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NO OBSTACLES

Navigating the world by leaps and bounds.

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David Belle invented parkour in France. It has spread mainly by videos on the Internet, and has been embraced in Europe and the United States by thrill-seekers and martial-arts adepts. Photographs from Magnolia Pictures

Parkour, a made-up word, cousin to the French *parcours*, which means "route," is a quasi commando system of leaps, vaults, rolls, and landings designed to help a person avoid or surmount whatever lies in his path—a vocabulary, that is, to be employed in finding one's way among obstacles. Parkour goes over walls, not around them; it takes the stair rail, not the stairs. Spread mainly by videos on the Internet, it has been embraced in Europe and the United States by thrill seekers and martial-arts adepts, who regard it as part extreme sport—its founder would like to see it included in the Olympics—and part gruelling meditative pursuit.

Movies like its daredevil qualities. A bracing parkour chase begins "Casino

Royale," the recent James Bond movie. It includes jumps from the boom of one tower crane to that of another, but parkour's customary obstacles are walls, stairwells, fences, railings, and gaps between roofs—it is an urban rather than a pastoral pursuit. The movements are performed at a dead run. The more efficient and fluid the path they define, and the more difficult and harrowing the terrain they cross, the more elegant the performance is considered by the discipline's practitioners.

Parkour was created in Lisses, a medium prosperous suburb of Paris, in the early nineteen-nineties, by a reserved and restless teen-age boy named David Belle. His father, Raymond, who died in 1999, was an acrobat and a hero fireman. In 1969, he appeared in newspaper photographs hanging from a cable attached to a helicopter above Notre Dame. The night before, someone had hung a Vietcong flag on the cathedral's tower. Raymond was lowered like a spider on a thread, and he grabbed the flag. David Belle is now thirty-three. He has an older brother, Jeff, who is also a fireman; they have the same father but different mothers. (A third brother died a few years ago, of an overdose.) David was raised by his mother's father. On the few occasions when he tried to live with Raymond, their temperaments clashed. David's grandfather told him stories about Raymond that revolved around his exploits—"Spider-Man stories and Tarzan stories," David says—and left him wishing to emulate him. He wanted to be Spider-Man when he grew up.

The parkour scene in "Casino Royale" is performed by a childhood friend of Belle's named Sébastien Foucan, who has developed a parallel pursuit to parkour, called freerunning. Belle appears in two kinds of films, movies that show him performing parkour for its own sake, and movies and commercials in which he appears as an actor performing parkour. All of the films have the kind of vaudeville improbability of a video game. He leaps gaps between rooftops that it doesn't seem possible to cross. Or he jumps from a rooftop to one that is so much

doesn't seem possible to cross. Or he jumps from a rooftop to one that is so much lower that he gets smaller and smaller, descending like a spike about to be driven into the ground. If parkour has a shrine, it is the climbing wall in Lisses, called the Dame du Lac, where Belle played as a teen-ager. The wall is about seventy-five feet high, and the films I like best show him fearlessly racing up and down it as if it had stairs. All are so steeped in risk that there are none I can watch without anxiety.

A young man who practices parkour is called a *traceur;* a woman is a *traceuse*. A *traceur*, Jeff Belle says, is someone "who traces David's footsteps, the way David traced our father's." Enthusiasts also say that a *traceur* is someone who goes fast. The video of Belle that *traceurs* seem to find most compelling, judging from how often they mention it, is one in which he crashes into a cement wall. I have found it on YouTube, using "David Belle fall" as the search term. Belle is attempting to leap over a double-wide ramp that leads to an underground parking garage. The ramp is enclosed by cinder-block walls, about three feet high. Belle arrives at a run from the left. He lowers his hands but they appear to miss the first wall entirely; he seems to be looking at where he means to land. Incredibly, while aloft, he turns, so that his shoulder, not his head, strikes the opposite wall. Ten feet beneath him, at the bottom of the ramp, a cameraman is lying on his back in order to shoot from below. Belle manages not to land on him. His first gesture is to see if the cameraman is all right. Then he begins walking briskly up the ramp. Toward the top, he turns and can be seen to be grinning.

Parkour has no explicit glossary, but *traceurs* typically describe the fundamental maneuvers as the cat leap, the precision jump, the roll, and the wall run. There is also the tic-tac, in which a nearly horizontal *traceur* takes at least one step and sometimes several steps along a wall and launches himself from it; and the underbar, in which a *traceur* dives feet first through a gap between fence rails, like a letter going through a slot, then grabs the upper rail as his shoulders pass under it. In addition, there are several vaults, including the lazy vault, the reverse vault, the turn vault, the speed vault, the dash vault, and the kong or monkey vault, in

which a *traceur* runs straight at a wall or a railing, plants his hands on top, and

brings his feet through his hands. All these moves link to one another, so that a *traceur* might say that he went cat to cat, or that he tic-taced a wall or konged it, then did a roll and a wall leap. The intention is to become so adept that the movements recede in one's awareness and can be performed without reflection. Jazz musicians occasionally say that a novice needs to learn all about his instrument, then he needs to learn all about music, then he needs to forget everything and learn how to play, which is a paradigm that also fits parkour, especially because both activities at their most proficient are improvised. A jazz musician wants to be comfortable in any key. Similarly, a *traceur* wants to be sufficiently fluent so that he can cross any terrain in flight without compromise.

Parkour's most prominent disciple in America is Mark Toorock, who lives in Washington, D.C., and runs a Web site called American Parkour. Toorock is thirty-six. In 2002, a brokerage firm where he worked as a computer technician sent him to London. "Some guys in my office were talking about this 'nutter' who was jumping across rooftops in an ad on TV—David Belle," Toorock says. "I started looking for him on the Internet, and I found a French forum where he was mentioned. Back then, there weren't any parkour sites. I made an attempt to speak to the people in the forum, but they were less than interested in talking to anyone who spoke English, and they weren't polite about it. I found out later that they didn't really want parkour spread. It was theirs, or so they felt. It's a very narrowly defined discipline, and they didn't want it misunderstood."

A few weeks later, Toorock discovered a British Web site called Urban Freeflow, which had just started up. Toorock arranged to meet some of the people involved in a park, and they went around climbing walls and jumping over benches. After two years, Toorock was transferred back to the United States and ended up in Washington, where he began his Web site.

Toorock is a little old for parkour. He says that he concentrates on "stuff close to

Toorock is a little old for parkour. He says that he concentrates on "stuff close to the ground, on speed and efficiency." At his apartment, he showed me a photograph of a parkour artifact—a sign posted in a park in Bethesda, Maryland, that reads, "No skateboards, bicycles, rollerblades, parkour type exercises or similar activities." "The only one in the world," he said. "So far as we know."

In 2005, Toorock organized a team of American *traceurs*—ten men and two women, who call themselves the Tribe—and when I asked him who among them was the most adept he said Ryan Ford, who is a sophomore at the University of Colorado at Boulder. Ford is five feet nine, and he weighs a hundred and forty-five pounds. His face is round, and his eyes are slightly slanted. He has Sioux and Navajo blood, and bristly dark-brown hair. Everyone in the Tribe has a nickname. Ford's is Demon, but, being earnest and unassuming, he's not very comfortable with it. He lives in an apartment in a rambling house with two roommates. We sat in the living room. Ford said that he discovered parkour on the Internet toward the end of his junior year in high school, in Golden, Colorado. He wanted to learn how to run up to a wall, plant his foot on it, and do a backflip. Looking for instructions, he found images of David Belle, among others. In the fall, he quit the football team, on which he was a wide receiver, to pursue parkour.

"I was always climbing rocks and trees, so parkour was already kind of in me," he said. "Pretty much everyone you talk to will tell you that parkour was always part of them." His parents were unhappy with it, though. "To them, it just looked like I was jumping off stuff recklessly for no reason," he said. "But I kept saying, 'It's not pointless, there's a whole philosophy to it.' "

I asked how he had learned.

"A key factor in parkour is gradualism," he said. "You can't find the highest thing to jump from in order to practice your rolls. You get down on the ground first and practice your rolls, then maybe you find something three feet high to launch yourself from. When you can do something correctly a hundred times out of a hundred, you increase your task. Maybe. If you feel confident. People wonder how

David Belle can leap between buildings and fall thirty feet. He started low and built up the difficulty."

It was a warm day, and the windows were open. We heard a dog bark, and a woman tell it to stop. "Parkour is about repetition and practice," Ford went on. "To say that no one in the U.S. has reached David Belle's level doesn't mean that there aren't extremely skilled people doing parkour; it means that he's trained for years, and no one here has. When I see a skilled *traceur*, I admire the dedication and the mental strength. There are some people who just have superior physical ability, but there are no secret techniques in parkour. A lot of the things *traceurs* do aren't necessarily impressive physically, anyway. From a *traceur's* point of view, the task is often mental. Some people can master fear. Other people might have more determination and, in the end, accomplish more things. I see myself fuelled more by determination than by the ease of putting fear in the back of my mind. I overthink, and I don't have the craziness some people do, but I have the determination."

"How often do you practice?"

"I try to do something every day," he said. Then he frowned. "One thing we say is we do parkour, but a lot of the time we aren't; we're practicing for parkour. True parkour is hardly ever done. If I'm practicing a vault and I turn around and do it again, that's not parkour, because it's continuing a circle—it's not making a path. The videos on the Internet are spliced together, so that's not really parkour, either.

"My fantasy is to be walking late at night on the street in New York City and have some guys try to rob me, and I use parkour to get away from them, but I've never had to use parkour, so in a way I could say I've never really done parkour. I practice parkour not because I think I'm going to have to use it but because I see it as making me stronger physically and mentally, just the way people don't go into martial arts because they plan to fight someone—they keep fit or get discipline.

Everyone's different, but the philosophy of parkour that drives me is that progression of ability, being better than I was the day before. There's a quote by Bruce Lee that's my motto: 'There are no limits. There are plateaus, but you must not stay there, you must go beyond them. A man must constantly exceed his level.' If you're not better than you were the day before, then what are you doing—what's the point?"

The next morning, I drove to Denver with Ford; his girlfriend, Kathryn Keller, who is brown-haired and petite and was a gymnast in high school but had to give it up when she hurt her back; and a tall, skinny high-school boy with freckles and a turban named Sat, whose full name is Sat Santokh Khalsa. Sat's American mother and father had converted to Sikhism, and when Sat was nine they sent him to a Sikh boarding school in India, called Miri Piri Academy. He had gone there for six years—he was now fifteen—and had just started Boulder High School. When he came home from India at the end of the school year, a friend had shown him a parkour video, and then he found Mark Toorock's Web site.

We drove downtown, to a small park called Skyline Park, outside a Westin hotel. Ford had invited several other *traceurs* to join us, and when we arrived one of them, a Russian named Nikita, was sitting beside a fountain that had been drained. Nikita was twenty. He had shaved his blond hair, and he had a small face, avid eyes, thin lips, and a sharp nose. He was six feet two and weighed a hundred and sixty pounds. He looked like a big spider. He said that he was from Belarus. "I grew up in a village," he said. "It was just five houses." In New York, where his father now lived, he had trained for two years to be an ultimate fighter. "We paid money to a manager to arrange the fights, and he left," he said. "After that, my trainer went into the movies." He shrugged off a backpack. "Two more days, and it will be one month I have done parkour."

The fountain in Skyline Park is a collection of reddish-brown concrete forms

The fountain in Skyline Park is a collection of reddish-brown concrete forms, squares and rectangles, stacked like children's blocks. It is about twenty feet tall.

"We call this the Cat Fountain," Ford said, "because there's a lot of cat leaps here." There is a fountain in a park nearby, designed by the same architect, which is called Precision Fountain, Ford said, "because it has a lot of precision jumps." The Cat Fountain was set into the plaza, so that from the pavement to the blocks there was a gap several feet wide and a few feet deep, which would be filled by water in warmer weather. Making a run toward the gap, Sat made a cat leap to one of the blocks. He was so slight that it seemed as if he had been lifted into the air by a wire. Once he had grabbed the block, his feet slid against it as he pulled himself up. "The slips are part of the technique," Ford said. "It's controlled. When you first start, you rely more on the equipment to hold you in place, your sneakers, then you learn to use your strength."

Warming up, Nikita twisted from side to side, like a screw. Ford did a handstand but had difficulty maintaining it. "My handstands are not so good," he said. "I fall over, since I got hurt."

"What happened?"

"Separated my shoulder," he said.

"Where'd you do that?"

Ford walked about ten paces. "Right here," he said. "Kong vault over this eight-foot gap. I should have landed in that flower bed, but I clipped a foot and fell into the gap and hit the wall. At first, I thought I broke my collarbone. I also cut my head. I drove home using one arm."

Keller said, "He left a message on my answering machine: 'I got hurt pretty bad, so just call me back.'"

While we stood looking at the wall and the flower bed, another *traceur*, a high-school boy named Dan Mancini, came walking across the plaza. He was tall and

thin, with brown hair, and wore a T-shirt and jeans. Ford clasped his hands above his head and stretched, then said, “Shall we hit some stuff on the fountain?” When Ford talks about people naturally gifted for parkour, one of the people he means is Nikita. We watched him pace off a ten-foot gap from the border to the fountain, then approach it at a run. The first time, he landed short of the wall, and the second time he cleared the gap but couldn’t hold on to the wall and dropped to the bottom of the fountain.

“I did that once,” Ford said. “Never again.”

Nikita said that he wanted to try one more time.

“You should,” Ford said. “I’ll film it.”

“You shouldn’t tell me,” Nikita said.

Ford got a video camera from his knapsack. He stood on a block beside the one Nikita was attempting to surmount and filmed Nikita as he came rushing forward, leaped into the air, and struck the block feet first, like a hawk, then grabbed the edge and pulled himself to the top. He stood on top of the block, jiggling his hands, and said, “Scary vault.”

They grew tired of the fountain shortly and began hoisting themselves onto a railing a few feet above the ground and walking along it on all fours: a maneuver called a cat balance or a cat walk. The railing framed three sides of a rectangle. The longest section was about thirty feet. “Cat walking is very tiring,” Ford said. “Your legs start to burn.” Nikita went up one side of the railing and made the turn and passed us. “Your legs burning yet?” Ford asked. Nikita shook his head. He turned the second corner. “Now burning,” he said.

After Nikita got off the railing, he paced out a cat leap from the plaza, over a gap of about eight feet, to a block in the fountain.

“The last guy who did that hit his face,” Ford said.

“Bit through his lip,” one of the others said.

Nikita soared over the gap and held on to the block, and the others shook their heads. Ford said, “You guys want to move? I got another cat leap for you.”

We crossed the street to a ramp that led to an underground garage. The boys leaned over the walls on either side of the ramp and looked down soberly. At the deep end, the drop to the pavement was about fifteen feet, and the distance across about twelve.

“This is the smallest parking-garage ramp in Denver,” one of them said.

“Yeah, we scouted it,” another said.

“Those French guys do it at the deepest part.”

“Yeah, but in France the cars are smaller, so it’s as deep but not as wide.”

They walked to the head of the ramp in a little pack. A few of them climbed up on the wall around the ramp and made tentative standing jumps to the pavement, landing at the far wall and grabbing the edge of it with their fingers, but no one wanted to try it for real. Embedded in the wall were pieces of gravel, making it rough to the touch. Nikita stood on a rail several inches above the wall, wobbling, as if on a branch. Through a window of the hotel, about ten floors up, a man watched him. Nikita bent his knees, thrust his arms forward, and leaped, his path making a little arc in the air. His fingers grasped the wall, but he landed hard and banged his shin. He lifted his pants leg to see if he’d cut himself. Then he said, “Let’s get out of here,” and everyone followed him across the street. His hands were scraped and bleeding. On a Velcro strap around his chest he had a zippered wallet from which he took some tape and wrapped his fingers.

After crossing several streets, we came to an apartment building and a concrete

parking garage that was four floors tall. Between the levels, running nearly the length of each wall, were broad openings like slits. Each was about a foot tall. Using them, the boys began climbing. One said, "Is this, like, the Asian place where the lady yelled at us to get out?"

A door at the top of a flight of stairs in the apartment building opened and a small, black-haired woman stepped out. "What are you doing climbing here?" she yelled. "Are you supposed to be up there? Get off. The stairs are for going up and down." She glared at them, and one by one they sheepishly climbed down. We took the stairs to the roof, which was connected to a walkway leading to a row of stores, all of them closed—it was Sunday. By one of the stores were two sulky girls and a boy dressed in black clothes.

"Are you guys some kind of youth group?" one of the girls asked.

"No, this is just us using the buildings to keep fit," someone said.

"Oh, I understand," the girl said. "That's cool."

"She does *not* understand," Kathryn said.

"Oh, my God," the other girl said. "It's like Spider-Man."

I turned and saw Nikita climbing a drain pipe to the roof of one of the stores. While I was writing "Spider-Man" in my notebook, his shadow as he leaped from one roof to another passed over the page.

Jeff Belle has an office in Paris, where he handles fire-department business. To speak with him, I brought a translator, Susan Chace, an American novelist who lives in Paris. Belle, who is forty-five, is small and wiry. He has a round face, a sharp chin, dark eyes, and black, cropped hair with flecks of gray. He was wearing a fireman's uniform, a dark-blue garment like a jumpsuit. The legs ended just above the tops of his black combat boots. Over the uniform, he wore a long coat

that had "Pompier de Paris" written on the back. We met at his office, then he took us to an empty, low-ceilinged room with a bar and an espresso machine and some tables stacked on top of each other. On the wall were photographs of firefighters.

Jeff said that David was a restless boy. "He was always exercising in front of the TV," he said. "He still takes whatever's next to him, maybe a big book, and starts lifting it. He can't sit still. He lives with it." The brothers did not see much of each other until David, at fourteen, moved to Lisses to live with his mother. Then Jeff, who was already a fireman, began to look after him. He would show him how to climb ropes and perform gymnastic maneuvers, and David would go off and do it his own way. Now and then, David would go to the climbing wall in Lisses with his father and show him things he had taught himself, and Raymond, thinking that he was being encouraging, would say, "I could do that when I was nine."

Through Jeff, David was exposed to the methods of Georges Hébert, a French sports theorist, whose motto was "Be strong to be useful." Hébert believed that modern conveniences such as elevators were debilitating. He thought that Africans he had met while travelling were healthier and stronger than Europeans, and that the proportions of the bodies he saw in Greek and Roman statues were ideal. The philosophies and the exercises he developed, which are part of a French fireman's training, were also meant to cultivate courage and discipline. Inspired by Hébert, a Swiss architect developed an obstacle course called a parcours. "David took Hébert's ideas and said, 'I will adapt it to what I need,' " Jeff said. "Instead of stopping at a reasonable point, he just kept going."

David was briefly a fireman recruit, until he hurt his wrist. While he was recuperating, he started thinking things over and saw that the life of a fireman had too many rules, and not enough action, and he decided to join the Marines, but he didn't find the same values among them, the "traditional values." He left

the Marines and went to India, where he stayed for six months. When he came back to Paris, he was twenty-four, and he didn't know what to do with himself.

"He came to see me at my house," Jeff said, "and he told me he didn't know where his life was going. He was only interested in parkour. You could be a super policeman or a firefighter using it, but you can't earn your living, because there's no championship. I said, 'Maybe if we film what you're doing.' "

It was 1997, and Jeff was involved in planning an annual ceremony in which recruits perform firefighting drills. He decided that David should put on a show. He told him to get a group together, so that he wouldn't look insignificant by himself. David collected two of his cousins and some other kids from the neighborhood, including Sébastien Foucan, with whom he ran around doing parkour. Jeff choreographed a routine for them. They dressed as ninjas and called themselves the Yamakasi. "It means 'strong spirit' in the language of Zaire," Jeff said, "but it sounded Asian." During the show, David climbed a tower and did a handstand at the top. He also scaled a fireman's ladder and did a backflip from it. After the demonstration, David began getting invitations to perform.

Jeff is proud of David, but worries about him. "This was a kid who refused any kind of system, who just wanted to live his life," he says. "If he's surrounded by the right people, he can do what he wants. Ordinary life really upsets him, though, because this world the rest of us live in is not where he finds his pleasure. He's easily disturbed by ordinary things. But he's also asking, 'Why am I doing this parkour?' All his family who did this physical stuff were doing it for a reason, but he's asking, 'Why am I doing this, what does it mean?' " Jeff added, "He's simple in his purposes. He doesn't like talking very much. He's someone who is looking for his way." I asked what sort of routines David observed in his training. Jeff shook his head. "He's still eating Big Macs and drinking Coke," Jeff said. "He likes chicken sandwiches. He trains when it comes to him. He's usually sleeping

in the morning. He's really a night guy."

We arranged to meet with David the following day, in Lisses, where he was staying with his mother. When David is in France, he lives either with her or with Jeff. "He doesn't really have a lot of money," Jeff said, "although people think that he does." He added that David was very easy to live with. "We don't know about the inside of his head, but outside he's very neat. His room is always in perfect shape."

The next day, I took a taxi with Susan Chace to Lisses, about half an hour south of Paris. When we were under way, the driver asked why we were going there. Chace said, "To see David Belle." The driver nodded. Chace asked if he knew who Belle was, and the driver said, "Of course. *Il est unique*." We left the highway and, following Jeff's directions, went around a rotary and came to a collection of low, flat-roofed, two-story buildings, like shoeboxes, painted light brown. We stopped in front of Belle's building. Chace knocked, the door opened, and the driver said, "That's him!" Belle had his chin tucked slightly, like a man looking out from under the brim of a hat. He had dark hair cut short like a pelt and a thin, asymmetrical face, with a sharp chin and a hook nose. He was wearing a red fleece top and jeans. As I paid the driver, Jeff Belle drove up behind us. We went into the apartment. The kitchen was by the door, and there was a living room beyond it with a circular stairway leading up. In the living room was David's girlfriend, Dorine Sane. David had his fleece top zipped to his chin—he had a sore throat—and he seemed subdued. He had just come back from three weeks in the Czech Republic, where he was making "Babylon AD," which stars Vin Diesel, and is based on a French science-fiction novel. David plays the head of an Internet gang that does parkour, and he choreographed scenes for ten actors.

Jeff and David spoke for a few moments, and then Chace said that David was going to rest, while Jeff took us to the Dam du Lac. Outside, we crossed a parking lot, then took an asphalt path through a park. Several hundred yards off, the Dam

du Lac rose up against the side of a small lake. It was the color of sandstone and

had the shape of an arch. “David was afraid of it in the beginning,” Jeff said. “Now he walks on it like it was solid ground.” The *lac* turned out to be made of concrete. As we walked along the edge, ducks paddled away from us. For some time now, a fence has enclosed the wall, but it was easy to climb around it. The wall was slightly concave, and the top was intersected by a horizontal slab, which had roughly the dimensions of a king-size mattress and was curled up at one edge. Here and there on the face of the wall were footholds and handholds in the form of slots the size of bricks. On one side was a rectangular box, open at one end, like a cave, which is called the cabana. Below, sticking straight out from the wall and about fifteen feet tall, was a form in the shape, more or less, of a hammer. Jeff said that the first maneuver David had done was a backflip from the cabana to the hammer. About twenty feet from the ground was a sign saying, “Escalade Interdite.” On it were signatures. “The kids climb up and sign their names,” Jeff said. “David also went barefoot on it.” He pointed at the top. “And at night sometimes he slept up there.”

For a few minutes, my mind screened images of David in videos I had seen—running up and down the wall, doing a hair-raising handstand at the top—then we began walking back toward the apartment. We passed a low building with picture windows—a nursery school—and Jeff said that when David and his friends were young “they jumped over the bushes beside it to the roof. That was their first trick.” While we were looking at a stairwell that appears as a prop in videos for a series of David’s cat leaps, Jeff’s cell phone rang, and it was David saying he was ready to talk.

When we got back to the apartment, David sat on a couch with Dorine, and I sat next to them. Jeff made coffee. For the most part, David sat quite still, like a machine at rest. The only part of him in motion was his right hand, which moved from Dorine’s hand, to her knee, to her lap, and so on. I asked how he knew whether a movement was too dangerous. “It’s just intuitive,” he said, shrugging.

“My body just knows if I can do something or not. It’s sort of an animal thing. In athletics, they have rules—you have to take your distance and stop and jump, everything has a procedure—but I never did it that way. I don’t take a risk, though, that I know I can’t do. I like life too much.”

He said that parkour hadn’t changed much, since he started it, but his intention had become more specific. “When I was younger, I was playing, the way kids play at parkour, but now I ask the question ‘Is this going to be useful for me to get to the other side?’ The movement is simple. I don’t do anything special, because I want to get to the other side. What I’m interested in for parkour is the utilitarian thing of getting to the other end, whether as a task or a challenge, but in film they like a little entertainment, so I do that, too, but it’s not what I’m interested in.

“You always have to get through the first obstacle that says, ‘I can’t do it,’ whether in your mind or for real, and be able to adapt to anything that’s put in your path. It’s a method for learning how to move in the world. For finding the liberty men used to have.”

I asked David why he had gone to India, and he said that he had friends there.

“How did you pass the time?”

“I just kept training,” he said. “I was training in the trees.” Jeff handed me a scrapbook with a photograph of David leaping from the limb of one tree to another. He was stretched flat out, horizontal to the ground, like Superman.

“I was at a waterfall one day,” David went on, “and there were huge trees all around, and in the trees were monkeys. There were fences and barriers around them, so they couldn’t get out, but I went around the barriers and played with the monkeys. After that, I watched them all the time, learning how they climbed. All the techniques in parkour are from watching the monkeys.”

He then showed us, on a computer, a documentary called “Warriors of the

Monkey God." It was about a tribe of monkeys who live on the rooftops of Jodhpur. The people regard the monkeys as holy. We watched them leaping from rooftop to rooftop and through the trees. The scene that made David smile was one in which numbers of them leaped onto, then off, a piece of corrugated tin that was loosely attached as a roof to some stakes. Their landings made the tin shake. Some of the monkeys were leaping from the ground, turning on their sides in the air, landing on the stakes and shoving off from them—a tic-tac.

Watching the movie, which was about forty-five minutes long, took only about fifteen minutes, because David kept advancing it to scenes of the monkeys in flight, looking exactly like *traceurs*. When it was finished, he said that after coming home he had just continued perfecting what he had learned from the monkeys. He had plans, he said, to make a movie with them.

I asked about the fall on the Internet, the one that the American *traceurs* always talk about. David gave a little smile. "I was a bit tired," he said. "It was the end of the day. I was just doing stuff with a bunch of kids. I fall all the time—I fall like the monkeys—but it never shows up on film, because they just want the spectacular stuff."

I thought of Nikita with his bleeding hands and said, "You never wear gloves?"

He said that he wanted to be able to feel the surfaces he was grabbing. He held his palms out for me to feel, and they were as hard and slick as linoleum.

I told him that I had been to see people do parkour in Colorado, and that they had imagined themselves as preparing to use it for an escape, and he said, "That's good. If you're really thinking about how to defend yourself, how to be useful, then that's a very different mind-set from just doing things to look good."

Last fall, David said, he had discussions with Sam Raimi, the director of "Spider-Man," about playing the role of Spider-Man's double, but he decided he wasn't

interested. "That was a childhood dream, to be in a Spider-Man costume," he said. "Now I'd rather appear on a poster with my own name, not as a character, saying, 'This is me performing.' " He was planning to tour the world doing parkour, he said. A French film company partly owned by the director Luc Besson paid his expenses to perform last winter in Madagascar, and David had also given exhibitions in Italy, Germany, and Portugal.

He yawned and rubbed his throat, and I took it as a sign that he was at the end of his interest in talking. I thanked him and stood up. We shook hands. He seemed to think for a moment, then he said, "I'm still learning. I'm not sure of anything yet, I'm just trying to be as complete as I can."

I nodded.

"What I do is not really something that can be explained," he said. "It can just be practiced." Then he went to call us a taxi. ♦

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Alec Wilkinson, a staff writer, is the author of ten books, including "The Protest Singer" and "The Ice Balloon."

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