

TRAPPED AGAIN FOR 127 HOURS

We're a little way into our conversation, and adventurer Aron Ralston is lost in thought. 'It was the most beautiful moment of my life,' he says. 'The intensity of emotion, the euphoria... It was ecstasy.'

He can see from my face I'm having trouble believing him. So he tries again. 'Think of it like this. Take every instance of joy, happiness, pleasure, delight and fun you've ever had in your life, and pack it into one moment. Then multiply that moment by the power of every piece of joy and happiness you've yet to experience... That's how I felt.'

So what's the incident he's talking about? The moment he set eyes on his beautiful wife, Jessica, on their wedding day, or saw his baby boy for the first time? No – and if you're eating breakfast, look away now – Ralston is talking about the moment he amputated his right arm to save his life. He's referring to the joy he experienced after he'd sliced through the last tissue that had been attaching the useless limb to the rest of his body.

It was April 2003 and he was at the bottom of a dark, cold chasm, hundreds of feet beneath the Utah desert. What should have been an enjoyable afternoon's exploration of this remote canyon had turned into a disaster when he dislodged a huge boulder, which then fell on him, pinning him to the rock wall by his forearm and hand.

If you've seen the movie 127 Hours, you'll know Ralston's story. He was trapped there – with a bottle of water and virtually no food – for five days, having failed to move the boulder or chip away at the rock to free his arm. By this point, Ralston – who had given up his job as a mechanical engineer for a life exploring mountains and canyons – had come to see his right forearm as his enemy. So, after snapping the bones using his bodyweight, he set about cutting off the limb with a penknife, an experience he describes as '100,000 times more powerful and beautiful' than seeing the birth of his son, Leo, 20 months ago.

'That was the moment I stepped out of my grave and into my life,' he says. 'I don't regret losing

my arm. It showed me what was important in my life, what I'm capable of.'

We are talking just a few hours after the culmination of his latest adventure, which again has put him in a remote spot and into harm's way. Ralston, 35, who now works as a motivational coach, is one of eight prominent people who have taken part in the Discovery channel's new series *Alone In The Wild* – other participants include cricketer Freddie Flintoff and TV reporter Donal MacIntyre.

The challenge for Ralston, who now has a prosthetic arm, was to be marooned on a tiny, uninhabited island off the coast of Belize, in central America, for 127 hours – the length of time he had been trapped in the canyon – with nothing but a few tools, some medical equipment, a bottle of water, a handful of rice and two video cameras. The idea? To see how he would cope with the solitude this time. And the isolation was real – there was no camera crew; Ralston filmed everything himself.

I travel on the boat that has been sent to scoop him back to civilisation at the end of the challenge. He's in good spirits but supremely tired. After giving a short interview to the TV crew, he's whisked back to the island where the show's production team is based, 20 minutes away. He phones his wife, has a shower, a little snooze.

I next see him holding court as he eats his first proper meal for five days. He's missed company and he's talking non-stop. There's much laughter and plenty of rum going down. But finally he leaves the table and we can get down to talking.

He tells me how the 'Utah experience' made him more keen to take death-defying risks – 'I thought I was invincible' – but that marriage and fatherhood calmed him down. He explains how he was bullied at school, and it was in response to the bullies that he set out to prove how macho he was by climbing mountains and going into canyons. He says he used to be 'a very cocky, hedonistic, self-absorbed guy'. Then he opens

Having to cut off his own arm in a climbing accident didn't crush Aron Ralston's desire for danger – quite the opposite. Here he tells Vincent Graff about his new ordeal in the wild

up about the past few days, about how much he has missed his wife, at home in Colorado. He says he found his isolation more of a strain than he expected, that after 48 hours he was near breaking point.

Food had been a problem. He caught a fish but a storm meant he couldn't start a fire to cook it. 'I had a meltdown. I was scared the sea would flood in. I hadn't eaten or collected any water. I felt guilty about putting my family through difficulties so I could be here. So I curled up and hoped things would still be there in the morning.'

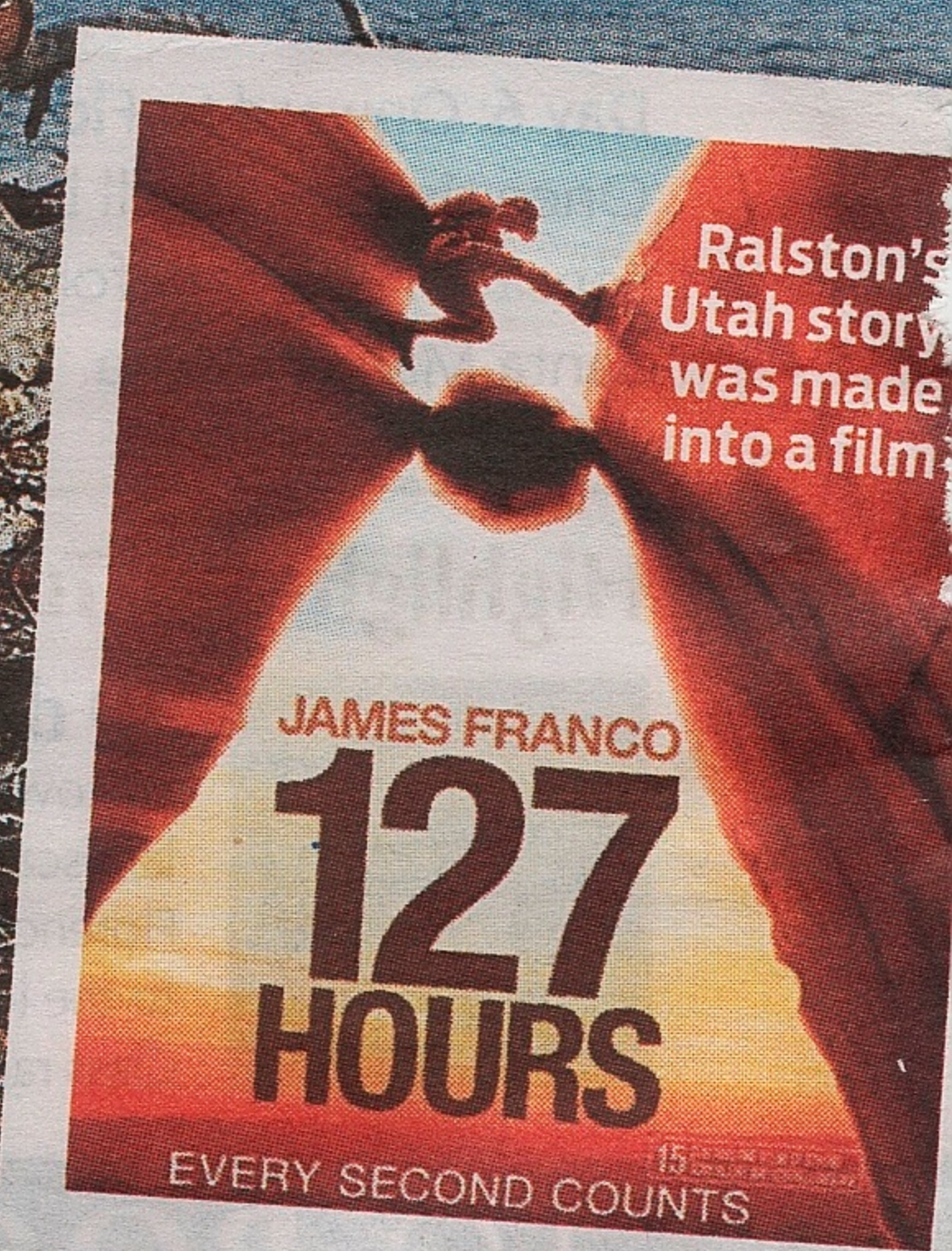
But his experience in the canyon had taught him that he needed to think about his priorities. 'I woke up the next day and thought: "OK, now it's time to start making better decisions." I got a fire going. I desalinated some sea water. I cooked some conches [sea snails].'

He says the island experience was valuable. 'I realised I've been getting my priorities wrong.' He recently bought a house and has been working like a maniac to pay off the mortgage in just a year (he charges up to £23,000 to deliver a motivational speech). 'I did a tour last month where I was in six cities in six states in six days. Crazy. I realised I'm missing out on Leo's first two years of life. It's pulling apart my wife and me.'

The island experience has helped him realise he needs to take things slower. So, instead of paying off his mortgage in a year, he'll give it five. Finally, I ask him about Leo. When he's a man, does Ralston want him climbing down canyons? 'After he's 18 he'll do what he wants. I can only hope Jess and I will have given him an upbringing that's given him some good judgement

so he'll take appropriate risks – and mitigate those risks and manage them. But I hope he'll have an adventure-filled life. It doesn't have to be in the outdoors, although I think it probably will be.' ■

Alone In The Wild, Wednesday, 9pm, Discovery. Aron Ralston's episode is on 9 November.



NOBEL IN DEFEAT? Both Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin were nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. Unsurprisingly, neither won