



FWA

FWA stands for Full Wife Approval. It's pronounced "fwah." No climb begins without it. FWA is reserved for big mountains. It's something we joke about, "Dude, I got FWA! We're going!" It's like the fun pass.

Maggie and I started dating on June 21, 1989. It was a love-at-first-sight sort of thing. She was physically fit, but not an outdoors girl. I told her how much I enjoyed the Adirondacks. I asked her if she wanted to go backpacking and, when she said yes, I took her to do Macomb, South Dix and East Dix—three trail-less peaks. I know, "What was I thinking?" Sometimes I get ahead of myself. I knew it was a beautiful climb up the rockslide, but I didn't think about what it would be like for someone who had never climbed to actually have to do it.

We got up Macomb and someone else was there who asked Maggie if she enjoyed the hike. She said, “Yeah. It’s my first mountain.” They said, “What?! He’s taking you up a trail-less peak for your first climb?!”

But she thought it was great. It was a hard, long day and she enjoyed it. We went up to the Adirondacks a couple times a year and when she’d climbed twenty or so peaks she said she might as well become a 46er. She never intended to be a 46er. She finished on my first mountain—Haystack—on July 5, 2003. I had a jeweler make up a custom gold charm of the Adirondack 46er logo. I gave it to her on the summit that day.

That’s why she appreciated my love for the mountains. She loved them too.

When I floated the idea of doing Everest, she had four stipulations: One, I had to tell her everything. Good, bad, indifferent. She told me, “Don’t leave anything out. If you’re going to be gone 12 weeks, say it’s 12 weeks. Don’t sugar-coat it.”

Two, I needed to train like a man-possessed. I had to be real serious about it. Before I went the first time, I ended up working out 12 months. Three, I had to upgrade my gear. I’d always been the frugal mountaineer. Everyone always mocked my fluorescent green fleece jacket that I’d gotten in a closeout bin. Something no one would ever wear, let alone buy. I remember meeting guide Craig John in New Hampshire to do some ice climbing work about six weeks before I left for Nepal. He said, “You need two of these and two of those.” I said, “Two? Why two of everything?” He said, “Because it’s Mount Fucking Everest. You don’t scrimp on the biggest mountain in the world. What if something

breaks or you drop it in the Icefall; what are you going to do then?” Four, I had to come home. That was the deal. I’m a member of the Live-to-Tell-the-Tale-Club.

We don’t have kids so that made the decision easier. If we had kids, I don’t think I would have gone. I think the responsibilities would shift to more important things. Not that I’m judging those who climb who have kids. It just would be a harder decision for me to make.

I’ve had people say, “Everest was your big dream—what if Maggie said ‘no?’” I tell them, “I wouldn’t have gone.” It’s that simple. I can go fly in the clouds, but I also have a motorcycle license from my days in college. I’ve asked Maggie about getting a motorcycle and she wasn’t wild about the idea. We talked about risk and concluded that it’s harder to manage on a motorcycle than when flying an airplane or climbing a mountain. So I don’t ride a motorcycle. It’s a risk-management issue.

The first test for our deal came when I got the Body Disposal Election Form. You have to decide, “If I die on Mount Everest, I prefer to be left on the mountain, to be cremated, or repatriation.” I’ve thought about the possibility of dying on a big mountain. For instance, when I first went to Mount McKinley in June 1992, 11 people had already died on the mountain that year. It made national news. On my way to Alaska I read an article in *Newsweek* saying it was nastier than Everest. People were dying left and right.

So when you look at the Body Disposal Election Form, there’s a bit of, “Holy shit!” to it. You start thinking, “What have I gotten myself into?”

The wording is pretty straightforward: “If you die on the mountain, your body will be put in a crevasse and/or marked

with a rock cairn in a respectful manner by your Expedition team members....”

“If you die down low, it might be possible to get your body down where it could be cremated by Buddhist monks from the local monastery. This would cost well in excess of several thousand dollars....”

It’s definitely something you have to discuss with your spouse. It shows that this is really serious business and was one of the first things that came up after we’d agreed that I was going to climb Everest. I’d been sharing with her who I was talking to about going there and including her in on my e-mails. When I decided I was going with International Mountain Guides, I brought this to her attention.

“Know how I told you I’d share everything?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she said.

“Well, here you go,” I said, handing her the form. “This is about as serious as it gets. I’m thinking I want my body left on the mountain if I die. What do you think?”

“OK,” she said after a moment, “I guess this is one of the things that goes with the territory. Thanks for sharing.”

I checked “left on the mountain.”