal I'd set myself, so how could I ever show my face there again, now that I had officially failed? My body had proven too weak, and now I had failed them as well, my comrades-in-arms.

Which led to the sadness, the crushing melancholy, at the realisation I would never again know the inside of a changing room. The energy, anticipation and nerves on the eve of combat, and then the aftermath – you've emptied yourself, you're hurting, cut and broken, hopefully you've won, and your eyes meet those of a team-mate. That's all. That's all it needs to be. The feeling that you're part of something bigger. The team, the club, the town, the country. To be cut loose from that ...

I withdrew into the room. My operation was scheduled for 8 May, and I sat tight waiting for it. I couldn't bring myself to go down to the club. I didn't want to see any of them. There was no mechanism at the Dragons – or, I believe, in rugby generally – to provide the kind of support, emotional, educational or otherwise, that a player in my situation needed, even if he'd been open to seeking it. But I will be for ever grateful to the Dragons for what they could and did do for me. Just the paperwork, for example, was enough to bewilder me. I couldn't motivate myself to get out of bed, so why would I fill out a form? The Dragons did all of that for me. They drew up a statement to announce my retirement, and let me edit it and

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add to it, to thank all the people I wanted to over the course of my career. Then, when it was ready, they asked me when I wanted the statement put out. Do it now, I said of a document that felt like a kind of contract with the end. Just get it out there.

The operation was the same procedure as the previous one, a microfracture, but this time there was a larger area of cartilage that had been broken off the bone. I went back to the room to recuperate and was lying in bed, feeling woozy and in pain, when the phone calls started to come in. Friends, newspapers, magazines. The press release had gone out, and now the end of my career was public knowledge. That was when it became real. Any subconscious hope I may have been harbouring that it had all been a joke, or that they would open me up and find they had made a mistake, or that it would just get better, vanished at that point. That day, all those emotions I'd been wrestling with since the diagnosis were replaced by one, which was uncomplicated and devastating. All those emotions were replaced by fear.

I had become institutionalised, which is the way it is with any performer in an elite team environment. Rugby had controlled every decision of my adult life. I had sacrificed so much – happily and gratefully, I must make clear – to be the best that I could be. I'd chosen to drop out of a dental degree so I could focus on professional rugby. My sister's wedding had clashed with my first cap for Wales, which came in South Africa. Rugby had determined when I ate and slept. Ninety per cent of my social life was in rugby. And now it was gone, with no chance of coming back. I was petrified. What do I do? Where do I go? Who am I?

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And so began the spiral into depression. The embarrassment caused by the failings of my body and, as I saw it, my career, compounded by the way I'd behaved that Friday night, crystallised into extreme self-loathing and the exhausting lethargy that accompanied it. I just didn't want to do anything, which made me hate me all the more. Hadn't I always been a man of action, if nothing else?

I went to some really dark places. I contemplated the very worst. And my self-hatred went to another level again for doing so. I feel guilty now about even considering it. I do believe that life and everything in it is a gift. That I thought about throwing it away troubles me still.

Mum and Dad were my fixed points. They were clearly worried about me, but they let me be there, in my cave, trusting that I'd find a way out. They were the one constant I had left. They're the only thing in my life that's ever been constant. No matter how crazy the world becomes, there has always been one rock: home. It's not a place, either, it's an emotion. All the things parents do for you ...

I'm lucky to have a wonderful relationship with them. We argue, but we are friends more than anything. My dad, Derek, is Welsh, and my mum, Lee, is Jamaican. I am the only child they had together, although I have two brothers and two sisters, one sister through Mum, the others through Dad. They'd been together for a while before I was born. I guess I was an accident, but I've always quite liked the idea of being a love child!

Much of my youth was spent living in a tent out of the back of our car. From Friday to Sunday, they would take me to motocross races all over the country. Dad bought me a 50cc

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bike when I was six, and we never looked back. Every weekend, I would race at the South Wales Schoolboy Scramblers Club. Dad would help mark the course and act as my mechanic; Mum would write the report for the local paper and make bacon sarnies for everyone in the vicinity of our car/tent. As I improved and attracted some sponsorship, it became a van/tent. If I raced well, we would stop off at a Little Chef on the way home, and Mum and Dad would let me have a cherry pancake. We'd be back home in time for *Catchphrase*. What awesome times! I would go back there in a heartbeat if I could.

Growing up, I never idolised the usual stars, but I always admired Mum and Dad. They were my heroes. They couldn't really have been more different from each other. Mum is passionate and emotional. She's the engine of the house, always on the go. Dad is calm and relaxed with an adventurous spirit. Both were strict but understanding. They make a great team, and from them I learned the values of kindness, a work ethic and doing a job properly. They instilled those values by being rock-solid, without ever being pushy. Even when I was confronted with that crunch decision, which any professional sportsman will face at some point, whether to turn away from a 'normal' life and pursue sport for a living, they left me to decide. In 2000, three years into a five-year dentistry degree at Cardiff University, Pontypridd offered me a contract. I took a two-year sabbatical from the course (which I never returned to!) and signed the contract. Despite the sacrifices my parents had made to provide me with the kind of opportunities they had never had in life, there was nothing but support from them – and the belief that I could make it.

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I was privately educated, to some people's surprise, considering my accent, tattoos and colour, but I would describe myself as coming from a working-middle-class background. Dad is an engineer and is still working, well into his seventies. Mum has usually worked with Dad, running the books, even driving the lorries when required. Now she is a magistrate. They have pretty much always been self-employed. They worked so hard they were able to send me to Monmouth School as a day boy. When I played junior rugby at Pontypool, I was seen as the public-school boy, and the fact that I went to public school I felt worked against me when I played for Wales Schools, far more so than the colour of my skin. It helped to foster the impression I had of myself as an outsider.

I would not describe myself as a rebel, but I have always felt a bit different, as if I didn't fit in anywhere. That is not a sob story – on the contrary, I have loved walking my own path. Although its repercussions were crushing during those dark days at the end of my rugby career, it has been the making of me. I learned to be independent and to think for myself from a young age. I was proudly Welsh yet of mixed race, an only child yet with four half-siblings, always around people yet never quite one of them.

That impression continued throughout my adolescence as a schoolboy and rugby player, further heightened by the fact that I was always the youngest of my peers, having been born in August. Just after I'd turned eighteen, I spent a year in South Africa on a sporting scholarship to Michaelhouse School in Durban. It was their centenary year and barely a year after the end of apartheid. I imagine – although I don't know this – that I was offered it because of my rugby and my colour. It was one

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of the best years of my life. For the first time I was striding out somewhere completely different and on my own. I grew up six years in one. That was where I embraced the idea of ‘professionalism’ in my approach to sport, the first time I’d applied to sport the lessons my parents had taught me. Schoolboy rugby was massive out there, akin to college football in the States. We played one game in front of 14,000 people. I was the only black pupil in the Michaelhouse first XV and, I’m proud to say, the first ever to receive the school colours.

If I’d always felt a misfit I was by now conditioned by rugby to feel happy as part of a collective and to feel inspired by it. Some of the greatest times of my life followed. I returned to play for Newport and represented Wales at sevens. A broken back put me out for a season, but after a year playing for Cardiff Meds at university I joined the rugby club at Pontypridd, the town of my birth. Here I fell in with a crop of talented youngsters. Some of my fondest rugby memories are of that club. We quickly became one of the best teams in the country. In 2002, we won the Principality Cup and reached the final of the European Challenge Cup. And that year five of us won our first caps. Mine came in Bloemfontein on 8 June when I became the 1001st Wales international on the summer tour to South Africa. If only it hadn’t clashed with my sister Debbie’s wedding – but rugby had long since been dictating the terms of my life by that point.

I won three more caps in the year or so following the first, but I missed out on selection for the World Cup in 2003. That same year, Pontypridd merged with Bridgend, during the restructuring of Welsh professional rugby, to form the ill-fated Celtic Warriors. Despite a really promising first season on the

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field, the powers that be closed us down after just a year. I could write a book about that turbulent period alone. We were broken up and auctioned off, I felt like we were cattle. Phil Davies rescued me with a contract at Leeds, and so began another happy spell, which included Leeds' first piece of major silverware in the shape of the Powergen Cup in 2005. Then, after the pain of relegation a year later, I joined Perpignan on my biggest contract yet, but I wasn't myself. I remember turning up more anxious to make friends than to play hard. Perhaps, deep down, I thought I'd made it.

I hadn't. I didn't play well in my first couple of games, by which time they make their mind up about you over there. I was injured in my third game and then became a fixture on the bench. I fell out with the president and watched a year of my life pass by. When Paul Turner offered me the chance to return to Wales with the Dragons I took it with more gratitude than he'll ever know.

Regrets over my time at Perpignan recurred throughout the agonising in that room. What a golden opportunity. Why hadn't I been myself down there? No matter how much I tried I couldn't stop myself going over moment after moment of my elapsed career, and not just the big decisions but little choices or mistakes I'd made in games I thought I'd forgotten about a long time ago. I sometimes have trouble remembering what happened yesterday, but vivid recollections of incidents from years back started appearing in my head. Why did I force that pass, why drop that ball? The ghosts of matches past reared up and crowded in on me. Had I been the best I could be?

It pained me so much to go over it again and again in my mind. But it wasn't just the missed opportunities, however

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large or small, that made the room so hellish. The regret itself tore me up. I hated myself for the inertia of it, the introspection. I was unmanned.

The turning point came while I was lying in bed, staring at the ceiling. I couldn't tell you what prompted it, or what I was thinking about when it happened. I just remember the moment.

My nana had died about two years earlier. I was very close to her. We all were. She used to live with my parents and was like a second mother to me. She was Mum's mother and her best friend. Mum struggles with her loss to this day.

Her funeral passed in the blink of an eye. I negotiated it on auto-pilot, not even particularly emotional on the day. I didn't take in much during the service. It was if the whole thing were playing with the volume turned down. But, for one line, someone turned it up.

'The horizon is only the limit of our sight.'

It was the vicar who said it. I don't know what he'd been saying before it, I don't know what he went on to say after, but it was a line that leaped out at me from the white noise of the funeral. Since then I've come to believe, from the bottom of my heart, that somehow, if people can do that, my nan was speaking to me through those words. I believe she could see through me, to my fears, and beyond, to what was waiting down the road.

I didn't know what the line meant; I just knew it was important, so important. And within two weeks I'd had it tattooed on my arm. I just had to have it somehow, to keep it on me at all times, never to forget it. Why I needed to, at that point, I had no idea.

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So, for the following two years, every time I looked at the inside of my left forearm, there it was, this strange, enigmatic sentence. And now, lying in bed, with my other arm immobile, some process in my head, chemical or electrical, emotional or spiritual, completed itself, and I suddenly understood it. The horizon is only the limit of our sight. There's much more beyond that we can't see, but not being able to see it doesn't mean it's not there. I wanted to live freely. No more fear. I'd spent my life being scared of what I couldn't see, of the future and of dark shadows in my head. I was sick of it. For once I was going to stand up and embrace them.

I have since had months and months in a tent to think this all through, and I have come to the realisation that rugby had been all I'd ever seen, particularly in those furiously focused, desperate last couple of years. I'd regarded the return to Wales with the Dragons as my one last chance. It was all or nothing. I couldn't conceive of a life beyond rugby, nor did I dare to try. I was holding on to everything I knew so tightly, desperate not to lose any of it. As my body, rugby career and relationship began to shut down, my horizons closed in. Now, for the first time, I could see that there might be more.

That was the point I picked myself up. Next, I picked up Sir Ranulph Fiennes's book *Mad, Bad and Dangerous to Know*. About a year earlier, someone had given it to me, and now I started reading.

I was captivated by his stories, the hardship and perseverance, the environment he performed in. It stirred something in me.

I never actually finished it, though. The first third was all I needed, it was so powerful. I really should read the whole

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thing one day, what with the way it changed my life. People have approached me to compare notes on a book that has clearly inspired so many others. 'I love the bit when ...' they say, and I laugh along nervously, too ashamed to admit that I haven't actually made it so far as to read that episode.

I used to feel embarrassed about that; now I don't mind so much. I read the first third of the book, and I was inspired. It gave me a taste, but I didn't want to read on and see someone else climb the mountain. I wanted to get out and climb it for myself.

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First things first, though. No one launches off in a new direction anywhere these days without first consulting the internet.

I reached over for my laptop, ready for my next brush with death by progress bar. Time slowed to a crawl in that white room, and the same went for the internet connection. But I had the first inklings of a purpose now. I'd made out a peephole to my future. I reached over for that laptop feeling, at last, something other than emptiness and pain. And soon (well, as soon as the bitrate would allow) I had come across a site dedicated to the Seven Summits – the highest mountain on each of the seven continents.

That very instant I learned of them I knew I was going to climb them. In fact, I was so sure it was as if, in a strange way, I had already done it. Another piece of me loosened; another packet of hope unfolded.

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It was then that I went downstairs and made myself a coffee.

There was no plan, of course, no thought of timeframes or records at this stage. All that mattered was that it was a new way of life and that it wasn't rugby. My vision did not involve a career path or a way of financing it, but that was fine. This was nothing more or less than the way out of that room. And I wanted to throw myself into it.

Already I was in thrall to the mountains. They are so much more than big lumps of rock. Their mystique is powerful, even in a small white room with a slow internet connection and a life of no direction. Particularly then. I knew little about mountains, but I felt the fear of them as much as anyone. My rugby career had been haunted by fear of failure. I had come to that realisation in this very room, but it was too late to do anything about that now. The fear of mountains, though – that could be embraced. I was angry with my body and I wanted to push it again. The idea of striving for something in an atmosphere with 20 per cent of the oxygen we breathe down here was just the kind of challenge I wanted. I needed to know that my body was not the failure, the broken wreck that had ended my rugby career. The path out of that room was now clear to me, and it led up mountains.

I can't say I was consciously aware of any of this reasoning, but I was driven all of a sudden. That same day, I looked into the kinds of organisations that could teach me the relevant skills. Which was another important point. I had to do this properly. I had no interest in being hauled up a mountain by a commercial enterprise, who would charge me a fortune

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for the privilege and leave me at the end of it barely changed from the man at the start. More than anything else, I wanted to learn a new skill. I fired off emails to a handful of companies, explaining my background, what I wanted to do, which was to climb the Seven Summits, and why I wanted to do it.

And the next day I pulled on a pair of shoes and left the house.

When you're in a fragile state of mind like I was, little things become so important. All I'd done was send some emails, but at the time it felt as if I'd, well, climbed Everest. I felt so much better. It was the first time since the injury that I'd helped myself, the first positive step I'd taken, having contemplated the worst. You can look back over a time like that, which obviously I have, and ask yourself why you didn't just pull yourself together sooner, send those emails on day one in the room, rather than on day twenty-one. I don't know. Maybe you just have to go through it all. But I'd been through it, and now I wanted to help myself.

Sure enough, when you resolve to help yourself, your positivity quickly attracts others to your side. I don't remember how or why my wanderings had brought me there, but I was standing outside the Welsh Shop in Cardiff, across the road from the castle, when my phone rang. A voice on the other end introduced himself as Tom Briggs of Jagged Globe, one of the companies I had emailed only the day before. He invited me up to Sheffield, where they are based, to meet Simon Lowe, the managing director.

'Simon's away next week,' he said, 'so how about in two weeks' time?'

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‘How about tomorrow?’ I replied.

I didn’t want to wait two weeks. There was a fresh momentum I could feel behind me at this point, which had been so lacking, and I had to ride it now. The next day, just two days out of the white room, I was driving up to Sheffield.

Mountaineers, I have since learned, come in all shapes and sizes – there’s no stereotype. And you would not look at Simon Lowe and think, ‘Ah, here’s a conqueror of mountains, if ever I saw one’. The man I met in Sheffield that day was in his late forties, I would say, grey-haired and bespectacled. I warmed to him immediately. One of the reasons mountaineers need not conform physically is that so much of the strength required of them is mental. It was obvious that Simon was passionate about his trade – honest and direct.

The latter qualities I particularly valued. Simon receives hundreds of enquiries from people who want to climb mountains. Once he’s talked them through what is involved, he won’t hear from many of them again. I drove up to see him in Sheffield, and he spent most of our first meeting trying to talk me out of it. He spent most of our second meeting doing much the same thing. I appreciated it, and I think he appreciated my response to it. He has a military background, and his eye for detail, which is meticulous, was never better demonstrated as he laid out the dangers to be faced, the techniques to be mastered and, not least, the finances to be mustered. His integrity was obvious. He would not take any shortcuts. I knew quickly that this was the company I wanted to learn with, then to work with. And I would not be cowed by his efforts to test my resolve.

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It was then that I set to work on my shoulder exercises.

Within a week of my first meeting with Simon, I had another call from Tom (who *is* the sort of big, broad fellow you might imagine astride a mountain top). They'd had a cancellation. Would I be interested in taking their Alpine introduction course in two weeks' time? It would involve ten days in the Alps, learning basic mountaineering techniques – crampons, rope work, glacier travel, and so on. Then if I wanted to, I could stay on for another four or five days and attempt Mont Blanc. Knowing Simon as I do now, I wouldn't be surprised if he threw it at me as a first test. The normal programme they suggest to bring somebody of my mountaineering experience at the time, which is to say none, to a stage where they might attempt Everest is three years. I had made it clear I wanted to devote myself to any such journey and to complete the Seven Summits, including Everest, in less time than that. Well, now, with this invitation, they would see just how serious I was about it. I'm sure they expected me to decline on the grounds of late notice, but I said yes without a thought.

It was my next step away from the room. I was living in the moment, without consideration for the long term, but I was living. There was cash in the bank. An insurance pay-out for my career-ending injury made up the bulk of it, but I also had some savings from my rugby days. Not a huge amount, but enough to let me take a leap like this. And, anyway, what else did I have to do?

It was an awesome two weeks in the Alps. I loved it. Just being outside was such a blessing. The Alps is a powerful place to be regardless of what you're doing, the opposite of being in that little room for so long. But to be there learning a new skill,

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at however rudimentary a level, and channelling my energies into something positive, while meeting new and interesting people, did wonders to move me on.

At the end of it, four of us stayed to climb Mont Blanc, and I was the least experienced by far. Our guide was a Matterhorn specialist, which means he likes to climb fast, the safest way to attempt the Matterhorn. We reached the Tête Rousse Hut (at 3167m altitude), which is the launch point for the summit of Mont Blanc. The weather had closed in, and we settled for the night. Normally, you attempt Mont Blanc (4807m) from the Tête Rousse Hut and return to the Goûter Hut (3835m), or set off from the Goûter and return to the Tête Rousse. But we set off from the Tête Rousse and returned there too, all in the same day. The conditions were good, and we were quick. We summited in six hours, which was the fastest ascent by a Jagged Globe team that year. But it was tough, my first experience of pushing so hard for so long and at that altitude. I might have been a professional sportsman, but in rugby you perform for eighty minutes. Here, we were on it for ten or eleven hours. It was exhausting, physically and mentally, but I felt confident throughout. When I returned to the UK, I rang Simon to tell him I was still in the game. Indeed, I was clearer than ever that this was what I wanted to do. I had passed my first test. Simon could move me into the category marked 'Not a joker'.

At this point, my plan was to climb two of the Seven Summits a year for the next three years. Before I went any further down that path, though, it was important that I got back into shape. I worked with my mate Kevin Morgan, who was now conditioning coach at Neath Rugby Club, on a basic endurance

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programme to help me transition from the power athlete I had once been.

My physical condition was one thing. Financially, I had even more work to do. The Welsh rugby community is strong and reaches into many walks of life. I had hoped that I might be able to source some sponsorship from within that network. I spoke to a few companies about funding. They all listened respectfully, but you can tell when people's eyes are glazing over. Nobody came in with anything concrete. It quickly became clear that my plan was too difficult to market. Three years was far too long to take over a challenge whose successful completion was becoming increasingly commonplace. I had been introduced to a company called Limegreentangerine, a design agency in Cardiff whose owners, Andy and Bev Rees, have become good friends of mine. They were the first of many who would come on board and give their time so enthusiastically and to such great effect. It was in our first brainstorming session (all four hours of it!) that we struck upon the notion of climbing the Seven Summits in seven months. It wasn't a world first – a handful of others had achieved it at that point – but it was a more credible project, and 'Challenge 77' was a snappy name for my life's new direction, at least. I was just so grateful to have that life back, and my confidence. The next chapter of it was starting to take shape. I had something to work towards, in the boardroom and out on the trails.

I can't remember what Simon's reaction was to this latest development. Drama is not his style, so it would have been measured. Either way, he didn't laugh in my face, which he would have had every right to. In his calm, meticulous way, he advised me that the next test would be to climb more

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technically, beyond 5000m. He suggested the volcanoes in Ecuador, where there are a few such peaks to be scaled. This opportunity would arise in a trip over Christmas and New Year.

Until then, I hit the trails with the best training partner a man could have – Ben, my beloved dog. We ran and we ran through – and up and down – the Welsh countryside. The gym was off limits. I was sick of it and I didn't want to be reminded of the rugby career I'd been forced to abandon. At this point, the energy driving me in this enterprise was anti-rugby, anti-rugby.

I have always been a dedicated trainer, but now it was becoming a form of therapy for me. I was pushing myself hard. Kev organised for me to undergo VO₂ max testing at the University of South Wales with Professor Bruce Davies. The VO₂ max test measures the maximum rate at which your body takes up oxygen during intense exercise, in other words how fit you are. On this occasion, mine involved pounding on a treadmill at an ever-increasing speed and incline, breathing through a sealed tube, until I could go on no more. We didn't learn a huge amount from the test that we didn't know already, but it was a useful and enlightening experience to force my body to the point of collapse. What we did learn, though, is that I have an irregular heartbeat. This is quite common, apparently, for elite sportsmen. When the resting heart rate falls below sixty-five beats per minute, residue can collect in the bottom of the ventricle, which is thrown up with each beat. My resting heart rate is fifty-two. It is also common for sportsmen to have an enlarged ventricle. Less common, though, is what it turns out I have, which is two enlarged ventricles. Bruce was quite

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concerned about the irregular heartbeat and put me through further tests, but his finding was that my heart is strong. Indeed, as soon as the heartbeat increases, it becomes regular. My heart is actually happier, it seems, when I'm exercising.

Another thing I learned in the Alps, and then in Ecuador, is that I seem to acclimatise to altitude well. Whether or not this is linked to Bruce's findings is unknown. Science has not yet unravelled the mysteries of altitude acclimatisation, which, besides, are vicious and unpredictable. I have since got to know one of Britain's best mountaineers, a tiny but super-strong woman called Adele Pennington. She is the first British woman to have climbed Everest twice and is on her way to becoming the first to summit all fourteen of the world's 8000m mountains. She is a phenomenon. Then, suddenly in 2010, near the summit of Makalu in the Himalaya, she suffered a pulmonary oedema, fluid within the lung. She had to be flown off the mountain for life-saving surgery. (Incredibly, she returned to Makalu the following year and summited.) You can acclimatise at a certain altitude as many times as you like, but there is no guarantee for the next time. So many factors play a part. Experience counts a great deal on a psychological level, but, physiologically, the body has no memory when it comes to altitude acclimatisation.

By now, Simon was beginning to believe in me. Not that he ever said it, but he started to discuss the kinds of skills I would need if I hoped to achieve what I wanted to in the timeframe we had chosen. I had to be self-sufficient, regardless of whether or not I planned to climb with others. I had to acquire a 'toolbox' of skills, some of which might not in theory be required. Although they may be the highest, the Seven

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Summits are not technically the hardest mountains on their respective continents, but I would be pushing so hard to climb them all within seven months that I had to train as if they were. Before we set off for Ecuador, I signed up for some ice-climbing in Italy almost as soon as we got back, and then further training expeditions in the Alps and in the Scottish Highlands.

But the final endorsement, the moment I knew Simon had seen something in me, came after we returned from Ecuador in January. Simon and I had shared a tent, so we got to know each other a lot better. I learned from him, and he was able to see how I conducted myself – that I was neither gung-ho nor wanting to cut corners. I was the only one of Jagged Globe's clients on that trip, among whom were some experienced mountaineers, to summit all of the 5000m peaks we tackled. I felt strong on all of them.

So, when we returned to the UK, Simon suggested one further tweak to my project. How about we throw in the two poles? If I climbed the Seven Summits and skied the last degree to the North and South Poles all in seven months, that would be a world first. Indeed, no one had stood at all nine places in the same calendar year, let alone in seven months. Seven Summits, three poles (Everest is known as the third pole), seven months – the 737 Challenge was born.

I was like a bottle of pop, I was so excited. It immediately felt right. This was a genuine world first. What a privilege to be able to attempt it! And this, six months after I'd retired from a life as a rugby player who had never climbed a mountain.

We escalated my training programme. In January I learned

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to ice-climb in Cogne, Italy; in February I returned to the Alps; in March I went to Scotland to develop my climbing skills; and in April I joined an expedition on the sea ice in Greenland.

There were a lot of moving parts in this project, a challenge of logistics, as well as the obvious others. We drew up a running order of peaks and poles for the Challenge. It was complicated, and I ceded control of it to Simon. Each location has a season, outside which it is impossible to attempt an assault, and of course each has a specific geographical position on the globe. Taking all of it into account, we came up with the following itinerary: the South Pole (geographic), Vinson (4897m, Antarctica), Aconcagua (6959m, South America), Kilimanjaro (5895m, Africa), Carstensz Pyramid (4884m, Australasia), the North Pole (geographic), Everest (8848m, Asia), Denali (6194m, North America) and Elbrus (5642m, Europe). The Challenge would officially begin on New Year's Day 2011 on the South Pole. All being well, I would complete it sometime in July at the top of Elbrus.

Margins were tight throughout, as you would expect of something no one had ever tried before, but one section of the Challenge stood out as particularly precarious, not to mention brutal. The North Pole, Everest and Denali legs were the most difficult legs individually, and they all fell within the same weather window. I would have to complete them between 1 April, when the North Pole season opens, and July, when Denali's closes. This would leave very little margin for error, injury, illness or weather delays. Considering most people take months to recover from an expedition up Everest, the Denali leg looked especially tough, as the one that followed. At that

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stage Simon was hoping to accompany me, but it was not inconceivable that I would have to climb it alone. It was therefore essential that I had gained experience of this treacherous mountain beforehand. To that end, Simon organised for me to join Jagged Globe's expedition in May.

I remember Tom briefing me about the mountain before I left, over a coffee at Jagged Globe's offices, and I was amped with nerves and adrenaline. Denali, in its own right, is a serious proposition to a climber, every bit as serious as Everest, if not more so. It doesn't have Everest's altitude, but at 6194m, the third highest mountain of the Seven Summits, it's enough to be getting on with. Besides, in terms of atmosphere and thus acclimatisation, it equates to a height closer to 7000m, relative to the Himalaya, because of the lower barometric pressure towards the poles. Which is another distinguishing feature – its proximity to the Arctic Circle. Denali is the most northerly mountain of the Seven Summits. Of all the things it is famous for, perhaps its weather is the most dangerous. Not only does the mountain skirt the Arctic Circle, but it sits just to the north-east of the Aleutian Islands, home of the Aleutian Low, a semi-permanent area of low pressure and one of a handful of places around the world where weather systems are formed. That means storms can whip up without notice. In the Alps and the Himalaya, weather comes across from the Atlantic, so you have longer to gather forecasts, but on Denali you can go from one extreme to the other in days. It is the coldest of the world's major mountains, with temperatures dropping to -40°C routinely and winds sometimes exceeding 100mph.

It is also known as Mount McKinley, but the native name, Denali, has become the more widely used. It means 'Great One'

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in the Koyukon Athabaskan language. Indeed, from base to tip, it is the world's highest mountain on dry land. The vertical gain of 4000m from base camp to peak is greater than that on Everest. Not only that, but, because of its remoteness, you have to carry everything with you and you carry it yourself. The limit per person is 125lb (9st) across a rucksack and sled (or pulk, as we call them, the Norwegian word for sled). In other words, you're dragging a decently sized teenager with you.

That expedition was the making of me. It was at that point that people who know about mountains began to think: he might just do this. I had spent the past few months building up my toolbox of skills, learning as much as I could from as many different experts, but there's no substitute for experiencing the real thing. Denali has a reputation for her weather, and she lived up to it. We were hit with the worst of that season. The first storm struck just under Motorcycle Hill. Then we had to sit out another, higher up, for seven days. On one of the first days, I made the mistake of leaving the zip open on the vestibule of my tent – not much, only an inch. As we hunkered down that night, the vestibule quietly filled with snow. My boots and rucksack were covered. That was the kind of mistake that could cost me on the Challenge without the luxury of extra days to dry things out. Always do your zips up.

I also experienced for the first time the chilling proximity of a fellow climber's death. A French guy in a group ahead of us had taken his pulk up to Windy Corner at 13,000ft (everything's in feet on Denali – that's about 4000m). Absolutely shattered, he sat down on it to take a breather, lost his footing and rode it off the side of the mountain. It's the end of days when you do that. No way you can stop. Horrific.

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Our leader on that trip was a guy called Rob Durnell, or Durny, a super-experienced leader on Denali and one of the best big-mountain skiers in the world. He taught me so much. It is such a privilege to be on mountains with these people. I try to make the most of every moment with them.

Summit day for us was tough – and at more than eighteen hours another new experience for a sportsman from the eighty-minute school of exertion. We had left High Camp (5200m) and negotiated most of the final push to the summit, up the Autobahn, through Denali Pass, past Archdeacon's Tower and across the Football Field. The names on Denali are colourful, if nothing else. There, at the foot of Pig Hill, the last steep climb to the summit ridge, the weather closed in. By now our group had dwindled from twelve to four. The wind chill was close to -40°C and visibility was poor. Conditions were marginal, but Durny decided we could push on to the summit.

It was on the way back down that things started to go wrong. We'd negotiated the summit ridge in really difficult conditions. Visibility was down to 20m or so. But, when you're edging along a ridge with the best part of a kilometre drop down one side and half a kilometre down the other, not being able to see very far has its advantages. Still, a narrow ridge at 6000m in freezing cloud is an environment fraught with danger. People fall from that ridge quite regularly.

We were in two rope teams. The one I was in was leading on the way back from the summit. We thought the other team were right behind us, but when we got down to the top of Pig Hill and waited there was no sign.

You fear the worst in those situations. We climbed back up the summit ridge. Thankfully, the other team were alive and

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well, but one of the guys wore prescription goggles. These consist of two pairs of lenses, hermetically sealed. They are supposed to be anti-fog, but it was so cold that the lenses had frozen over not only on the inside and out, where they could be scraped, but between the lenses, where they could not. So he'd had to take them off, which meant he could barely see. The others were having to guide him off the ridge as if he were blind.

So we reorganised our rope teams, this time with Durny and our other guide, Caitlin – a very pretty Alaskan, hard as nails – helping this guy off the ridge. Durny asked me to lead the other team down. I was amped. Bricking it, but amped. And super-proud. For him to put that level of trust in me. It was only for about half an hour, but it was the biggest step in my evolution so far.

When we reached the top of Pig Hill again, we regathered and composed ourselves. If the conditions in which we summited had been difficult, they were now deteriorating even further. You could see no further than 10 to 15m. We were in rope teams of three, and I could make out only the silhouette of the next guy, as the rope disappeared into the white. Things were so bad that other professional guides had waited with their groups at the top of Pig Hill for Durny to break the trail back to High Camp. Only someone with intimate knowledge of the mountain could navigate in these conditions, and Durny was that man. He was like the Pied Piper, with around twenty people following him now.

It was a painful descent; they often are. You've been climbing for hours. Eighty per cent of accidents happen on the way down. One of our team was really struggling with the altitude

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and fatigue. He had quite a few falls. Twice Durny and I had to effect an ice-axe arrest to save all three of us.

It was epic. And I loved it. The deprivation. I think everyone has a masochistic streak in them, but I would say mine is particularly pronounced. And to be around professional mountaineers who were finding it tough came as a massive boost to my confidence. Because I felt all right. Clearly, it was about as far removed from a walk in the park as you could imagine, but I was coping. More than that, I felt I was thriving.

I came off Denali like a man restored. Physically I was shattered, but life felt good again. I had a purpose, and the belief that I would fulfil it was now hardening into confidence. Still, there was plenty more to endure before I could even think about setting off. In June, Simon arranged for me to undergo cold-water-immersion testing at the University of Portsmouth. It was a three-day study on different types of survival blanket. I was to be the test dummy.

Simon had organised it through a few contacts of his. They were interested in their blankets; Simon and I were interested in preparing me for the possibility of a fall into the icy waters of the Arctic Ocean on the North Pole leg. It was genuinely horrible. As a rugby player, I was used to ice baths, but this was a new level of pain. I was supposed to be immersed for an hour, or until clinical hypothermia set in, whichever came first. My body fat is pretty low, so it was hypothermia for me.

Three days running.

With a thermometer up my arse.

I don't know which was worse. We laughed about it on day one, as they presented me with this thermometer the length of

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a drinking straw, a tub of Vaseline and a room where I could be on my own. By day three, the laughing had stopped. But it's by far the best way to measure your core temperature, and I appreciated the importance of ensuring an accurate reading.

The first thing that happens when you are lowered into the pool is that your survival instincts kick in. The body goes into shock. The blood vessels constrict, placing the heart under pressure. The most common cause of cold-water deaths is heart attack. Next, your mind says, stop, get me out of here. The challenge – and the reason I was doing it – is to manage the panic and control the mind. It is a neat analogy for so much of what an endurance athlete does. You are engaged in a non-stop dialogue with your body, constantly overriding its defence mechanisms to drive yourself on. Because after the head has bleated about its discomfort you enter the stage where, physiologically, your whole body is starting to protest. In other words, it's really hurting. Again, the answer is an exercise in suppression and exertion of will. I just don't give myself the option. For all the conversations you can have with yourself about coping strategies, escape plans, worst-case scenarios, when it is all stripped away the final question, the raw, naked crux of the matter, is that you do it or you don't. With a test like that, I go into lockdown. I'm in here. I'm in here until they pull me out. And that's it.

Obviously, it's one thing to think like that when surrounded by scientists with a thermometer up your bottom and another on your own in one of the world's frozen wildernesses, but the experience gained from the former is invaluable, as is the knowledge of what can be endured. I now know what it feels like to be hypothermic – and, just as importantly, what it feels like when you're not yet.

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I ended up lasting around about fifty minutes in the tank each time, before my body's temperature dropped below 35°C – hypothermia. This is when the test begins for the scientists. They pull you out, wrap you in a shiny survival blanket and lie you on a piece of foam in a cold room for an hour. That part was even worse, because you become colder before you become warmer. You are shivering uncontrollably, unable to speak or even react, and they leave you on your back for an hour. There's no threshold to be activated this time, no point at which you can be hauled out. You just have to endure. It's a long hour. On the third day they adjusted the oxygen levels in the chamber, so we did it all at the equivalent of 3000m in altitude.

At the end of the hour you feel cold but more comfortable (the survival blankets work!), whereupon the process of rewarming begins. They place you in a bath at a very specific temperature – pretty cold by normal standards, but on the return from hypothermia it feels nice and warm. Then, over the course of another hour or so, they gradually warm it up.

All in all, it's the best part of three hours. The process didn't change me physiologically, but it transformed me mentally. Resilience is a trainable skill, like any other. So much of what we do physically is driven by our mental fitness. Here was further evidence that these extreme environments could be endured.

It was now June. I was due to leave for the South Pole in December, six months away. The 737 Challenge was in the public domain, but I still had no funding in place. My positivity was all very well, but without the more prosaic support structures of sponsorship and publicity I was as unfit to take

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this thing on as I had been a year earlier, when I'd never climbed a mountain in my life.

I've already introduced some of the key members of the team that I had put together so far – Simon; Bev and Andy at Limegreentangerine; my parents, whose role was to become so important – but not yet Tracy Pinder, my PR manager and rock of support. She and I had met earlier in the year, when a mutual friend had asked her to produce a promotional video for the Challenge. We got on like a house on fire and after she'd organised for me and a few of the boys to go to the Moto GP in Catalonia – and get on the grid – that was it. She was never going to get rid of Parksy!

When I'd left for Denali in May, I had a very crude plan in place. But while I'd been away, Tracy had discovered the extent of the Challenge's commercial shortcomings.

We arranged to meet for a picnic in the New Forest, straight after my last dose of hypothermia. It was a sweltering day, something my poor body did not appreciate after what it had just been through. But we sat down and talked it all through. I drew a diagram of my ideal team, some of which was already in place, and Tracy, or Pinders, as I sometimes call her, pressed home the need to get things moving.

I had already decided by then that I wanted to raise funds in aid of Marie Curie Cancer Care and was working with Karen Jones, the fundraising manager of Penarth Hospice. It was important to me that the Challenge left a positive legacy. As for many, cancer has loomed large in my family. My dad has survived it, as have my sister and brother-in-law. I lost my Uncle Terry to it when I was young. While I was preparing for the Challenge, my cousin, Joy, was losing her battle in the

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Marie Curie hospice in Penarth. It was there that I met Karen, and she and I hit it off from the start.

It just so happened that Sir Ranulph Fiennes was supporting Marie Curie, too. Karen was able to introduce me to him, when she frogmarched me to the front of a queue of people waiting to speak to him after a talk he'd been giving at a Marie Curie event in London. I was amazed by how interested he seemed in the Challenge, taking a moment out of his book-signing session to talk to me about it. I had with me that precious copy of his book, which had played such a part in helping me out of the white room. He signed it, and underneath wrote his email address. Don't hesitate, he said. It was insane. Later, I went to his home to interview him for a promotional video for the Challenge. He had considered climbing Vinson with me, but it never happened. Regardless, I was so grateful for his support and his words of wisdom on the video.

'You must remember,' he said, 'the part that luck plays in everything we do.'

So true. As I have learned for myself since, and continue to learn.

But you also need to make your own luck. When it came to the funding of the Challenge, I had not been doing that until Tracy helped focus my efforts over the picnic in the forest. It was no use having everything in my head; I needed to delegate, something that I have never found easy. And so came together the best team a person could wish for, a team of people who pulled together on nothing more tangible than belief. They gave their time and energy for free, and in some cases, even more than that: they risked their own capital. Tracy was to manage my PR; Simon oversaw the logistics and acted as technical consultant;

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Andy and Bev designed my website and branding; Gemma Hutton of Gusto Events became events manager and all-round bottle of pop; Lindsey Bridgeman and Carwyn Williams worked on fundraising and sponsorship; Emma Assender looked after admin and schools; Rob James was commercial director; Gareth Thomas managed the books, along with Mum; and Mum and Dad oversaw the whole thing. We held meetings at the Cameo Club, where a room with sandwiches was provided by the owner, Huw Davies, an old friend of mine. We were a happy little team, greater than the sum of our parts, and I am genuinely as proud of what we achieved as I am of anything else that followed. All the money I had at that point – from my insurance pay-out and my savings – had gone into my training, so we had to build a brand and a website without any backing, and then try to win sponsorship. A person with any kind of pedigree in this field would do it the other way round – put together a game plan and secure sponsorship before they go public – but I had no pedigree, as evidenced by the fact I had gone public a while ago. I pulled together my team and then set them what might have been considered an unreasonable task.

What a lot I was asking, and how they responded with a passion and belief that humbles me to think about still! Two years later, we won a prestigious fundraising award for our efforts. Limegreentangerine would also win a design award for their work on the 737 Challenge website.

With people like this in my corner, I knew I had every chance.

I had two more mountains to climb before I left. One of them was 8201m high; the other, well, it was a mere 886m, but I climbed it seven times.

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At the end of July, as part of my deprivation training I'd set myself the task of a twenty-four-hour climb in the Brecon Beacons. I chose Pen y Fan, and the plan was simple: start at 3 p.m., walk to the top, then back down, then back up, and so on, and keep doing it until 3 p.m. the next day. It was a simple test of mental resilience. There was no science to it. In the end, I managed seven legs. I was accompanied for some of them. Tracy and Kev did one each, but during the night I had to make do with sheep for company. I had grown used to the sight of their eyes glowing in the beam from my head torch. At 4 a.m., though, I thought I must be hallucinating when I saw a couple of eyes start dancing and jiggling about. It turned out to be the head torches of Ollie and Rob from Boulders, an indoor climbing centre in Cardiff. They'd brought golf clubs, so we ended up firing a few balls off the top of Pen y Fan as the sun came up.

But the first ascent was special because I was accompanied by Captain Anthony Harris, who had lost a leg in Helmand province. He was in so much pain on the way up. He'd only just learned to walk again, and his prosthesis was rubbing the stump of his leg raw. But he made it. There are so many amazing people out there, each with their own mountain to climb. Whenever I struggled for the rest of that twenty-four-hour climb, I thought of Anthony. Then, when I finished, I headed into Cardiff for Kev's engagement party and fell asleep talking to my old Ponty team-mate Ceri Sweeney. But he's used to that!

My final test before the Challenge would take me to new heights. At 8201m, Cho Oyu, in the Himalaya, is the sixth highest mountain in the world. Simon considered it important

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that I experience the kind of altitude I would have to operate in on Everest. And, more than that, I had to if I wanted to climb Everest with Jagged Globe. One of their conditions for it was that climbers have experience of an 8000m expedition.

Cho Oyu did become an important mountain for me, although not necessarily for that reason. It provided another demonstration of the power of luck.

I left for the Himalaya in September with Matt Parkes from Jagged Globe and Steve Williams, the Olympic oarsman. Steve would be joining me on the North Pole and Everest legs. We had already trained together on the sea ice of Greenland, and now we were taking our 8000m test.

Our leader was Rob Anderson, an American climber who is the only man to have climbed the Seven Summits solo, making it to the top of Everest at the ninth attempt, fourteen years after he'd started his mission. As such, he was the perfect man to accompany us on this expedition. Because this was a new and powerful lesson. This was my first experience of not making it to the summit.

The reality is that you don't always, as Rob knew well. You have to manage that disappointment, which is unlike pro sport, where everything is so clear-cut – you win or you lose. In mountaineering, the tapestry is richer.

The problem was a rare shift in the prevailing wind, and more specifically the threat of avalanche. Usually, Cho Oyu is about as accessible as an 8000m mountain gets, which is not very, obviously, but it is unheard of for nobody to have summited by late September, as was the case here. There had been huge blizzards. The snow sat bloated and threatening on the higher slopes. It was beautiful to behold, even if the air was

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thick with tension. We made it up to Camp 3, which is at 7300m, but the snow was knee-deep, and I could see the concern in the eyes of Rob and Matt. A team just behind us had been caught in an avalanche, and another big one struck a couple of days later above Camp 3. Remarkably, a team of Sherpas fixing ropes at 8000m survived that one. They were swept 400m down the slope and would have fallen to their deaths had the rope linking them not looped over a protruding rock, to leave them dangling either side of it.

It was clear that the mountain was unstable. The dynamics of an avalanche have been well studied, but, even for the most experienced and well-informed, trying to second-guess them is a form of Russian roulette. The Tibetans decided to close the mountain, which is extremely rare on Cho Oyu.

So they decided to hold a party. Management of the mountain is shared out among the major commercial teams, whose Sherpas come together to fix the ropes. Because none had been fixed that season above Camp 3, there was a surplus in the rope budget, which the Tibetan authorities decided to spend on beer! They sent it up the mountain on a yak train. It was the most bizarre party I have ever been to. At 5700m, Cho Oyu's is the most elevated base camp in the world, so this had to be the highest party ever held – music, beer and Sherpa dancing.

We all left the mountain the next day, bar three climbers. Two of them became the only people to summit Cho Oyu that year. The third was killed in the attempt by an avalanche.

I came away with mixed feelings – heavy with disappointment that we hadn't made the summit but so grateful to be safe and

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alive. I had learned a valuable lesson here, at an early stage in my development, which wouldn't have happened had the summit attempt been successful. It's not about conquering mountains; it's about working with them. Sometimes the mountain says no. Always the mountain is boss.

Still, I'd climbed beyond 7000m now without any trouble (or supplementary oxygen). This was an important threshold to cross.

The 737 Challenge was on. I was to leave in two months' time.