The White Death

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Ay, but to die, and go we know not where;
To lie in cold obstruction and to rot;
A kneaded clod; and the delighted spirit
To bathe in fiery floods, or to reside
In thrilling region of thick-ribbed ice;
To be imprison'd in the viewless winds,
And blown with restless violence round about
The pendant world.

Shakespeare: Measure for Measure III.i
Overture:

_BROAD PEAK_
On the Great Sea of Ice

'Clap!'
A shiver down my spine. Flames lick the overhang of the boulder at Bardumal, a black shadow in the skyline of the night.
'Clap, clap!'
Fifty-six piercing eyes reflect the light of the excited fire. They blink in unison. Heads bob slowly left and right. From the darkness of the earth, a moaning note rubs its way out of her breast and climbs into the sky.
'Ya habiibi!' The warm plaintive scream cuts my breath in two. The echo of the voice slides along the rosy flanks of the Braldu Valley while a crescent moon pricks its ear up in the dark. 'Clap, clap! Habiibi. Clap, clap!' The fleshy voice digs into my pores and I am into it, clapping with the beat.
Then she jumps over the circle of eyes and into the light of the fire.
'Clap, clap! Clap, clap! Ya habiibi! Clap, clap!' She strips off her blouse. In the foreground the moon reflects her face. In the background the fire between her legs projects her image upon the boulder and shadows intertwine.
'Ya habiiiiiiibi!' She pinches the essence, a human essence between her vocal cords, and strums it loud with her lips. 'Taala. Taala.'
A song unrolls to the accelerating rhythm of the hand-clapping. She turns upon herself, arms widespread, a dish towel in one hand, bending and moving and contorting her abdomen and limbs. Our eyes caress her thighs while our hands clap to the gyrations of her abdomen. Our faces bend to the rolling of her soul.

She bends her supple fingers back and forth and rolls her hands around her wrists, now picking up the rhythm with her hips. She moves and turns and breathes and sweats and whirls and spins her arms, bellydancing to the extremities of her nails.

Into the air leaps Ali Hussein, wild-eyed and possessed, cutting out designs in the air, a wooden stick swinging as a sword. Then Big Karim jumps in, confident and sure, masculine, showing off his strength in brutal complex jumps, manifesting his feelings for the lady of the veil.

'Clap! Clap! Clap!'

The tempo slows down. Ali crosses his forearms over his chest, then extends them toward her as if to give his heart away. She deflects her face and shyly turns it toward Karim, extending her arms his way.

'Clap, clap!' The sounds abate. All is quiet.

Big Karim jumps high into the air with a scream and when the bare balls of his feet come back into the sand, the handclapping resounds and the song bursts forth. The beautiful shadow advances one leg to the right of Karim and stares him in the face. He eases his right thigh against her knee. The music stops again.

'Ya habiiiiibi! Taala.'

The handclapping and the voices redouble all around. A chorus moans to the gesticulations of her belly. Taqi yanks off his veil to expose a masculine face. It is etched in simple beauty, pure—a man made into a woman for a Balti dance—a woman made into a man in Muslim Pakistan.
We had crossed the icy barrier with our Balti porters and now we were more than friends, singing and dancing together—into the night.

* * *

We had been breaking the trail in rapid rhythm through a new layer of fresh snow, moving ahead in regular and mechanical short steps, up and down the great sea of ice, covered by an immaculate dark blue sky. This section of the expansive Baltoro Glacier between Urdukas and Gore was dominated on our left by the towering erections of the Trango and Bianje groups; their sheer granite walls reached up to titillate the icy blue sky, then thrust thousands of feet back into the frozen forms below. The hanging balconies of frozen liquid, the snow splayed across the great North Face of Masherbrum to our right, appeared to slowly rush down toward the flatter fjord which merged with our own, providing striking confirmation of the invisible motion that perpetually sculpts and alters the terrain upon which we moved, a powerful life beneath our feet.

We had left Urdukas at six in the morning, our second campsite on the southern bank of the Baltoro, and had been trekking up the glacier for seven long hours—up and down, up and down. Yannick and I traded leads every thirty minutes, breaking the trail ahead of our caravan of porters, pedaling over the snowy terrain—up and down the icy flanks of the glacier to our next campsite, a flat spot which had been given the name Gore.

On this crisp spring day, we broke our usual calisthenic routine of running up the slopes of nearby hills and instead repaired to our tent for a tournament of tarot. For once, Gilles was getting some good hands and was passionately beating the hell out of Yannick, the doctor, and me.
'Gilles, you have the luck of a cuckold!' I smirked. In France, when a man has a streak of luck at cards, it is not unusual for others to jokingly accuse his wife of adultery. Gilles looked at me out of the corner of his eye and unflinchingly responded with a wit all his own.

'Well, it's been your fate for the past week, Georges.' By evening the weather had cooled down, even inside the tent, where we all were now waist-deep in our sleeping bags. At length, Yannick took an intermission to relieve his bladder and in so doing seized the opportunity to explain the art of passing urine while reclining in a sleeping bag, a lesson which was to prove invaluable in the coming days. The doctor, Gilles, and I, complete novices, were soon to realize that there is genuine technique to be mastered. The trick, so deftly expounded by our instructor, was to pivot slightly on the side, to hang laterally into the can, and, then, most important of all, to relax, just relax, relax, . . . , rela-a-a-x.

*   *   *

Jean, the doctor, took time out to operate on himself before dinner. He had been suffering during the last few days from an infection under his toe nails, which made it difficult for him to enjoy his walk on the unstable terrain of the glacier. In France, Yannick had had to convince the doctor to accompany us up the Baltoro, telling him that the march into base camp would be nothing more than an enjoyable little promenade.

'Rocks, damn rocks!' the doctor cursed as he cut into his toes. 'Talk of a promenade! Nothing but damn rocks!'
That evening the nocturnal sky was brushed with an intense blue, hung with a multitude of sparkling stars. The moon was playing cache-cache behind Crystal Peak in the distance, and a light breeze was sliding down the surface of the glacier. I was alone, walking in the vicinity of the campsite. I rinsed my lungs with the clean air. A few chills ran down my spine. It was -5°C Celsius. A slow turn about—one last look around before retiring. The glaciers, the peaks, and the skies were still, as though surprised and frozen in that state. Only the tent was animated, fluttering gently in the breeze. Time was suspended.

I slid into my sleeping bag and pulled the cord to close the fabric around my face, leaving just enough room for my nose and mouth. An ocean of mixed colors danced before my sealed eyelids, inviting me to dive into its peaceful waters. The thoughts of the day receded and I let myself be carried out to sea.

A house, with many windows, glassy transparent windows, and sliding doors opening to the outside where it was raining hard. Other people there too, and Norma. She and I grew bored and quit the crowd, passed by a blazing fireplace. 'Come, let's make love in this room,' we laughed, and ran towards the quilt, holding hands tightly. It was a green room, and as we undressed, we lost sight of each other. The rain beat on the windows and the wind pushed on the sliding doors. The whole house squeaked under the lash of the storm, which shook it like a deck of cards. Then water ushered through the joints of the door and through the decayed casement of the window, spilling into the bedroom in violent streams with blades of grass and dirt. Drafts of moist air engulfed our void and the walls began to corrugate and split; heavier waters spewed forth from every crack and hole. And as the water level rose and the
house absorbed the liquid, I tried to hold back the sliding
doors and panels and the windows, running from one to
the next, counteracting the forces exerted from outside.
But the doors opened of themselves; the glass panels swell-
ed up, exploded, and the waves gushed in.

A pair of wet tennis shoes walked me out upon a
molested landscape. The inundation was upon the coun-
tryside. Tidal waves covered the horizons, some on their
way towards us over the lesions and contusions of the
earth. Go! Run away, run away to higher ground. I left on
foot, through forests and fields, en route to the mountains
among multitudes of people in a state of panic. It was no
longer raining, but the skies were red, loaded with a
thickness, hanging in hot colors of sunset, for ages. No
nights—only long half-days on the trail to the mountains.
White brahma bulls staring with glassy brown eyes, bodies
pushing other bodies in wheelbarrows, men with haggard
eyes, babes in arms, women with unkempt hair, never
looking back, peering up to higher ground, running
through rice fields and rain forests, along muddy and
rocky trails, and me among them, scrambling, fleeing,
escaping the debacle, on my way to the mountains.

The multitudes climbed up and we could see the ravag-
ed plains below. We did not eat. We could not eat. But now
I was pushing the other way, against the current—down
the trails against the swarming flow of human ants. I was
returning to the plains, alone, through the zone of death
between the safety of the mountains and the horror of the
plains. A zone of sickness. The dead had been deposited
there and marauding brigands dwelled among the corpses
and the lepers, killing and installing a reign of terror
throughout the land.
On the trail I met a man coming out of the flatland on his way to the mountains. He drew near, looked into my eyes, and whispered, 'It's not a local thing—it's a cosmic thing—it has to do with the sun—some kind of explosion—there are particles in the air—that's why it's all so red—but don't go back down! More tidal waves are expected—it's only the beginning. Scientists don't understand—nobody knows—everybody is scared.'

I could see he too was frightened as he continued on his way up. And I looked down, down on the devastation, then up to the reddened sky and across the horizon wet of blood. Taking my head into my hands and closing my eyes, transfigured, I cried, 'Oh, Lord, why must I see?' And then my eyes opened on a clear blue sky.

I walked on towards the plains around the uprooted trees, broken and strewn about by the inundation, around torn bridges, through the water, beside the vermin, furniture and house tops floating in the torrents, through a landscape of war, and as I walked, I listened to myself barking, 'Norma, Norma!' The echo of my voice resounded off the eroded scars of a steep river's bank. I was so disappointed in the thinness of its timbre, I could only murmur, 'Norma, Norma,' looking all around for her—'Norma, Norma!'

At two in the morning I awoke with a start. The tent was collapsing and it was no dream. A storm had broken without warning, piling up more snow on its skirts than it could withstand. Gilles made a wild and frantic effort to peel out of his sleeping bag to hoist up the roof of the tent, stumbling over me in his haste. Soon Yannick and I were into the fray, doing battle with the elements. From three
until five, each of us took turns shaking the snow off the surface of the tent, while the others made an attempt to sleep. After such an auspiciously peaceful evening, we had not anticipated this sudden shift in weather. It was, nevertheless, a good introduction to the transitory nature of the elements in the highest mountain ranges of the world, a lesson which I was not to fully comprehend until much later.

By 6 a.m. we had broken camp in the snowstorm and had begun to push through the howling wind toward our next campsite, Concordia. In this spring season of 1978, we were the first expedition to lay a track on the upper Baltoro. To find a safe route around the moraines and crevasses of the glacial body to our destination Broad Peak—that was our task—through the rubble and boulders that had been carried along by the most recent contortions of the living glacier.

With Gore behind us, we marked our way with cairns for our porters' return and for later expeditions that would pass this way. Kissed by the snowfall, Yannick and I routinely turned back for a sign from Hassan, who knew the terrain well. He looked toward us out of the distance. When he did nothing more, this meant to continue on in the same direction. When he lifted one of his arms, it meant to take a sharp right or left or an oblique right or left, depending on the way he moved his arm.

I now saw Hassan moving both arms. That meant stop! It was time to take a rest. We had been on the move for three long hours and the break was welcome respite. Hassan briskly approached through the snow. Each one of his steps was confident and sure. His foot never slipped. Under his dark brown gabardine pants, his legs were fast and nervous like those of a sprinter. His pants had taken on the form and shape of his lean muscles. He wore a
gray plaid shirt with dark green stripes, a Helly Hansen sweater, a green and brown wool shawl, and a checkered broadcloth blazer, a bit short at the extremities and tight around his square chest. Topped with the classic Balti hat made of gray white wool, knitted like a sock, his face was radiant with energy, his wrinkles were strong, but rounded, his skin of dark Mediterranean color. He had a pear-shaped nose; two black holes in his smile. His beard had grown since leaving Skardu and it gave him a rough look of the gentlest pirate one could imagine. He reminded me of a Corsican fisherman. But he was a Balti and what a Balti!

As Hassan approached, he noticed my gaze fixed intently upon his features. He might have felt that I was trespassing into his private world, but he just smiled back at me in a fatherly way. Hassan could well have been my father, for he told me that he was almost four cycles old, which translated into four times twelve years, according to the Tibetan reckoning.

Although we had been trekking at an elevation comparable to the summit of the Matterhorn, the porters were as alert and vigorous as they had been down in Skardu where we hired them. We shook off the layer of fresh snow blanketing our shoulders, pulled out the icicles which had grown from our beards and mustaches, and each looked around to find a flat stone to turn over as a seat. The weather was improving. It stopped snowing and a strong breeze blew in from the east, pushing the fog downward along the glacier. We had experienced un coup de tabac, a transitory squall.

Taqi, Ali Hussein, and Haji started a gas stove to brew up some tea. They melted some snow for water, added half a handful of tea to the gallon pan along with a fist of ghee. Finally, a hefty dash of salt.
Ghulam pulled out two cold chapatis from the plastic bag he harbored in his pocket. These he had saved from last night's dinner for just such an occasion as this. Yannick, Gilles, and I shared a small can of tuna and some pâte de foie, which we spread over our chapati, while the doctor cursed the day he had acceded to Yannick's supplications.

'Rocks, damn rocks!'

Hassan handed me a cup of tea. I reciprocated with a piece of chocolate which he dunked into his tea and sucked.

'Do you like chocolate, Hassan?'

'Look bad. Taste good.'

Soon we were again on our feet and away up the glacier. We could see patches of sky here and there. Then as the clouds burned off, the temperature rose—abruptly, until, quite suddenly it seemed, it became too hot to continue, so we stopped briefly to remove our anoraks and balaclavas. A thin layer of damp fog was all that protected us from the intense rays of the burning sun.

Clumps of clouds floated directly ahead of us in the east, and there, framed in the distance, reared the summital pyramid of the presumptuous West Face of Gasherbrum IV. A beautiful face! Gasherbrum IV is one of a family of colossal peaks which go by the same name. Gasherbrum I, or Hidden Peak, and Gasherbrum II are two of the world's fourteen eight thousand meter mountains—the eight thousanders, as we call them in Europe. The Gasherbrum complex takes its family name from the native Balti language: rgasha, meaning 'beautiful' and brum, meaning 'mountain.' These words combined to provide an apt salutation to these giants of the Karakoram.
Two other eight thousandsers, those highest of the high, inhabit the Karakoram—K2 and Broad Peak. One of the ten, Nanga Parbat, towers over the Punjab Himalayas in Pakistan. Another, Shisha Pangma, also known as Gosain- than, can be found in Tibet. The remaining eight rise up from the Himalayan chain of Nepal.

The terrain before us seemed to widen and flatten. In one last breath, the wind pushed away the remaining clouds as we arrived in the heart of the Karakoram group of the Himalayas—Concordia—surrounded by a court of handsome peaks attired in robes of sparkling white snow.

Concordia is truly the heart of the Karakoram—the junction of three huge glaciers. The Baltoro is the artery feeding out; the Godwin-Austen and the Upper Baltoro are the veins flowing in. Con—cordia, 'with—heart', is an accurate appellation and there, at the confluence of those three pulsating vessels, is a fabulous observatory from which can be viewed all three glaciers and the mountains nourishing them. It is the doorway to the kingdom of the giants of the Karakoram, the objective of this day's march.

Up the right vein, a harmonious mountainous massif is cloaked in layers of pure white ice and snow, the Bride Peak, Chogolisa. In front of us stands a castle of complex architectural design whose steep ramparts of rock are partly covered with snow, the Gasherbrum complex. Up the left vein is a majestic, well-proportioned pyramid, the King, K2, its Abruzzi Ridge radiating royalty toward China and Tibet. Just to the right of him is the mother queen, very pregnant, Broad Peak, known also as Phalchan Kangri, the large mountain—our mountain. I wrote in my diary:
Kingdom of the Giants
 Approach to Broad Peak West Face
This kingdom we have entered is an enchanted one. We must now tiptoe lightly so as not to disturb the exalted life of its king-gods. Perhaps if we do not offend them, or tickle them too much, we will be able to sneak up their flanks to touch the crown of one, quickly turn around, run down, and depart with our toes still on our feet.

Standing on a glacial table in this observatory, this kingdom of the giants, I sensed the spirit of Hermann Buhl, a prophet in his own time. This mountaineering genius had led an Austrian team of four to Broad Peak and Chogolisa in 1957. He, Kurt Diemberger, Markus Schmück, and Fritz Wintersteller established base camp in early May, and set out to climb the West Flank on the 13th. On May 21st the weather turned bad and the four retreated to base camp, returning on the 26th for a second attempt. After an unsuccessful bid on the 29th, the team once more retreated. Then on the 7th of June the four climbers set off up the face, arriving at their 'assault' camp on the 8th of June. Early on the morning of the 9th they launched another summit bid. Schmück and Wintersteller reached the col at around 1:00 p.m. and continued on to the summit. Buhl had at first waited below on the summital ridge, slowed down by wounds he had suffered on Nanga Parbat four years earlier. He then summoned all his strength and was able to join Diemberger on the pinnacle just as the lights went out. The two were fortunate to be able to downclimb in the moonlight, returning to the assault camp at 1:30 the next morning.

Although Buhl's party utilized fixed ropes and fixed camps, the accomplishment was an important step forward in the Himalayas. These four mountaineers helped to show that it is not necessary to use artificially induced
oxygen to scale an eight thousander, that it is not necessary to utilize high altitude porters and reserve climbers; in short, that it is feasible to climb the highest mountains in the world without a heavyweight infrastructure and the siege tactics employed by large expeditions of the past and of today.

As Buhl's face crystalized on the screen of my memory, something pulled gently at my collar from behind. A powerful extended arm of Chogolisa? I turned my head and looked back to the Bride Peak, all clad in snow. **Chogolisa, do you hold a darker secret? What did you do to Buhl shortly after his ascent of Broad Peak when he disappeared upon your face?**

My eyes fled eastward to where the shadow of Gasherbrum IV was vivid with the spirit of the Bonatti of '58. And although Hidden Peak lived up to its name, I could also sense its presence behind Gasherbrum IV. Messner and Habeler had left an inheritance there in '75 when they climbed the 5,600 foot North Face in pure Alpine fashion.

The atmosphere of this kingdom was intense with Buhl's presence, and the spirit of sportive Alpinism pervaded the whole arena. It was against this backdrop of Himalayan accomplishments that I now came face to face with Broad Peak. As I turned my head back towards her west flank, I comprehended for the first time the gravity of my undertaking.

Up in the skyline I could distinguish the three summits of Broad Peak. Our objective would be the highest summit towards the south. We would approach Broad Peak the same way that we approach mountains in the Alps—without artificially induced oxygen, without fixed ropes, without fixed camps, and without high altitude porters. We intended to leave the glacier in one self-sufficient
Though not as high as Everest in elevation relative to sea level, the actual vertical height of the West Face of Broad Peak surpasses the Southwest Face of Everest by almost 3,000 feet.

This was to be my first attempt on an 8,000 meter peak, over 26,000 feet, more than 6,500 feet higher than anything I had ever experienced.
party, cross the bergschrund, force a route up the West Face in one progressive push all the way to the summit, then find a way down the mountain, all this in as little time as possible.

It was difficult for me to put the dimensions of the West Face in scale, for I had never seen such a massive wall before. There was a first bergschrund at 16,000 feet and a second one at 16,400 feet. The bergschrund of a mountain marks the transition between the glacier below and the face above. Mountains are alive with snow and ice flowing downward in tune with gravity's magnet. The glacier in turn moves away from the downward thrust of the mountain's flesh creating a fissure or crevasse which girds the mountain's base. This fissure is the bergschrund and it can present a major obstacle to advance for a mountain climber. Above the second bergschrund there was a mass of snow, ice, and rock, plastered all about the tormented 10,000 foot face up to the main summit at 26,400 feet. A spur divided the face into two concave bowls, both dominated by a huge upper hanging glacier, suspended like an enormous balcony which roller coastered up toward a pass between the central summit to the left and the main summit to the right at the end of a long ridge now smoking in the skyline.

A closer look revealed a series of long sinuous snow chutes snaking their way up to the immense balcony of ice above, a section of the face I dubbed Buhl's Spur. At our distance it was not possible to size up the relative difficulty of the two bergschrunds, nor could we trace out a distinct line above the overhanging glacier. What we could make out, distinctly, was the utter enormity of the face. I realized that more than ten Matterhorns could be comfortably pieced into this face in the manner of a jigsaw puzzle.
As far as vertical was concerned, the West Face of Broad Peak could almost accommodate three North Faces of the Matterhorn, one stacked atop the other. From bergschrund to main summit, Broad Peak's 10,000 foot face already surpassed Hidden Peak's 5,600 foot face by over 4,000 feet, and even topped Everest's 7,200 foot Southwest Face in vertical.

This was to be my first attempt on an 8,000 meter peak, over 26,000 feet, more than 6,500 feet higher than anything I had ever experienced. The thought of scaling this enormous wall, Alpine style, just Yannick and me, with our winter climbing gear, prompted me to ask myself how I would fare so high up there in the cold thin air. I had guided most of my life in the Alps but had never been at such Himalayan elevations. How would my body react? Yet as I surveyed that enormous mountain, Broad Peak seemed to open her flanks to me, beckoning, gently urging me to come closer, silently tempting me to experience her mystery. I again sensed the gravity of the challenge before me, tempered now by some kind of inner confidence which I have often experienced before a significant climb in the Alps. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. Why have you chosen to come to this place? My mind wandered back in time, over the course of my life, and back to the months preceding my arrival in this kingdom of giants.
A Familiar Setting

I could understand her feelings. I had felt that same tension at home, usually relieved by a happy catharsis of laughter, hugs, and unmitigated joy upon the return of a loved one. I had experienced what it was like. Sometimes there had been longer waits than expected, with worries and anxiety engendered by news of accidents on a mountain where relatives were guiding. Alas, there were those strangely timed visits by a good friend we had not seen for some time. Just one glance brought home the painful truth. So I could understand Norma’s concern.

Before we knew it, April had descended on the two of us in the U. S. where we made our home. I left my wife and flew to France carrying two hundred pounds of gear and a heart equally heavy. In Chamonix the mountains welcomed me back with a soft mantle of fresh snow. A cloud hung over la Verte. I found comfort again in the familiar surroundings of my childhood.

I stayed with my grandparents in Argentière, a small village above Chamonix. At 4,034 feet elevation, it is one of the most picturesque Alpine villages in the valley of l’Arve, surrounded by peaks such as l’Aiguille Verte (13,563 feet) and le Chardonnet (12,532), bordering the Cirque d’Argentière with its renowned wall of north faces—one of the most impressive climbing areas of the world. For vertical training I had only the embarrassment of choice, a five minute walk from my grandparents’ chalet to the foot of either side of the valley.
On the west ridge coming down from *le Chardonnet* toward Argentière, there is a thin crest named *les Becs Rouges* which climbs up to the closest summit, *le Bec de Lachat* at 7,860 feet. *Le Bec* dominates the northeast side of the village and falls down to the valley floor in a long succession of slopes and avalanche chutes for some 4,000 vertical feet. This would be my French training ground.

At 6:30 a.m. the next morning I was at the foot of the big avalanche chutes coming down from *le Bec de Lachat*. The snow had frozen overnight and a layer of hard crust covered the whole side of the mountain. The chutes offered an excellent facsimile of the slopes we would encounter on Broad Peak. I started up the lower avalanche debris, moving around large compacted snowballs. Using my ski poles like a cross country skier to coordinate arms, legs, and breathing, I rapidly progressed up toward the huge rock of *la Pierre à Bosson*. A leg—a stick—a breath. A leg—a stick. A leg—a stick—a breath. A good rhythm.

As the avalanche path turned smooth and icy and the angle of the slope became too steep to securely edge the soles of my boots into its crust, I stopped, put on my crampons, then reaccelerated, climbing quickly up the forty degree chute, now running, now walking, sweating and breathing like a seal, enjoying the work in the cold air and taking in the beautiful colors of the early morning.

The ground was steep and icy. In places the skin of the mountainside had been peeled down to the bone, exposing a few new rock slabs to the sun's light, wounds inflicted by the brutal avalanches of the winter. I detoured them to the side via some snow slopes. Scaling the limbs of the natural pyramid on its winter coat, I moved up *les Becs Rouges*. I
knew the place well. It was good to be in the mountains again. Good to be home.

In the distance the surveyor's bench mark, a wooden stake, was situated on top of the first crest. I fixed it as my goal and pushed myself on as fast as I could climb. A glance at my watch—one hour and fifteen minutes from the moraine below to the marker on *le Bec de Lachat*. Not bad. The training I had already done in the U. S. was paying off.

A cold wind blew in from Switzerland just over *la Pointe de Balme*. I pulled my anorak from my pack and put it on, swallowed a few sips of lukewarm tea from my can-teen and looked around. Several of the great north faces of the Argentière Cirque loomed familiarly on the eastern skyline. Their ridges still ran in snowy garlands from peak to peak. To the extreme right and west of the succession of north walls, the guardian of the entrance to the cirque, *l'Aiguille Verte*, was crowned with its upper hanging glacier. *Sa calotte*, we called it. The elders had named this peak *la Blanche d'Argentière*, for it was the most conspicuous of the many peaks dominating our village. Only later was it renamed *l'Aiguille Verte*, 'the green needle', and simply called *la Verte*, 'the green', after the bluegreen reflection of the light on the ice cliffs of its upper hanging glacier. *Quel beau sommet!* 'Its older name is more expressive,' my grandfather used to say. And he was right.

And *l'Aiguille Verte* was a respected mountain. *'Il ne suffit pas de la monter. Il faut la redescendre,'* le pépé always said. [It is not enough to climb up. One must also get back down.]

The sun's rays ricocheted off the glacier in a mist which rose up from its surface and moved toward the
green peak, at length smothering the North Face in a cloak of flaming smoke which flickered in the skyline. The West Face of Broad Peak slowly and progressively slid across the frame of my imagination, revealing itself as mysterious and dangerous, but not unfriendly. Then, just as slowly, it receded and faded away into the shadows.

I felt an urge to descend quickly and talk with le pépé about l’Aiguille Verte of 1929. I hurriedly downclimbed and from the Plateau de la Cuillère glissaded the chute to le Planet on the bank of the valley. Twenty minutes from the crest I surprised my grandparents as they were taking their breakfast of baguette and café au lait. I could not restrain the flow of questions.

'How was the ice in the chute of l’Aiguille Verte?'
'It was alive. Black! Thirty hacks for every step!' ‘It's there that the chopping helped?' I asked, referring to the days when all the valley folk would chop and store their wood up for the winter.

'Yes, with the left hand—you couldn't fool around,' he signaled with his left, using a pencil to underscore the seriousness of his point. 'That's why we aimed for the rocks to the right. There the conditions were good.'

'How long did it take you to get to the summit?’
'We started at 3:30 from the refuge and by 9:30 in the morning we were on the summit.'

'C'est dingue. Nowadays we cannot do better.'

'Bradford was young and healthy,' he continued, referring to his client.

'We didn't climb faster when the chute was all in snow last summer with Bernard Maume. Your time stands the test of years.'

'The conditions were good at the border of the chute
and we did not want to fall asleep in the face. We were afraid of the descent. I wanted to do the first descent of the Sans Nom Ridge. On the summit I told Alfred to lead toward the Point Croux, but he turned back and said in patois that it was enough for the day.

'So you came down the Monk Ridge?'

'Ah, and there, just one hundred meters below the summit, right at 4,000 meters, that's where we found the famous pocket.'

'Oh yes, the pocket!' 

'There must have been a ton brought down from that pocket. But only six hundred pounds of the good dark smoky quartz.'

'It's a pity we don't have any crystals left from that pocket.'

'It's Alfred who brought down the granddaddy. Over sixty pounds it weighed. I told Alfred, if you want it, take it. It's at the entrance of the pocket . . .'

Crystal stories succeeded to more climbing stories. My grandfather ran to the bedroom to fetch one of his guide's ties to show me how he had rappelled from one of them on Mummery Peak and from the peak which now bears his name. He wore a wide grin upon his face as he relived those great days, and I shared in them to the best of my imagination. I explained how things had evolved with the development of new technique and modern gear and he insisted that we were now climbing better than in his day, while I continued to think the opposite, aware of the danger and risks he had taken without the protection of the nylon ropes and the nuts and ice screws of the modern day climber. It was a great exchange and, as always, an exhilarating experience to trade climbing lore with pépé.
For some years I had wanted to climb a big mountain in the Himalayas. But I had been rejected as a member of one team after another, often because the expedition leader felt that I was too young to risk a Himalayan ascent. In 1974 the Company of Guides of Chamonix, of which group I had been an active member since 1969, set out to conquer Everest via the West Ridge. The leader of that team was Gerard Devouassouxx, the president of our company, a brilliant climber strongly influenced by Alpine tradition, but at the same time open to new ideas—a positive and energetic man. I talked to Gerard about joining the team.

'You'll be ripe for the next expedition. In the meantime, take this,' he said as he made me a present of his own altimeter.

Alas, a few weeks after his departure, Gerard was carried away by an avalanche on a slope of the West Shoulder. Now every time I look at that altimeter, with his name engraved on its leather case, I am reminded of our brief friendship of the past. I had no way of knowing then that this great man would disappear on Everest, nor that we would meet again in the Himalayas some years later.

I had also been turned down by the French in their bid for Nanda Devi in '76 and for Dhaulagiri and Ama Dablam in '78; then, after I moved to the States, by the Americans for K2 in '78. I often felt that my enthusiasm worked against me. But then Yannick Seigneur, a veteran Himalayan climber from the Chamonix area, invited me to accompany him to Pakistan to attempt Broad Peak à deux.

We often got together in the mornings and practiced vertical on les Bec Rouges in preparation for the trip. Our best time up the almost 4,000 foot vertical was one hour and five minutes, belaying each other through the layers of
windpacked snow near the top. We raced each other up the chutes. When one of us felt the rhythm slacking off, he would pass in front of the other to pick it back up. Obviously Yannick had stamina and a bottomless reserve, for during those training sessions, when he fell into his rhythm, his momentum was extraordinary. Even back in his flat where we talked in front of a map of the Karakoram spread across the dining room table, he was infused with energy, checking on the food on the stove in the kitchen, dressing up his son to go out with his wife, carrying a box of books around while talking to Marie, to his son, and to me, and answering the telephone, all at the same time. He had the hardest time compromising with the space allowed by the length of the receiver cord, as he moved his legs up and down and paced all the while, finally cutting the conversation short to get back to us. Leaving his home after that encounter with a hundred and sixty pounds of drafty dynamite in perpetual motion, I let a puff of steam go through my lungs and relaxed both arms like boxers do between rounds.

Returning from the training session, Yannick and I talked about the speed with which we expected to progress on Broad Peak. 'Since we are doing three to four thousand feet of vertical in one hour,' I ventured, 'it might be possible to do three to four thousand feet a day on Broad Peak.'

'It'll be good if we complete the climb in one week,' Yannick responded.

At last it was definite. By the 20th of April, written authorization arrived from Pakistan. Gilles Sourice would be our camera man, Jean Fauchard our doctor. The food and equipment had been carefully packed and inventoried, then air freighted ahead to Rawalpindi, a total of six hundred pounds.
On the 28th of April we were at the airport. Gilles said goodbye to his wife and Yannick bid farewell to Marie. By now she had grown accustomed to his absences. Yet for some unexplained reason, Marie seemed worried that something would happen on Broad Peak. Gilles and I were shaken by this presentiment and turned away, engrossed in our own fears.

'I'm lucky, so I'm not very worried,' Gilles finally blurted out, confiding the opposite.

'What do you mean, you're lucky. I'm lucky, extremely lucky,' I responded, showing the same.

'I'm sure that I'm luckier than you,' Gilles continued. Spontaneously we turned back to Marie. With our luck, we consoled, there was no cause for alarm.

And she believed us. In fact, I think we believed it ourselves.

* * *

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The least damage to our shoe-string budget involved a flight to Pakistan via Moscow from Marseille. Our Tuppolov aircraft took off to the south, tipped its wing, banked over the Mediterranean, and leveled off. A thick mattress of clouds covered much of Eastern Europe as we made our way toward Mother Russia for a layover of several hours. We were happy to deplane and unwind our legs, but equally happy when settled into another Aeroflot aircraft bound for Pakistan. The change in temperature and humidity between Moscow and Karachi transformed us into a trio of wet noodles so that by the time we had transferred to a 747 bound for Rawalpindi, we were drowning in perspiration.

And it was not long before we were wrapped in our first red tape, running here and there to secure matters before leaving for the Karakoram, shuffling papers at the Ministry of Tourism, the French Embassy, the police station, the customs offices, the airport, the bank, and on and on endlessly, it seemed. But at last our departure date for Skardu was set. We crossed our fingers in hopes that the weather across the Punjab Himalayas would be fair that day, for Yannick knew from previous experience that delays of up to two weeks were not uncommon.

At 4:50 a.m. on the 14th of May the skies were clear when the five of us, including our liaison officer, arrived at Pindi’s airport to embark on our flight to Skardu. We had confirmed our reservations three times and were antsy to
be on our way, but now, for some unexplained reason, we were not on the passenger list. Our confirmed reservations had somehow unfirmed. There was no more room, and the inevitable come-back-tomorrow left us with no alternative than to do exactly that.

On the following day we again showed up at 4:50 a.m. and this time our five names appeared on the list. We had scaled our first summit: fifteen days of paperwork, bureaucracy, and diplomacy in Rawalpindi. We longed for the physical engagement on Broad Peak.

The hostess announced that, Insha Allah, we would take off without delay and that, Insha Allah, we would fly over the Punjab Himalayas and that we would land in Skardu later that morning, Insha Allah. Allah is a living part of every moment in the everyday life of Muslim Pakistan, which like the mountains themselves, reminded me of man's mortality.

The city soon receded into the background as we made for Skardu, a little town in Pays Balti behind the Punjab Himalayas at the foot of the great Karakoram Range. It was good to exchange the furnace of the plains and the overcrowded towns for the freedom of the mountains which could be seen from above in the cool atmosphere of the plane. My body began to unwind to its comforts as climbing challenges unwrapped themselves beneath us. To the right an immense meringue of ice and snow, its contours shining in the early morning sun—Nanga Parbat—'the Giant of a Thousand Winters,' the Germans had called it. In France we always thought of Nanga Parbat as 'the German mountain.' Wall of Frozen Light, Silver Saddle, Father of All Avalanches, Death Zone—all these romanticized names added an aura of mystery to this mountain and sharpened the edge between the brightness of its color
and the darkness of its history. Albert Mummery, the adventurous British climber of the late 19th century, together with Goman Singh and Thapa disappeared on Nanga Parbat in 1895. And what really happened so high up there? I looked for them from my window but could see no sign. And Hermann Buhl—what about him? He solo-climbed the mountain from a high camp in 1953. Upon his return from that first successful ascent, something could be seen in his eyes, something far off and distant, something out there. What was revealed to Buhl on that lonely odyssey to the summit? Had he perhaps seen things that others had not? The aftermath of that German expedition led by Herrligkoffer and the ensuing litigation between Herrligkoffer and Buhl made one wonder what really was at stake. And then there was Reinhold Messner in 1970, the disappearance of his brother Gunther after the two had climbed to the summit, and again the ensuing lawsuits with the expedition leader Herrligkoffer. What really happened to Gunther? What had Buhl seen up there? Why had Herrligkoffer's expeditions spawned such lawsuits? And where was Mummery now? So much history seemed to enliven the mountain with dialogues—with dialogues between climbers and mountain, between climbers and climbers, and between mountain and climbers—known and unknown dialogues and secrets shared only by Nanga Parbat, by Hermann Buhl, by Mummery, by Singh, by Thapa, and by others who had seen.

I ran from window to window to get closer to Nanga. That mountain made me think of an active volcano that spews snow instead of lava. I suddenly realized that Nanga, with its 26,658 feet of elevation, is the guardian that collects the storms intended for the Karakoram and that snow has accumulated there for centuries. Foi de bleu!
When you see Nanga Parbat, something draws you closer.

The pilot invited us to view the Karakoram Range from his cabin. The light of the early morning sun flickered as the shadows of the giants of the Karakoram oscillated on the rugged mountainous massif stretching out as far as the eye could see. To the northeast there were three hats lying on the horizon. Northernmost, a clown hat stood taller than the two others. It had a pyramidal, sober shape and a sharp name—K2 (28,253 feet). Southernmost, a forked hat, lower in elevation, was constructed of towers—mysterious castles with a charming name—the Gasherbrums (26,470 feet). In the middle, a Bactrian hat, about the same elevation as the forked one, made of two broad summits, resembling the humps of a camel—Broad Peak (26,400 feet). It was not possible to glimpse Broad Peak's third summit at 24,725 feet or to appreciate the difference between the central summit at 26,240 feet and the main summit at 26,400. Any one of the three summits would be a fine climb. In progressive steps, first from France to Moscow, then from Moscow to Rawalpindi, and now from Pindi to Skardu, we were closing in on our objective—the main summit, via the West Face.

The plane started its descent over the Indus to alight in the lap of Baltistan. A cool breeze welcomed us into Skarku, its heart, where we pitched our tent and spent the night.

* * *

*Salaam 'aleykum*, Skardu! I sit on the ramparts of the fortress dominating the town. My legs hang down an ancient wall of dried stones sealed with mud. The air envelopes my bare chest and limbs, but it is neither hot nor
cold. The thick coat of air protects me; its softness comforts me. It is a skin in which I feel natural and whole. A rug of gray ochre dryness unrolls sandy plains into a wall of black mountains—the Karakoram. The Giver of Life snakes its way between my legs and through the desert land, spotting its banks with green designs—the Indus. The gray underbelly of a huge animal rolls across the sky. An attentive hand sprinkles over the land a thin shower of earthy gold with a delicate lightness of wrist and touch. A few droplets of softness fall over my shoulders and thighs. I must protect my writing paper. White-tailed fowl circle above me, slyly performing their acrobatics. The village song rises up on a kafir’s ear—a call to Allah’s prayer. A dog howls. Another barks. Children squawk. The birds sing on in sharp staccato laughter. Out of nowhere, a fat man and five children. Salaam 'aleykum Baltis. The fat man mimes the turbulent gestures of the defenders of the fortress, slicing out figures with his imaginary sword while the children skip and hop around him. As soon as he appears, he is gone, tightrope walking along the walls of the fortress with his troop. Now the funambulists climb up a dirt hill and throw stones into the canyon on the opposite side of the fort. Their yells and the crashing of the stones return to me modified as gunshots. The crazy laugh of the fat man echoes like a machine gun. The aerialists strut to the long pole towering on high above the fort and climb it one by one. The wind picks up. It smells of dust. It is 5 o’clock. Another loud invitation to prayer climbs up the walls of the fortress from the town. It is time to go down to Skardu for a few mulberries.

* * *

The White Death • 41
I realized that more than ten Matterhorns could be comfortably pieced into this face in the manner of a jigsaw puzzle.
Dasso. A tale of the dryads. There, at the entrance of the village, jammed in a tree, I stuffed myself with black mulberries. We had come to Dasso from Skardu by Jeep. From here on it would be all feet.

We were a veritable caravan, albeit a miniature one, striking off the next day for Chakpo at an elevation of 8,600 feet. Yannick, Gilles, and I pumped up our inflatable tent in the heart of that village and unwrapped a colorful map, showing our route of approach—the villages of Chungo and Askole. Abandoning civilization we would spend the night at the uninhabited campsites of Korophon and Bardumal. Then leaving all vegetation behind us at the impressive tongue of the glacier at 11,220 feet, we would enter the mineral kingdom and continue on for four days with overnight stops at the campsites of Liliwa, Urdukas, and Gore, finally reaching Concordia, a day's walk from Broad Peak and the central moraine of the Godwin-Austen, the site of our base camp—ten days to span the remaining seventy miles separating us from our engagement.

Along that rugged trek, between Korophon and Bardumal, the bridge across the Panmah River had been swept away, making it necessary to detour up the valley and back down the opposite side. Since none of us was particularly excited about the idea of walking three extra days to gain the two hundred yards of ground between us and the opposite bank, we came to a decision: We would chance a traverse some several hundred yards downstream where the river forked into two channels. Yannick and I struggled through the swift icy waters and at last attained the sand bar, shivering and crying from the paralysis in our
legs, gritting our teeth to camouflage our pain from the porters. The second channel was easily negotiated. Our job then was to convince the porters to undertake with their loads what we had just accomplished with light packs. None knew how to swim, so all were justifiably terrified. To set an example, Gilles ferried the first load across, followed by several porters, praying before, during, and after the exodus. The current was strong. The rapids came up to mid-thigh and hip in places. One of the porters courageously eased into the rapids and found his footing among the rocks of the channel. The chill water lapped his legs and hips. His lips quivered. Slowly he advanced one leg, then the other, now teetering precariously. And then he went under, no longer to be seen, except for his hands, which clung desperately to a sling which was secured to a second porter. At last he submerged, regained his composure, and again found his footing. Tautly, and now more cautiously, he inched across.

As the porters finally stepped up over the opposite bank, we helped them unload their charges from their shoulders and congratulated them on their accomplishment. Some set off running, kicking their legs up and down like scissor blades. Others rolled in the sand among the boulders, massaging their numb limbs with handfuls of silky sand made warm by the beating rays of the sun. A few knelt toward Mecca and prayed. Though wet and cold, we had saved at least three days of trekking up and down the valley. Our porters had made it possible and we were grateful. That night we all danced before the boulder at Bardumal. Together we had crossed more than an icy river. We had crossed a human barrier. We were no longer Frenchmen and Baltis. We were now brothers.
South Summit 26402 ft

Route on Broad Peak West Face
Taqi started frying chapatis and I stole one when he wasn't looking. It was still warm and fresh—just like stealing a warm cookie out of the oven back home. That's why we called him Mama Taqi. It was cozy sitting by Mama Taqi while the ghee sputtered in the wok and the wood burned in the fire. When Mama Taqi finally discovered my theft, I congratulated him on his culinary art and he was happy to be appreciated.

We had collected as much wood as we could that day, for soon we would be leaving all vegetation behind. I stuffed my senses with a few last minute impressions: colorful flowers, the long green leaves of the elders, the greenness of Payu. It was not certain how much time would pass before we would again return to a normal existence.

Did the ibex, the mountain goats of the Karakoram, ever venture onto the glacier and its lateral moraines, like the chamois in the Alps? I wondered. We had seen some that same day and took turns watching them through binoculars. They were playing together, jumping up and down the slopes. As far as our yeti was concerned, I began to wonder if he would continue up the Baltoro Glacier itself. Several times that same morning we had crossed the tracks of a big something while moving up the banks of the Braldu. The twelve inch tracks were fresh and the animal had even left us some fresh souvenirs. We queried our porters about the tracks, but they avoided answering. They were only interested in the ibex, at which they took aim with their wooden sticks, pulling the trigger with reckless abandon.

No dancing that evening. Everyone was tired. Besides, we could not improvise a good enough dancing surface, and by this time we had become such pros that only the best facilities would do for our nocturnal ritual. For once we sat around and discoursed on the dancing itself.
'The rhythm is so simple.'
'Simple but so alive. *Kare Gilgit! Kare Pindi! Kare Lahore!*'
'Dancing the other night at Korophon with Taqi, I felt possessed by the rhythm, as though drunk. When I stopped, my head and body were still throbbing to the tempo.'
'I recorded that evening on my cassette,' the doctor said. 'Did you notice how interested they all were to learn *Alouette* and *Frère Jacques*?'
'Today when I passed one of the porters on the trail, he looked at me and started clapping his hands, singing *aluet chanti aluet*. I responded, *Kare Gilgit! Kare Pindi! Kare Lahore!* And five minutes later there were porters all around, singing and dancing right there on the spot.'

Hassan had been there too, participating from a distance. As he sang and clapped, the rays of the sun illuminated the wrinkles of his face. A wealth of fond memories seemed to roll from the reel of our older porter's life and flash across the whites of his eyes.
'They sure are friendly, once you break the ice.'
'It's a good group and most important of all, there're just a few of us,' said Yannick.
'We'll be in base camp before long if the porters keep on the way they've been going. But I still do not understand why you want to climb that mountain,' the doctor intoned.
'If you like dancing and chapati, you should stay down here and see more of Pakistan. Come to Lahore, my home town,' Ali the liaison officer interjected. 'It's a beautiful city and it will be my great pleasure in life to show you around.'
Into the night we chatted about the Baltis, about Pakistan, and about life, until our eyelids finally grew heavy and sleep overtook us, and we resolved many questions of life in our dreams.

* * *

On the 23rd of May we left Payu and approached the huge black tongue of the Baltoro Glacier, a thick barrier sealing off the Braldu Valley. It received us with cracking noises that originated from deep within its throat, giving evidence that it was alive. A monstrous and incredibly powerful natural bulldozer was rolling toward us, at less than a snail's pace, with its tongue outstretched.

We rounded the apex of the tongue and climbed up a trail on some boulders to its side, finally setting our feet on its blade, then pursuing the yeti's tracks we had seen earlier between Korophon and Payu, which now led through the glacier itself, following exactly the line that previous expeditions had taken, up and down the moraines, over the unstable boulders for hours, an incessant game of dynamics and balance. Each time we crossed a gravel bar, we detected fresh tracks. What would our yeti be doing on the Baltoro? Perhaps he was on his way to a higher summer hunting ground, somewhere above Urdukas. Whatever he was up to, this animal was succeeding in spreading the legend of the yeti.

In Liliwa Yannick disbursed the daily allowance of cigarettes and matches to our porters. The brand—K2. All smokers seemed to like them. And Yannick did not forget himself. It seemed almost incongruous that he could be so
strong and yet smoke with such gusto. Sometimes Gilles also smoked a cigarette. 'I don't smoke'—he would say—'only one from time to time,' sliding the doors of his face open on a wide row of perfect teeth. Two symmetrical wrinkles rayed his smooth cheeks. He had a straight nose which divided his face into two profiles devoid of imperfections. The three faces came together in perfect harmony. Two dark wings for eyebrows embellished the brightness of his eyes. Three perfect wrinkles were engraved at their corners from which a soft kindness radiated inner calm, a man at peace with himself. He was quite a handsome fellow, something more than a movie star. He grew up in the southern part of France and his body was accustomed to the Mediterranean sun. When it was sunny, he was at his ease. That's where his body belonged—a movie star, except that he was real, inside as well as out.

Yannick, Gilles, and I ran up more vertical during the early afternoon, up some chutes and rock slabs above the campsite, where we found ibex horns, which we hid under stones to retrieve upon our return.

The extraordinary sweep of the Baltoro Canyon lay prostrate before us, and I imagined myself capable of enduring bad weather like an animal, carrying on for days through the high peaks, living in the mountains, eating grass and berries, sleeping under rocks, climbing up the faces of the rock pinnacles bordering the Baltoro, one after another, day after day, running free, living among the mountains, happy and at one with myself and the world.

The next day we stepped up to the campsite known as Urdukas and there were delayed by a ten inch mantle of snow. But even the snow could not impede our dancing, which we pursued with relentless energy, as did Taqi, Ali Hussein, Big Karim, and all the other porters.

We stayed in Urdukas the next day, arrested by the snow, but Yannick and I ran up and down more vertical,
as if the dancing was not enough. Gilles filmed, running and panting up a hillside at 13,000 feet. *This guy is nuts,* I thought as I trained my eyes on Yannick's back, but I followed on his heels, never giving up. In fact, the opposite—I waited till he sensed that I was no longer there, then I'd push in an all-out dash and pass him by. 'Now Yan, come from behind if you can, run yourself into the ground!' And it would go on and on until stars flashed before my eyes and I felt like vomiting up my stomach and my lungs. Then simultaneously, we stopped, white froth trickling from our jowls, each looking deep into the pupils of the other's eyes, neither flinching. Then were we total friends, and even more. No further need to analyze the face on the other side. We were dog friends.

From the look of disbelief carved in his face, Gilles had no wish, no need to share. He brought balance to our group of four. All the while Yannick and I raced up and down that great sea of competition, Gilles drifted on a lake of calm.

When the sky cleared the following morning, the snow plastered peaks opened up in sharp relief and summoned me out of the tent: Payu Peak, the Uli Biaho and Trango Towers. East of the Trango Towers, a gigantic construction lifted itself into the heights—the Cathedral. Three major stories built of enormous towers and shafts of red granite extended for more than 5,000 feet from its base rooted in the glacier to its steeple hooked to the clouds—vestiges of a monstrous Tower of Babel which once climbed for miles into the skies, a long time ago in another era, an era of half-gods, who once inhabited this glacier, of whom the yeti was its sole survivor. It was they who had scaffolded the Cathedral walls one on top of the other, one into the other, for ages imbricating stones into a huge tower ascending to the heavens. And this was its ruin. Patches of snow filled
the open cages of stone covering some of the ornaments and decorations integrated with the structure, radiating under our sun. The light diffused palettes of colors around the royal portals, the stained glass windows—the multiple entrances and messengers of light to the mysterious interior of the great Cathedral. Not only did I want to spider up its flying buttresses to its spire, I also wished to enter it by one of its rose windows and climb down into its aisles and walk through the cavernous corridors sheathed in pure transparent crystals of quartz, inside the immense chambers, around the enormous columns of marble jutting up, arcading high up there, under its vaulted roofs—an airy interior full of icy cobwebs, intriguing vistas and perspectives, a greenhouse of filtered lights in the heart of an organic complex of spines and ribs, a world of unknown, perhaps unknowable, but real, presences. Many such challenging mountains were here, still waiting in ageless silence.

As we pedaled through the new layer of fresh snow, Masherbrum and the sheer Mustagh Tower seemed to walk by us, and we caught an occasional glimpse of the two main summits of Broad Peak behind the South Ridge of Crystal Peak. Hassan signaled with his arms to indicate an oblique turn. Then up and down on the great sea of ice! Up and down, caressing its waves with the palms of our boots, until finally on the 27th, we arrived in the enchanted kingdom of the giants. There in the midst of mountains all vested in snow, off in the distance, stood Broad Peak. I let the air go out of my lungs. I was here. It was Broad Peak.
Calm Before the Storm

I looked toward the Bride Peak whose summittal hump undulated high in the southern skyline and parted into two long legs extending toes into the east and the west. Chogolisa lay bared atop a blanket of white velvet and unveiled her glistening snow under a cloudless sun, exposing her snowy limbs in a provocative indecency, calling me to a honeymoon of risk. I was captivated by her openness, yet I could not rid myself of a remote fear that lodged within my core. She knew my desire, but I could not feel her heart, what it held and where it beat. She seemed to hide it in her mind where things reposed unsaid. Suddenly a dim light of something long ago grew brighter, then flashed crimson in my skull. She had already killed her first lover. She held Buhl’s secret between her lips.

I looked back at Chogolisa and saw that she had already sensed my fear. She was veiled again by the clouds. No more forms, no more flesh. Only a face with two glaring eyes set wide apart, filled with emptiness and emptied of fullness, filled with a morbid intangible love. Way out there, yet still so close. Could she love so much? I was unprepared. No, not yet. Some day, maybe.

We found a suitable place for our base camp on the moraine at the foot of Broad Peak. There we paid off our twenty-eight porters. It was hard saying goodbye to Hassan, Ghulam, Ismail, Jordan, Ali Hussein, Mohamed, and Big Karim. They had become our friends and we theirs. Perhaps some day we would once again sing and dance and jest together.
We pitched two tents, one for Jean, Gilles, Yannick, Mama Taqi, and me; another for Ali. Mama was our cook. Ali was the emissary of the Pakistani government in base. He was with us to make certain that we climbed the right mountain and that we did not take radio equipment up the summital ridge to spy on the Chinese. He was also there to insure good relations between the porters and the sahibs. In any event, neither Yannick nor I are secret agents and it would have been difficult to miss Broad Peak.

Early morning, the 29th of May. We were up at 1:00 a.m. and eager to climb Broad Peak. We walked into the starlit oriental night—soft and crisp, yet more intense and mysterious than in a child’s storybook. On the previous afternoon, we had marked the way across the glacier with cairns, which we now discerned with the aid of our headlamps. As our lights cast their illumination in conjunction with the moon, they enlivened the white seracs, lit their flanks, sharpened their geometrical forms and lengthened their shadows, transforming them into ghosts. Each feature of the terrain emerged out of a fairy tale landscape.

After an hour of approach on the glacier, we stood below the face, at the base of Buhl’s Spur. The weather was cold, but clear. Stars twinkled in the vault overhead. No room for conversation.

A first bergschrund lay at the end of a short gentle slope. It was small and we quickly negotiated the traverse by means of a snow bridge deposited across its lips. Climbing up a thirty degree slope for a few hundred feet, we met our first obstacle, the real bergschrund.

We put on our crampons, roped together, and approached. With a limited field of vision, using only our headlamps in the dark of the early morning, the view of
the bergschrund was impressive. In the lead, I spotted a tongue of ice spanning its lips, lying against the rock wall. Delicately I cramponed onto the thin snow bridge. I placed one hand on the rocky face to my right. Tiny crystals glistened in the reflection of my headlamp. A dark black hole gaped up on my left. I shuffled across to the opposite side and anchored my ice axe in the upper lip, stamped out a platform in the crusty snow, and belayed Yannick and Gilles across.

'We at least have the bergschrund behind us,' I ventured, shrugging my shoulders. 'Only 10,000 feet and we'll be up.'

In order to progress faster and safer, we unroped. The solo climbing would enable us to move without the necessity of setting belays. Moreover, we preferred to rely on our individual abilities, allowing each to rest according to his own need and whim.

Our first serious climbing was now to commence. The angle of the face steepened and reared up. We attacked and climbed the first chute up to mid-calf in the crusty snow. In the shadow of the rock wall the snow was too deep to permit rapid progress, and I began to wish that the angle would steepen more, for less snow.

Happily, six hundred feet higher up, when we emerged from the area where the rock wall cast its diurnal shadow, we found the snow to be solid and crusty. Our progression was smooth and rapid. We were going well without much of the fall-through experienced below. Much better. Now cramponing in zig-zags, using our ski poles to gain leverage, we began to feel the weight of the packs as they bore down on our backs.

My legs continued to move in regular rhythm, in short
steps, as I moved up the mountain—right foot frontpoint, left foot frontpoint; right foot lateral on ten points, left foot frontpoint, right foot frontpoint; left foot lateral on ten points, sometimes applying other techniques to rest certain muscles and allow others to work. Yannick followed up in my footsteps ten feet behind, then Gilles.

'Do you want me to lead through now?' Yannick asked.

'No, not yet.'

Right foot frontpoint—left foot frontpoint—right foot lateral—left foot frontpoint—right foot frontpoint—left foot lateral. Again. Right foot in—left foot in. Yes. Right foot lateral—left foot frontpoint—right foot in. The rhythm was going smooth. Broad Peak was opening up. Kick that crampon deep, now shallow. Soft, now crusty. Right foot, left foot, ...

The three of us were gaining altitude quickly, at a speed I had not anticipated, progressing as fast as we do in the Alps at 10,000 feet. I enjoyed being out in front.

One and a half hours from the bergschrund, I stopped. Yannick moved into my tracks and began to lay his own.

From a small outcrop of rock attached to a piton, a piece of rope dived taut into the snow, a remnant of a previous expedition. Now I followed in Yannick's footsteps, a pleasant change of pace.

Daylight began to break as we moved up to the top of the chute, reaching a rocky platform, our first resting spot. The platform was a mess—tents ripped by storms, gasoline stoves, cartridges, poles, shredded foam pads, nylon bags of rice, equipment scattered all around—clearly the remains of the Japanese Camp I from '77.
'Look! Some chop sticks!' Yannick yelled.

Indeed, the chop sticks were black with a polished lacquer finish, embellished with elaborate red kanji. Initially depressed by this sight of waste and pollution, we soon felt a sense of comfort in even so squalid a sign of humanity.

A brainstorm: If the Japanese had been generous enough to leave us more supplies higher up, we might as well abandon our packs, fetch the chop sticks, and move up fast. But we could not count on our Japanese predecessors to have been so extravagant farther up, nor were we experts with chop sticks.

Yannick removed the stove and the pan from his pack, and I extracted a plastic bag containing powdered drinks, while Gilles investigated the Japanese booty. Hot liquid soon replenished what we had exuded in perspiration, giving us renewed strength.

I felt Yannick's gaze upon my back, and I turned my head to catch the corner of his eye, its beam already in motion on its way elsewhere. He would not let me enter the piercing green mirrors of his source, as if afraid to show me his mellowness, or afraid of missing something, or afraid of being attacked by something. Slices of tousled golden hair framed his tanned features, strongly angular around his rosy nose, which was peeled by the scorching sun. His beard grew wildly below a half-opened mouth filled with bright sharp teeth. He was breathing rapidly, his eyes electric—a wolf and an amazing one, as though chiseled from a rock—quick, stop, fast, moving instantaneously in solid blocks of space, ready to attack, struggle, or disappear at any moment, alert to the extreme. Somewhere in him, there was an incredible store of something, something that does not want to die, coursing through his features, his chin, his chest, his limbs, his total presence—tangible
power. I looked up at the face of Broad Peak and back to Yannick's face. *Mother Queen*, I thought, *you have a tough one here,* knowing well that the mountain would love to keep such a strong man as Yannick for a lover.

Yannick struck off first. Some six hundred feet below the gendarmes, the gradient steepened and I sensed the greater effort commensurate with that change. We moved from our chute on the left to a concave chute over a projecting bump which had accumulated deep snow on its northerly flank. Our tracks might create a fracture line, sending Yannick, Gilles, and me sliding away on a slab, down the 1,500 feet of the slippery slope below. To militate against such an eventuality, we crossed over one by one, lessening the added weight on the bump, moved up some sixty feet, then traversed rightward, up again another sixty feet before traversing. We finally worked our way up toward the chute on the right. Thorax-deep in Broad Peak's snow, we removed the upper layer with our hands and then cocked our legs to gain altitude, a different technique, a tiring procedure.

Safe in the concave chute, we proceeded straight up toward the gendarmes—thirty steps then rest, thirty more then rest, slowed down by the thick carpet of snow, until, finally, by 10:00 a.m. we had reached the gendarmes on the spur. For the first time we could look down on Concordia and Mitre Peak.

Another stop at 18,500 feet. Although fatigued by the previous eight and a half hours, we had already put more than 3,000 feet of vertical between us and base camp, approximately 2,500 feet of technical climbing from bergschrund to our present location. Gilles, in keeping up, was doing an impressive job. He had begun filming during the last hour and this had demanded concentration and determined effort.
We removed our anoraks, gloves, and balaclavas. The powerful rays of unfiltered sunlight went straight to work on our exposed skin. Quickly we applied cream over face, lips, and hands. We gobbled up some chocolate and coconut bars and washed granola down with hot tea—already so hard to swallow through our cotton-lined throats.

Rehydrated, we held council to determine our next move. Why not continue on for a few more hours? We felt up to it.

The long spur snaked its way up the West Face, dividing it into two huge concave bowls on either side. Each of the bowls was dominated from above by immense ice cliffs from which avalanches of seracs fell regularly for 6,000 feet down to the Godwin-Austen below. The crest of the spur was sinuous, loaded with bumps and cornices of snow and ice, snowy buttresses, and two zones of gendarmes of poor quality rock.

'Let's bypass the crest of the spur and the gendarmes by detouring to the right along the flank,' I suggested to Yannick.

'That's where we went up in '76,' he responded. 'Much more fresh snow then.'

In the spring of '76 Yannick had already undertaken Broad Peak with two other climbers. After three attempts, they succeeded in reaching the pass between the central and main summits at an altitude of 25,600 feet. There the cold was intense and the wind pitiless. The trio continued up the mixed ridge of the main summit where Yannick fell through a cornice on the eastern lee of the ridge. By the time he had collected his wits and struggled back to the ridge, the three were too cold and exhausted to continue. This failure, so close to the summit, left a bitter feeling inside Yannick and he naturally wanted to return to try again.
'This year it's so much drier, faster, and safer.' Yannick continued.

'Lucky, I told you,' Gilles said. He punctuated the discourse by swinging his forty pound pack onto his shoulders. Doing an about-face, he stabilized himself with his ski poles and then started working his way into the snow slopes by kicking short steps into the crusty surface. 'I'll go ahead and film you coming up.'

'Nice of you to prepare the route,' we joked.

Ten minutes later, Yannick and I followed in Gilles' steps. We detoured to the right of the crest beneath the gendarmes, cautiously crossing one foot over the other to avoid entangling the teeth of one crampon in the straps of the other. A mistake here could have serious repercussions—an unwelcome glissade of more than 3,000 feet down the face.

Now and then we saw patches of sky through the gendarmes on our left as the clouds floated by. They were not hostile clouds. Then, suddenly, on our right, irregular gun shots, followed by a crescendo of explosive noise. A large slice of ice shifted downward from the ice cliff above the concave bowl and exploded into thousands of pieces before plummeting into the glacier below. A long train of snow and ice hurried past at our level. I was acquiring a feeling for Himalayan dimensions.

By 12:30 p.m. we began searching for the terrace that Yannick recalled from his previous experience on Broad Peak. The steeper terrain required intensive use of our ice axes to secure our movement. We frontpointed in Austrian style and finally emerged on a crest. Then we negotiated one last bump of ice where we noticed a short section of fixed ropes of two varieties. The newer yellow nylon ropes seemed to be in good condition and had probably been
abandoned by the Japanese the year before. The white ropes were swollen and weathered and were probably remnants of the Poles.

A Polish team of fourteen members had tackled Broad Peak in the summer of 1975. They climbed via the Austrian route to the pass between the main and central summits where five climbers struggled up the rocky ridge to the top of the central summit. While rappelling down the summittal ridge to the pass, the five Poles were caught in a storm. As the wind hurled itself against the ridge, Nowaczyk plummeted to his death down the East Face, into Tibet. Further down, Kesicki, Kulis, and Sikorski fell and both Kesicki and Sikorski died. Only two of the five climbers returned to base camp, severely frostbitten, but alive.

We climbed along the ropes, testing them, fearing to take a chance on used equipment, and finally pulled up to a succession of two platforms, first a small one, then a large one; the latter had been an important camp for earlier heavy teams. About thirty feet of rope grew out of the nearby ice. Some thirty ice screws were tied to the rope and three empty bottles of oxygen reposed in the snow. More coiled ropes in quantity, and a few pieces of insulation pads strewn about. No rice and chop sticks at this level!

'Probably Japanese Camp III,' Yannick announced.
'So much equipment!' Gilles added.
'C'est dingue!'

Already 5,000 feet higher than Mont Blanc, at an altitude of some 21,000 feet, we were drained. This was where Buhl's party had established their Camp II after seven days of hard work. We had arrived in ten hours—up 5,000 feet—an achievement beyond our expectations.
It was one o’clock and the sun was bearing down on us, extracting its toll—our bodily juices. We applied a new layer of cream to our faces and lips, removed our sunglasses, and veiled our faces with scarves which were drilled with holes for eyes and mouth. We would bivouac here on the lower, cleaner platform. The golden tent which we unfolded came in two parts and weighed seven pounds, quite heavy for an Alpine style ascent and not the best available when we purchased it, but the only one available with our funds. A layer of nylon in the shape of a saddle was stretched with fiber glass poles and anchored to the ground at both ends. The guy lines were attached to our ice axes which were thrust into the ground. Two of the empty Japanese oxygen cylinders were brought down from the upper platform to anchor the lateral guys. Then a layer of white silk was hooked to the frame inside the shell. We laid out our insulation pads on the floor of the tent, followed by our sleeping bags, and started up the stove to melt as much snow as could be managed. By 2:30 p.m. we were installed in our nylon igloo, had replenished our liquids and sat down to enjoy the intense pulsating landscape.

Now higher than Mitre Peak, looking down, we could see the contours of the three glaciers: the Godwin-Austen, the Upper Baltoro, and the Baltoro proper, all joining hands with one another in Concordia. The Southwest Face of K2 displayed two of its nicest features, its southwest ridge and the upper section of its west ridge.

We crawled into the tent and lay together inside our respective sleeping bags. Even inside the tent the reflection of the sun on the snow around us was intense, so intense that we stayed veiled, dozing, waking intermittently to sip water from the pan. Hours passed, hours of tossing and turning, and of drinking, of more tossing and turning and drinking, with occasional chatting. At length we crawled back out.
In the direction of Masherbrum, high up in the sky, a wide horizontal dark wave of clouds surged toward us, pushed by a strong wind from the west.

'Those clouds,' Gilles observed. His tone was serious. Yannick and I looked hard and long. Then he broke the silence. 'They seem to be coming from every direction now.'

'The mousetrap,' mused Gilles, 'springs with alarming quickness.'

'We'll see,' and I fetched some freeze dried shrimp creole from the tent to keep busy.

The food was palatable. The weather was not. The front of the storm was over Concordia and moving rapidly in our direction, seeking us out. We crawled back into our sleeping bags. More tossing, restlessly turning as I turned the weather over in my head. Norma again. A few weeks earlier the weather was better. Things were brighter. We were together, a bomb of life squeezed tightly between our hands.

By midnight it was snowing hard. The wind picked up and began to beat the nylon walls of our tent like a tapette against a rug. Twice we got up during the night and twice we circled the tent to clear it of snow. When Gilles had joked about the trap, I had not thought twice. Now his words came back to trigger in me a subconscious anxiety about the prospect of being trapped. I was the mouse; the mountain was the cheese; the storm, the trap.

Such a storm might not have been a matter of concern for a large team. For such a group there was always backup support of team mates higher up or lower down, and the comfort of the fixed ropes would also provide a feeling of power and security. For us, there were no fixed ropes to descend in case of a blizzard and no companions to summon to our rescue in the event of a difficult situation. We were alone and had only ourselves.
We had all thought about this eventuality months before, but now practice gave a different dimension to the theory that had preceded. As I lay in my sleeping bag, I turned over thought after thought. The tent? Ours was not a box tent. Just an ordinary tent. It could not withstand heavy snowfall and high winds for long. The food and gas? We had precious little of either, not enough to sustain three men for extended periods. The climbing equipment? Extremely limited. Not even enough ice screws and pitons to rappel down for more than five or six pitches. No—wait! The Japanese gear! Suddenly the Japanese refuse was comforting. The physical parameter? A simple fracture or medical problem at such elevations could spell disaster. Altitude sickness or frostbite and it might be impossible to descend. Tiny details began to take on new meaning. What if one of us should lose an ice axe on the mountain? Or a crampon? Or sunglasses? It could result in serious consequences, even something that simple. If I lost my ice axe, I would have to downclimb facing the slopes, frontpointing with my hands against the cold snow and ice. Very risky! If I lost a crampon, I'd really be up a creek without a paddle! There was just no good solution to that one no matter how much I tossed it around. Rappel down? Get lowered down by Yannick and Gilles? And what if I lost my sunglasses? No problem. We had an extra pair somewhere between us.

I pushed the pessimistic thoughts out of my head and focused again on the contrast between heavyweight and lightweight expeditions. A very basic difference had to be the fixed rope—that umbilical cord extending the lifeblood from base camp up the side of the mountain—that crutch that one can always lean on in disaster situations. An interesting analogy came to mind—the Greek myth of the
Minotaur, the labyrinth, and the ball of twine, and how Theseus had found his way out of the labyrinth by following the twine. I pictured the Minotaur as the Storm, the labyrinth as the mountain, and the twine as the fixed rope. But could we find our way out of the labyrinth without Ariadne's twine?

A new thought surfaced as I reviewed what I had seen on Broad Peak so far. I imagined a line of fixed ropes stretched out up and down the mountainside by the Japanese of '77. They had taken two months to climb Broad Peak. The repetitiveness of load carrying between the camps, the incessant yo-yoing up and down the fixed ropes, the ferrying of equipment and oxygen to higher camps in the name of team effort or country—an unrewarding contribution to a possible victory for only a couple of climbers who happened to get slotted at the highest camp at just the right time, sometimes by political maneuvering, sometimes by luck, sometimes by hook or by crook—a puzzling philosophy of climbing.

Well, perhaps the fixed ropes were not so comforting after all. Timewise the exposure on a fixed rope was far greater than on an Alpine style dash up a mountain. Consequently the risk of avalanches, rockfalls, and serious storms was also greater within the heavyweight framework.

Daybreak at 5:30. About ten inches of snow had fallen during the night, when fears and anxieties were magnified. It was comparable to a bivouac in the Alps where I had spent many nights under much severer conditions.

The sky, uniformly gray, did not augur improvement. No question about continuing up. We would descend to base camp and wait out the weather—and that forthwith.
We stuffed our equipment into our packs and cleaned up in haste, abandoned our tent, and jetted without breakfast. It would not do to lose time and expose ourselves to further bad weather. *Go while the going is good!*

'Hey, we're lucky. Look down there!'

We could still detect faint traces of tracks in the snow. To diminish the risk of avalanche danger, we climbed from the foot of the gendarmes straight down to the platform of Japanese Camp I. Another eight inches of snow and the risk of avalanche would have made the descent perilous. Back in Japanese I in three hours, we rested and reassessed our chances. If we were to wait out the weather in base camp, we could certainly use more rations. Why not pack down twenty-five pounds of the Japanese rice?

We loaded the rice onto our backs. Yannick picked up the chop sticks and we downclimbed, finally retracing our steps across the bergschrund. *Bonne humeur!* Late in the morning of May 30, we left the moraine and trundled back toward base camp.

I wished out loud: 'We should make it to the summit in two or three days if we can keep to the same rhythm.'

Yannick countered: 'The higher you go, the harder it gets. We won't progress as fast at 24,000 feet as we did at twenty. Ultimately the test will be up there.'

*Yes. Up there. High up there.*

* * *
Every morning I set my alarm watch for 1:00, poked my head out of the tent, and then if the weather was bad, back to sleep. Up again at 3 o’clock to repeat the same routine. Finally the skies were clear at 1:00 a.m. on the second of June.

‘C’est bon, on y va!’

By 2:30 we three were away, fixing ourselves the same objective—the platform at 21,000 feet. Broad Peak was laden with more fresh snow. To avoid avalanche danger we set out to shortcut the lower section of Buhl’s Spur by climbing straight up a long chute toward the first patch of gendarmes. We sped upward as though we were on the Brenva of Mont Blanc. How fast we progressed! And how good we all felt—refreshed, invigorated, and ready for the engagement!

The mountain was alive. Hissing noises revealed avalanches of fluff that scurried down here and there, regularly, but in small amounts. We were well acquainted with the lower portion of the spur, for we had traversed it going on three times, twice up and once down. Five hours after crossing the bergschrund, we again attained the platform where we had bivouacked three days earlier. What had taken nine hours three days previous now took six and a half hours from base camp, and this in spite of the heavier snow.

‘We’ve come up like bullets,’ said Gilles.

‘I may have shot up a little too fast,’ I confessed. ‘I’ve got a headache.’
From Gilles: 'Me too.'
'Moi aussi,' chimed in Yannick, 'but it'll pass.'

Not a single cloud could be seen in the sky and a moderate northeast wind danced high up on the summit. Moisture usually invades from the sea, out of the west. But today the wind was wafting in from China, a promising sign of good weather. We straightened up our tent and rested throughout the afternoon, melting snow for drinking water.

The sun brought the snow slopes to life on both sides of the spur. Big avalanches exploded down the two concave bowls on either side. Five thousand feet above them, the huge ice cliffs also urged the mountain to speak its mind. Occasionally a slice of ice broke tumultuously to stumble down the face, passing at our level about half a mile away, a purring rumble of ice and massive clouds of snowdust. I turned my head left and right to follow two simultaneous avalanches on both sides of the ridge. The sinuous spur upon which we were situated was obviously the safest route to the upper hanging glacier. In 1957 Buhl and his companions had selected the most direct line up the mountain.

Although we were too close together to sleep well, I felt rested when my alarm went off at 1:30 a.m. It was June 3. A quick look outside—beautiful and cold! Seen from base camp there would be three tiny headlamps beaming a human presence in the huge dark shadow of the West Face. I imagined the doctor looking up at us, for we had told him we would break camp early. I hoped he was watching. How often had I myself watched the headlamps of friends moving up a mountain in the Alps—tiny insignificant dots of humanity, glowing in the dark.
We put on our supergaiters and crampons over the double boot layer and loaded our anoraks with food for the day. We would save time by eating out of our pockets.

Our bivouac site was situated some 4,600 feet up the spur from the bergschrund. Another 900 feet separated us from the black gendarmes about 1,500 feet below the upper hanging glacier. From the black gendarmes to the glacier a wedge-shaped ridge snaked its way up the spur. The walls of the ice cliffs at around 22,000 feet of elevation hid the remaining reaches of the mountain, except for the south summit, whose shadow darkened the skyline of the night.

At 2:30 a.m., with ski poles in hand, we set off from the platform toward the black gendarmes, kicking steps into the thin layer of snow that initiated our route up the spur. Soon we were up to mid-calf in fresh snow. Along the steep angle of the spur, more effort, hard work, more frequent stops to catch our breath, the wind playing uninvited melodies on the fabric covering our ears. The intense cold had hardened the nylon of our anoraks and the stiffness of our joints induced us to move our elbows back and forth as we pushed on our ski poles. In the round screen of my headlamp, I could only distinguish a portion of Yannick's feet. When leading, it was necessary to maneuver the headlamp with my neck in order to select the optimal route. The mountain was big. But like anything big, it was big only when taken in big amounts, all at once. On the terrain itself, it must be taken piece by piece, bit by bit, portion by portion, pitch by pitch, each edible in its turn.

For some reason, I kept pondering the origin of the word gendarmes. Gendarmes for policemen and gendarmes for rocky pinnacles—gens d'armes, 'people of arms.' As
though mesmerized, we climbed on, groping ever upward, each absorbed in his thoughts, until finally we swung up onto the narrow ridge that led to the upper hanging glacier, a long garland of snow. Dawn revealed a spotless sky to reassure us that we had indeed hit a stretch of fair weather. We pushed on and on and up and up with our ski poles and appreciated the help they contributed, finally passing what must have been Japanese Camp IV, another platform, more refuse. We didn’t stop. A series of ice bumps grew into view, leading to the upper balcony, the glacial plateau stretching between the two summits. Now we stopped and breathed longer and more intermittently. Progress was slowing down. Next a bump of ice, short in size but steep. Axes out! Approach. Up. Forty steps and stop. Another forty steps and stop, frontpointing up the steep ice buttress. Pulling over the top, I looked up to see the spur undulating up, up, up to the upper hanging glacier. I began to feel my legs going stiff from the cold.

At 22,000 feet I noticed the effects of the altitude; inspirations twice as often to obtain the effects of one at lower elevations. Fatigue began to mount faster now; legs grew colder; rest stops occupied longer intervals of time.

Still another platform. 10:30 a.m. And more refuse. Japanese V we supposed. Surprising to find another camp at such proximity to the last—IV and V so close together. Why so close?

Now faced with a section of forty-five to fifty degree ice stretched between two icefalls, we summoned all our courage and attacked. The clear, blue ice flaked and cracked under our crampons and axes. A few inches of powder covered the glassy ice in spots.

'Ça va?' Yannick asked.

'Oui, c'est bon!' Gilles replied.
The hard work exasperbated the effects of altitude; our packs required all our strength and attention. Reassuring was the fact that we were not roped together.

At last, a good hour later, we rounded the nose of the bump and pulled up onto the first ledge of the upper hanging glacier. We sat down to rest.

'Whew, what a difference!' breathed Gilles.

The canteen had been wrapped in the sleeping bag. We drank, swallowing particles of ice that had crystallized in it, looking down on the spur behind us, satisfied in the work we had done, seeing that it was good. We were close on 23,000 feet and had gained 2,000 in one day. And it was only midday.

The upper hanging glacier looked like an amphitheater, crowned on either side by the two summits of Broad Peak, set off in the middle by a pass, which I had christened the Petit Col. The ridge to the south leading up to the central summit was steep and short. It was the site of the Polish drama of '75 and I thought of it as the Polish Ridge. To the right of the Petit Col, the ridge eased up in the distance. It was much longer and exhibited a serrated surface like the teeth of a saw. There in the skyline, the first outstanding view of our objective, the main summit, still far off in the distance.

We were now in a very high place and the sensation of height was contagiously present—the feeling one might get looking down from a very high building, the Empire State Building, or from a high tower, the Eiffel Tower, or better still, the feeling one might have looking down from the top of six or seven such structures, one stacked atop the next.

I peered out southward and then westward. Was that really Nanga Parbat on the horizon? Most of the peaks gird-
ing the lower Baltoro Glacier had shrunk and were already below us, except for Masherbrum and Mustagh Tower. To the left of the central summit, K2 appeared as an extension of our own mountain, a fourth summit of Broad Peak. The Gasherbrums were hidden by the main summit. But to the right we could clearly distinguish Chogolisa, the Vigne Glacier, and a multitude of peaks stretching out toward India. And there was Concordia with that huge interchange of frozen freeways bulldozing their way through the mountains of the Baltoro.

We got up and flexed our weary joints, then pushed off toward the Petit Col, going very slowly. I kept fighting to break through an invisible barrier, a sound barrier, which should explode the minute it be compromised—forty steps, then thirty steps, now twenty steps, rest. Yannick was in the lead, now a good two hundred feet ahead of Gilles and me, climbing up the roller coaster snow fields of the amphitheater. Gilles and I took another break, while Yannick moved on to find a suitable platform for a second bivouac.

We finally dragged ourselves up and into Yannick’s tracks. His silhouette was moving ahead, a black speck in a pristine white surrounding. We now climbed in short sequences, moving and resting, moving and resting. The breathing was shorter. The resting seemed longer. By three o’clock we caught up with Yannick, who had stopped on the flat lip of a crevasse and had already begun to install our tent for a second bivouac. Gilles and I sat down again and rested for five minutes beside our packs. Too heavy.

Before taking refuge in the comfort of our sleeping bags inside the tent, we invested an hour keeping house, arranging and organizing. We had eaten up 3,000 feet of mountain in twelve hours on this second day and were now at 24,000. It had been much harder than the first day.
The elevation was taking its toll. Even when resting, I could sense an intense unworldly pressure bearing down on the walls of my body, a completely new experience. In fact there was less atmospheric pressure here than down below. The environment was turning hostile and I could feel it, though my perception of what it was did not correspond to reality. My body was in truth opening up to its surroundings. It was not being constricted by the environment. My body wished to expand into the rarefied envelope that now clothed it. And I more than knew it. I felt it. Physically. We were exposed. Nude. Living dangerously.

Some 8,000 feet separated us from base camp. Some 1,600 feet remained to the Petit Col between the central and main summits. Still another 2,400 feet to the main summit. The training was paying off, and we were surprised to see Gilles doing so well, for he had not trained so hard.

'What do you think?' Yannick asked. 'We ought to make it to the summit and back in two days, maybe in one with a bivouac on the way back here.'

'We could leave the tent, take enough for two days and go light,' I suggested. 'We've gotta find a way to go lighter.'

'We're already very high,' Yannick said. 'I didn't think we'd gain elevation this fast. From here we ought to go to the summit in one push.'

'If the weather holds,' added Gilles. 'It looks okay, but I've got bad news. The camera's already frozen up.'

We had the stove going and melted snow for water to slake our ravenous thirst. We drank tea, hot chocolate, soup, and powdered fruit juice, everything and anything we had in the form of liquids, but our bodies continued to scream out for satisfaction. The only positive result was
that there was little need to urinate high up on the mountain. Our liquids were being absorbed.

As we customarily do in the Alps, we prepared our packs for the next day, stuffing in all of the technical gear needed for the summit bid, making a mental note of those things now in use at the bivouac site that would be required higher up. I took everything out again and put it back in, double checking, eliminating as much as possible upon reflection. We packed enough equipment for a possible bivouac in the open: Three survival blankets, foam pads, sleeping bags, one stove plus gas cartridges, extra clothes, and plenty of liquid food. As far as the climbing gear was concerned, we would carry between us two ice axes and one ice hammer, one 110 foot rope, three seat harnesses, three ice screws, five pitons, three stoppers, five karabiners, a few slings and nylon webbings, and our three headlamps with two extra bulbs and four extra batteries.

We put our packs in the vestibule of the tent. While Gilles melted snow for more water, I made an interesting discovery: Outside the shrimp creole I had eaten the day before now exited in a form similar to that which it had earlier entered.

That evening we had more shrimp creole. After dinner, time for a rest. Our two-man tent was too small to accommodate three. With my head at the back of the tent in the stuffy air, squeezed in between both Yannick and Gilles, I could not breathe. At length I crawled over Gilles, turned around, and assumed a downhill posture, accompanied by a pair of feet next to my face. My contortions in turn caused Yannick and Gilles to readjust. And so it went; every time any one of us repositioned or turned, the two others had to do likewise.
Headaches crept into the infolds of our brains and began chiseling away, requiring medication to permit rest and sleep. Yannick had asked the doctor to bring along a special brand of sleeping pill he had found effective on Makalu, but when asked for them in base camp, the doctor did not seem upset that he had forgotten to bring any along. So experiment was the order of the day. Yannick and Gilles took one brand, and I took Phenergan aspirin, which quickly helped me to relax. No sooner had I begun to doze than Yannick and Gilles began to stir. Minutes ticked across the vast emptiness of our surroundings, punctuated by heavy inspirations from my friends.

'Gilles, something wrong?' I asked.

His breathing had accelerated and each minute now seemed less tiny.

'My head is pounding. I don't feel so good,' Gilles moaned as he lifted himself up on his flank.

'Me either,' Yannick added. 'I don't know what it is, but I feel bad too.' Yannick rolled his shoulders and moved his arms around as though to shake it off. Then, pale-faced, both dragged themselves to the entrance of the tent, zipped it full open, and thrust their heads towards the open air.

_Merde_. What's going on?

Yannick and Gilles were on their sides, gasping for air, moving towards suffocation. Not yet there, but certainly on their way.

'Georges—you—how does—it go—with you?'

'Those headache pills you took!' I lay there powerless as Yannick and Gilles began to hyperventilate. _Are they going to suffocate or pass out?_ The blood of worry and concern rushed to my head. _Stay cool._

By degrees Yannick and Gilles calmed down. A good hour later they were their old selves. And no headaches either.
The experience revealed how a small detail could have enormous significance high up in the mountains. One moment all was well. The next, a crisis was at hand.

I stuck my head out of the tent for one last look around before retiring for the night. Not a cloud in the sky. To the north I could almost touch K2 with my fingertips. Many valleys and peaks below were plunged into the darkness of night while up high we enjoyed the last rays of the twilight.

We were not the only ones to enjoy the warmth of our sleeping bags. Stuffed between our legs and on either side were our boots, gloves, mitts, gas cartridges, food, and water bottles. The cold wind seeped through the silk and nylon layers of our tent. A strong gust shook its walls as though to remind us of its anger.

When the sun disappeared and the wind played about the upper hanging glacier upon which we camped, it turned to a bitter cold. As in the Alps such a situation augurs good weather for the coming day. We dozed off and awoke intermittently through the night. At 1:30 in the morning we kindled the stove and began to remelt the ice which was still in the pan. One at a time we dressed in the overcrowded tent, an hour of laborious effort. Already cold inside, we added extra layers of clothing to confront the colder climate outside. Yannick and I had each brought up a new pair of socks, half silk and half wool, in anticipation of the summit bid. They were warm after having spent a comfortable night between our legs. We thought it a good idea to change socks to insure the absence of humidity in our boots. This simple decision would turn out to have important consequences.

By 2:30 the three of us crawled out of the tent where June 4 revealed another clear sky. We crawled back in and swallowed some lukewarm cocoa, followed by a few
biscuits. No hunger. Only the tension and anxiety to be away, difficult though it was to leave the cramped comforts of our tent. The pace of time and thinking was slower than normal, but still in proper relation with each other—life in a semi-frozen state.

By 3:00 a.m. we were away, very slowly kicking up to the Petit Col between the two summits, our headlamps cutting a swath through the darkness. The snow seemed to be alive, swirling about our legs, swishing and dancing across the steps of the ice field. In the lead, I moved one step at a time. I dared not think of what lay ahead.

Hardly had we left our bivouac site when Gilles announced: 'I'm turning back.'

He opened his pack, handed me a couple of gas cartridges and Yannick the stove. Some of the equipment and climbing gear went to Yannick, some to me. There was nothing to say. Up here it was a personal decision to continue on or to call it quits.

'Take care,' Yannick said to Gilles.

'Yes, take care,' I echoed.

'I'll make it. Bonne chance.'

Five minutes later Gilles disappeared into the tent, back to the warmth and comforts we had given up, for what I knew not.

The extra time afforded by the early start would be crucial to our success, but it meant exposure to the intense cold of the early morning. The sun would rise on the opposite side of Broad Peak and would not reach us on the West Face before 9:00 a.m., six cold hours into the future.

I broke the trail up a thirty degree slope. -40° Celsius. The cold began to affect my toes and I continuously flexed them inside my boots, but I could barely feel them. I knew what it meant but refused to admit it to myself.
A cold wind swept across the surface of the mountain, hugging it tightly. Every fifty steps Yannick and I sat down side by side and hit our knees to activate the blood flow to our feet. We were now concerned about the dawn, when the sun comes up to push the cold down the surface of the mountain to the valley floor, setting a convection current of cold air in motion. It is precisely then that it is coldest. We feared lest we suffer frostbite at just such a time. The only aversion tactic was to become as active as possible before dawn, to activate as much blood as possible to prevent it from turning to ice.

At intervals Yannick and I exchanged slaps and blows across our backs and legs. A borderline situation presented itself. A degree or two less would force us into retreat. But we continued to climb the bumps of snow, working our way up towards the pass, two lonely crepuscular motes in the early morning cold, slowly freezing in this alien environment.

Repetition of the same thing—climbing and battling each step through the snow fields, keeping active, fighting off the intense cold, while the unearthly minutes winged on.

‘Quel froid!’

We sat down to rest as we had been doing every fifty steps, no longer able to ignore the absence of feeling in our toes. Yannick stripped his crampons loose and started beating one foot against the other, flailing them with his ice axe, directing all his energy and concentration to convey more blood into his toes. For my part, if only I could impart some movement to my toes, I would be better off. I took off my crampons, my supergaiters, my double boot, one foot after the other, massaging the inner boot layer around my toes. No sooner had I succeeded in reviving the
toes of one foot than the toes of the other foot went numb. It was useless. I put my footgear back on, feeling that I had not gained much, to find Yannick still at it, assaulting his boots with his ice axe and ski poles. It was a good work out, but when we set off again, we felt exhausted from our efforts.

Three hours earlier—what seemed to me like half an hour—we had departed from our tent under a sky full of stars. Now we were moving ahead in the frozen light of the early morning. Dawn passed without conscious drama. Above in the distance, on the summit, swirls of snow were pushed by the northeast wind. They rolled about, pink against the light of the awakening sun on the opposite side of Broad Peak. It's true that the higher we climbed, the closer to the stars we got. The sky was sapphire blue, dark, deep, rare.

We climbed, stopped to warm up, climbed on, stopped and always moved as fast as possible, but still progressed at an average of only one hundred and fifty to two hundred vertical feet per hour. Everything had slowed down except for time. It was out of joint. Each time I looked at my watch, an hour had passed. No longer easy to believe in reality.

My body was tired but I was ready to give all I had to reach the summit. No thought for Gilles now, none for Yannick; there was just me and the mountain. For a short instant, I felt alone, given over to my strength alone, desperately alone. The lonely feeling sent a shiver of cold through my being, my testicles drew up, and my strength began to ebb, slipping slowly away, out of my body, leaving behind an empty shell. But just as suddenly it was over and a flow of warmth engulfed me—Norma, le pépé, maman, Dusan, my friends, and their spirit. Consciously or
unconsciously they all were with me. That day we kept go-
ing on together.

I became obsessed with the terrain ahead of me. Go! Go! Gain more and more ground until there is no more going, just air, and the terrain on the other side, down.

With each slow step, we gained elevation. At 25,000 feet we assaulted the final forty-five degree ice slope that led to the pass. I watched Yannick sixty feet ahead of me. Every few steps he leaned upon his axe, his head against the ice. I could hear him breathing heavily in and out. His heart seemed to beat out loud. It did not seem too easy for him either.

12:30! This was crazy! The record was playing at half-speed. We had been moving quite fast, it seemed. In fact, we had been climbing in slow motion. The altitude was playing tricks on me—consciousness and unconsciousness, I don't know where one starts and the other leaves off.

Mmmy knnnee rrroolled uppp and ooover the snnnow. Mmmy hhhead mmmoved uppp and dooown and I tripped over the next step. Rooolling over the snnooow. Wooooo. Woooo. Rooolling like a looocooomoootive.

A big circle rolled inside of me and onto the terrain that slowly unrolled with me. The roll started in my leg and moved behind and back into my body, a roll in my hip and behind, a roll in my chest and back into the nape of my neck and back and into my brain and my head rocks forward and back, and it followed the circle and rolled forward and back, and my eyes rolled back down into my skull and my hips and my legs, and I carried on, rolling slowly—a dizzy circle unrolling on itself.

Yannick had taken two pictures but I no longer cared for pictures. The rolling was hard enough. And stitches of pain had developed on both sides of my lungs, as if I had
run too far too fast too long. You have the will to go on but will your body be able to cope or will you suddenly feel too much pain to continue? A Dieu va! If I am destined to get to the top, I will; if not, I will not!

Frontpointing a fifty degree slope became a ridiculous effort. Ha, ha, ha! At the top of the slope just below the pass, I climbed a few demanding rocks. Ha, ha, ha! Finally, 1:45 p.m.—we pulled ourselves up on the col between the central and main summits, a narrow and rounded pass—un petit col. We looked out to the east into Tibet for the first time.

A strong Chinese wind acknowledged our arrival. Much too cold! Cower down and hide out in the west. Downclimb to a combe ten meters below the pass. There we rested, started the stove, and swallowed a pan of tomato soup. But the hands of the clock were still turning.

'How's it going, Georges?' Yannick asked.

'It's killing. It's already 2 o'clock. We've got to hurry. How 'bout you?'

'I'm okay. We've got to make it. I'll go to the summit today.'

It was just a few hours away. Yannick extracted pitons and ice screws from his pack. I pulled the rope out of my load and for the first time since the bergschurnd, we roped together. The beginning of the mixed ridge looked relatively easy by Alpine standards. Something like the Midi-Plan Traverse in the Mont Blanc Range from the Col du Plan to l'Aiguille du Midi. But with such fatigue at 25,600 feet it took on another dimension. We were 800 vertical feet short of the summit. But how long would the ridge itself be? We had done enough climbing to know how false summit can lead to false summit on the terminal ridge of a mountain.
We climbed from the *combe* up a steep snowy buttress and assumed a route slightly below the crest stretching up to the summit, partially protected from the northeast wind by the cornices and wild rock formations on the sharp edge of the ridge. We progressed with one hundred feet of distance between us, down gullies, across patches of snow stretched between rocky outcrops, sometimes ascending to the ridge itself, following our intuitions about the fastest and safest route up the last portion of the mountain.

We crossed a rock slab some eighty feet on the west side, where we encountered pitons and pieces of rope, vestiges of a previous expedition. *Should I say Grüss Gott or konnichi-wa?* Those abandoned items were just one more hazard to be circumvented.

Now we passed a snow saddle where Yannick said, 'It was here in '76.'

I realized that we were at the spot where he had fallen through a cornice in 1976 when he first attempted Broad Peak.

Looking up and down the ridge ahead of us and behind us, we saw that most of the cornices had been sculpted on the east side, some of them fifteen to thirty feet thick, a huge unstable mass of snow hanging over the sheer east side. Be careful not to walk too close to the edge of any of the cornices. Their relative position indicated that the summiteal ridge of Broad Peak was customarily battered by wind and snow coming out of the southwest, from the direction of the sea, where humidity and moisture collects and is then propelled inland. But today it was coming from the other side, out of China.

Next a steep bump of ice, and then a rock chimney full of wind-splayed snow directly in front of us. A short pitch of crack climbing became extremely demanding at 26,000
feet. And the pain had not left my chest. But it had not in-
creased either. All my attention was fixed on the next few
yards ahead. One short step after another. One pull of the
arm after the other. I again looked at my watch. It was 4:30
p.m.

We followed a cornice in the shape of a half moon. A
long and narrow arête led to a sharp, pyramidal summit.
We were now on the threshold of 8,000 meters and very
close to the pinnacle. Yannick had disappeared. I imagined
him coiling the rope and waiting for me to come up and sit
next to him on the summit. I strained to pull myself up
those last few feet only to see Yannick down the other side
on his way to another higher point farther away up the
ridge.

I could see him climbing up the next ramp to still
another summit. He was no longer erect, in a bent over
posture, catching his breath every two or three steps.

From the Petit Col I had been going all out. I now
began to worry we might reach the summit too late to per-
mit a safe retreat. I feared that I might not reach the sum-
mit at all, so I fixed myself an ultimate objective. I would
somehow drag myself to the top of that next bump,
another potential summit, via a ridge composed of snow
for the most part, and a few rocks here and there. Yannick
was walking slowly ahead of me. I was no longer on the
edge of exhaustion, but into it already for some time, ex-
ploring the edges and fringes of some unknown space,
some inner reserve, now crawling on all fours like a child,
reaching into myself, deeply. Hang on. Don't get shaken off.
I was a child and I crawled on and on until I finally reached
the little saddle and lay down on my side, gasping for air,
on top of my own summit.
I watched Yannick move slowly along the snow crest in the direction of a rocky outcrop in the skyline, a long parallelepiped of rock. He scrambled up, his silhouette detached in the sky, his head bent down, looking over and down the other side. Then turning to look back in my direction, he hoisted his ice axe into the air, and in so doing he signaled that he had attained the summit. I felt that I was there too. It was ours together. Would to God that I were up there with Yannick, but I had no more will power for those last few feet. I looked at my watch. It was already ten past five. I remained still and looked around. I pulled Norma's picture out of my pocket and kissed it. More friends were with me in spirit that day.

The sky was clear. I could see all the way to Nanga Parbat. Far away the sky and earth melted into each other. Yannick was now beside me. We shook hands and from the glance we exchanged, we sealed our friendship and knew how the other felt—relief and nothingness. Just nothing for a while. That nothingness that makes us climb mountains, months of preparation, weeks of approach, days in the face, for a few seconds of nothingness, more than happiness, a short meeting with eternity.

Yannick pulled out his Rollei. He wanted photos of the summit. But the film advance would not function. It seemed to stick as though it were at the end of a roll of film. Now he began his monologue with the camera. It would be a shame not to have at least one picture of the summit.

Yannick put the camera back into his pack and rested a while beside me. Time was still racing as we turned back into ourselves, shifting our attention to our next goal—making it back to base camp alive.
We started our descent, fearing a night in the open, high up. Yes, we would survive, but at what price?

The morning had been too cold for our feet; a night out would be a serious threat to our toes and fingers, and, indeed, to our lives. Yannick had said, 'The descent, it's easy,' but as we retraced our steps down the long summital ridge, neither of us found it to be so. First, the chimney, then the steep bumps of snow, requiring care—down-climbing facing the snow—then the rocky slab closer to the pass, requiring rock moves to traverse. We were expending as much energy climbing down slowly and carefully as we had spent climbing up. Perhaps too much.

The wind had pushed a soft mattress of cotton against the Chinese flank of the mountain, just below the pass. For a split second I had the impulse to hurl myself into it, to be caught by the clouds, but there were too many gaps between its cotton tufts, through which could be seen patches of glacier below. Too dangerous, it seemed, inviting though it was, that magic carpet spread over the North Gasherbrum Glacier of mystical Tibet.

We finally reached the pass just before dusk and paused. The rocky ridge leading up to the central summit of Broad Peak looked short in comparison to our ridge, but it was in fact steeper and more difficult. It was a ridge of rock, plastered with snow. Its west face was black; its east face, white and steep—a challenge beyond our time.
From the col we would make a rappel and then downclimb with no rope. Cautiously setting out, we moved out of the extreme danger posed by exposure to wind on the summittal crest. No, it would have been impossible to survive a night there without serious damage. Then, climbing down the steep ice face, we set foot on the upper section of the ice balcony just as the sun disappeared behind the horizon.

'We have a good part behind us,' said Yannick, breathing in a sigh of relief.

With the increasing loss of elevation, the rest of the way down would be progressively easier, or so we thought.

'Yes, here it's better,' I concurred. 'Let's go all out for the tent tonight. I'd rather downclimb all night long than bivouac in the open.'

Ahead we could still discern our tracks from the morning and we followed them down the roller coaster ice bumps of the upper hanging glacier. Now fatigue was extreme. Resting became dangerous. So easy to just let go, to lie down, relax, to sleep, to sleep in the soft white snow. I counted each time I rested, and on the slow count of three I dragged myself back into action. One . . . two . . . three. Failure to get up on the count of three and I might never get up.

My feet were still cold. They had never warmed up. I tried flexing them in my boots in frequent attempts to activate the circulation, but with little success. With dusk the extreme cold was again upon us and the threat to my extremities weighed heavily.

And the descent seemed endless. I downclimbed like an automaton, following Yannick who was now out ahead of me. He was not looking back. Each of us was obsessed with his own rhythm, with himself.
Standing here in the wind, on this tumor of our planet, watching the ranges of the Himalayas stretched to the horizons among rivers of ice and cloud mattresses all around, gently kneeling and lying down on this bed of velvet snow, fatigue belongs to me no more. I begin to count—one . . . A foreign state of warmth lives inside of me, and I am happy and content. See for a moment the white clouds coming up from the west, enveloping the mountain, stars glittering to the sounds of the highest silence that rocks me while I slowly recede out of consciousness and into sleep. Clouds on mountains grow into one another. There is only a huge foamy floor stretched out ahead to the slightly bowed horizon. And out of the floor a silhouette comes dancing, jumping, her long white robe lifted up by the fingers of the wind. She takes three steps ahead and two back, two more ahead, then one back; she is coming closer and the closer she comes, the more I am taken . . . two . . . she lifts her arms and motions with her hand, beckoning, and I open my eyes and shut them again to see that her hand is a soft silky cloud inviting me to join her up there. I fix my closed eyes on her graceful hand which oscillates, keeping time with the wind. It seems to reach into my mouth and move down my throat, down, down until it stops, then pulls me up by my entrails. I close my eyes and do not resist, knowing that that is what she wants, for me to sleep, for then I am hers, and she is mine. I must open my eyes if I am to survive, or is it death to be alive? Now I know not which. I can only look up into her face and she smiles at me and comforts me and tenderly parts her lips, and I want her more than life. I follow the line of her nose into her eyes and they tell me that it is all right—that she has loved me, always, and I want to listen, and do, as I follow the lines of her hair down both sides of
her neck and into the milk of her bodice. She sees my eyes and reads my mind, for now she bares her breasts, extending both arms toward me. I close my eyes and gladly give myself up. Some of me will disappear, it is true, but is it life? For such completeness, for such warmth, for such pure transcendent love, it is a decision to which I have acquiesced without fear. I need have no second thoughts. She is mine—she is life and the revelation gives me peaceful sleep. She takes me into her arms and squeezes me to her breasts, while she kisses my eyelids and rocks me away. The light grows dimmer and no longer filters through these holes where once my eyes shone brightly. I am going fast, going home. It is peaceful, restful, comfortable; death is life. I feel myself passing out of this body and I fall deeper and I know that . . . three . . . the word causes my muscles to twitch, involuntarily, and I struggle against my will to open these occluded eyes to see that I am still flesh, alive, or dead, whichever. Something that is not me shunts my eyes from her gaze, and I shrink from the White Death, the beautiful, peaceful, sensuous White Death; I push my body away from her soft creamy flesh and tear myself from her fingertips, touching them with my own, one last tactile farewell. I somehow pull my bones up out of my grave of ice. Stars and patches of black flash before my eyes, traveling at lightning speed. The squinting, gritting of teeth, and shaking of head drives them away, but they come back and seem to persist as I lose elevation fast, downclimbing on easy terrain, some distance to the left of my tracks.

Now I go down. The ground has fallen out from under me and I jump, hurling my carcass forward, landing on my knees, sprawled out on the downhill lip of the crevasse. On all fours, looking ahead I see Yannick's silhouette off in the
distance, on a course of its own. He would never have known. Collecting my wits, I pull myself back up and continue down, all my attention and concentration fixed on the next few feet ahead.

What is it that pushes me onward? I cannot say. I continued to downclimb, now catching up with Yannick. But we must have passed the site of our second bivouac! The temptation was great to go back up and look for the tent to the left of our tracks. But I could not be certain. Perhaps the tent was further down. The fatigue and altitude were still trying to take control over my reason, and we were still very much exposed. With the extreme fatigue, a sudden break in weather or the slightest physical impairment could still spell disaster. So we pursued our descent like two robots—the only thing to do. Then, there it was, out of nowhere, just a short distance below me, a castle!
After twenty of the hardest hours we had ever undertaken, at 11:00 p.m. we stumbled into our tent, letting gravity pull our packs from our backs. We then unloaded from them all of the equipment we had carried for those twenty long hours, and which, ironically, we had not used—our sleeping bags, the food, the extra gas cartridges, the clothing, etc. I started the stove to melt some snow and we lay down, side by side, exhausted.

While the stove burned we had no intention of sleeping, but I fell instantly into a dead sleep without a second thought and later woke up to find Yannick fast asleep and the stove still burning. What luck it had not tipped over! I woke Yannick and we savored lukewarm tea together. He complained about his toes and I complained about mine. So it was time to have a look.

First we opened the shell of our outer boots—as hard as a wooden sarcophagus. Then we unlaced our inner boots, a lighter coffin of rigid felt and lamb's wool. Below it the shroud of our socks was stuck to the skin of our feet. We delicately unwrapped our extremities to gaze upon a set of mummified toes painted a disgustingly gray blue. Frostbite! We stared down on them and listened to the silence, then laughed.

'It's okay. I don't mind losing one for every eight thousander,' Yannick joked, as he went to work on his toes.
I promised Norma I would bring them all back, I remembered, hoping that I would not have to lose one for every eight thousander.

Our frostbite had been abetted by poor circulation, probably due to the pressure of the inner boots on the extra thickness of the new socks, just at the point where the toes joined the feet. Had we not changed socks the night before, we may not have suffered.

We checked on the weather throughout the night, catching a wink now and again. Finally falling into a deep sleep, for the first time on the mountain, we slept until daybreak.

That morning of the 5th we started down with the burden of our heavy packs, the accumulated fatigue of the three days past, and the excruciating pain in our toes and feet. The weather had held—just a few clouds congregated high up in the sky. Side by side we downclimbed the lower reaches of the balcony, aiming our sights on Buhl's Spur. Our feet were swollen and sensitive to the movement of each step. Our happiness was great and equal to our accomplishment, but we held reign on our emotions. We were not done yet.

Downclimbing the plateau of snow and ice, we could not help admiring the colossus soaring up in front of us, just off to the right.

'Et le K2?' I began.

'Via the South Face. I think it would go, but it would be steeper.'

We stopped, sat down, and studied the South Face of K2.

'Yes, on the glacier take the ice spur up—avoid the seracs on the right by climbing the mixed section closer to the Southwest Spur—up to the right to the foot of the long
The White Death

snow slopes of the South Face—straight up those slopes in the middle and the curvy chute to the Abruzzi Ridge. Then the summit. It’s long and steep.'

'It’s mostly snow and ice. It’d go fast.'

'The face is big. There must be a few good bivouac spots,' I said.

'Let’s think about that down in base. Allez, on y va!' said Yannick.

We pulled our weary frames up and again descended, finally halting at a bump of ice. In the Alps I would have downclimbed it 'with feet at 10:10,' as we say in French, cramponing on all points. But here at 23,000 feet with the fatigue and frostbite, and another 7,000 feet below me, I could not do it as Armand or Georges would have done on l’Aiguille Verte. I turned around and faced the mountain and downclimbed the forty-five to fifty degree ice slope on front points, the safe way—back down a few steps, plant my axe firmly, place my hand on its adze, and rest my head on the back of my hand, touching my knees to the terrain, against the thin layer of powder which covered the hard ice. Sometimes I kicked two or three times for better purchase in the brittle ice which often fell away in convex flakes. I could see them flying down the mountain in the frame between my legs. I winced in pain from each kick of my raw frostbitten toes. At last we reached the spur where it was now feasible to turn around and continue at a faster pace. My mouth was cotton, my tongue swollen. I had difficulty swallowing, more difficulty breathing. The tissue was dehydrated; the mind dulled. We stopped and the tea brought us back to life.

'My feet hurt so much I won’t stop anymore. I’m going as far as I can,' Yannick said.
Some blood trickled back into my toes, conveying needles of fire to what I had feared were dead cells. *Good! I might not lose a single one.*

Yannick's silhouette rolled steadily down the mountain, never stopping. By the time I reached the black gendarmes, he had set some six hundred feet between us. By the time I reached the level of the gray gendarmes and Japanese Camp III, he had moved out of sight. How could Yannick's body continue to advance without stopping for liquids? He was strong; I was dehydrated. Another quart of liquid and all the cells of my body said thank you.

Long and painful snow chutes succeeded one another. In the burning heat of the afternoon the crusty snow of the morning was transformed into a soggy mush and I gave my swollen toes relief by glissading down some of the chutes, losing vertical quickly.

*Take care. You are not yet all the way there.* I crossed the bergschrund, kept on moving, crossed the second. I was on the moraine, at last. The pressure suddenly switched off and happiness engulfed me. *You've made it!* *You've made it!*
On the afternoon of the 5th the sky clouded up and lowered its ceiling. Some porters returning from English base camp at the foot of K2 passed by on the central moraine of the Godwin-Austen on their return down the Baltoro. We stopped all eight and hired them to carry our equipment out. It meant double pay for them, for they had just been paid off by the British. No need to send Taqi to Askole to fetch porters—a savings of at least seven days.

Everybody had reason to rejoice that evening. A festive dancing and singing party was planned and executed. Yannick and I made feeble attempts to participate, but each one of our claps was measured by two from our friends. We were still exhausted and before long lay side by side in the tent while the others sang and danced in the distance. I closed one of my eyes—. . . Kare Gilgit . . . —I closed the other eye—. . . Kare Pindi . . . —I slept in. . . Lahore.

*   *   *

On June 6 we prepared our loads. Naturally Mama got first choice of what we discarded. The other porters helped themselves to the rest of the equipment and food, leaving only the twenty or so pounds of pork sausages. We left the
pork buried in a hole on the moraine, marked with a wooden stake. The French national expedition to K2 would try to locate our cache the following year.

After our stone house was destroyed, future parties would fail to recognize that anyone had camped here for nine days. The campsite was clean as a whistle.

As for our toes, Jean said that no amputation would be required. We cut holes through the tops of our inner shoes to provide freedom for our swollen frostbitten toes inside our boots. Even after this prescribed surgery, the walking was difficult and clumsy. To take our minds off the pain, we took turns describing sumptuous meals, fantasizing all manner of gastronomic delights beyond our means. On the way to Concordia:

\[
pâté de foie de canard à l'Armagnac et aux truffes
langouste à l'américaine
soufflé aux épinards et au gruyère de montagne
salade de cresson
plateau de fromage
omelette norvégienne
Avec le poisson une bouteille d'Apremont
Gevrey Chambertin et Mazis Chambertin
\]

One imaginary meal succeeded to the next, as we fantasized our way back toward civilization.

During those days of the return march we measured our success. Yannick had brought the solidarity and strength given by experience. I had brought the enthusiasm and freedom of the newcomer to the Himalayas. We had had no arguments, not even one over detail.
Yannick was disappointed that we had not succeeded in obtaining some footage of the summit. Perhaps we would shoot something in the Alps to complete the movie he was doing. Not something to think about now at any rate.

Up and down, up and down, we retraced our steps on the great sea of ice. Far away in the western sky, a long train of dark clouds rolled our way like a tidal wave out of a crimson horizon, heavy with blood, pushed by the high winds. In the south, a curtain of translucent gray pearls gave evidence of heavy rainfall.

Reaching Askole, we pitched our tent on a beautiful pasture above this first village below the Baltoro. A light breeze touched our faces with refreshing fingertips; the scenery was quiet and peaceful. I was full of warmth—a need to sit alone for a while. A flow of happiness engulfed me again. I belonged to the mountains.
It is easy to say in a conversation that there is no truth, but when you are down there realizing it for yourself, opening your eyes to the untruth of the truth, the truth of the untruth, life's untruth, life itself, then it becomes frightening to perceive so little of it. I had collapsed thirty meters below the summit of Broad Peak, a rocky summit. But I had felt that I had been on top, that my effort was complete, that when Yannick lifted up his axe, mine was outstretched too.

Yannick had suggested that we simulate pictures for his movie in the Alps and we had all agreed. Back in France Gilles filmed us on the summit of les Bans where we found a rock up on the mountain which we felt resembled the summit of Broad Peak. Sharing in the glory of the summit, I stood thirty meters higher.

I tried to reconstruct what really happened near the summit of Broad Peak. There had been no snow. To everyone's mind that summit was a rocky one. Pictures taken later in the Alps to simulate the summit did not aid in my search for the truth, even in the pleasing color of the climbing magazines. What was the truth? Had Broad Peak been climbed? Certainly not by me. Returning to Diemberger's description in his book *Summits and Secrets*, another truth dawned. From his book:

At last! There, in the level rays of the late sun, above a steep snow-slope, we could see dark rocks clean-cut against the sky. There was nothing higher. We made a last effort. Fritz and I stood on the rocks, with clouds drifting around us. There was really nothing more above us . . . In front of us, to the south Broad Peak's summit-
crest fell away in gentle curves, swung away widely beyond them—and then—yes—started to rise again! Went on rising, up and up, to form a shining cone of snow, way over there, probably an hour away—the true summit! Perhaps fifty or sixty feet higher than our vantage-point, no more than that . . . but an hour away, over there.

So there had been a snowy summit too. A rocky summit? I had not known that there were two summits on Broad Peak’s main summital hump, a rocky summit and a snowy one. Now I promised myself to go back some day and stand on the snowy one, but not for glory this time; rather to better understand why summits draw out of us what they do, both the best and the worst, why things so often transpire up there near the summit, and why that odious quality that goes by the name of glory looms so high in our insignificant human fiber.
Intermezzo:

KANGCHENJUNGA
'Let me see your hands.'
Norma slid her thin fingers into the warm sweaty palms of my hands.
'See, they're all wet. Every time you talk about climbing, your hands sweat like crazy.'
'I know. I know. But see, it’s Kangchenjunga. The North Face. With Doug, Joe Tasker, and Peter Boardman. The four of us, lightweight.'
Kangchenjunga was good news and at the same time a bit overwhelming; good because it meant real climbing, overwhelming because the world’s third highest mountain had a mean reputation. But Doug Scott’s invitation brought with it a ray of light into my day, for with the arrival of winter, the month of December had cast a shadow over my physical well being. I had developed a pain in my abdomen and some days I felt as though I was rolling a cube across the floor of my existence. I wished for a sphere, but it was a cube, a cube as heavy as life. One morning the air was so thick I found it hard to swallow. That same evening the phone rang and my grandmother said, 'Georges, le pépé is dead . . .'
Three days later, shortly before Christmas, Norma and I were in Argentière. Snow was everywhere, a mask on everybody’s face. Le pépé was lying in his bedroom, his yellow countenance imparting a faint smile. He had left instructions—where to get the planks of larch for his coffin, how to lay him in the house, facing l’Aiguille Verte, how to
remove him from the house, headfirst, through the win-
dow (like his father Zian had been moved thirty years
before), which of his children were to bear his coffin to
church, how we were to carry him to his chosen resting
place in the cemetery, and above all, 'no hearse.'

Everything went according to his wishes. Family and
friends were there. The guides were there too, from
Chamonix, Saint Gervais, Courmayeur in Italy, Zermatt
and La Fouly in Switzerland, and from many other places
in the Alps. They wore their traditional costumes and car-
rried the flags of their companies through the single narrow
road of the village in a long procession. My cousin and I
carried him from his bed 'where a good guide should die,'
he had said, to his last refuge in the earth of Argentière
where centuries of our family slept at the foot of l'Aiguille
Verte.

I picked out of my collection a crystal of smoky quartz,
dark in color as he liked them best, perfect in shape—also a
pink fluorite from the North Flank of l'Aiguille Verte—and
slid them both into his shroud.

And now there were ugly masks looking down into the
hole dug deep into the frozen ground, and a few genuinely
sad faces, but pépé I know that you're smiling and that the
spirit is not lost. We've got many more mountains to do
together. Next is Kangchenjunga.

*   *   *
On the 28th of February I was aboard a Pan Am 747 bound for London, laden with equipment and supplies destined for the Kangchenjunga Massif. This mountain, known among climbers more simply as Kansch, was once thought to be the world's highest mountain. Today it is recognized as the world's third highest after Everest and K2. At 28,207 feet it is one of the world's hardest eight thousanders, not only because of the difficult terrain, but also because of its unique geographical setting, which lends itself to frequent and sudden fluctuations in weather. Being relatively isolated from the greater Himalayan chain, situated on the border between Nepal and Sikkim, the great Kangchenjunga Massif has no natural shelter from the monsoon precipitation that moves in from the southwest. Consequently, climatic conditions here are far more apt to upset climbing plans than on K2 or Everest.

London was my first step on a stairway which would ultimately take me to the north flank of Kangchenjunga. I would successively pass through Chamonix, Hope, Nottingham, New Delhi, and Kathmandu, not to mention the many small villages of the Tamur Valley of Nepal.

Joe Tasker had made arrangements to have me collected at the airport in London from whence we drove north to Hope in Derbyshire. Joe ran a climbing shop there and had taken on the difficult and unrewarding assignment of gathering the technical equipment needed to undertake the climb. I especially wanted to see him to talk together about the equipment which I was to procure in France and also to unload the gear I had brought with me from the U. S. He turned out to be pleasant and reserved. When I departed the next day for Doug's place in Nottingham, Joe quipped, 'Now that Doug is a vegetarian, I wonder what we'll eat on this trip.'
I had committed myself to Kangchenjunga with $600 in my bank account. How would I get the $2,000 extra required as my contribution? I immediately contacted the Musée Alpin de Chamonix and a few hours later I had the money in hand. I was lucky to have my crystals, lucky to have invested so many years crystal hunting in the favorite mountain cirque of my childhood—the Cirque d'Argentiére. The mountains were now repaying me for the untold hours of effort and labor excavating for crystals and minerals.

I had long nurtured the idea of opening a museum in Argentière where I could display my collection of minerals from the Mont Blanc Range along with displays marking the evolution of crystal prospecting through the centuries—the Musée des Cristalliers. One more piece sold meant one less piece for my imaginary museum. For the moment, however, climbing would have to take precedence.

Back in France—a week frantically driving here and there and everywhere to pick up the food and equipment to which I was committed. I then drove my Citroen 2CV to Hope, loaded to the gills, where I helped Joe pack up for shipment to India. A day later Peter arrived from Switzerland, bringing plastic boots and a carton of food. And soon thereafter, the four of us were on a vegetarian diet in Nepal.
On the 13th of March we landed in Kathmandu, Nepal's capital city. Several days later we flew to Bhiratnagar in eastern Nepal. Having already made arrangements through the British Embassy for the transport of our equipment to the British Gurkha camp in Dharan, from Bhiratnagar we traveled to Dharan by jeep and there rendezvoused with our equipment.

A night at the British Gurkha camp. Fans are blowing the damp hot air through the room. Last touch with a mattress. Too hot. My mind wanders. I wish to sleep but can't. Sweaty, bleary-eyed, spaced out, swept along by events that have taken a course of their own. We're heading for the unknown.

Dharan was the starting point for our approach march to the great Kangchenjunga Massif. Traditionally there have been three major approaches to the world's third highest mountain. In earlier times the approach march usually originated in Darjeeling and proceeded to one of three destinations on the mountain: the Southwest Flank via the Yalung Glacier, the East Flank via the Teesta Valley of Sikkim to the Zemu Glacier, and the North Flank via the Tamur Valley to the Kangchenjunga Glacier. Several factors convinced Doug to ask for authorization to approach the North Flank. In the first place, Sikkim was then closed
Nepali Freeway
Approach to Kangchenjunga North Face
to nonindigenous mountaineering parties. So the East Flank was automatically ruled out. Besides it had already been climbed in 1977 by an Indian party via the Northeast Spur. The route up the Southwest Flank to the main summit had already been climbed in 1955 by Joe Brown during his ‘hard years’, followed by Norman Hardie and Tony Streather, and there had been a good deal of activity on the Southwest Flank by the Japanese and Austrians, who had both succeeded on the West Summit, known also as Yalung Kang. That left the North Flank and although the mountain had been approached from the north in 1930 by G. O. Dyhrenfurth’s international team, that attempt met with failure. The North Face of Kangchenjunga remained untried for almost half a century. It therefore seemed that it offered the obvious challenge.

On the 18th we distributed the loads to our forty-seven porters and set off on foot northward along the trail which was to take us successively through the villages of Dhankuta, Hille, Gopha Pokari, Nessum, Doban, Mitlun, Chirawa, Eloch, Amsil Lhassa, Phele, and Ghunza. Our immediate objective was Dhankuta, a rich village nestled on the top of a hill beyond the first crest of Dharan. The Dharan-Doban trail is to eastern Nepal what Interstate 95 is to the eastern U.S. The Nepali freeways, however, differ from those of America. The engines of the vehicles in America correspond to the legs of the people of Nepal. Depending on how strong you are, you become a bike, a car, a truck, or a semi. We were bikes since we carried very little in our packs and progressed fairly slowly—luxurious bikes, however, protecting ourselves from the sun under multicolored umbrellas and still sweating like dogs as we propelled ourselves forward under our own power.
Around a corner I came face to face with a Nepali truck coming down the side of the hill. A woman, very pregnant, was being carried on a man's back in a basket, and he was half-running down the hill toward Dharan. Seeing me sweating my way up the incline with my little pack, he indulgently smiled and welcomed me to Nepal with a bright and loud namaste. 'Namaste,' I answered. This is ridiculous. Here I am panting up this hill with a small pack and this guy comes running down with a woman on his back. We all think we are strong. People back home believe that we are strong. They've got to come here to see what strength really is.

That night we installed our camp on the left bank of the Leoti Kola, right in the middle of a rice field. As the light of the day faded away, the flames of a fire danced on the hillside of the opposite bank of the river. They leaped through the darkness of the night, growing larger, at times engulfing whole trees. Farmers were burning a hillside to reclaim land to plant more terraces of rice.

Up at 6:30 a.m. and back in the groove of the trail by 7:30—I used ski poles, even in the absence of snow. At first my British friends laughed at me, but soon Peter was trying out a pair himself. Peter had a quote to fit every situation. When he talked, he carefully searched for the proper adjective, the exact expression. He often selected a word I did not know. And when I asked for an explanation, I heard another of the same. He seemed to have something to offer. Perhaps I would learn from him during this trip.

Many people along the trail could not help laughing at us. In their eyes we must have looked comical with our light packs and strange gear. By 12:30 we had arrived in Dhankuta. From my diary:
Joe, Peter, Nima Tenzing, and I are sitting at the foot of a tree. A group of children and adults have gathered around us. I am buried in a book. Slowly I lift my eyes and they fall into Nima Tenzing's face, who bursts into laughter. I laugh back at him and all the village people spontaneously burst into laughter. Soon we are all laughing. I have no idea why we laugh. We just do.

There was a generation between our two Sherpa friends Nima Tenzing, who was in his late fifties, and Ang Phurba, our sirdar, in his thirties. Nima looked like an older guide of the Compagnie des Guides de Chamonix, a happy well-established Sherpa, laid back from his previous successes through life, including a stint with the first successful Kangchenjunga team of 1955. When he smiled his whole Mongolian face wrinkled and smiled too. He must have been a lucky man if I was to believe the French saying that your luck in life depends on the space between your two front teeth. Nima looked satisfied and at peace with himself, a very friendly and communicative older guide from the mountains of Nepal.

Ang Phurba, now in his thirties, had the determined look of the younger guides of Chamonix. He was making it for himself and his family, eager, willing, and ambitious, always looking around with a quick analyzing glance. A reserved smile sharpened the lean features of his European look. Alert and always on the move, Ang Phurba was a bright example of the younger guides of Nepal.

That night we sited our camp above Dhankuta and I wrote:
Kami, our cook, is peeling potatoes by the fire.
Thirty loads are spread all over the ground.
Soft is the light of day at 5:30.
Peter reads Goodbye to All That by Robert Graves.
The smoke from the fire blows in my face and makes me cough.
Lynyrd Skynyrd's music blares from Joe's tape.
Nepali music competes from Mohan's radio.
Two birds circle on the hill above the banyan tree.
'What is that song, Joe?'
'Free Bird.'

Morning, 8:00. We were on a long crest between Dhankuta and Hille. We passed by a house on the downhill side of the crest. Western music filled the Nepali air and poured from a radio inside, 'Goodbye, my friend, it's hard to die!' We all burst out laughing. It was so easy to release tension at the slightest provocation.

When I climbed to the top of a small pass to look northward, I could make out the sharp pyramid of Jannu for the first time and the summital peak of Kangchenjunga. I yelled to Pete and Doug, who were walking on the trail ahead, but they were too far away to hear. Already at our altitude of 6,000 feet it was windy and crisp. Looking up toward Kangchenjunga all wrapped in a mass of swirling clouds, I knew it had to be cold up there at 28,000 plus.

Moving down the trail from the pass, a powerful young locomotive in shorts caught up with me. Clean-cut, muscular, and effervescent, it was our liaison officer.

'Then if you like Nepal, why do you come here for climbing?' he asked with a broad smile.
I smiled back at him. 'That’s just the excuse.'
'I do not comprehend that,' he said, assuming an air of seriousness.

Mohan spoke with a strong retroflex accent and a demonstrative inflection, executing an array of gestures, sometimes giving the appearance of a clown. That night we dined to the music of Sonny Rollins.

'Mohan, how do you like this music?'

He responded with a studied grandiloquence: 'In such music, in such art, killing cares and grief of heart.'

Poor Mohan blushed when we all cracked up.

Later he discoursed on backblasting, which we could not at first make out. But we soon understood that he spoke of farting. Nepalese people, he said, were very much ashamed of backblasting, so much so that they always went far away to do it. He said, 'Got fart.' And seeking clarification we asked if gods like Vishnu or Krishna farted. 'If they do,' he explained, 'there are strong winds on earth and rain all over.'

Five more days to Ghunza, the last village before base camp, and Doug posed an interesting question to Peter.

'If we were the last four people on the face of the earth, would we still do it?'

'A stupid question,' answered Peter. 'There would be a lot more challenge elsewhere.'

But I did not think it was a stupid question, nor did I consider it a clever answer.

One night in the Tamur Valley the topic of conversation shifted to marriage and honesty. We talked of telling the truth and of giving our thoughts up to our loved one. Could a relationship be imagined where it would be possible to tell the whole truth and even half-formed thoughts?
Or would that invariably deteriorate to a point where the complete truth could no longer be shared? I wrote in my diary:

*When I think of you,*
*I see the cave of Ali Baba—*
*Filled to the brim.*
*Which is impossible to empty,*
*Because it fills itself.*

Along that trail Doug, Peter, and I left camp to do some bouldering. We found a big boulder with a smooth slab, which I climbed by running up its side, hooking on to it with my fingertips, and then struggling to mantel over the top. There was an easy exit slide down the face. I climbed down and climbed back up and soon Peter too was on top. I playfully nudged him down the exit, but he slid out of control and landed in the grass. At the time his left foot did not seem too bad, but an hour later he could not put it on the ground. He had pulled a ligament, and I was responsible.

That night in Chirawa our camp was set upon a grassy saddle in the midst of luxuriant vegetation, colorful with lights and loud with noises. The Tamur River roared its life blood through the jungle forest. It was a peaceful evening, except for Peter’s foot now bathing in a bucket of warm saltwater. He and I exchanged a look and I understood that we both hoped that tomorrow would bring him back to his feet.

An offer of hallucinogenic mushrooms was extended to Peter and me and to the others. My intuition told me to back off. But instead of listening, I played the social card.
Nepali music lifted itself up and crawled out of Mohan’s radio. A nut of pain suddenly seized me in the nape of my neck. A hazy curtain rang down in front of my eyes. I shook my skull to dissipate the fog but to no avail. I could not see clearly anymore. The sounds, the smells, my senses were all distorted. Chemicals were at work on the cells of my body and I could not arrest their evil. I longed to vomit, to contribute a share to my body’s natural battle to reject the drug. But I was paralyzed, given to the destructive forces of psilocybin for the length of its duration. I waited anxiously and finally submitted to a most unpleasant and uncontrollable journey through a tortured blackness. I thought of Peter and felt sorry for him, and as I looked at him, I knew he too felt sorry for me for feeling sorry for him. Then I felt sorry for him for feeling sorry for me for feeling sorry for him and on my feelings traveled, on a train bound toward destruction.

Doug came out of the forest and ascended to a boulder where he announced that he had been talking to the trees. ‘It’s all dog-eat-dog out there,’ he said with a demonic smile. A tree in the form of a dog eating another dog in the form of a tree—I tried to envision that. But before the image could completely take shape my thoughts plunged into a deep sea of insanity. Walking into the forest I soon grew frightened by the sinuous leaves and by the flies, so I quickly turned around and scurried back to escape into the comforting peacefulness of my imagination. The trees did not want to let me go. They cast vulgar innuendoes. I began to fight with them to reestablish love above sex, but sex won out in the end and the dogs and the plants intertwined with one another in an inglorious victory celebration. And now the world was drenched in tears and empty of warmth. The long minutes ticked by while I struggled to avoid drowning in a tangible hell.
At last I came out into the light and promised myself never to take such a drug again. And then an important fact became clear. I deeply loved my body for having ridded itself of that intrusion. It knew what was good and what was bad—much smarter than me, seeking only the good while I accepted the bad. In that same instant a revelation dawned—I realized that I had much to learn from my own body.

For four days now Peter had to be carried in a wicker basket by a strong team of three porters, to the village of Ghunza. There we would exchange the porters of the plains for the Sherpas of the mountains. Ang Phurba paid them off and went to the village chief to discuss our needs. Much discussion and negotiation ensued, until finally our porters were selected by the chief, among them many women, even whole families, old people and young alike, fathers, mothers, daughters, and brothers. In the high valleys of Nepal women carry loads every bit as heavy as do men. There is no discrimination there.

We had met a handsome young Sherpani on the trail to Ghunza. She had been with her mother, carrying a load up a steep trail, her forehead beaded in perspiration. I could not see her legs moving under her clothing, only the toes and the heels of her shoes as they appeared and disappeared from under the hem of her dress. Small in height like her compatriots, Dawa had a lean attractive figure and wore clean clothes which fit tightly against her sinuous body in bright coordinated colors. A timid but healthy bright laugh often animated her presence. Her hair was tied up in a chignon, inviting the observer to undo it. She had two smiling brown eyes, as wild and deep as a crevasse, as suggestive and appetizing as a Black Forest Cake, soft and warm as those of a child, and yet as noble
and defying as those of a bronze statue. It was good to see that Dawa was in the crowd of Sherpas. She would carry a charge to base camp with us—a blessing from Buddha.

Monday, April 2: We are back in the mountains. We move between them and they move around us. This has been my first great day. I started up on my exercise program once again, doing vertical with ski poles on 500 meter hillsides to a crest above Kangbachen from where I had a good view of the North Face of Jannu and the two beautiful unclimbed peaks to the west. From my vantage point on the crest, I saw four huge eagles circling in the sky at about 16,500 feet of elevation, some 100 feet above me. I lay down and remained immobile with my camera poised. They circled over me wondering if I was a possible meal. I think Norma is sending some good vibes. I can feel them.

We set foot on the yak pastures of Lhonak with a majestic view of the face of Wedge Peak to the northwest.

Biggest challenges on the way up so far:
North Face of Jannu direct,
West Ridge of Jannu,
North Faces and West Ridges of the two unnamed, unclimbed peaks northwest of Jannu,
North Face of Wedge Peak,
White Wave, with garlands of snow, a fantastic summit—seductive, reminiscent of Chogolisa, well defended with ramparts of seracs and snow flutes.
West of the Tamur River there were also some nice climbing challenges. I made a mental note to seek authorization some day for Drohmo Peak, in addition to Wedge Peak and White Wave, all three unclimbed and forbidden.

That evening in Lhonak I felt an urge to move, to jump, and to run around the environs of our campsite. It was set on flat pastureland spotted with a few rounded boulders and surrounded by grandiose peaks, an ideal gymnasium, with mountainous spectators animated by the movement of the clouds. I did some cartwheels and monkey flips and soon a few Sherpanis joined in, imitating the cartwheels, prodding me to demonstrate again and again. I performed more cartwheels in progression, one after another, turning, jumping, flipping, and stopping dead. I was playing the part of the buffoon and the Sherpanis were enjoying it. Soon two Sherpas joined in, barely daring to lift their legs off the ground. One tried a monkey flip and fell on his back, to the delight of the Sherpanis who now pushed and shoved and encouraged one another to join in. One approached and pushed me from behind for more cartwheels and flips, so strangely pleasant a sensation to be manhandled by a woman. I sensed excitement and electricity in their bodies too and ran after a Sherpani here and one there. But they sprinted away like deer. Four of them ganged up and attacked, pushing me away—I would have to do more cartwheels and flips to satisfy their appetite for more. Too bad my British friends did not care to join in the fun.

After dinner the Sherpanis began to sing and dance around the fire, linking arms in a row, and stepping rhythmically back and forth to the refreshingly simple and repetitive music that filled the air. I made room for myself in the row next to Dawa and joined in the dancing. Her
hair was thick, silky, and clean. I liked the smell of it, knowing that it would rebound if only I were to close my teeth around a tuft of it. Doug also joined in the dancing for a while before moving to his tent. And Gilles and Yannick, although they were not present, I thought of them. I knew they would have enjoyed being there that night.

The 4th of April. We left Lhonak and moved up to Pang Pema on the bank of the Kangchenjunga Glacier—our first view of the great North Face of Kangchenjunga. We all remained silent. A large area of the North Face was hidden behind the South Ridge of the Twins. This would in fact turn out to be the point of attack. We paused to look through the binoculars, then continued on to base camp, anxious to get a better look at our objective.

At an elevation of 16,500 feet, Pang Pema had been the base camp of the 1930 expedition—a flat little prairie with short grass and a few flowers—a nice balcony overlooking the bowl of the Kangchenjunga Glacier. To the east we saw Tent Peak, Nepal Peak, and the Twins, three major summits of the Sikkim Himalayas, demarcating the boundary between Nepal and Sikkim. From our position the face of Kangchenjunga imparted an air of peacefulness and stability. But there was a strong wind pushing clouds around the summit. Perhaps Kangchenjunga would prove to be less tranquil once we became acquainted. Perhaps we too would be pushed around up there.
At base camp we paid off our porters and made arrangements to have wood brought up by yak from Ghunza. Kami and Nima started piling up stones, over which they stretched a large blue tarpaulin. This was to be our kitchen. After giving some thought to the pitching of my tent, I finally oriented it toward Wedge Peak and Kangchenjunga. That way I would have a view of the mountains while reclining inside. I smoothed out the floor, stretched the nylon walls taut, nailed down a peg here, and performed a cartwheel there, audaciously throwing my feet toward the faces of Nepal Peak and Kangchenjunga.

After a good night’s sleep we were up early and off to the North Face. The descent into the Kangchenjunga Glacier and the subsequent walk over the moraines on undulating waves of rock reminded me of the Baltoro Glacier in the Karakoram. Up and down, up and down. Too much for Peter’s injured foot. He turned back.

Snow began to fall and the wind picked up. The rest of us carried on for four and a half hours, building cairns to mark our way. By 12:30 a soupy fog covered the glacier and the weather continued to deteriorate on the bumpy Kangchenjunga runway. We finally dropped our loads at the entrance of the reception bowl of the North Face and turned around.
Kangchenjunga

North(west) Face
Back in base camp, we were exhausted. My headache made me ask just what the hell I thought I was doing here. But the comfort of my sleeping bag brought instant relief. I again felt human. I knew what I was doing.

Two days of rest. Sunday the 8th. A bout of diarrhea confined me to base camp while the others took off to find a suitable spot to site Camp I and to possibly do a recon for a higher camp at the foot of the mountain.

Kansch was obviously going to be a much longer experience than my previous one on Broad Peak. I could smell it in the air. We had already spent twenty-four days since leaving Dharan and had not yet commenced the climbing. In as many days Yannick and I were already off Broad Peak and on our way out of the Karakoram.

The team returned to base camp on Tuesday the 10th with the welcome news that they had found a suitable spot for Camp I and a possible spot for Camp II higher up on a cwm to the left of the face at about 19,000 feet. Doug, Joe, and Peter rested up from their work.

On the 12th day of the month we set out for Camp I, welcomed by fresh snow. It continued snowing throughout the evening and into the night. The incessant rumbling of the avalanches crashing down the North Face of Kangchenjunga, and, to a lesser extent, from Yalung Kang and the Twins, gave testimony to life in the mountains. In equal measure it gave us fuel for our dreams.

On a fateful Friday the 13th, we set out for the face, carrying loads to establish Camp II on the plateau that the others had reconnoitred. A short section of seracs which Peter had baptized Death Alley led up to that flat terrace or plateau, which I called the Northern Cwm. On the cwm we pitched our two tents—Camp II, partially encircled by a horseshoe of mountains, a massive tectonic structure of
snow, ice, and rock. In front of us—the wide concave North Face of Kangchenjunga. To our backs—the Southwest Face of the Twins. To our left—the West Face of the North Col. And to our right, in the distance—the cheek of Ramthong Peak at the extremity of the western arm of the Kangchenjunga Glacier. Some 9,000 feet of vertical separated us from the high point on the summital pyramid of Kangchenjunga at 28,207 feet. The ridges of Kangchenjunga, unlike those of so many other mountains, do not slope down from its summit to meet the valleys below. Rather, a high complex of horizontal upper ridges extend for miles before they fall downward at its extremities. The summital pyramid sits atop the huge massif extending in three directions: west, north, and south. To our right the West Ridge moved from the Main Summit to the West Summit at almost 27,900 feet. Past the West Summit, known as Yalung Kang, the ridge stays high and leads to Kangbachen at 25,900 feet, before it splits into two ridges which lead to White Wave toward Jannu on the one hand and Ramthong Peak and Wedge Peak on the other. To our left the Main Summit falls down to the North Ridge and continues to the next high point, the Sugarloaf, so-called because it is a rectangular excrescence of rock at 25,400 feet. The depression on the North Ridge, the North Col at 22,600 feet, towered some 4,000 vertical feet above us. It is the bridge that connects the North Ridge of Kangchenjunga with the South Ridge of the Twins to our backs at 24,108 feet, some 5,000 feet above us.

No tiered cake or Schillerlocke—Kangchenjunga was a pastry shop of shelves laden with cakes up to its ceiling. The ceiling was the sky; the icing, the summits; and the shelves, the configuration of the terrain which falls in steps and shelves of ice barriers and rock all the way down to the
cwm. Three shelves span the north flank of the 9,000 foot wall in three major steps, separated by three wide bulging ice terraces. To our right, further west, below the West Summit and toward Kangbachen, the shelves are even more numerous, smaller in size, but more vicious and active.

Frank Smythe, a participant in the 1930 expedition to the North Face had recognized the overhanging glaciers as presenting a formidable impediment to progress on Kangchenjunga.

There is probably no mountain-side in the world which sends down greater avalanches than the north-west face of Kangchenjunga, for ice walls miles in length and hundreds of feet in thickness defend the mountain from attack and cast loose avalanche after avalanche on the glaciers beneath, and woe betide any one who comes within range of this natural artillery.

How to get to the icing of the tallest cake in front of us? Smythe had expressed an opinion in 1930.

It was at once evident that the principal problem of climbing Kangchenjunga was in reaching the north ridge of the mountain. If that could be gained there seemed a fair prospect of getting to the summit, but in order to do so it would be necessary to climb up and over a broken wall of ice some five hundred feet in height.

The three balconies of seracs appeared to give the face a kamikaze air, but I traced out an Alpine line with my fingers.
'Tic, tac, one day here; tic, tac, one day there; tic, tac, a third day there; tic, tac, summit and back there . . . '
'Tic, tac, we don't want to go under the seracs,' my British companions interrupted.

A four day Alpine style ascent to the summit appealed to me. There was the obvious problem of the objective danger from the first barrier of seracs on the lower section. This was essentially the line that was taken by the international team of G. O. Dyhrenfurth in 1930 except for one difference. His team had made the mistake of trying to 'climb up and over a broken wall of ice some five hundred feet in height' and in the process had lost the Sherpa Chettan. In those days, exposure time was much greater than it is today. The difference is due to modern ice climbing gear and technique. The first barrier of seracs could be detoured on the left via some steep ice slopes, and then, crossing back to the right to the top of the serac barrier, one could establish a first bivouac above. Thence there were two solutions. One, to rejoin with the North Ridge via some snow slopes leading up to 23,000 feet, just below the Sugarloaf, then to carry on to the summit via the North Ridge, a longish project; the second solution, straight up the North Face via a section of steep mixed climbing below the Sugarloaf and then diagonally right to set foot on the top of the second shelf of ice for a potential second bivouac around 24,000 feet. From there, one could avoid the third barrier of seracs and climb left up an open chute to the foot of the pyramid below the Main Summit, bivouac at 26,000 feet and then carry on up the snow bands to the top of the summit the next day and back to the third bivouac site and perhaps further down. In all, a four day climb to the top.

I wanted to transpose what Yannick and I had done on Broad Peak, to do a quick clean ascent of the face. The possibility was there to try. And yet, as tempting as the
Alpine line was to me, it did not appeal to the others, perhaps because it involved several hours of exposure under the first wall of seracs; perhaps it was because they had had no experience Alpine styling an eight thousander.

To bypass the seracs altogether would mean a long detour up the West Face of the North Col. From there one would proceed up the North Ridge all the way to the summit. From the North Col to the summit, the angle did not appear difficult. But the climb from the Northern Cwm to the North Col was another story. It looked like the Couzy Spur on the North Face of *les Droites*, but here finishing up at 22,600 feet, over 3,000 feet of steep mixed climbing, definitely unsuitable for an Alpine style ascent. If the others were uncomfortable with my Alpine style line, I felt equally uncomfortable with the uninspiring route up the North Col.

It is in fact interesting to compare our decision to forego the obvious route on the face for the North Col route with the decision taken by the Dyhrenfurth party of 1930. Frank Smythe recorded the decision in his book *Kangchenjunga Adventure*.

We stepped on to a level terrace of snow... What we saw was doubly disappointing. Before us, the glacier rose in unbroken snow slopes set at a moderate angle, yet steep enough to obscure all but the crest of the ridge connecting Kangchenjunga to the Twins—the ridge we must gain. But what was visible was very unpromising. Here were no easy rock shelves and snow slopes, but sheer ice-armoured precipices. Only the face directly beneath the highest summit of Kangchenjunga seemed to offer any hope.
... at last we could see the whole of the face separating the North Ridge from the Eastern Tributary Glacier. Our hearts—I know that mine did—sank, as we gazed at it. There was no question of climbing it [the North Col route]. The only possibility, if 'possibility' it can be called, was directly over the ice wall, under the face of Kangchenjunga.

When Smythe and others of the Dyhrenfurth team saw the route up to the North Col, they dismissed it, opting for the exposed route on the face, just as I had done. My British friends, however, dismissed the latter, opting instead for the North Col. The North Face seemed to offer the sportive lightweight challenge. The North Col did not. It carried with it the onus of unenterprising heavyweight work. We were going to force our way up the mountain. We would not be climbing with the mountain as Yannick and I had done on Broad Peak; rather, we would be climbing against the mountain, a different kind of engagement where equipment and time would play a large role. We would, in essence, be assaulting the North Col. And so it was decided that we would lay siege with fixed ropes and fixed camps, finishing up the North Ridge to the summit. This decision taken, we turned back to Camp I.
I remember the time precisely because I looked at my watch. It was 9:20 p.m. when the deafening noise filled the air. I said, 'Fucking hell, what is that?' Zipping open the flaps of the tent Doug and I occupied, and sticking my head out, I saw two heads—Pete's and Joe's—hanging out of their tent. Directly above us like an atomic bomb, a huge white wall hurled itself towards us out of the darkness of the night. No time to dress. Not even time to run. I just zipped up the tent and held onto the poles for dear life. The tent shook furiously; the air reverberated with a violence that seemed to last forever; I could feel snow particles in the air as the avalanche moved closer and closer. My heart pounded faster and faster. Then a calm. I unzipped and outside, a whiteout. Snow particles hung all around like smoke. Our tents were plastered with snow. The avalanche had died a few yards away.

Fifteen hundred feet separated us from the Twins. And that interspace was riven with a number of crevasses which we considered barriers to avalanches. But we were wrong. The avalanche had wiped right over the crevasses.

We settled back down again. I looked at Doug and he looked at me.

'I don't like it.'

'I don't like it either,' Doug retorted, drawing up his lips.

From the tent next door, Peter understated it in typically British fashion, 'Close call!'

No comment from the Sherpa tent.
I tried to relax, but my heart hammered on and I experienced what really happens when one is deeply frightened. In the intestines and the stomach—they tensed up and let go, tensed up and let go—rapid vermiculations. I tried to relax and rest. Twenty minutes later the same noise could be heard coming from the same direction. Not even time to review my life. This time I did not even look outside. From the tent next door I heard a loud ‘fucking hell’ and then I looked at Doug and he looked back at me and we both knew that this was it. The terrain would be all smoothed out and prepared by the first avalanche. Now the second avalanche would wipe right over us.

Noise—wind—the tent began to shake—more peristalsis of the intestines—Notre Père qui es aux cieux ... [Our Father Who art in heaven ...]. For some reason, it stopped short. Probably not enough snow.

‘You've gotta be ready any time, youth,’ Doug said, unsmiling.

I was not ready, that was for sure. And I admired Doug for his approach to death. Still, I wondered if he too might not be ready.

Nerves on top of my skin, the slightest noise fired my cells. Doug's movement in his sleeping bag set me off—small avalanches coming down the North Face of Kangchenjunga, anything. I could not settle down to wait for a third avalanche.

Early the next morning, Ang Phurba and Nima moved our Camp I further from the Twins while we returned to Camp II with loads of personal gear and tents. We established ourselves at 19,000 feet on the cwm in a line below a huge chute coming down from the Twins. The slope seemed too steep to entertain big slides. It would not permit significant accumulation of snow. Still, it would take time to gain confidence in this presumption.
On the evening of the 14th, Nima and Ang Phurba performed a Buddhist ceremony to appease the gods of the mountains, burning juniper bushes and sprinkling libations of rice while chanting the scriptures. We were blessed for the commencement of the difficult task of climbing and fixing the North Col.

Doug broke the trail up the plateau to the bergschrund. I watched his ski pole sounding the deep snow for concealed crevasses. One foot poised above the solid ground, checking—now down and the other up, probing where the ski pole had already found resistance—now the ski pole up testing, followed by the other foot. Then down into the crevasse Doug's arm raced, uncontrollably down, following his ski pole. He had lost his balance, lunged forward, and landed on the opposite firm ground, avoiding a headlong descent into hell.

More wary of hidden crevasses than ever, we tacked up to the bergschrund of the North Col. 10:00 a.m. I volunteered to lead across the bergschrund and up the first expanse of technical climbing. I scrambled into a couloir of solid ice and tractioned up the steep lip. Deep snow had accumulated in the section between the two lips of the bergschrund. It was fragile, a soft cork bounded below by an immense void. In fluff up to my hips, I began ramping across on all fours to the upper lip, where I anchored my axes and reestablished myself by manteling over it. Then up the gullet into the snow slope above, pulling the fixed rope behind—on for another two hundred feet toward a rock barrier.

We had agreed to take turns each day in teams of two while the other two rested. Joe and I were starting while Doug and Peter retraced their steps to Camp I. I used a deadman to fix a belay and Joe jumared up. I moved off again through mixed rock and snow, concentrating on the
snow for swift progression, while fixing pegs in the rock for protection. The quick gain in elevation was uplifting—every move something new. I was there, completely there, mind and body, so small in the immense surroundings, yet so much a part of them.

Another hundred and fifty feet on the incisors of my crampons. Another belay and on for a third pitch in sections of ice adjacent to rock. The plastic boots were warm, surprisingly so, and provided a good base for my feet. I installed another belay and fixed the rope. Joe again jumared up with the remaining fixed rope. Then he moved into the lead in similar terrain. Another hundred and fifty feet. Another belay.

By 3:00 p.m. it had started snowing. We agreed to call it quits for the day and hustled back to Camp I where we found Peter and Doug worried about our supply of rope. Only 1,500 feet in addition to our three climbing ropes. We estimated from pictures just how much more would be needed to fix up to the North Col and found that it would take every bit we had and more. Nothing to do but send Ang Phurba down to the Czech team on Jannu to bargain for more rope. I wrote:

_Snow late into the night. More avalanches. Always the same nervous reflex. The thunder of the noise increases, comes closer, and disappears. I try to convince myself that our camp is in a safe spot, but I know it is only in the safest spot, equidistant from the foot of the Twins, the North Face of Kansch, and the seracs to the left of the North Col. It seems that we’re inside a bucket—snow slides all around us all the time._
On the 17th Doug led through a steep section of rock via a rock ramp and I watched him through binoculars. Even so, it was not until the next day that I could appreciate the difficulty of his pitch. The lines followed a natural crack running up a black striated rock band. Bulges of steep climbing led to three slabs requiring laybacks and hard mantels. Steep névé separated the rock moves. Joe and I continued the next day, climbing difficult pitches of mixed snow and ice. Joe led two pitches and then I took over to lead three. A tricky traverse over a thin shield of black ice which covered a rock slab under an overhanging rock was tiring and precarious. The ice was brittle and hard. We heard a familiar sound close by. Up on our left, coming from the top of the Twins, a huge slice of cake tottered and cascaded down towards Camp II. I followed its trajectory with my camera—3,000 feet on a layer of air. It hit the plateau below and wiped across our tracks, carrying on all the way to Kangchenjunga where the clouds of snow splashed up like smoke on the North Face. That evening we crossed the path of the slide to find that a thousand feet of our tracks had been buried in compact snow the consistency of concrete.

We watched Doug and Pete through the binoculars the next day as they fixed another 450 feet of rope and then we prepared a ratatouille niçoise for their return. Exhausted from the day’s work, they appreciated our concoction, just as we had theirs the day before.

We now had about 2,100 feet fixed on the face of the North Col and were short only 900 feet. There seemed to be a very difficult section just above the point where Doug had stopped that day. It was short, but steep. The angle eased off after it, but the pitch seemed to require the utmost precision and care. We all agreed to take a day off and then go for an all out push on the 21st in an attempt to reach the North Col in one day to establish Camp III.
After a day's rest we struck out again for the face. Ang Phurba and Nima Tenzing approached for the first time. 'It's steeper than the Southwest Face of Everest and there's more ice,' Doug had told Ang Phurba the day before. 'Jumaring is awkward in places, but you'll manage.'

Ang Phurba had already been on the Southwest Face of Everest and had distinguished himself by doing some carries to high camps, as high as Camp VI. Nima Tenzing had not done any technical climbing and was concerned with the prospect of making his way up to the North Col, but he was shyly willing to try as best he could. We counted on both of them to carry two loads of about thirty pounds, the same weight we had packed during our earlier pushes up the route.

Bad weather obliged us to retreat to Camp II. The next day we all came down to base camp to wait out the weather which had turned for the worse. We stayed in base camp three days biding our time, in wait of stable weather.

_Sleet diffuses a pleasant velvet melody through my chamber as it splatters against the sails of my tent. White beams of light penetrate its walls. It is early morning and snowy outside. The weather is bad, very bad. Forced to stay in bed, sleep, read, listen, think, day and night, I close my eyes and sail away, into the wind._
Every morning I peeled myself out of my sleeping bag and zipped open the flap of my tent to be greeted by the inviting face of Wedge Peak. *C'est une face magnifique!* It was not a huge mountain, more of a peak in the true sense of the word, but what a peak! Shaped like a wedge, hence its name—a huge wedge of rock covered with white bluegreen ice, as though squeezed out of a cookie press, with flutes, cornices, and mushrooms of snow and ice—a multifaceted mirror, extremely vertical with long pitches of rock and ice, a few splotches of black ice here and there, technically challenging in the extreme.

I traced out a route with my binoculars. Climb a little moraine on the other side of the glacier, then set foot in a nice *cuvette* of snow leading progressively up to the face, or rather to a rock spur which very quickly vaults like a roller coaster up up up to a long mixed section of ice and rock slabs. About two thirds up the face, be wary of the obvious line that loses itself in a dense forest of vertical ice pitches, overhanging mushrooms and seracs, and snow flutes, which all rise to build a summital cornice, overhanging like the topping of a wedding cake.

*'Putain si c'est beau!'*

I could not see a way out of the face to the summit. What a challenge to try to find a route up the last 1,500 feet. And once on top, another interesting problem: How to come down?

I talked much of Wedge Peak—so much that the others came to call it Norma's face. And I was captivated by Norma's face. A cloud rolled over Wedge Peak and a slice of ice particle rose into the fiery glow of the evening like a curl of golden hair caressing the thin white skin of Norma's forehead. So thin a layer that I could see through it, the blue capillaries conducting the blood around her head—the
warm liquid in motion pushing life through her, a dream made true, my miracle and her image with me, completely alive.

Peter and Joe were reading Jane Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility*. I asked Peter if I could borrow it. I could if I really wanted to, but I would not understand. I always thought of myself as sensitive and did not understand what there was about sense and sensibility that could not be felt. If the book made sense and its author was sensible, anyone who was sensitive ought to be able to sense it. Peter’s idea of understanding did not make sense to me, nor did it seem sensible.

Ang Phurba returned with the much needed rope, which he had wheedled from the Czechs for our small, but precious, bribe—a whisky cake. The six of us left base camp for Camp II, with a brief stopover at Camp I for a spot of tea. Joe and Peter came to our tent for dinner over which we mapped strategy for the coming days. We would rest the next day and pack carefully for the push to the North Col. Enough food for a week would be needed, along with gas stoves, gas cartridges, and gear. The most efficient tactic would be for two of us to quickly jumar up the fixed rope and climb the difficult section, finishing up on the col while the others carried heavier loads. Since Peter could not lead because of his foot, the lot fell to Doug and me.

The next day Doug and I were off, followed by Ang Phurba and Nima Tenzing. Doug carried a light pack with a stove and a canteen of water together with a few odds and ends. I carried two Czech ropes across my shoulders and broke the trail in a crusty layer of snow which had fallen during our absence. Doug finished up to the bergschrund and then up the ropes we jumared, gaining
elevation fast. Six hours later, in the early afternoon, we were at the top of the fixed rope where we had left technical gear, equipment, and food on the edge of an ice slope which now reared up into a steep vertical section of rock before angling into the chutes which led to the pass. The section was extremely intimidating, the most difficult of the route, and I would have deferred to Doug had he been eager to undertake it himself.

'Well, Doug, you want to lead it?'

'It's all yours, youth,' he responded in his deep voice.

And so it was decided. Straight above us the rock band was without hope, no cracks, no holds, no projections. The way up ought to be to the right. Doug gave me a tight rope and I came around him, climbing diagonally up the slope, cramponing on brittle blue ice. Luckily there was a small crack in which softer ice allowed me to get a good anchor hold with my axe and hammer. I followed it, but soon the crack disappeared and I found myself at the extreme corner of the ice ramp, bounded below by over 2,000 feet of nothing. About fifty feet from Doug's belay, I protected myself with a drive-in, which I was able to hammer in only halfway before it struck rock. The ice was brittle and steepened as I edged towards the only weakness across the rock band, a vertical chimney. The brittleness and fragility of the thin layer of ice over the face required extreme caution. Every rockhold sloped the bad way, downward. Left hand with axe biting a precarious hold in a crack full of ice—right hand trying to gain some leverage from a small downsloping hold which I could feel only by removing my gloves—two points of the crampon of the left foot anchored half an inch in brittle ice which I had to kick three times—right foot grasping to find friction against the rock slab, I inched along, cautiously, on a razor blade of equi-
librium and balance, body molded against the mountain. Another forty feet of such gymnastics and for the first time I was in a position where I thought a peg could be driven into a thin crack in the rock overhead. But to extract the peg from the karabiner which was clipped to my harness, I had to hang heavy on the ice axe in my left hand—excruciating at a height of 22,000 feet. With every hit, I had to compensate with my left foot so as not to lose my balance. At length I was happy to have a peg in and it did seem like a good peg. At least I had some protection, but the unreal climbing was only just beginning.

I traversed on a thin ledge about three feet leftward and found a good handhold far above me with my ice axe. I grasped it by pulling up, gaining balance with my right hand and dropping the ice axe from the sling on my wrist. I then quickly grabbed the hold with my left hand and moved my right hand to the same hold, where I found myself completely extended—a body on a rack. Commitment! Let one hand go now and I would fall since my feet no longer supported me. And a fall here was forbidden. There was only one way out—up. My hands were cold and much of their tactile sensitivity had already ebbed away. Stomach, knees, nose, shoulders, everything possible to gain an extra inch. Momentum and continuous motion, that was the key to a successful mantel. But they were not available to me at 22,000 feet without oxygen. So it was twenty mantels, one after the other, one for every two inches, with rests after every bit of upward progress.

I finally pulled my body over the solid ledge to find that it was an illusion. It was an unstable wedge of rock. My lungs heaving, my hands freezing, I had to rest on it nonetheless.
Recuperation. Time to tackle the chimney! The rock walls on either side of it were smooth—very difficult to get into a bridge position, a *grand écart.* With my right hand I anchored an axe into the icy back of the chimney and assumed the bridge with one knee against the left wall, right foot kicking into the ice, and left hand palming cold rock above. Forcing my back against the right wall, I slowly started backing up the chimney. Moaning out loud seemed to aid my progress. *'C'est dingue, c'est monstre dur!'* What did Doug think of my noisy acrobatics? I even surprised myself. But I needed every bit of help that I could get.

Extruded from the chimney, I sat down on its right wall and rested, then onto easier terrain for another twenty feet to a small platform. I had led with two ropes, a yellow one nine millimeters in diameter for protection and a white one to pull up the pack. I tied both to a sling and yelled, 'Off belay!'

Above me the climbing was easy mixed for about eighty feet to a terrace at the foot of a chute. Doug jumared up the yellow rope with a heavy pack, taking time because of the steepness of the pitch. He also had the extra task of pulling a second pack on the white rope. I took up the slack and as the pack rose through the chimney on the white rope, several rocks dislodged and tumbled down our route.

*'Rock, rock!'* Doug shouted down to the others.

He then headed up toward the terrace, while I rappelled down the chimney to pick up my pack. I then had to turn around and jumar back up the difficult pitch. I was tired but it gave me pleasure to retrace and survey my previous moves, now with the comfort and safety of the fixed rope and the jumars.
When I pulled up on the terrace beside Doug, a pan of freshly melted snow awaited me. He had prepared some orange drink and we swallowed it with eagerness. Just what the doctor ordered!

It was 4:00 p.m. and we were still far from the col. The weather was deteriorating and a bad situation was developing. We considered our predicament. Ang Phurba had already turned around and Joe and Pete were not yet in the picture. Time was running short. I would try to fix up to the col quickly while Doug belayed me. I took off for the terminal chute toward the pass, this time carrying my pack. The climbing was not too difficult but the pressure of time was. I had to move fast. Hastening, I carried on without protection—no ice screws, pegs, or slings. The pack was too heavy to allow rapid movement, so I secured it on a snow stick. It had begun to snow and the wind was blowing hard. Kicking steps in the terrain, I finally ran out of rope some ninety feet below the col. Another belay around some stable rocks and Doug began jumaring up, while I rappelled down to retrieve my pack from the snow stake. We met on the rope and talked quickly.

Two tasks to accomplish. First, get to the col and find a suitable bivouac spot. Second, get the equipment there—a problem since Ang Phurba had not brought his load up and the others had not shown up yet. How could we best accomplish these goals, just the two of us, before the storm got worse and darkness set in? Doug would go down to the foot of the chimney pitch to pick up Ang Phurba's pack and check on Joe and Peter, while I took his, which contained a tent. I would then continue up to the col and try to find a suitable bivouac spot there where I would pitch the tent or begin digging a snow cave.
Doug handed over his pack and started rappelling down. Leaving my original pack behind on the snow stake, I jumared back up to the high point and secured Doug's pack after pulling out some of the Czech rope. I tied the rope to the anchor point and cautiously climbed up alone, autobelaying and hoping that the col would not be a knife blade ridge or a narrow cornice. About ten feet below the col, I spotted a rock wall with an alcove just beneath it, a stroke of luck because the wind was now gusting. I secured a piton firmly in the rock and fixed the rope. Now turn around again and go back for Doug's pack, which contained the tent. One more time down the fixed rope I went, then back up to the bivouac spot, this time with the heavy pack.

I started digging the snow out from under the boulder to enlarge a platform for the tent. Darkness was almost upon me and I had to work fast. After I finished digging, I took off my mitts to assemble the aluminum poles. My hands began to lose all feeling. The tent was flapping wildly in the gusting wind. I knelt on it and worked numbly to insert the poles, putting tension on it with my knees and keeping it as close to the ground as possible. The wind wanted it badly. I wanted it worse. Hard work. At last it was together and in place.

Now I could make out two bodies jumaring at the foot of the terminal slope. I unclipped the jumars from the fixed rope, ran the rope through the karabiner of my harness, jammed another karabiner across it to use as a brake, clipped my protective sling to the rope, and started rappelling down toward them with the intention of picking up my original pack. Since I was topmost and Doug second, I took his pack (originally Ang Phurba's), Doug took Joe's, and Joe returned for mine a few feet below. A while later
the three of us were up by the tent. Doug was exuberant to see the work accomplished. He gave me a kiss and said, 'All right kid!' then slid into the tent.

The weather had gone bad. I thought of the three others. Decidedly unlucky, Peter had gone down after one of the rocks which had been dislodged from the chimney hit him on the wrist. Ang Phurba had also turned back. Nima had dumped his load when he encountered an awkward traverse after jumaring 900 feet up the face. Meanwhile the wind had picked up and the tent was shimmying. We cooked some tomato soup and freeze dried shrimp creole and were not unhappy to listen to the symphony outside.

An uncomfortable night—the three of us stuffed into a two man tent like sardines in a can. The floor sloped downwards lengthwise and assumed the shape of a bowl breadthwise. The wind continued to lash the walls of our tent, causing them to scream in our ears, awakening us throughout the night. To make matters worse, all this buffeting was interspersed with repeated reproaches from Joe to remain still. He was suffering from a headache.

It was still snowing the next morning when Doug returned from wringing out his bladder. He had found a nice vacuum spot on the Sikkim side of the col which seemed like an ideal spot to site Camp III.

Looking toward the North Col from Camp II earlier, we had thought it a sharp pass. Now, to our surprise, we found it to be a huge saddle, much like a giant mushroom growing on the crest of the ridge. The winds were predominant from the Nepali side, where we had been climbing, and they had clearly pushed the snow toward Sikkim, molding cornices on the other side of the pass. The vacuum spot was about fifty feet down into Sikkim, just
between the point where the wind blew over the pass to form an eddy of snow below.

We moved into the vacuum to establish Camp III. With the aid of a shovel and our axes, we dug snow holes to accommodate two tunnel-connected tents. As we worked, a huge roar wrenched our necks leftward. On the Northeast Face of Kangchenjunga a serac avalanche exploded down the Bauer Spur, somersaulting down 6,000 feet of virgin terrain.

The clouds filled the valleys on the Sikkim side of the col, and yet we could see far away into China behind the Twins. The Tibetan plateau, dry and flat, contrasted sharply with the Himalayas, rugged and dense.

Toward Nepal, looking west, we saw the Kangchenjunga Glacier, meandering between Wedge Peak which was almost level with us, and the Twins, Nepal Peak, Drohmo, and others. The valleys far into Nepal were iced with a foamy layer of vanilla clouds stretching far into the slightly bowed horizon.

Grandiose Sunday the 30th. Impressive weather. I wrote in my diary.

*Shivering in the cold breeze of the morning, standing side by side, Doug and I marveled at the spectacle around us. The rays of sunlight progressively moved over the surface of the earth, bringing life in the form of a huge beam of energy. We stood on the ridge, which seemed to form a natural wall between Sikkim and Nepal. On the eastern side, a mattress of clouds hung over Sikkim, where a few summits peered through—anoter planet. On the western side of the pass, Nepal was now free of clouds and radiating its summits in the tender yellow of the mor-*
ning sun—Makalu, Everest, and Lhotse, the three major hats on the landscape. Soon the dry plateau of Tibet revealed its ochre color, delimiting the mysterious southern border of China. In the sky a few stars still glittered. On the earth the contrast between the power of that sunrise and the shivering of my tiny insignificant body on the North Col, a part of Kangchenjunga, and Kangchenjunga a part of the earth, and the earth now animated by the sun, suddenly awakened in me a flash of understanding—I was part of the whole too.

We walked back to the tents without saying a word. While Joe rested with a severe headache, Doug and I decided to go down below the chimney to pick up two packs that had been left behind. The thought of going back down only to jumar back up made me tired before I even started. At the foot of the chimney we bumped into one of the packs. Doug concealed a piece of candy in one of his fists and said, 'Pick a hand. The one who picks the candy goes down for the other pack.'

I went down for the other pack and then yo-yoed back up the last portion of the rope, my fourth time in two days. Peter and Ang Phurba arrived in Camp III in the afternoon; Ang Phurba carried up a cylinder of oxygen to be cached on the col as an emergency precaution. Peter was back in action, his wrist willing to jumar back up the 3,000 feet of fixed rope.

The next morning, Joe's headache had not lifted. At 23,000 feet a headache can be a prelude to serious ailments such as cerebral oedema. The only thing to do if it persists is to lose elevation to recover. Consequently Joe decided to return to Camp II, heartbroken because it meant that he would miss the summit.
Doug, Peter, and I were ready to continue up the North Ridge and after a reconnaissance to leapfrog to the summit. While Joe slid down the fixed ropes, we stepped up the roller coaster ridge—an immaculate denticulation of snow in the direct course of the strong winds coming out of the west. My limbs stiffened by the lashing gusts, I was feeling good and led all the way, tracing out a route along the virgin humps and ramps, kicking the metallic teeth of my feet into the icy surface of the ridge. I pushed our route along the huge blade stretched between the Twins and Kangchenjunga, an airy spine bounded by thousands of feet of space on both sides. Still aiming skyward, we attained the foot of the Sugarloaf and fixed our packs to a peg on the rock wall. The steep rocky step could be negotiated by detouring to the left via some snow slopes leading to the scree terrace above. And that was good news. Content with our reconnaissance, we turned around and started our descent to Camp III. I freed myself from the unnatural suture that stitched the three of us together, preferring to downclimb alone, in a most natural way, the way I was accustomed to in the Alps on just such occasions.

'This is a big mountain, Georges. You don't do things like that on a mountain like this,' someone said.

I did not see what the size of the mountain had to do with it. No rope—no possible entanglement between rope and crampons. No rope—no unexpected pulling and hence no loss of balance. No rope—no endangering the lives of the others in case of a personal fall. No rope—no useless maneuvering. No rope—no burden. Only concentrate on the terrain ahead and the moves, a gain of safety and time. I downclimbed on my own. A silent stop—take in the forms, the colors, and the scent of our mountain with its skies. Seeing it made it beautiful.
Still roped together, Doug and Peter pulled alongside and we downclimbed side by side, finally arriving at Camp III. I brought some freeze dried peaches back to life that evening and we all pitched in to whip up various and sun-dry items for dinner. In the coming days we would try to leap to the summit in two or three bounds, an appealing and joyful prospect, although spotted by the fact that Joe would not be with us.

On 2 May we returned to the north wall of the Sugarloaf and spent three hours digging a snow cave. Agreeing to fix the wall of the Sugarloaf on the following day, we retired to our grotto where we resurrected more peaches. The next morning Doug led up the Sugarloaf, fixing 500 feet of rope. The top of the scree terrace was surprisingly level and led right to the summital pyramid. All technical difficulties were now behind us—better yet, below us, forgotten. We needed only a spell of fair weather come the following two days and the summit would be in the pocket.
However well laid plans may be, the weather will always have the last word. Terrific winds and blizzards smite the high peaks of the Himalayas; six feet of snow may fall within forty-eight hours on Kangchenjunga; the temperature may drop twenty or twenty-five degrees below zero Fahrenheit, and woe betide the party that is caught on the upper part of the mountain in a blizzard; they will be lucky if they escape with nothing worse than serious frostbite.
Frank Smythe, *The Adventures of a Mountaineer*

Although Smythe had failed to attain the upper reaches of Kangchenjunga, he had, nevertheless, written the script which was to be played out some fifty years later. We left very early on the 4th with the intention of forcing the route to a bivouac at a high point from which we could go to the summit and return to the bivouac site the following day, carrying with us a tent, food, stove, gas cartridges, and gear to last three or four days. Jumaring up the step, we exited on the scree terrace atop the Sugarloaf, a huge balcony of rocks and snow. The wind was blowing hard at 26,000 feet, so hard that stones were flying in gusts of sixty to seventy miles per hour. Often we stopped to wait for a lull in the wind before forging ahead. Finally I suggested that we cross over to the Sikkimese side of the ridge just left of a huge rocky outcrop I had dubbed the croissant. We were...
sheltered there as I had expected we would be and
descended some fifty feet, fixed a deadman, and dug a plat-
form in the airy ice to pitch our double layered tent, secur-
ing it with snow sticks, ice screws, and ice axes. If only the
winds on the Nepali side would subside during the night,
the summit would be within reach the following day.

At 1:00 a.m. we were awakened by increasingly tur-
bulent winds, this time blowing in from Sikkim. It seemed
as though neither side would have us, and we now wished
to have neither of them. We would have to get dressed and
be prepared to evacuate quickly, before things got out of
hand.

As I pulled on my overboots and started packing up my
sleeping bag, the central armature of the tent snapped,
violeently. The fabric flapped about wildly, beating out an
unpleasant rhythm. We took turns holding the broken sup-
port to provide room to finish up with the dressing. Strips
of fabric began to tear from the outer layer of the tent, and
even with gloves the support became too cold to hold. I
somehow fastened on my crampons and glanced at Doug,
who was closest to the entrance. He got out of the tent first,
but as he exited the empty space he left behind gave fuel to
the voracious appetite of the wind and disappeared. The
tent began to move away from the face and I thought for a
split second that Peter and I were being taken away with it,
but Doug was holding on outside. Once outside I began to
fully comprehend the seriousness of our predicament. The
cold was more than intense and the wind was gusting at
hurricane force. I crouched down to avoid being blown off
the ledge. In a rage the wind violently ripped the goggles
from my face, snatching them away. I closed my eyes to
protect them from the ravage of the ice particles which
fired from all directions. When I finally opened my eyes, I
felt the tears freeze and quickly moved my eyelids back and forth in an effort to defrost the pupils.

We were all tied to the rope anchored to the deadman above. Now, all together, we jumped on the tent to collapse it and pin it down. Then with a knife we quickly cut it open to extract our packs. Finally, we severed the nylon slings which held it and then it was up and away, hoisted into Sikkim by our angry enemy the wind.

Doug and Peter still had their crampons to put on, and Doug was having difficulty buckling his straps. Meanwhile he had taken off his mitts.

'Doug! Put your mitts on!' I screamed.

He did not respond and continued working barehanded. It was now every man for himself. *What a stupid place to die!* We had to do something now and do it fast. Already my fingers and toes had gone numb. I could not activate the blood.

We must have been fifteen feet below the deadman which itself was another thirty or forty feet below the crest. If we were to survive, we would have to cross over the ridge and cower down on the Nepali side.

With my crampons already on, I went for the pass in an attempt to get a rope across. The first hurdle was to reach the deadman. To move when the wind was gusting would have meant failure—no, worse—destruction. Even anchored with both axes and crampons on all four points, I found it hard to maintain my ground. I then tried twice more for the deadman and twice I failed, only to be blown back down the ledge. The wind was gusting in long expirations, punctuated by tiny fragments of less violent time. A calmer moment—I fought my way up the fifteen feet, pausing heavily for two more violent gusts to pass. Reaching
the deadman I pulled up as much slack on the rope as possible, then tried for the pass—once, twice, but now there was no slack in the fucking rope. Nothing to do but come back down to the terrace in the wind where Doug and Peter were finishing up with their crampons. Then together Doug and I made for the deadman, where we dumped our packs in a snow hole dug the day before.

‘Let me try it, Georges.’

Doug went for the pass while I belayed him with the rope. Using both axes, one at a time and moving slowly, he inched his way up. I could just make out his outline at the level of the crest where he could not thrust his head over. He needed more slack. And just as I gave it to him, I noticed that a nut had flown through my hands. It was already six feet above me up in the sky, on the rope. Still Doug needed more slack to get over. It was necessary to pay out the rope through the karabiner to which my pack was tied, in the hole. I untied it and five seconds later a violent wind slammed me hard. At that same instant my pack lifted up, straight up into the sky, and catapulted into Sikkim, doing a loop de loop over my shoulder.

There was no time to think about the pack with all my equipment since Doug needed more slack. He backed up, picked up some speed, and threw his body over the crest like a rag doll—the only way. Up on the ridge, about one hundred and fifty feet to the right of where Doug disappeared, on a rocky section, large slates of rock were mating with the wind, up in space. I thought of my pack: sleeping bag, down boots, down mitts, food, gas, camera, altimeter, . . . —all lost.

Doug would have to fix the rope, and it would have to be less windy on the other side; otherwise there would be little hope. I found myself being pulled. Doug must need
slack right away, so I moved up toward the ridge to give it to him. The more I moved, the more Doug pulled. The more he pulled, the more I moved. He did not need slack; he was belaying me up very tight. I had not even had time to bring up his pack, which was still anchored to the dead-man. In my turn I hurled myself over the pass into Nepal and fought my way down towards Doug. He seemed to be suffering. His hands had been exposed while he held the tent from outside and even more when he worked with his crampons without mitts.

I had already spent considerable time exposing my flesh on the upper section of the ridge, trying first to cross over, then belaying Doug at the anchor. I did not relish more life-threatening exposure. But his hands seemed bad, so I offered to go back to the other side to retrieve his pack and to take the rope to Peter.

I crossed back into the infernal conditions of Sikkim, blinking and squinting without goggles, going blind for a while. At last I picked up Doug's pack and Peter tied onto the end of the rope, happy that we had not forgotten him. We then repeated what I had already been through, forcing our way up and over the crest to join Doug.

On the Nepali side the wind was blowing less strongly, but blowing nonetheless. Down the thirty degree slope, we anchored our axes and exerted all our strength to pull our carcasses down. Climbing down was more like climbing up. I constantly flexed my toes and fingers to activate the bloodflow, blinked my eyes and shielded my face from the snow with my hands. Still my eyeballs jiggled and ached as I struggled down.

We were back on the scree terrace, approaching the step. At the top of the rope on the edge of the Sugarloaf, I felt intense pain in my toes—wooden stubs set ablaze. Good! The blood was returning to my extremities. I would not lose them!
Half an hour later we were in our snow cave at Camp IV examining and fondling our feet and hands. Doug had frostbite on the tips of his fingers. Peter had a toe which would not come back to life and frostnip of the nose. His hands seemed to be okay. My fingers and toes were fine, but I was seeing double. One eyeball pulsated wildly. But I felt good, very good to have come out of the ordeal alive.

* * *

* * *
In Zugzwang

We had experienced violent winds during our previous expeditions but never anything so extreme and life threatening. After some tomato soup we started rappelling down the ropes. Doug's frostbitten hands did not allow him a smooth descent. I carried his pack to Camp II, where we found Ang Phurba and Joe. Joe had already gone down to base camp to recuperate from his headache and returned to Camp II with Ang Phurba. There they had passed a bad night. Even down in Camp II the wind had threatened their tents. All of us returned to base camp that same day—the 5th—arriving at 7:00 p.m. Doug, Peter, and I had downclimbed over five miles of mountain, more than 10,000 vertical feet in one day.

We had already succeeded in forging a new route to the North Ridge via the North Col, and we had reached a high point of 26,000 feet. This high point merged with the route that the Indians had forged in '76 from the Northeast Spur. The remaining straightforward section of the mountain had already been successfully climbed by the Indians. So we wouldn't be doing anything new after our high point. Had the weather been more congenial, or at least less inclement, we would already have been to the summit and back to our tent, or in Camp IV the same day. The only positive aspect of our retreat was the fact that Joe would now be able to rejoin the party for a second bid on the remaining 2,500 feet, assuming, that is, that we all recovered and were granted a spell of good weather.
Doug's and Peter's frostbite turned out to be superficial and my eyes quickly healed. We rested up in base camp, read, kept busy, and in general got on one another's nerves. While Mohan and I played dominoes, I glanced across at Peter, who was involved in a discussion with Joe. I sometimes understood what they said, but I wanted them to tell me what they felt. Their elaborate way of speaking made it difficult for me to grasp the men as a whole. From my diary:

I find that this trip suffers from a lack of humor. Peter and Joe are always plunged into a book, withdrawn unto themselves, or talking seriously. I don't think we've ever played a game together. I brought along a set of dominoes, but dominoes are too foolish, they say. One has the right to think of dominoes as a foolish game, but the game does involve more than just dominoes.

Three days later on the 8th of May, the four of us together with Ang Phurba and Nima Tenzing moved back up to Camp II in good weather. By noon a light snow was falling. Ang Phurba and Nima were instructed to begin evacuating Camp II while we made one last rush for the summit.

The next morning we dawned at 4:00 a.m. and toiled up the cwm in the dark. Because I had lost my pack above the scree terrace, I carried up another sleeping bag and additional gear which the others already had stashed away at Camp III. My pack was heavy. At the foot of the fixed ropes, we found that we were two jumars short. Ang Phurba had forgotten to bring the jumars we had reminded him many times not to forget. We had eight between the
five of us. Two of us would have to jumar up with only one. Ang Phurba would have to have two and Doug would get two because of his frostbitten hands. Who else would get two? Peter, Joe, or me?

Both Peter and Joe were quick to point out that they had already climbed up once with one jumar. Hence they deserved the extra jumar. I had already volunteered more than my share in many ways and decided to stand my ground, for a change. I noted that while they were moving up the rope with one jumar, I was leading on the North Col where I had done three carries to the upper section of the face that same day after having led the hardest pitch on the entire face. In addition, I now carried a heavier pack to replace my lost equipment and sleeping bag. Peter remarked that it was not their fault that I had lost my pack during the storm and Joe said he had carried up my sleeping bag the day I led the difficult chimney pitch with nothing on my back, which I corrected, noting that I had carried two coils of rope across my shoulders. Besides, I had not carried a pack on my back because it had been necessary to fix up the last section with great haste in order to make the North Col before dark—that I not only had led the hardest pitch and made three carries, but that while he was gently coming up with one jumar, I had also dug a platform and installed the tent in a storm. Peter remarked that while I was climbing the difficult pitch I had loosened a rock which had broken his wrist. This entitled him to the two jumars. But if he had broken his wrist, he wouldn't have been present two days later, climbing up 3,000 feet of rope. Tempers were flaring and nerves were on end. The mountain was taking its toll.

I have never approved of the heavyweight mentality which goads one climber to weasel an advantage over the
others. A sensible approach to the jumar problem was for each of us to treat our companions as equals and to resolve the difficulty by drawing straws, which is what I finally suggested. I won the two jumars and moved up the face.

We all yo-yoed back up the fixed ropes to Camp III. Peter and I dug a platform for the tent that Ang Phurba was bringing up. We would spend the night in III and go to IV the following day. On the 10th we left for the snow cave at the foot of the Sugarloaf, as planned, climbing up the ridge in a strong wind. By the time we arrived at the snow cave, we were all spent.

The weather was fine on the following day, the 11th, but we were too tired to launch a second attempt on the summit. The 12th and 13th turned out bad. When we checked the scree terrace above, the wind was whipping up large clouds of snow—too windy to set out.

Biding our time, we lay around in the snow cave, waiting for the weather to break. On the 13th our patience had worn so thin it was on the point of erosion. We must make one last attempt the next day, come what may. Two plans emerged from the discussions: Go for the summit in two steps, digging another snow cave around 26,000 feet, followed by a summit bid on the second day; or one concerted effort with no bivouac. We all agreed on the second option, taking along a snow shovel for insurance. In all other respects we would go light, without sleeping bags and with no planned bivouac.

My idea was to leave on the night of the 13th and climb through the night to have the light of the day to finish up the summit and return to Camp IV. By 6:00 p.m. we left IV according to schedule. Out of the west came three layers of menacing clouds, but by now we had seen so much bad weather that we had no mind for predicting what lay ahead.
I broke the trail to the foot of the fixed rope on the scree step in deep snow only to find that the bottom rope had been swept away by the wind and was now hanging behind a snow flute some sixty feet away. It meant more work. In order to get at the rope I had to perform a steep traverse on blue and brittle ice, just above the overhanging ice wall of the upper lip of a small bergschrund. Joe belayed while I repaired the rope. I then jumared up it, followed by the others and crossed the scree terrace in the dark of the night with only our headlamps to light the way. The weather started to deteriorate as we crossed over, and the wind continued to pick up momentum. Shaking from extreme cold, by 10:00 p.m. we had to stop for tea. By midnight we were at the foot of the croissant around 26,000 feet. We looked for a shelter and finally espied some waves which had been sculpted by the wind on the snowy upper plateau. They looked as though they could be worked into a snow cave, yet I felt the spot to be too windy. Something more protected ought to be found further up, closer to the croissant—the bergschrund of the summital pyramid.

In the dark of night our presence was manifested by the illumination of our helmet lights. Because of the wind, I yelled and signed with my hands my intention to carry on. I took off, climbing for a good half hour. Joe’s lamp steadily followed behind me. He was attached to my rope, or at least I thought so. Moving along the croissant, I soon found its bergschrund and started coiling up the rope. As the end moved into my mitts, I looked hard, but there was no Joe. So the light that followed—what was that? It moved closer and Peter came alongside, coiling up his rope to find nothing at its end either. Doug and Joe had untied back at the snow waves to dig a cave.
I showed Peter the bergschrund at the foot of the croissant, then broke open the upper layer to find that the consistency of the snow below was very soft and hollow. I opened up the crack and got down in it where I began to enlarge its cavity at a point of contact with the rock. Peter soon joined me and we worked together.

It was comforting in the snow cave. We cooked ourselves some tea and talked, concluding that it was more dangerous to remain in it than to move on. It would be too easy to relax in the crack and freeze. So we were off again and tackled the summittal slope of the last pyramid above 26,000 feet, still a good 2,000 feet from the summit. Out of the crack and into the lead, I cramponed up a thirty degree snow slope followed by Peter. If the snow conditions were good, the weather was extremely bad. The wind blew spin-drift into my goggles where it rolled around, tickling the corners of my eyes. The ice again irritated my pupils, and once more my right eyeball pulsated. Peter came alongside me and I saw that his face was all white and hoary.

Progress was now very slow. By 3:00 a.m. we reached a rock band at the end of the snow slope. But because of the bad weather and the dancing snow, we could not see a way through it. We knew this section of the mountain from pictures, but where were we now? Should we traverse further to the right in an attempt to find a chute up through the rock section? Or should we admit that we just did not know where we were? Given a slight improvement in the weather, we could carry on to the summit, but I was now feeling more than fatigue, already far into my reserve.

In the sinister atmosphere of clouds and snow swirling about in the strong wind, for a few seconds, just a few, I caught a glimpse of the summittal towers to our right, enlightened by the moon. Just as suddenly the view disap-
peared behind the clouds. Peter and I waited for the day to break, hoping for the weather to improve. We dug a little platform for our feet, anchored our axes, and started hitting our feet and hands to keep them alive.

'Peter, we can say we've climbed this mountain! We're so close to the summit. I feel like I've already been on top and climbed it . . .

' . . . we're not yet on the summit!' Peter yelled into my face, cutting me short. Suddenly I realized that Peter and I were miles apart. His violent reaction stunned me. It shattered something inside me. Had I committed a crime by telling him my deeper feelings—that I felt we had already climbed the mountain? I had wanted to make him feel good by giving him a share in the effort produced to reach our high point. But he did not think I was talking to him. He must have thought I was talking to the people out there, the crowd for whom a summit is too often climbed. But I was no longer talking about the summit of Kangchenjunga, but my own summit. I had reached it and tried to tell him that. And now we were on a different wave-length, miles apart—a different species. I understood what Peter was concerned about—the glory—because I was concerned about it too. But he probably would have understood me if he had done what I had done on the mountain.

A good hour later, when the day came, we were as blind as we had been during the night. It was foggy, snowy, and windy—a complete whiteout. We would have to return to the bergschrund and wait there to see how things developed. Back in the crack by 4:30 a.m., we cooked some more with the stove which hesitantly responded to the gas that fed it. Peter's face and beard were stuck with ice. I helped him unstick the dust mask glued to his beard. We were both uncomfortable, tired, and cold—miserable.
The weather improved slightly. Coming out of the crack, we saw Doug and Joe on their way up. Peter returned to the womb as I went down to greet them.

'You *%##!*!' Doug growled. 'Never saw a climber in the Himalayas take off like you did the other night. I told Pete and Joe you were impulsive!'

Doug's harsh comment hurt me. It awakened in me a realization that the closer to the summit we got, the higher the egos climbed.

'We went for the summit and couldn't make it,' I told Doug, and that seemed to relieve his anxiety.

There had been an obvious lack of communication the previous night, but no premeditated design to steal away to the summit. In the bad weather, both Peter and I had misunderstood Doug's intentions and had proceeded while he and Joe dug a snow cave. If there was impulsiveness, perhaps Doug's comment could be so interpreted.

We all went down into the bergschrund and talked about the summit bid. Outside the weather was not clearing and we did not have the gear to remain another night. No sleeping bags and insufficient gas. There was no alternative. Our second attempt would have to be scuttled.
Vicarious Victory

Returning across the scree terrace, I sensed what we all felt: So close. Given a spell of better weather to finish up, we would be successful. But the weather did not want to acquiesce. So close were we, yet so far away.

Reaching the snow cave by 8:30 a.m. we dived into our sleeping bags and were lost to physical exhaustion, cold, and depression. Sleep—drink—sleep—eat—sleep—talk, one last time. I had given my best and should now listen to my inner voice which had always guided me safely in the Alps. Something deep inside me said go down. I listened. I distrusted the weather and had already exerted my all throughout the climb. The others would give it one last go, this time adopting the plan we had previously rejected. They would go back to the crack at the foot of the croissant and spend the night there. The next day, weather permitting, they would again go for the summit. If the weather did not break, Kangchenjunga would once again have triumphed.

I would listen to the weather forecast on the radio in base camp and signal with fire on the night of the 15th. One fire would mean average weather the next day. Two would mean very good weather. Three fires would indicate the premonsoon calm. No fire at all would indicate bad weather. I would also send word for the porters to come up from Ghunza on the 19th or 20th so that we would be able to leave on the 20th regardless of the outcome of this last summit attempt. The probabilities of good weather seemed remote since up to then we had had only a few good days without wind.

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So, on the 15th I moved down from IV, shaking hands with the others and wishing them good luck. I carefully downclimbed the ridge to III. Going down alone reminded me of the descent on Broad Peak where I had been very tired and where the downclimbing had been dangerous because of it. Again I was tired and exercised caution. A mistake on the ridge would mean 3,000 feet down the west side. Every step I took facing the slope, I thought of my grandfather, who always laughed at other climbers who moved in this way. Yet I knew he now approved and recognized that it was the right thing to do in consequence of my fatigue and the exposure of the terrain.

I arrived at III by 9:00 a.m. where I brewed up some tea, packed up one of the two tents and some gear, loaded myself with as much as possible to carry down to Camp II. With a forty pound pack, I was soon on the fixed ropes. They were in bad shape, stuck to the face behind a couple inches of ice for half the distance down to the bergschrund. During the past week while we were high on the mountain, the ice around the ropes had melted and frozen over. Autobelaying with slings and downclimbing beside the rope, I freed it with my axe, continuing in this way for about 1,200 feet—strenuous work—four hours of purgatory to reach the begschrund and that still left the flat section across the cwm. The condition of the snow had changed drastically and I sank hip-deep in places, but Ang Phurba and Nima saw me coming and came to meet me on the plateau, fearing that something had happened to the others.

We set off for base camp together, looking back to see if we could catch a glimpse of the three others on their way to the croissant, but saw no one. 6:30 that evening—base camp—rest at last.
7:45 p.m.—I listened to the Nepalese forecast: 'East Nepal, mostly cloudy, with thunder showers in the afternoon.' No, the sky was clear with bright stars overhead. For once, excellent weather seemed to be in the offing. According to the forecast I should light no fires. When the prearranged time came, I lit two fires, consistent with the real weather. It would lift their spirits and they would be able to judge for themselves if the weather turned. At any rate, my fires were not seen, for Doug, Joe, and Peter had not come out of the crack.

The three left the snow crack at 8:00 a.m. the next morning and followed the tracks Peter and I had previously laid. They carried on toward the summit and all of base camp watched them through binoculars. I had a battery of cameras with telephoto lenses aimed at the summit. The weather was crystal clear. It couldn't have been better. I watched for hours, keeping my binoculars trained on my companions, taking many pictures, sharing vicariously in their victory.

By 4:00 p.m. they had reached the little pass to the left of the tower. From that point on the summittal ridge, they joined the route of the first ascent of Kangchenjunga. They disappeared on the summittal ridge around the southern section of the pyramid. I figured they would reach the summit around 6:00 p.m. and looked hard for their return. Around 7:00 p.m. a mass of clouds began to envelop the summit, moving in from the west. Some lightning in the general vicinity and I became frightened they might be struck by a bolt on the summittal ridge. I looked but could not see a soul. Then, just after 7:00 p.m., later than expected, I saw some lights flash, already halfway down toward the snow crack. I counted them. There were more than one, but how many? I could only make out two. One,
two, three—whew, yes, all three were there. By 9:00 p.m. they reached the crack and we exchanged a few signals. By the rapidity of their flashes, I understood that Kansch was in the pocket. The lights disappeared one after another into the darkness of the crack.

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The next day I watched Doug, Joe, and Peter descend from the snow crack to Camp IV where they remained for a while, then down to Camp III where they soon disappeared from view behind the South Ridge of the Twins. I had expected them to come all the way to base camp, but they stopped overnight at Camp II. On the 18th I watched with binoculars until I saw them walking down the Kangchenjunga Glacier toward base camp. I went out to greet them with a bottle of grape juice. Doug approached first, alone, and I met him on the moraine. It was good to see him alive and well. We hugged.

'Why weren't you with us, Georges.'

We both shed a tear and I felt a bit of myself had gone with Doug to the summit. He slowly moved on to base camp, while I walked out to meet Joe and Peter. Twenty minutes later, we met and I gave them grape juice and took Joe's pack. I would have liked to share in their happiness too.

Back in base camp we celebrated with a cake that Kami had made, along with a half bottle of whisky. No one seemed elated about the summit. I asked for a recounting of the summit day, but no one seemed interested in sharing their experiences. Perhaps it had been too deep an experience for me to share, I thought. Perhaps they were just tired. Something, however, something imperceptible, seemed to obtrude below the surface.
The next day Mohan and I walked down to Ghunza, setting a brisk pace, arriving after eight hours. We proceeded to the police station to radio the message of our success to the next town. It took us two and a half hours to send a short message to the outside world.

On one of the trails of the village, a familiar silhouette caught my eye. She walked ahead in the distance, carrying a basket of potatoes, moving with the grace of a panther. It was Dawa, the 'moon', and more mysterious than her name signified. I quickly caught up with her and looked into her almond eyes. No, it was not Dawa. It was another planet, one that I did not know.

'Namaste, didi!'

'Namaste,' she rejoined, with a song in her inflection.

After a night in Ghunza, Mohan and I trekked through a forest of rhododendrons, on our way to the Czech base camp on Jannu. The walk up was a vacation in paradise—flowers teeming along the trail—yellows, reds, purples—moss hanging from the trees, pure lights filtering through. I felt lightheaded. Doug, Joe, and Peter must also experience this forest, I thought.

Mohan and I chatted with the Czechs, who were communicating with their advance team by walkie-talkie. The summit party was just closing in on the summit via the West Ridge. I met friends of Dusan Jagerski, a good friend, whose presence has stayed with me since he disappeared in the Fairweather Range of Alaska in '77. The Czechs offered me schnaps and we drank to the mountains. My comrades invited me to come climbing in the Tatras Alps, and I reciprocated by inviting them to the Mont Blanc Massif.

Returning to Ghunza the rhododendron forest was delightful once again. After the intense exposure to the
white snows of the higher elevations, my eyes sank into the rich verdure and said, 'Thank you, thank you, thank you.' We were back in Ghunza by 3:00 p.m. on the 20th of May where Doug, Peter, and Joe had just arrived with the caravan of porters. They were enjoying a cup of tea with Dawa’s parents.

A few days later as we walked down from Ghunza toward Amsi Lhassa, our Sherpa team was conspicuously incomplete. Ang Phurba joined us on the trail; a few hours later, Nima Tenzing and Kami turned up. They were all a trifle tipsy, perhaps from a last dip of chang and tumba back in Ghunza where I supposed they had toasted their departure with friends earlier that day. Asked why their eyes were so shiny, they reacted shyly and did not wish to elaborate.

'Important business, important business,' Nima whispered.

I knew that something had transpired in Ghunza, but what I was never to learn. Everyone in our group, the Sherpas and the climbers included, had been taken by the charm of some of the Sherpanis, particularly by Dawa. Perhaps there had been some difficult separations between our Sherpa friends of the Khumbu Valley and the Sherpanis of Ghunza.

A few days later as we walked out I again inquired about the summit day. I asked Joe and Peter if I might read their diary descriptions of the summit. No, the diaries were too personal. Was anyone willing to talk about the summit? Was anyone willing to share? It seemed unfair.

Finally, Peter gave in and related some impressions: He had never before been so high without oxygen and as he moved up the summital ridge, he had expected something to happen, a hallucination. But nothing happened.
Suddenly he was there and felt surprised to be on top, except for the few feet that were left untrodden in deference to the religious significance that Kangchenjunga held for the Buddhists. He was happy to have made that last effort to go for the summit. To the north, huge towering clouds could be seen over Sikkim through which Kabru reared its head. The West Summit and South Summit of Kangchenjunga could also be seen. The West Summit appeared difficult from the north; the South Summit looked more feasible from its south flank. Jannu then appeared through the clouds. In the background the Everest-Lhotse group was visible with Makalu enveloped in storm clouds. Coming down, Peter had seen a large black crow fly past the summit. An omen?

Peter seemed happy reliving those moments on the summit. But returning to the present seemed to pose a problem for him, a concern which I still could not comprehend, but one which Joe also displayed.

By the 25th we were in Doban. I walked along the path which meandered along the river bank. A brahma bull, crowned with a large hump and bejeweled with an impressive dewlap, savored a cud of juicy fresh grass. He found barely enough time to breathe between each new mouthful. As I rewound my camera to take a shot of that beautiful white beast, I looked up to see two enormous horns on their way towards me. I had had no time to move, but the big head stopped short by only ten or fifteen feet and slowly lifted itself up in a plaintive moo, casting two dark brown eyes over my countenance. I stepped back. Those eyes. That look! Some strange presence was hidden behind the skull of that bull. The ghost of a human thought inhabited that face behind its dreamy eyes. I knew that dreamy look. I knew it from someplace. I had met those eyes before. That look was familiar to me. But when? Where? I could not remember. Perhaps in a different time. A different place. In a different world.
I took off my clothes and let myself drift away in the current of the Newar, then swam to the bank. Walking back, reentering the water upstream, I let myself drift back down in the current, completing the cycle—a sensual experience. I was coming back to a sweet life, sensing the pleasures of an ordinary existence made extraordinary by six weeks absence from it.

A few days later we walked on the ridge toward Dharan, this time with Makalu on our right and Kangchenjunga and Jannu on our left. I was lost in thought, rediscovering life, thinking of Norma, friends, and relatives. I began to review the days on Kangchenjunga and to sum up my experiences there. It had been so different from Broad Peak. That mountain had been such an enjoyable climbing experience, with real Alpine style climbing and with lots of singing and dancing and good humor in base camp and on the march in and out. This trip had been more hard core and suffered from a lack of companionship and lightheartedness. It had been a cold experience. Perhaps it was just a reflection of the difference between the Anglo-Saxon and the Latin temperaments. I had been so used to the expansive French approach where emotions are expressed and are not held in reign, where one knows where one stands, where one does not hesitate to touch. No touching on this trip. The British had been reserved, perhaps more refined, more complex. A different kind of experience for me. Why should this difference exist? I pondered it and laughed at myself, a Frenchman, trespassing into the world of three Englishmen for a short interval of time. What right did I have to analyze them? But could one of them enter my French world for even so short a period? How would they fare in my world? How would they survive in the framework of a French expedition, speaking a nonnative language for ten weeks, rubbing
elbows with people who have different customs, quirks, kinks, and habits? To emerge sane might be just as trying for them as this one had been for me.

As I turned the events over in my mind I had to admit that there were few conflicts on the mountain, but at the same time so many things had been left unsaid. There was that subtle but strong undercurrent which I sensed from the beginning but failed to grasp. At first I took it for my own problem, the problem of getting to know and understand the British. It was in fact far more than that. There seemed in the end to be some kind of complicated relationship among the British themselves, with Peter and Joe in one corner, anxious, and Doug in the other, calm. It had finally surfaced when Doug went to Taplejung in an attempt to fly out early, interpreted by Peter and Joe in a most unsympathetic light. Other criticisms followed. Doug had not been in good form on the summit; he had been the first on the summit and had slipped twice on the way down, they said. He had moved ahead and been the first to arrive in base camp. Perhaps it was true that Doug had been slow on the summit day. As far as I had seen him on the mountain, however, he had always acted strong and efficient. In fact, he was the only member of the team who had been an active participant at all stages of the climb, leading seven of the twenty-five pitches up the North Col while Peter led none because of his foot. Doug had done more than his share of the energy-consuming cooking at high elevations. He had done more than his share of load carrying and platform digging. He had fixed the rope up the Sugarloaf and was there on the first summit attempt when Joe was down in base camp with a headache. And he was there on the summit too when I was down in base. So
if Doug had been slow on the summit day with his frostbitten hands and fatigue from having been always present, his all-around performance on the mountain more than compensated.

The climbing itself had been interesting on Kangchenjunga, but not my idea of a rewarding experience. Perhaps my disappointment could only be measured by my failure to go to the summit. Still, the free-climbing Alpine style attempt on Broad Peak had provided a more sportive adventure without the insurance of fixed ropes.

I did learn one thing on this trip: To climb within the siege framework, one must use one's brain as well as one's brawn. I had pushed all out on the North Col which contributed to my decision to forego the third attempt on the summit. I had not had the cunning and the patience to relax and reserve my strength and energy. I reflected on this lesson at length walking out from Kangchenjunga and asked myself repeatedly if this was a lesson worth learning. Yes, perhaps it was for one who thinks only in terms of summits. For me, it was a lesson, but maybe not all that valuable a lesson. No, I was glad to have given my all. I was glad to have contributed to the summit success. The question of whether the climb itself was a success, however, did not seem clear. Although a lightweight expedition, this one had some of the traits of a largescale expedition. As our bodies climbed higher, our minds seemed more distant one from the other. And now, after the trip, after the 'success', that distance had remained. The climbing had not been for the fun of climbing, but for the glory of it. Our only friend remained the mountain. It had brought us together, and now we had in common only Kangchenjunga.
In Gopha Pokari there is a sacred lake which dominates the ridge and forms a natural mirror for the reflection of Makalu and Langtang Peak. I walked around the lake ogling the teeming schools of fish gliding under its clear waters, and as I walked I saw a man. He was singing and chanting as he peered into the hand of a fellow Nepali. He was a guru divining the fortune of the other. I fetched Mohan as my interpreter and handed ten rupees to the wise man.

'Tell him that we have been on Kangchenjunga, Mohan. And ask him how high I went.'

The wise man listened and then showed on his hand that I had almost been on top, but not quite to the summit. He had passed the first test and was singing and chanting as he gazed into my palm.

'He says that you are not a writer,' Mohan translated. 'You are not a poet but you are good at telling others what you know. You want to teach others what you know.'

Yes, I was a guide and I enjoyed teaching others how to climb in the Alps.

'He says that you will come back to Nepal soon and that you are seeking glory here.'

'Tell him that I am coming back this fall.'

'He says that the climbing will be successful and that you will lead and others will follow.'

'I don't know. I'll talk to Doug about that.'

'He says that your wife wants to come too and that she wants to do what you are doing. She wants the experience that you are getting. She's back at home now, worried.'

Yes, I thought. I must get home soon.

'He says that your relationship with her is very good, that it is a good union.'
The wise man held up two index fingers together in a parallel union.

'He says that you are very lucky, a very lucky person.'

A German I had met on the trail listened intently. Reinhart could not contain himself and at length broke in: 'Tell him that I am also very lucky.'

I thought of Gilles Sourice who considered himself luckier than me. The guru stared into Reinhart's eyes.

'He says that you are lucky but that you, 'pointing to me, 'are much luckier.'

We all laughed. Yes, I must be at least ten rupees luckier than Reinhart.

'He says that you are not good with money.'

'That's true.'

'You must have given to someone who never gave back. He says you must make an effort not to give money with your right hand, but with your left hand if you expect to see it come back.'

I studied my right hand and then my left.

'He says you will find a way to make a living nonetheless. You will have one daughter and two sons, live without accident until 75 and then have one. If you make it through that one, you'll live 'til 84.'

'Ask him about my wife. Will her life and ambitions be fulfilled?'

'He says yes and that your relationship is solid and lasting. It is a very happy marriage. He says that you will be greeted by some kind of official or national organization.'

Everything I heard was positive. It pleased me. This man did have a talent. I did not believe in fortune tellers, but I would wait and see.
Crescendo:

*KUSUM KANGURU, EVEREST, NUPTSE*
KUSUM KANGURU
'Ang Phurba, what does Kusum Kanguru mean?'
'Kusum means *three gods*. Kanguru means *white mountain*.'
'Kang means *mountain*, as in Kangchenjunga, then.'
'In Kangtega too. Kangtega means *saddle mountain*.'
'And Kangbachen?'
'Kangbachen means *biggest mountain*.'
'So Kusum Kanguru means *three gods of the white mountain*?'
'Because there are three gods.'
'Ang Phurba, people here think the mountains are sacred, don't they?'
'The people from Monjo think the gods of Kusum Kanguru bring them bad luck when things do not go well.'
'Do you think that we have upset the gods?'

It had all happened so fast. Doug Scott had mentioned Kusum Kanguru before we departed for Kangchenjunga in the winter of 1979 and had included my name in his request for authorization. He had also mentioned the possibility of Everest and Nuptse. By the end of May '79, the authorization had come through for all three peaks. We would undertake them together, splitting the authorization fees. And by that time an American climber, Mike Covington, had also joined our group.

The program for the fall was ambitious since each of the three peaks was itself a major project worthy of a single expedition. But we wanted to undertake the three climbs
in Alpine fashion, squeezing them all into one season, using one peak to acclimatize for the next. It seemed logical to start with Kusum Kanguru and work our way up to Everest through Nuptse.

Norma and I passed the summer in Chamonix, enjoying a few months together before our next separation. We climbed up the Brenva Spur, the classical route on the Italian side of Mont Blanc, a trip I had made many times before. I watched Norma cramponing up the ice ramps near the top, kicking the teeth of her crampons, precisely, with a sweet strength, giving the best of herself, finally coming out of the spur and onto the summit with a wide smile on that part of her face exposed through her down hood. The cold bit into her thin skin leaving behind white footprints. The sun shone into her eyes and her eyes shone back. I was lucky to have such a companion.

The departure date drew nearer. 'It's nothing. Just a symbol,' Norma said.

'I took off my neckchain and threaded the key onto it. 'I'll never take it off.'

'I'll wait for you,' she said.

High up in the skies, winging my way toward New Delhi, I reflected upon Norma's companionship—a sunrise. I was so used to experiencing it that I tended to forget the miracle it represented.

In the distance the gray runway gets smaller, fainter, and disappears behind the crest of le Jura, pulling you away from me, drawing me closer to you. I must return to the airport where I left you—the soft blue of your eyes, your face still close to mine, I put your picture into the chest behind the curtains of my eyelids.
'Hara-kiri!' 
'The North Face, you're right.'
'How about the West Ridge?'
'Looks better—but the upper section—that cornice blade. It might go. But it's in the wind. And the snow up there—I bet it's rotten.'

The great triangular North Face of Kusum Kanguru dominated the moraine where Doug and I stood tracing out imaginary routes to its two untrodden summits. The North Face presented the obvious climbing challenge. Heavily snow fluted, it was crowned with large mushrooms and cornices of snow and ice, overhanging above the concave bowl of its face. It was a terrain uncontrolled and uncontrollable, eager to funnel treacherous snowslides and cornice avalanches down its sheer 4,000 foot face, inviting long hours of Russian roulette. Out of the question.

Two ridges bordered the sheer face. The West Ridge to the right was all snow, easy angled, but long, very exposed to the wind. It was sharply contoured in the skyline, indicating a thinness and potential difficulty for progression. The knife-blade ridge was laden with meringues and cornices like shaving cream on a razor blade, probably unstable. Extremely dangerous, intriguing in a way, but I did not care for shaving cream. The North Ridge to the left involved an initial section of low angled climbing on loose rock, quite similar to the Furggen Ridge on the Matter-
horn. Then it reared up in a steep mixed buttress of snow covered slabs—technically promising. A snaky ridge followed, leading to a sharp summital snow blade. Heavy cornices and large mushrooms undulated and flowed along and over the spine of that ridge like mayonnaise across the blade of a butcher knife, balancing in place and glistening under the sun, very appetizing. Clean, untrodden Kusum Kanguru had been here for ages, waiting for us, ready to give the best of herself, and in return expecting the best from us.

Our mountain was set to the south, Kantega to the northeast, and Tramserku to the northwest. It moved away from us as we left the beautiful cirque and walked back down to Monjo, now in the misty monsoon rain. Not rain in the normal sense. Not even perceivable droplets. More a mist that bathed our clothes and invited leeches who longed to go on pilgrimages.

'I've never seen so many leeches in one place!' Doug ejaculated.

I jested, 'I guess they're thirsty,' removing the leeches from my boots, one by one. 'How many've you got?'

'I don't know. I haven't been counting,' he answered. 'Well, I've got eighteen. Seems like a record to me.'

Eighteen blood-sucking wormlike creatures of half an inch to two inches long had congregated on my boots and around my ankles, all searching for an eyelet or tiny opening through my boots and socks. I had already removed one from behind my ear and held it in the palm of my hand. It was slimy, slippery, and swollen, segmented into many parts, with two cuplike suckers at either end. It had apparently dropped onto my head from an overhanging branch. After sounding my skin for a pipeline of blood running close to the surface, this leech had injected a local
anesthetic in its chosen site and had commenced its operation without my knowledge or approval. Earlier, others had invaded more private areas in search of a rich vein.

Maybe they were not so ugly—the leeches. Perhaps they were not that bloodthirsty after all. The humans might not think so badly of them if given the opportunity to visit their own slaughterhouses. Were we perhaps jealous of their blood seeking aptitude? Were we envious of their hermaphroditism? And although hermaphrodites, they copulated head-to-tail, the penis of one in the genital aperture of the other, and vice versa, in mutual exchange of seminal fluid. Surely their way was more satisfying than our own. Were we envious of that bisexuality? No, it was not that. Rather, they had acted so presumptuously, so furtively. I did not resent donating a drop of blood to their well-being. It was just that they had not asked for it properly.

I tightened my fingers around the leech. For a second, my inclination was to pinch it in two. What a cruel reaction. My leech cried a tiny drop of blood, and I threw it back into the grass.
We carried on westward, descending into the Kyashar Valley to Monjo, a Sherpa village at the entrance of the Khumbu Valley where Doug and I regrouped with our little crowd, now complete. Mike Covington had arrived the same day from Lukla and reunited with his fiancee Samje. They held between them a little bundle, their newborn baby, whom we soon began to call Sherpington, a combination of Sherpa and Covington. Doug's wife Jan was there too with their two daughters. Nima, who had been our assistant cook on Kangchenjunga, was now promoted to principal cook. His brother Sella had been dispatched to assist Doug's family's needs under Jan's authority.

A more beautiful family than the brothers Nima and Sella would have been hard to imagine. Kind, willingful, each facet of their eyes, a smile—with nothing else but themselves. Spontaneous and deep, totally real, a refreshing pair. Ang Phurba, our sirdar on Kangchenjunga was there too, plunged into his notebook, preparing for the transfer of our equipment to Kusum Kanguru base camp.

I had the sweetest time with my Sherpa friends, teasing them about heaven and hell, telling Ang Phurba he would go down with the leeches and the yetis while Nima and Sella would go straight up, flying. We laughed and laughed together as they mimed their imaginary roles. 'No, no. You Ang Phurba, you go down. Down with the big leeches. As big as yetis, swarming all around.' And he would say no with his head, smiling and laughing as I
described the horrors and torments down there. 'But I'll be down there too,' I told him. 'I'll show you around. We are no good, no good. Down, down, we'll go.' And we laughed like hell.

'Sella, up there! Nima, up there! Flying all around, with Buddha and pretty Sherpanis, drinking chang, flying airplanes.'

And they shook their heads, saying no, no, still listening hard to the unfolding of heaven, all of them with their eyes of children, innocent, without barriers, pure, so beautiful. At times I had to go and hug them.

Back in my tent, I watched a spider spinning a web at the entrance. I could see her rappelling down. Quite a long free rappel. Something like a thousand feet overhanging, appropriately translated. It's mate walked across my sleeping bag, catching me off guard and for a split second my reaction was to kill it. It was quite large and had scared the hell out of me, that hell I had been discussing with the others. But in truth I took pleasure at watching its long legs moving mechanically under the black hairy bubble. And now I was relieved not to have killed, but sad for having had the impulse. I had already observed how the people of Nepal gently removed from their bodies leeches, spiders, or other creeping and crawling creatures, with never a thought for harming them. I made my peace with the spiders and fell contentedly asleep.

'Good morning, good morning, good morning!'

'Oui, oui. Which month, which day, when, where? Daylight! Norma? Not here! Mountains? Yes, Nepal! Oh, yes! Kusum—Monjo—morning—Sella.'

The zipper of my tent opened on a smiling Tibetan face and a cup of tea appeared balanced on Sella's hand.

Outside it's wet and fresh. Puffs of smoke filter through the roof of a Sherpa dwelling below the path. The milky river rambles behind a little hill covered with pine trees. Ang Phurba ignites a fire. Nima and Sella are running around with their pot of tea from one tent to the next.

Those two brothers really did get along very well. I thought of my own brother Patrick, whom Norma and I had visited at the hospital of Annecy shortly before my departure from Geneva.

Thinking too much of you glues me to the ground. At the same time, I tend to forget that you’re there too as I live my own life. But I feel so totally disarmed when I find Pat again. I don’t know what to do. I kiss you. I want to give to you, but I don’t know how. We could have done so many things together. So many if’s. But the facts are there. I try to give myself an explanation for so many things in life, but Patrick I don’t understand you. Is the interpretation of the signs you manifest right? Can we communicate? Is it possible? All those years spent together and my strongest innermost hopes demolished. I am afraid that I don’t love you anymore and yet I still do love you so much. You destroy the barriers of my intelligence and I flow towards you, pushed by my feelings while I cling to something that is mine. How can I touch you? You belong so much to a world I only have glimpses of. I feel my blood running in you. You’re in me too. Patrick, your body is so strong. Why did your mind forget to grow?
We packed up our loads, sixty in all, more than expected because Doug's family had decided to accompany us to base camp. One last minute letter to Norma and I would be off. But what to say?

I opened the curtains of my eyelids. The sea is here. You are just below the bush on my raincoat, over my pack. My hands caress one side of your face, slowly. You bend your forehead to the corner of my shoulder and neck. I hear the sea, my nostrils tickled by the scent of your hair. I slide my head along them until a bit of my cheek is next to yours. There is no distance any more. I hold my head in my hands. It's yours. Don't forget me. I'm here.

And where to post it? I asked Ang Phurba. 'The local guest house,' he suggested. Someone would eventually carry it to Kathmandu—a ten day trip. Then ten more days to America. If everything went well, we would already be on our way to Nuptse by the time Norma read it.

Off and up to base camp along the flanks of the Kyashar Valley, the 'deep and difficult valley'—a promenade on a carpet of fresh vegetation, blooming with edelweiss, gentians, campanulas, anemones, violets, and other plants unknown to me. Now to pick a wild strawberry at the detour of the trail, to walk across streams of foamy water bubbling down the hillside, the tinkling of familiar bells, Alpine meadows. At the detour of a crest, I surprised a majestic bird perched upon a pinnacle. He shot back an eagle eye and jumped into the air, baring six feet of

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golden striped wingspread, then soared away above the Kyashar Valley. It did not seem too difficult for him, but for us now making our way along the steep precipitous cliffs, it was not so easy. The trail crossed behind a waterfall in another section of the valley. I fixed a bit of rope for the porters to cross an exposed slippery rock slab. Miniature chortens marked every little col we approached. Bamboo poles and prayer flags fluttered in the wind before each crossing. Our Sherpa friends cut branches and leaves and strips of fabric and placed them on the chortens as a sign of their devotion.

At 14,500 feet, a half moon moraine veiled the tongue of the Gyashar Glacier. Streams snaked their way through a wide and flat plateau of Alpine meadows, decorated with clean granite boulders. A green rug surrounded by cliffs and waterfalls cascaded from a cirque of new faces, untrodden ridges, and virgin peaks, heavily charged with upper hanging glaciers, like garlands of snow, shining high above us. Their images were reflected in the beautiful ponds situated in the heart of the plateau. And there we established base camp.

On the 14th of September, Doug, Cov, and I were up early and scrambling up the ridge toward the foot of a steep rock buttress, still distant. We feasted our eyes on the panorama of mountains. To the left of the cirque stood the southeast wall of Tramserku all fluted and shelved in snow. A thin east ridge led up to Kangtega, the 'saddle mountain', capped with two snowy pommels. To the right the massif moved through Peak 43 and many subsidiary summits, unnamed and unclimbed, up and down and around us, terminating in Kusum Kanguru at 21,000 feet.

With the initial section of the ridge behind us, we pulled up to the steeper rise, a buttress of two sections. A first short section of mixed rock and snow and a second of high
rock slabs of snow and ice. The latter was long and difficult; the former short and easier.

The next morning we were off early on mixed ground climbing toward the steep slabby buttress. Seven long hours passed before 12:30 when Doug belayed over a saddle of snow mushrooms, one pitch away from the buttress. From there the pillar smoothed out and steepened to present about six hundred feet of what looked like very difficult climbing.

It had started to snow. Time to stop? No, Mike would start digging a snow cave in one of the mushrooms at the foot of the buttress while Doug and I continued on to fix some rope up two or three pitches to insure a quick start in the morning. In my turn I moved into the lead up the initial section of the buttress—two pitches made extremely tricky by the unstable snow cones plastered up the rock slabs. They were our sole means of progression up the pillar.

Doug returned to the snow cave around 3:00 p.m. soaked from the two extra hours in the wet snow. By the time I got down after cleaning up the equipment used for protection, I found that the snow cave had taken on the semblance of a comfortable winter retreat. I pitched my hands into the fray and by 5:00 p.m. we had an inviting little home at 19,000 feet on the pillar.

A night in the snow cave. Then up by 4:00 a.m. and away by 5:30, jumaring up to our high point of the previous day. Leading up the pillar, I looked to the left to see a huge wall of seracs discharging from the upper hanging glacier, creating a fracture line which gradually opened up. A large grotto had been formed by the grinding action under its foot. Over a ton of blue ice moved slowly, initiating little slides at its base where smaller chunks were pummeled, ground up, and shoved over the edge of the mountain wall to fall two thousand feet down the face.
I drove in a peg, clipped a karabiner to it, ran the rope through the karabiner, and hung myself from the peg in order to free both hands. *Untie the straps of a crampon and get a foothold in the rock. The left foot because there's a place up there where you'll have to use your left foot. Now kick the right into that crack full of snow. Uhhhhmm. That's it. Solid! Get in there baby!* I pushed myself upward brandishing an ice hammer in my right hand, left hand feeling for rock holds, my respective feet making analogous moves.

The huge slice of ice to my left ground its way along the slick surface, moving slowly, a gigantic fingernail pulled across an immense blackboard of slate, screeching out loud—*Look at me! Look at me!*  
*Yes, we see you.*  
*Hear me! Hear me!*  
*Yes we hear you.*  
*Feel me! Feel me!*  
*No, we don't want to feel you.*  

The huge mass of ice turned, tottered, and then thundered downward, exciting the surrounding space in waves of violent motion, before finally crashing on the moraine below where large blocks of ice wiped over our reconnaissance route of four days previous.

I recoiled and held on tight, then traversed left to mixed ground, climbed up and around the top of the buttress, and finally pulled up to the ridge at the top of the first section. It was 10:00 a.m. when I belayed Mike and Doug up. We were at the foot of a long snowy ridge and could see only its foot—a tormented ridge with fantastic ice and snow formations that unfolded in sharp relief. Heavily corniced, the ridge separated the east flank of the North Ridge from the North Face. But we could not yet see the summit.
Some 1,500 vertical feet must have separated us from it. That put us above 19,500 feet. Henceforward the ascent would be on snow. To move fast we would go light to the summit that same day. It would be a blitz, an all-out effort without sleeping bags, stove, gas cartridges, insulation pads. Only two or three ice screws and a few rock pegs. Now a quick fortification of tea while Doug held some pictures of Norma at a distance. I photographed them against Kangtega. Then off with light packs up the ridge.

As I led up the ridge, the weather was served up in courses—intermittent spurts of snow showers and fog. Now it was clear enough to take pictures; now we could no longer make out where we were. To my right the North Face, a fantastic wall with steep ramps and snow flutes, angling at fifty to eighty degrees down the face to the glacier below. To my left, from behind, a cloud of fog. Above us the vault swelled, crackled, flaked, and fell. Space shrank. Time grew. It snowed.

I kicked a step with my right foot, sinking down into mush, nothingness. Kicking with my left foot on the east side of the ridge, I found a thin layer of crust collapsing. No support for traction. Underneath, all sugar. Two or three feet deep. My forearms followed the handles of my two axes as I drove into the deep snow, now lifting one leg up and the other over. Apart—wide apart—one from the other—the splits—to keep my torso from disappearing in the rotten snow. Now cross over to the eastern side of the ridge and climb up some snow chutes—move under and around those mushrooms. Steep and short sections of more white mush—quasi-vertical.

I oozed up and around the mush, across a curving chute leading up to a saddle of snow higher up along the
ridge. Traversing several yards diagonally, I found myself in a situation where carrying on seemed out of the question. But turning back was equally unfeasible. The only thing to do was—do something! I spread my legs wide apart, straining the rubberbands in my groin, expecting a pop at any time; arms extended high up, each of my axes estranged from the other and from my crampons for more buoyancy—less chance for a fall through the collapsing snow. One foot at a time to see what would happen, molding myself to the terrain as I edged up, hanging on with my chin and eyebrows, my chest and inner thighs. Don't put your feet together or the sugar will take you! And Mike below! How good was Doug's belay further down? The great distance between us did not promise much.

Slowly, very slowly leftward and upward, my legs still bowed, my arms still extended on high, grubbing in the snow, I finally arrived at the corner of a saddle where I manteled over the top.

'Stupid,' I reprimanded myself. Simply no excuse for such acrobatics at this elevation without protection. I carried on for a few feet and came down into a gutter of snow on the other side of the saddle. Under a mushroom, a short expanse of rope hibernated under the ice, remnants of a previous unsuccessful Japanese expedition. It was surprisingly secure in the snow pack. I tied on, giving the others a tight rope to come up.

Should we now continue up the ridge or try to rappel down to the balcony of seracs to the left which led up to the overhanging glacier? My companions preferred to carry on up the ridge for another two or three pitches to see if things would not improve.
Mike took his turn in the lead to experience the extreme difficulty that the poor snow conditions presented. It was snowing lightly when I pulled up alongside Doug, who had been waiting for Mike to finish up on a steep section. Some mushrooms of snow had already collapsed twice below him and his anxiety quotient seemed to climb with his body. Doug belayed from about a hundred feet below the mushrooms. Mike had now disappeared and was perhaps involved in a traverse or in some difficult section. But the rope did not uncoil. I seized the pregnant pause to again discuss the feasibility of rappelling down to the upperhanging glacier to our left, which seemed to provide an avenue downwards and back to the North Ridge just below the summit. I started downclimbing a ramp just below Doug to a saddle which led onto the balcony and twenty minutes later the three of us found ourselves on the upperhanging glacier under a patch of blue.

We were at a lower level, to the left of the North Ridge. But from here we could see the summit. Up there. No cornices to block our view. Only a staircase of steep saddles leading to the summital snow blade, very sharp in the skyline.

It was now 1:00 p.m. Much more time had passed than anticipated. And we were thirsty. We had made a mistake by neglecting to bring up our stove. No means to melt snow. No way to replenish our juices. I found myself marveling at this stupidity. Liquid absorption is one of the keys to success on a high altitude climb. God! How could we have been so dumb?
I commenced to eat handfuls of snow to soothe, or at least moisten, the cottony mucous coating the membranes of my mouth and throat. Mike announced he would not continue. He was tired, happy to have come so far. We should carry on without him. Now only a thousand feet from the summit, we encouraged him to put in one last effort. But soon he had become quite sick. Mike had to throw up but there was nothing for him to puke. His liquids had already been consumed by his unstaved engine.

So Doug and I would try for the summit while Mike recuperated. We were now so close. The weather was still bobbing and weaving, throwing intermittent fists of snow showers and fog. We scaled several seracs and ice combs to find ourselves at the bottom of an ice chute with a vertical section. Relaying each other in the lead, we climbed toward the foot of the summittal crest, all the time concerned for avalanches. It was snowing and the mist was moving in. Mike was no longer visible down below and the peaks around us disappeared one by one. Around some snow slopes and up some steep chutes we climbed, up into the sky, once detouring a large crevasse, drawing near the summit. Some undulating snow saddles riven by a series of crevasses, and on the last one, just below the summit, in a furry whiteout Doug and I climbed, balancing on a layer of one and a half feet of fresh snow, cushioned by a layer of air. With every step we heard the snow collapse on that

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cushion, but I seemed to be driven, driven onward by some igniting force, almost against my will and certainly against my better judgment. Something beyond it all pushed me—to the summit, at any cost.

Five minutes later I was in the lead, growing ever more tense, sensing something in the air, something imminent, all my senses peaked, when it happened. All around the slope cracked up like a jigsaw puzzle and began to slide down towards the big crevasse we had detoured below.

I was already moving fast and Doug had the identical reflex. Without thinking we ran upwards in a frantic attempt to get off the sliding slope before it could gain enough momentum to carry us with it into the crevasse below. The fracture line was about thirty feet above me, some sixty feet above Doug. We ran. We had no other choice. Little oxygen at this elevation. Run harder! Get off this death trap! Go, go, go! Move! Adrenalin primed, we ran with a quick burst of energy and finally ran up and off the moving blanket of snow. We stopped, gasping for air on stable ground. The snow slope carried on down the mountain, as we watched, to be devoured by the hungry crevasses below.

I looked down on my pant legs. They had been shredded by my crampons during the instantaneous sprint to heaven. But no blood. Lucky. And lucky I had not tripped.

'It's just a slide like that that killed Dougal,' Doug said.

'What do you think?'

'What about you?'

'If we climb the North Summit, we will have at least succeeded in topping one of them,' I said.

Doug immediately started leading across a bergschrund and climbed diagonally up a very steep section of snow and ice which returned us to the North Ridge,
already thirty feet up the foot of the summital blade. We had three ice axes between us—two in the lead with Doug, who cleared off the snow on the crest with his gloved hands and dug a trench. He progressed in it for another sixty feet of exposed climbing, then belayed me up. As the weather improved, he ascended to the North Summit. I soon joined him in the sky under patches of clouds, stretched out over the peaks of the surrounding cirque.

_Am Gipfel des Berges ist die Ruh!_ It was good to be on top of a mountain. It was especially good to be on top with Doug after having carried Kangchenjunga in my heart. We shook hands, then looked toward the north and I remembered that Mike was down there. I knew just how he felt. Just a thousand feet below.

We took pictures, then sat down and looked around. Behind Kangtega we could see the upper section of the South Face of Lhotse and Nuptse, with Everest towering above them in the background. Surprising to see Cho Oyu so close in the northwest. I lay down on my stomach on the cornice and looked down the South Face. There was nothing to see except air down a hundred feet to a layer of clouds. The overhang blocked any view of the face.

We had set foot on the North Summit at 5:00 p.m. It was a small summit, about ten feet by ten, but a real summit. We looked over to the other summit, about three hundred feet away, barely higher than our own, but definitely higher. A garland of snow led away from our own up to the West Summit, the purest ridge I had ever seen. It was a picture, one of Samivell's watercolors. At least a good hour's round trip. Too much. The West Summit would have to wait. It would remain unclimbed.
It was time to start our descent. I belayed Doug down the summittal blade and then followed with the two ice axes, downclimbing the narrow snow ridge while Doug took in the slack. We then tackled the upper hanging glacier, descending toward the spot where we had left Mike.

Again fearful of slides, we walked one hundred and twenty feet apart, minimizing the weight in any one area. Finally we crossed a slope at the top of a steep section and fixed an ice screw for a rappel. Just as we coiled up the rope, the whole slope we had just traversed cracked along the line of our tracks and slid downward, carrying noise and snow several hundred feet to the crevasse below, smoking all the way.

'That could have been us.' said Doug.

'You have to be ready,' I responded, having heard the expression from Doug on Kangchenjunga.
Back on the upper hanging glacier with Mike, what should we do next? Bivouac here with no gear and no stove? No. We would have to return to our packs for the stove, sleeping bags, and food. It would be a lengthy, laborious, and exposed climb: Back up to the North Ridge first and then downclimb the mushy snake ridge. We would not make it without a bivouac in the open. On the other hand, we could try to find our way down the upper hanging glacier through a series of seracs, and then traverse over to the top of the pillar where we had left our packs. But could we find our way down through the heavily crevassed serac-infested glacier? No tracks to follow. No previous experience on the upper hanging glacier. And balcony succeeded balcony in a labyrinth of icy pathways and blind alleys. Unless you know how to connect between balconies on such terrain, you can easily lose too much time exploring, ending up overexposing yourself to seracs, crevasses, avalanches, and weather. During our climb up the ridge, I had kept an eye on the terrain of the upper hanging glacier to the left of the ridge.

'I think I can find a way down,' I said to Doug and Mike. So I started leading down.

Two ice screws and nylon webbings hang on my harness for insurance in case of a fall into a crevasse. I am far away in the lead, roped to the others. It is a challenge finding the way down—a puzzle. I try to concentrate, imagining the seracs I have seen earlier from up on the ridge. Through enormous camel bumps cut by crevasses and
serac walls, I move. I can only see the next sixty feet ahead. Yet as I approach a crevasse too large to traverse or a serac too high to climb, a corridor of escape catches my eye and I ease into it, facing another obstacle. Again there is an exit and I find myself in a place which fits with a picture in my memory. From one instant to the next I expect an uncrossable crevasse, an unclimbable serac, an impenetrable zone. We are in the area of the huge serac slide of the morning. If I am not careful I will lead my companions to the same fate. But when there is a serac, there is also an aisle down it, which we downclimb. And when there is a wall, miraculously, there is also a way through it. When there is a crevasse, it can be circumvented. It seems as though the obstacles are flattening out in front of me, and so we move quickly in the glistening white fairy garden. It is a landscape with a tempting sensuality. I seem to carress with my feet the forms of a giant, guided by an invisible hand.

We have been climbing for fourteen hours without liquids when we arrive at the edge of the overhanging glacier. If my calculations are accurate, we should now follow the alley of snow and emerge in the vicinity of our equipment at the head of the buttress. Yes! We're home free! I feel a surge of satisfaction at having solved the puzzle.
Mike led the traverse across a steep section back to our packs. We immediately set to melting snow for tea, soup, and orange drink. Our bodies consumed the liquids with all the relish of a fish thrown back into the water. But the weather was now deteriorating and there was not enough snow for a snow cave. We would have to bivouac on the ledge in the open.

Doug and I dug out a platform while Mike made himself a trench smack on the head of the buttress in a cone of snow. If we had been moist from the exposure that day, during that night we became wet. Snow and more snow. And us without a tent. Doug turned over during the night and the snow slid between us, finding its way eventually under our sleeping bags, soaking them through. I opened my eyes in the night to see a bolt of silvery lightning illuminate the whole range of mountains around us. A heavy atmosphere and a black sky was its aftermath.

Water from the snow seemed to want to force its way through the cracks of my insulation pad and through the tiny holes in the seams of my sleeping bag and clothes. My kidneys were cold. The water then sought out all the pores and holes in my body. I tossed and turned. In the early morning I finally sat up and looked at Mike's perch.

'Cov, it looks more like a coffin!'

There must have been five inches on either side of his sleeping bag with 3,000 feet straight down the North Face to his left and a sheer drop off down the East Face to his right.
The weather alternated between good and bad, clear and misty—a simulation of time-lapse photography. The clouds seemed to move in from Monjo, rise up to the summit, and then drop down the East Flank from where they traveled down the valley to Monjo, thus completing the loop. It explained why the weather had come in spurts on the summit day.

Five rappels later we were back at our snow cave at the foot of the pillar. Another five and we were down with the tents enjoying food and drink. Many more rappels and numerous pitches of downclimbing returned us to the foot of the North Ridge. 5:00 p.m. We dropped our packs and ran down the gravel chutes of the moraines like a group of kids going out for recess between classes.

Relief. Rest and rejuvenation in base camp. A conversation with our sirdar.

'Ang Phurba, do you think that we have upset the gods? Do you think they will take offense now that we have climbed the North Summit?'

'No, now the gods will be pleased. The people in Monjo are going to be happy.'
'Aren't you afraid to die?'
'No, I am not afraid to die. Why would I be afraid to die? But I don't want to die.'
'What do you mean?'
'I don't want to die because I live.'

Shop talk filled the air in base camp where we sat in a circle on marine bags in front of a fire built into the ground. All of us watched on as the blaze consumed the branches. I became lost in the colors and shapes of the flames. The dilemma of my life seemed to unfold in them. I wanted her to share the good times. To be with me. Always. But could she understand that I had to go away to be me, to love her the only way I could. Now I was recreating her from all the pieces of my mind, by the will of my love, my imagination. I could do that. And I loved it. She entered me whenever I wanted her, but did I know her in reality? I felt an urge to touch her, to melt into her. Instead, I melted into my dreams and they filled me with warmth, but a chill ran down my spine. I moved my hands closer to the fire, rubbing them together, warming them. Those hands, they could not recreate Norma for real. I was alone.

Doug got up and walked to his tent. His head seemed to grow out of his thorax, pushing up long copper colored strands of hair that fell over his wide shoulders. Two thick clawy hands hung at his sides far away from his hips. From his armpits down, the rest of his body tapered into a funnel...
of skin and muscles. Each limb was synchronized with the others, well oiled. As the massive shadow of his silhouette withdrew, I could not help but think of him as a robot, an exceptional robot, well engineered to fell mountains. Quick in softness like a snow leopard, Doug turned on himself and moved back towards us, his face now in the shadow. His long wig and the garret windows of his glasses built a second wall of shades above his clean face. A discussion we once had on the topic of personality reminded me that Doug thought of a man with a personality as a man with a mask. The real man was never a personality, he said. I always thought of personality as encompassing both public and private shades of man. I wondered for a second if Doug was wearing a protective mask. My eyes transfixed his shades and he acquiesced with a smile. Into the calm and intense wave of heat inhabiting him, I looked into that mysterious and powerful spring which he himself was always in search of, the light of his life. I thought of him as the British yeti, a man of resource and depth, a solid and tender bloke, good to have as a friend.

I gazed back into the world of the fire, rubbing between my palms the key Norma had given me. It hung from the chain around my neck and gave me comfort. She was waiting for me.

I walked back to my tent. A flutter of wind on the tent's walls, the spasmodic flow of blood through the funnels of my heart, the chaotic mixture of voices, laughs and noises from the circle round the fire, and suddenly through that hurly burly a wave rolled in. It rebounded, took off, landed, took off again, and took wing. Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata escaped from the cassette deck.

The following day I ambled into the Himalayan meadows on the other side of the moraine. The sky was
deep blue; the waterfalls cascaded down the flanks of the mountains; the grass was very green. My spirits were lifted.

I spent the day picking flowers and filming them with a macro-lens. She smiled inside the multicolored crowns of silky petals I had arranged around her face. I took pictures of Norma's picture.

Away in the distance, nearer the glacier, toward Tramserku, the sound of a stream signaled that something was happening there. I drew closer to it and sat down beside the water.

Have you already come down the bank on nodules of rock that roll under your feet? Have you placed your butt upon a stone and thrust your toes into the water? Have you looked and listened to the water of a torrent rolling past? The more you look, the more you see. Waves, small, medium, big, bigger—sliding, jumping like a trout, above and around, between the stones of all sizes, earthy, ochre, white, mossy, lichened, granite, schist, veined, broken, split, polished, shiny sand, shining through the calmer waters of the bank. The torrent oscillates, propagates, cascades, and melts into the horizon. Eddies bubble. The light reflects the shadows of the stones off the mountains and the toes off of your feet. Grass hangs its limbs there too. Insects walk and play on the beaches and on the cliffs, and sometimes bathe. An incessant rhythm soars a few feet above the torrents, a sound made up of all the others—roaring, gurgling, trickling, down to the smallest. A symphony of life. A battlefield of action. Sliding over the earth and through time. A novel.
EVEREST
Drained by the Dudh Kosi, the Khumbu Valley snakes its way northeastward, gradually gaining elevation; then, stepping up from one plateau to the next, it transforms itself into the Khumbu Glacier. Finally, turning sharply to the southeast and crossing the Everest icefall, it climbs to the highest step, the Western Cwm, encircled by the great Everest-Lhotse-Nuptse Cirque—our destination. Walking in Khumbu toward Everest, setting foot on one plateau after the next, is a progression in giant steps on a staircase to paradise. As the valley tapers, the mountains grow taller. As you walk up that long gallery, the statues on either side continue to grow until at last you approach the pearly gates of the Western Cwm and pay homage to the Himalayan deities Everest, Lhotse, and Nuptse.

We wanted to climb Kusum Kanguru, Nuptse, and Everest the same way we climb mountains in the Alps—Alpine style. Kusum Kanguru was already behind us. The first chord of our ambitious crescendo had been played. That left Nuptse and Everest.

We planned to approach Nuptse from the Western Cwm and attempt the unscaled North Face. Although Nuptse had been scaled once via the easier South Face using standard siege tactics, no one had initiated a project on the North Face from the Western Cwm, much less an
Alpine style project. This inattention can be explained in part by the apparent steepness and exposure to avalanches that the North Face presents. But Dougal Haston and Doug had climbed the Southwest Face of Everest in 1975 and there on their perch high up on Everest, directly across the Western Cwm opposite Nuptse's North Face, they conceived to climb it via a line they could see from their high vantage point.

Dougal met a premature death in the Alps in the winter of 1977, so Doug went on to tackle the Nuptse project with Mike Covington and Joe Tasker in the fall of 1978. That attempt was quickly cut short by the weather after some nine feet of snowfall precluded all chances of success.

Everest was to be the third and final objective of our fall outing. When authorization came through, the West Ridge had not been climbed from the Lhola Pass. Then, in the spring of 1979 the Yugoslavs succeeded in making the first complete ascent of the West Ridge, albeit in the context of a largescale expedition. Everest had been climbed countless times, usually by the normal route; yet no clean ascent of the mountain had ever been made. An Alpine style attempt via the West Ridge presented an interesting and challenging problem.

With Kusum Kanguru behind us, we returned to Monjo and would successively pass through a number of villages nestled on the high banks of the Dudh Kosi; we would be trekking up from Monjo to Namche Bazar and from there to Khumjung, Tyangboche, Pheriche, and Lobuche, and finally to the higher uninhabited reaches of the Khumbu Glacier.

Stepping up from Monjo, we entered the renowned village of Namche Bazar where the family of Mike's
fiancée made their home. The mood was festive—talk in
the air of marriage between Mike and Samje—plenty of
food—an abundance of chang.

‘Chang!?'

‘Okay, but that’s the last one. No, no—not full. Just a
bit. That’s enough! No! ... Well, okay. Thank you. *Tuchee!
*Tuchee!*’ a thank you in Sherpa for that last cup of chang.

‘More chang! Drink more, please!’

‘No, please. No more. Well—*tuchee!*’

Lightheaded and dizzy from the Sherpa spirits, we
bade farewell late in the afternoon (lest we find ourselves
unable to leave at all) and walked up to Khumjung where
our sirdar Ang Phurba had arranged to put a house at our
disposal. Doug’s family would remain there with Samje
and her baby while we carried on to Everest base camp.

Khumjung conveys the atmosphere of a toy village
built by children. Each house is very plain from the out-
side, white in color. All are set in rows, simple and un-
complicated—a refreshing sight for Western eyes. The
mani-walls at the entrance of the village are engraved with
prayers in the Tibetan script and support an array of
chortens which receive and bid farewell to all who chance
to enter and exit there. This village is situated on a balcony
fronting some of the most impressive peaks of the Khumbu
area, most notably Ama Dablam, Kangtega, Tramserku,
and Kusum Kanguru. Of these, Ama Dablam is the moun-
tain that imparts to the Himalayas what the Matterhorn
does to the Alps—a striking summit with a personality,
which perhaps embodies in some abstract way what
mountaineering is all about—more than simply climb-
ing—an attempt to share in nature’s beauty and purity. All
this is epitomized in striking fashion by Ama Dablam.
A French expedition destined for Ama Dablam was camped just outside the village and this fact was soon transmitted via the Himalayan grapevine. Walking between houses and through potato fields, then across a pasture, I finally emerged on what had not long before been a lovely montane meadow, now occupied by a largescale encampment, tents dispensed in rows and columns with one large mess tent to mark the compound's center, toward which I made my way.

The leader of this expedition had been one of my instructors for my guiding certification back in Chamonix. Others of the guides I had known from the Alps where we had sometimes crossed paths coming out of climbs with clients. All were engaged in intense discussion concerning what lay ahead now that they had been delayed fifteen days due to late arrival of equipment, which had been held up in Bangkok for God knows what reason. They had decided to shortcut the approach from Kathmandu and had spent thousands of dollars to fly into Lukla. A score of paying clients had been brought in to be guided up the fixed ropes to the summit.

My compatriots were interested in our results on Kusum Kanguru and were grateful for whatever tips I could offer on snow conditions: Consistently better east of the snow flutes and cornices than on the north flank; problems in securing belays and anchor points for protection. As I was to later learn, this team would encounter similar obstacles on Ama Dablam.

On the following day, we packed up and organized the equipment for the Nuptse-Everest leg of our climbing marathon. Some of this equipment would be used by several British climbers who were to join us after they had a go at Kangtega. Most of the thirty-seven loads would be carried by yaks.
A few days earlier, when we set out from Monjo, the sky had been blue and the vegetation teeming. But in Tyangboche we found the trees, flowers, and grass much sparser. Above 14,000 feet the mountain flowers are tiny and tough and the grass is rough. It seemed so easy to grow in Monjo, but here it was so hard. What grows in Tyangboche, however, does so with an intensity and vitality that only a mountain stock can display.

From Monjo the mountains had appeared so distant, so unreal. Here they reared up in unabashed candor. They were so near, so tangible. The brush that painted Ama Dablam had stroked it with a roughness and a precision, forming curves and lines and colors, an immaculate skyline canvas pulsating with vibrant intensity. Intense—that was the word! Life becomes sparse in the upper reaches of the Khumbu Valley. But what there is of it is intense.

Far away in the background, the trio—Nuptse, Lhotse, Everest—built a natural dam which blocked up the valley. Yes, Tyangboche was a beautiful village. With its bright tough flowers and nervous rhododendrons, with its imposing mountains, it was so beautiful that I felt no one should be allowed to go to the bathroom there.

It was time to give Nima a rest, and it was a refreshing change of pace to have dinner prepared by the monks of the Tyangboche monastery. This monastery was founded some sixty years ago by the lama son of a wealthy Khumjung family. After the death of his wife, Gulu Lama devoted himself to the study of the scriptures and journeyed to Tibet for further study and training. When he returned some years later, he founded the Tyangboche Monastery. Shortly after the great earthquake of 1933 destroyed the main temple, Gulu Lama died, but three years later it was reported that the young son of Tibetan
immigrants in Namche Bazar had been speaking of his home and possessions in the Tyangboche Monastery. Monks were dispatched to Namche to determine if this boy was in truth the incarnation. He was brought to the monastery and Gulu Lama’s belongings were placed before him, scattered amongst the articles of other monks. The boy did not hesitate to reveal his incarnate identity by selecting those things that had belonged to Gulu Lama. He had passed the test and assumed (or reassumed) his rightful place in the Tyangboche Monastery. I had met the incarnate lama in 1974 when I first passed through Tyangboche. Now, however, he was not present, having gone to the hills above Tyangboche for meditation and retreat.

We left the gods behind on the following day and walked up to Pheriche, the last year-round settlement before Everest Base Camp. Having no trees at this elevation, the inhabitants of Pheriche have to construct their houses of other materials. And what was more logical than yak dung? First, a layer of sod, then a layer of slate and rock, then a layer of dried yak dung, and then the sequence repeated itself.

We arrived in Lobuche the following day to be greeted by a light snowfall. During the warmer season the yak herds take their yaks from above Pheriche to Lobuche. Although there are no year-round dwellings in Lobuche, there are two tea houses in friendly competition for the business of the trekkers that pass this way during the climbing seasons.

Mike practiced his French. ‘Bonjour mademoiselle.’
‘Namaste! Could we have some cha?’ I asked, using the common Nepali greeting.
'Oui, yes, ja,' came the surprising response from the mouth of a charming young Sherpani. 'I speak English,' she continued. 'Ich spreche Deutsch. Je parle français.'

'How is it that you speak all those languages?'

'It is a small world. Everything I learn from tourists.'

If I didn't believe it before, I was now convinced that the world was small.

Half a foot of snow accumulated during the night. We would have to go down to find pasture to graze the yaks before continuing up. Perhaps we would be delayed two days, perhaps more. But then the winds began to do battle. A swirling turbulence of clouds danced above the Khumbu Glacier and finally evacuated over the flanks of the hillside from Lobuche Peak to Pumori.

So we struck out for higher ground, following in the path of our yaks and soon, looking out across the glacier, saw the West Face of Nuptse stripping herself of her last garments, except for her head, where one long cloud simulated the hair of a mermaid blowing seductively in the wind. The West Face of Nup—tse, the 'west—peak', displays the mermaid in her most slender shape, delimited on the left by the sharp detail of an undulating West Ridge laden with snow, and on the right by the Southwest Ridge, which climbs up her body in large steps to her head. Parallel funnels of snow and rock build a zebra of shadows and light across her West Face. The harmonious lines of her figure lend to the mountain a vivacious expression of life.

To the left of Nuptse, the shoulder of the Goddess of the winds—Everest—extends one arm to the west. The shoulder appears as a massive foundation to support her upper pyramid, the famous pyramid, which hoists her
other arm high into the cosmos as if to signal victory. But we were still too low to see it.

Nuptse and Everest, the two mermaids of the triumvirate ruling over this upper sea were hiding a third queen behind their western ramparts. But one knew that Lhotse was there too in the background, just south of the ruler: Lho—tse, the 'south—peak', with an attractive but awesome South Face, which had yielded to no one.

The yaks set a good pace, sensing the presence of the mermaids three, and soon arrived at Gorakshep, a patch of land with a small hut of stones. It stands at the foot of Pumori, the ultimate goal of most trekking parties. These parties, after fifteen days of walking from Lamasangu just out of Kathmandu, climb up a few hundred feet to the first bump of Pumori to get a view of Everest, discharge their cameras, then turn around and go back. Some are more adventuresome and go on to Everest base camp by crossing the Khumbu Glacier eastward toward the West Face of Nuptse, then persevere for several miles to base camp, which is where Doug and I found ourselves that same day by noon sharp.
A Polish flag was flying in the distance from a large mess tent. White flags fluttered atop bamboo poles erected by Sherpas to ward off evil spirits. Silhouettes appeared among the rocks of the moraine staring at us as though we were extraterrestrial beings come to violate some territorial barrier. Then four or five Germans and two Poles greeted us openly.

The first to approach us as we walked into base camp was a pirate with a foulard tied around his head—big beard, large suntanned hands, and a rough smile—Ray Genet.

'Grüss Gott,' I said in German.

'How are you?' he answered in English as we shook hands.

'Where are you from?' Ray asked.

'Chamonix.'

'Ah, t'es français,' he smiled, switching to his French circuit. 'Tu connais Hervé Thivierge?' [Oh, you're French. Do you know Hervé Thivierge?]

'Bien sûr. Hervé c'est un de mes compagnons de cordée.' [Of course. Hervé is one of my climbing companions.]

'You know he worked with us last year on McKinley.'

Ray was Swiss and had moved to Alaska where he ran a guiding service.

'And you, you're with Doug Scott? What are you doing with the English?' Ray asked me.

'Just climbing.'
'Just the two of you?'
'No Mike Covington's with us. He's still on the approach.'
'Ahah! It'll be good to see Mike again.'
Ray also knew Mike from the States.
We rapped on about his team's efforts on Everest, about our climb on Kusum Kanguru, and about our plans for Nuptse and Everest. The Germans were now on their way down from Everest as a result of the storm which we ourselves had experienced in Lobuche—six inches of snow for us but far more for the Germans at the higher elevations.
Ray invited us to come for tea after we had established our camp and settled in. We set to work digging platforms for our tents about a hundred yards south of the Poles, while Nima set a fire blazing for our afternoon repast.
Zing! Zing! Zing! A suicidal axe for climbing, but a marvelous ice tool for digging. I was slicing huge blocks of ice as if they were pieces of cake. In Chamonix I had arranged with Germain Charlet of Charlet-Moser to make up some special ice axes for Everest and Nuptse. The new axe had a longer handle for more leverage, no teeth on the pick, and a sharp tapered chisel to break ice instead of penetrating and anchoring as with the normal climbing tools. This axe was an excellent platform digger and time saver. The tents were already in position when Mike arrived from Lobuche.
Now time to reflect on the wealth of the heavyweight Germans! They had piles of equipment in base camp, a superabundance of food, a proliferation of tents. The contrast between their opulence and our meagerness was striking as it had been down in Khumjung with the French who were destined for Ama Dablam. Was there perhaps a
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helicopter stashed away in the German camp too? The Poles had a somewhat different setup—much less luxurious than the opulent Germans, no Sherpas, but a large team of twenty. They consumed only canned foods throughout their residence on the North Face of Lhotse. In at least one respect we fared better than this largescale team. We had brought along mostly fresh vegetables purchased in the valley, including cauliflower, potatoes, beans, peas, carrots, spinach, radishes, and a special fruit endemic to the region, which tasted like a cross between a pear and an apple. With these Nima made a delicious stew. Except for one case each of canned tuna and kippers, we were on a vegetarian diet.

I snapped pictures of the beautiful pristine crest of Nuptse fronted by an immense ugly pile of rubbish. That particular pile had been excreted by the 1978 French expedition to Everest. We could tell from the labels on the cans. The heap must have been the size of a room, perhaps a good ten feet high and ten feet long, but there were also piles representing other countries—Germany, Great Britain, Japan, the U. S., etc. Nothing yet from Greenland, Tahiti, or the Yemen. The Poles had already advised us not to draw our water close to base camp. Several of their members had come down with dysentery and their doctor suspected bad water. Better to take the precaution of walking two hundred yards beyond base camp to avoid the pollution. The largescale expeditions were certainly notorious despilers of the environment, but I really had not realized how bad until now.

Our work finished, Doug and I decided to take the Germans up on their invitation for tea. We moseyed over and met everyone except for the leader and his wife. Ray Genet, being the only member who spoke fluent English,
French, and German, introduced us to the Germans and to the Sherpas and fetched tea, bread, sausage, and cheese. Pertemba was there too. He was their sirdar and had been sirdar on the Everest Southwest Face expedition. There he reached the summit of Everest. I could see that he was sly and alert, a fox with boundless energy packed into his Mongolian features.

The Germans had been on the point of launching a summit attempt when the storm hit. They were now eager to have another go at it, so we wished them well and returned to our camp to find one of Nima's worldly vegetable stews. We were probably eating the most wholesome food of all the climbers in base camp and paying less than one thousandth the price. Our climbing program also differed. We would be undertaking an Alpine style ascent of Nuptse, and Everest still hovered in the background.
The three of us left base camp on the 29th at 5:00 a.m. bound for the Western Cwm to steal a closer look at the North Face of Nuptse. Our first obstacle was the treacherous and dreaded icefall—the transition between the final plateau of the Khumbu Glacier—the Western Cwm—and the penultimate step of the glacier—where Everest base camp is sited. It is a huge chaos of ice in perpetual motion, about four miles in length, heavily laden with crevasses and seracs. As the snow and ice is discharged into the Western Cwm from Everest, Lhotse, and Nuptse, it is pushed and thrust north-westward until it finally drops down and simultaneously turns sharply to the southwest at the entranceway of the great cirque. These countervailing forces of pushing, thrusting, dropping, and bending serve to compress, contort, rip, gnash, tear, and maim the glacier in such an exaggerated way that it is difficult, extremely difficult, for climbers to enter the Western Cwm and hence approach Everest, Lhotse, and Nuptse. If you have equipment, you spend some time fixing the icefall—a ladder across a crevasse here, a rope across a serac there, and so on until finally you span the icefall. Once the icefall is fixed, you progress very fast up the snowy cwm to your destination.

We had no Sherpas and carried all our equipment on our own shoulders. Moreover, we had no special equipment to fix the icefall. Hence, on this occasion we availed ourselves of the equipment which the Germans had already secured across the icefall.
There were precarious sections in the icefall which presented extreme objective danger from collapsing seracs, and the ever present fear was there of being drowned in an avalanche coming down from the West Shoulder of Everest on the lower section, and of falling through the surface into one of the crevasses that lay in wait poised for a juicy meal of human flesh. But according to Doug, the icefall was much less contorted and tormented this year than he had seen it in previous years. And that was a good sign.

The Western Cwm is probably the world’s highest glacial valley, giving the impression of a huge bowl, bordered by Everest, Lhotse, and Nuptse. When the sun strikes the Western Cwm, the temperature rises dramatically as the solar rays reflect off the steep walls of the encircling giants down into the cold, cold snow.

At the entrance of the Western Cwm just above the icefall, we dug a platform and pitched our tent halfway between the German tents on one side and the Polish tents on the other. At an elevation of some 20,000 feet we were already close to the elevation of Kusum Kanguru, yet it had not been hard work to Camp I. It had seemed more like high altitude trekking than climbing in the infamous Western Cwm.

It was good to be feeling so fit. We could easily have carried on to Camp II but decided against it, preferring to relax, to go gently and acclimatize gradually to the higher elevations.

Already at Camp I, I began to sense an inner conflict, looking to the right up the challenging steep North Face of Nuptse and then up the Western Cwm to the inviting path up Lhotse to the South Col, and then up the easy normal route of Everest—the conflict between the challenge of Nuptse and the inflated prestige of Everest.
Our Ambitious Crescendo Culminated with Nuptse
Looking back out of the Western Cwm, I could see in the western skyline a wave of mountains, beginning with the Lhola Pass below Everest, continuing up to form Khumbutse, descending again and then ascending to form Lingtren, down again and up to Pumori. Through the troughs of this great wave, Gyachung Kang lifted up the shield of his East Face—en garde!

That evening the blue in the Tibetan sky was deep, a rich luxurious color I had not seen before. A blue for Norma whose image seemed to appear behind the Lhola Pass. Beams of glowing heat were projected into her face, painting her cheeks in rose, lighting and shading the curves of her golden curls. She smiled. As the sun set in the west, it rose in reflection over the soft horizon of her blue eyes in the east and I drifted away in that calm sea of extreme blue.

That night I could not put my mind to bed. I was drowning and the conflict between Nuptse and Everest was the water that inundated my being. It did not seem to bother the others, but to me the prospect of squeezing in both Nuptse and Everest in the allotted time did not seem likely. My fear of losing Everest began as a small seed, sprouted into a hearty Alpine weed, and then grew and blossomed into a flower for which I reached out but could not quite grasp. We must not spend too much time on Nuptse. Otherwise we shall surely lose Everest. Lose Everest—lose Everest—lose Everest—climb Nuptse—lose Everest. Take Everest into your hands—forget Nuptse!
The Everest Bug

Everest weighed heavily on my mind as we walked up toward Camp II the next day. Is this really the Western Cwm? Is that really Everest? Is this what so many climbers had written about, the mountain that comes to the minds of all lay people when the Himalayas are mentioned? To be honest I had expected more. Glancing now to the right I could see that Nuptse offered the obvious climbing challenge—technically difficult. To the left the Southwest Face of Everest was disappointing, unaesthetic in appearance, very dry, with piles of black rock which contrasted with the clean granite of Nuptse. The North Face of Nuptse appeared more difficult than the Southwest Face of Everest. But Everest was there and I knew what it represented to most people, including myself. Climbing up via the South Col simply did not seem to pose a major problem to an Alpine style ascent.

I was obsessed with the idea of climbing Everest—so much that I finally decided I would clear my conscience: I would talk about it with Doug and Mike and plead my case. First, to organize my thoughts. Now, let's see—Nuptse offers the real climbing challenge. It has been scaled only once from the other side by a large team. In contrast, Everest has been climbed by over ninety different people. There are already four separate routes on the south side of Everest—the normal route via the South Col, the American route up the West Shoulder from the Western Cwm, the West Ridge Integral from the Lhola Pass, and the Southwest Face. Isn’t the next obvious
step forward on Everest an Alpine style ascent of the normal route? It’s true that Messner and Habeler climbed Everest via the normal route without oxygen, but their climb was carried out within the infrastructure of a largescale expedition, with fixed ropes, fixed camps, high altitude porters, and oxygen to fall back on in case of an emergency. Norton in 1924 already reached an altitude of over 28,000 feet without oxygen. A real step forward would be a completely natural Alpine style ascent—a clean ascent.

Eventually we stopped to brew up some tea midway between I and II. 'I really have a problem,' I started. 'I mean I don’t know about you guys, but here we are walking up the Western Cwm with Nuptse on one side,' I gestured with my hand, 'and Everest on the other—and I just can’t concentrate on Nuptse here,' turning to my right, 'with Everest staring me in the back,' I finished, stabbing my thumb over my back toward Everest.

'What do you mean?' Doug asked, as much with his face as with his vocal cords.

'Well, I don’t know about you but I think we should forget about Nuptse and climb Everest first.'

Doug shook his head and said, 'Before coming here you knew that we were going to climb Kusum Kanguru, Nuptse, and then Everest. You knew that and now you’re changing your mind.'

'Yes, it all looked good on paper, but I’m walking on the Western Cwm today. Right now! Here! It’s just different now. I can’t concentrate on Nuptse.'

'But what about the others who are coming to join us? We’re not supposed to split parties.'

'But we don’t know when they’re going to finish up on Kangtega. To me, looking at Nuptse from here, it’s obvious that it’s going to take us a couple of days to come back up
here after returning to base camp, a week in the face, a couple of days to come back down, three or four days to rest, at least fifteen or twenty days with one or two days of bad weather here and there. You mean in twenty days we're gonna start Everest with the high winds at the end of October? We're going to jeopardize our chances on Everest by going for Nuptse. The weather is excellent right now and the snow conditions are perfect. In fifteen or twenty days it might be too late. It would be a good step forward to do the normal route of Everest Alpine style.'

'But Nuptse is a very good acclimatizing trip for Everest and we don't have authorization for the normal route of Everest.'

'The only problem is that Nuptse is not just an acclimatizing trip. I think it's going to take so much out of us that we're not going to be able to climb Everest afterward.'

'I don't agree. We planned to climb Nuptse before Everest. Then we do the West Ridge Alpine style. We need to acclimatize to have a chance to reach the summit of Everest and we planned to do it with the Kangtega boys.'

'But Nuptse isn't the right mountain to acclimatize on. The best way to acclimatize is to go up to the South Col. We could acclimatize to 26,000 feet in two days. Then come down. We can do it twice. Then go to the South Buttress where we have authorization. Even for you, Doug Scott, an Alpine style ascent of Everest is more significant than the North Face of Nuptse!'

'We'll wait for the Kangtega boys. There's no way I am going to set my foot on this face,' Doug intoned, gesticulating toward Everest. 'Georges, you really have the Everest bug!'
'Sure I have the Everest bug and it's easy for you not to have the Everest bug since you've been on top of Everest. I'm just telling you how I feel today. I feel strongly about it and I don't want to hold it in.'

'Anyway, we're going to go to Everest after Nuptse and do a clean ascent of the West Ridge.'

'For me that's overwhelming to tell the truth, especially after climbing Nuptse. I have a hard time looking at the two mountains as a sequence—one after the other. Right now one seems to be working against the other—Nuptse against Everest and Everest against Nuptse. I don't think we can do both in one month. To climb the North Face of Nuptse is going to be a twenty day round trip and there just won't be time for Everest at the end of October with strong winds higher up on the mountain.'

'Well, the Japanese climbed Everest at the beginning of November,' Doug said.

'But you had a storm in mid October last year which made it impossible for you to climb Nuptse, and the French climbed Everest just before a storm and would not have made it afterwards.'

'Usually the strong winds come at the end of October and the beginning of November. We'll still have fifteen or twenty days ahead of us after Nuptse and it should take us no more than a week to climb Everest if we're acclimatized.'

'Let's guarantee Everest and then try Nuptse!' 'You've really got the Everest bug,' Doug repeated. 'That's just prestige.'

'It's true and I'm sure there's something bad about it, but I cannot not have it because I have it.'
We agreed to continue on to Camp II. As Doug and I exchanged leads I sensed what he sensed—we respected each other in spite of our differences. I pulled my egoistic thoughts back into myself. *Let's try to squeeze everything in,* I thought to myself.

The traditional site of Camp II is situated at the foot of the Southwest Face of Everest, protected by a ridge of stratified rock. It is the safest point on the Western Cwm, sheltered from most avalanche danger. In Camp II the glamor of the German expedition was again in evidence—seven huge tents and a superabundance of stores. We invited ourselves for tea and then pitched our tent between the Germans and the Poles, followed by a visit to our Eastern bloc neighbors, who were ferrying loads from their base camp to their Camps III and IV on the North Face of Lhotse. They, like the Germans on Everest, were drawing near to a summit bid. We wished them well.

From Camp II we could see for the first time a feasible line of ascent up Nuptse's wall. The North Face is a wide wall, very pure and white, delicately pleated, heavily snow-fluted, displaying some hard mixed climbing in the central portions of the face. It presumes an air of extreme difficulty and steepness. Nuptse is really more of a dam than a peak. Astride that long rampart of ice and snow, an interminable ridge stretches toward the southwest for more than four miles, from the Khumbu Glacier to the
Lhotse-Nuptse Col at 24,833 feet. Three dominant features stand out on Nuptse’s back: the East Summit at 25,640 feet, the main summit—our objective, at 25,850 feet, and another high point further west at 25,574 feet. The main summit was first climbed in 1961 via the South Face by a largescale team of British climbers. The West summit was reached by the Japanese via the West Ridge from Everest Camp I. The East summit remains virgin.

That afternoon Doug and I set out across the Cwm to get a better view of our line and to set a track around the crevasses up the slope which gently climbed to a barrier of seracs blocking access to the long snow ridge leading up the North Face to the main ridge on Nuptse’s back. There was no route up the North Face which was free of avalanche danger, but the route we traced out seemed to offer the least risk. As we drew nearer, a cushion of air seemed to underlie the snowy surface across which we moved. An area the radius of some thirty feet began to tremble under our feet. A collapsing snow bridge? A hungry glacial stomach below? If nothing else, perhaps it would settle the question of Nuptse versus Everest in favor of neither. And then the snow did collapse and Doug and I fell—down, down—six or eight inches down. It had been only a small snowquake. There were no crevasses beneath our feet and therefore no juicy Doug and Georges for dinner.

As we made contact with the advance guard of Nuptse’s defenders—those awsome but attractive seracs of shiny blue ice—I felt their gaze fixed upon us following our every movement. Then, up to the right, a torrent of silkwarm gloves of frozen ice was hurled defiantly at us. I knew then that I had recovered from the Everest virus. The challenge had been issued and I had accepted it enthusiastically.
We returned to Camp II to find Mike in a bad way. Coming up from base camp, he had not felt well. Then, suddenly, he shot past us like a bullet, arriving in Camp I ahead of us. But his progress to Camp II had been very slow. Now, in Camp II he was suffering from a headache and an upset stomach. Naturally we were concerned. The higher elevations did not seem to mesh with his system.

The next morning we decided to return to base as fast as possible. Leaving Camp II at five in the morning, we were back by eight. We had jetted down, and Mike was now out of danger, on medication and sleeping in his tent. I scribbled some thoughts in my diary.

_Climbing Everest via the South Col is not technically difficult. I don't think you'd ever have to put in an ice screw or fix a belay. It's just plodding up. No wonder so many have done it. I would still like to do it Alpine style without fixed ropes, oxygen, and all the trimmings. Doug is not motivated for Everest before Nuptse. He has already climbed Everest. He is free, free to think 'Nuptse'. I would prefer not spending too much time on Nuptse because I would like to get to the top of the big bugger. There must be something wrong with wanting to climb Everest just because it is the highest mountain, or even just because it is there. But looking up the normal route from Camp II, I couldn't help thinking that it would go so easy Alpine style—just plodding up, so easy you could just bring up your grandmother and your cow. I still would not mind climbing Everest with my grandmother and my cow._
So we would wait two days before attacking Nuptse. That way, Mike would be given time to recover, and Doug and I, in anticipation of the Alpine ascent of Everest, would reconnoitre a route up the Lhola Pass, a broad saddle between the flat Rongbuk Glacier going down into Tibet on one side, and the Khumbu Glacier stepping up from Nepal on the other. Our side of the pass was steep and displayed a huge wall of seracs, making the prospect of scaling it direct out of the question. In Everest base camp, one hears the incessant explosions of the snowquakes and avalanches sweeping down Lhola's untidy wall. The problem was how best to approach the pass with some chance of coming back.

There were two routes up the Lhola which did not invite a kamikaze style climax—a mixed ridge of rock and snow to the right of the pass looking up, following the French line for a while, then crossing left instead of continuing on to the West Shoulder, and, a second, the Yugoslav route, a rock spur to the left of the pass on Khumbutse, which entailed a hard grind up to a point above the Lhola and a traverse to the pass itself. The first solution involved some objective danger, but was technically easier; the second was safer, or at least so it appeared, with no seracs to impede our progress or threaten our lives; but the safer route was technically difficult, involving some 1,500 feet of rock climbing, prefaced by 500 feet of scrambling up moraines to reach the foot of the spur.
Doug had photographs showing the route that the Yugoslavs had opened in the spring of '79. They were the first to be granted permission by the Nepali authorities to tackle the West Ridge of Everest from the Lhola. Previous expeditions had been forced to find a route up the West Shoulder below the Lhola proper. But that surrogate route involved crossing a number of snow slopes with considerable exposure to avalanche danger. Friends of mine had already encountered avalanches on the West Shoulder in 1974, and when the air had cleared, five Sherpas had been buried alive, along with Gerard Devouassoux, the expedition leader.

So it was natural that we should opt for the second solution—the Yugoslav line, which Doug and I had already tried to make out en route to Camp I in the Western Cwm. The new route had to be there somewhere, and since we had a photo, it should not have been difficult to locate. Yet we found it impossible to translate the photograph from our distance, nor could we find a trace of ropes or other clues even with the aid of our binoculars. So up on the Western Cwm we gave up and concluded that the route would in the end be easy to find by approaching from base camp.

And that is what we did on the 2nd of October—set a track for the Lhola, stopping off at the German camp to inquire into the Germanic front lines on Everest. Good news and bad news. On the previous two days all members of the German team had made it to the summit, in two groups, one two days past, a second party just yesterday. There were eight climbers comprising the second party; four had returned early from the summit and four had been forced to bivouac overnight just below the South Summit at 28,500 feet. The bivouac party included two
Sherpas along with our friend, Ray Genet, and Hannelore Schmatz, the wife of the expedition leader. One of the two Sherpas had retreated down to the South Col alone, legitimately fearing the consequences of an overnight bivouac at that altitude where the brain cries out for oxygen and the body, for warmth, all through the night. He had made it back by 9:00 p.m. and now the Germans were awaiting news of the remaining three. But there was no news, and that did not bode well.

As we broke a trail toward the Lhola, my thoughts were with Ray Genet. I remembered how he had befriended us upon our arrival in base. I hoped for the best. Then, as though to confirm the worst, Doug found a climbing boot at the foot of the moraine, a vestige of a previous expedition. I examined the boot and noted on its instep the initials GDX written in black ink, which I immediately recognized as those of Gerard Devouassoux, who had been swept off the West Shoulder of Everest in '74. In Chamonix he had been a progressive force in the Compagnie des Guides and the French climbing world. Back home we had all felt the void that his death had left. I put the boot into my pack with the intention of carrying it up the moraine to leave it in a safe spot where I would retrieve it on the return.

Up close we confronted three main rock spurs at the foot of Khumbutse and each appeared more confusing than the next, more confusing in fact than when we had seen them through our binoculars on the Western Cwm. So most of the day was spent climbing up and down in an attempt to locate a possible line up the spur. At last, after much yo-yoing, we did find the route, but by then it was late and, besides, we were anxious to hear the latest from the Germans. So we postponed the Lhola ascent and climb-
ed back down, scrambling over the moraine to base, and through to the German campsite. There had been radio contact with the higher camps all morning, but the communications had been confusing because transmission had been conducted in Sherpa. The Sherpas in base camp did not know English. The Europeans did not know Sherpa. The net result—nobody knew much of anything, except the Sherpas themselves, who were unable to clarify what had happened, if anything, neither by tongue, nor by gesture, nor by expression. But it seemed obvious that something was in the air.

Coincidentally, Ray Genet's wife Kathy had just arrived in base camp, quite pregnant, after walking twenty-one days with her one year old baby. Kathy knew Mike from his previous trips to Alaska, and they were chatting and talking beside Ray's tent which now seemed a symbol of his presence. Kathy knew that Ray had spent the night out below the summit, but he had bivouacked many times on McKinley and had survived in several epic situations in that part of the world. So she was confident that all would go well, while we were not.

A Sherpa reported that Ray was okay, and Doug left the radio to transmit this message to Kathy—that the news was good, that Ray was on his way down, but that he could not be certain because it was hard to understand the Sherpa's meaning. The best thing to do was to wait for news from the Germans themselves.

I remained stationed at the radio listening for another fifteen or twenty minutes. It now appeared that the translation had been wrong and that of the three who had bivouacked, only the Sherpa had made it back to the South Col. It seemed that Ray and Hannelore had collapsed in the snow. Meanwhile, the team doctor had gone up from the
South Col with three Sherpas, carrying oxygen, food, and equipment.

Doug, Mike, and I returned to our tent to discuss how we would deal with the situation in the event that Ray could not make it back to the South Col. Since there were no Germans in base camp, there would be no responsible person to comfort Kathy should worse come to worst. Since Mike was a friend of the Genets, he would talk with Kathy.

We moved back to the German camp to find the liaison officer crying into the radio. 'What happened? What happened?' he cried.

'Ray Genet and Hannelore Schmatz are dead. Nothing can be done. The Sherpa is alive but he's got cerebral oedema and severe frostbite.'

Kathy was still unaware of the tragedy that had taken place on Everest. We asked her to come to our tent for tea.

Then back in our camp, Mike broke the tragic news to Kathy. She clung to him for a long time. Her nails dug into Mike's back. Pain and disbelief were etched in her face. She bent over and clutched her pregnant belly, 'Ray! Ray! It's not true,' she wailed. 'It's just not true. Oh God! This baby, it hurts!'

Kathy's pain was contagious. There she was with her son and her pregnant abdomen, very much alive, with more life in her than a man could ever have. She would give a new life soon. She overflowed with life, only seeking confirmation that life was legitimate to have. Now she had to face death, the death of her man. How could a pregnant woman understand that concept which was already so foreign to me? And the body was up there. She would not even see it. She would have to reconcile death in a most abstract way.
I wondered how Ray looked lying in the snow. Back in France I had not long before met with death in a man. He had been hit by a rock which fell from a limestone cliff in the Vercors. I stayed alone with him. 'So you're going?' I asked. But he did not answer. I caressed his face, reformed his cheeks into a smile, arranged his hair, and cleaned his face. I felt the blood still pulsing through him and thought that he was alive, but it was only the pulse that throbbed at the ends of my fingertips. I bent over kneeling, one knee in the grass, my hand on his face, touching his skin. The grass was cold but living; the skin was warm but dying. A holly bush grew out from behind his neck. Tiny purple flowers surrounded the bed upon which he lay. He was bathed in a tender yellow light. The grass, the flowers, and his hair fluttered in the breeze.

Two stones had struck him. One had broken his leg. He must have walked with his hand on his hip, because the other stone had driven his arm into his abdomen, opening up a large gaping hole in his side. I moved his forearm out and with it the warmth flowed out of his body with his intestines. I pushed his entrails back into him and bandaged his wound with my T-shirt. The smell was strong, but it was not a permanent smell. It was one of those odors that rides the breeze—the smell of a freshly killed chamois. A column of black ants swarmed into his wound—life in a background of death. I straightened the bones of his leg and rearranged his neck, elevating it with a rock for a pillow. His breast suddenly moved up and down. 'He's still alive,' I yelled to a friend who would not come near. 'I saw him move.' But he did not move. I had seen him move because I could not grow accustomed to a breast so calm, so immobile, so dead. His legs outstretched, his arms along his sides, he lay at peace with himself, now smiling. I plac-
ed my cheek against his and realized that to understand what he felt, I would have to experience death myself.

He was so much a part of this life, yet no longer a part of it, and more still a part of some greater life. That body was of this world, alive, yet dead, no longer regenerating itself, yet still feeding the ants crawling over it—the end of a rope looping back on itself, a circle of infinites, beyond my reach. I had no particular feelings for that man, only a compassionate tenderness for belonging to the same species. No pain did I feel, rather a puzzle that intrigued me. And probably not a very important puzzle in the scheme to which it belonged, in the next dimension where the earth itself is one solitary electron of that system. The mysteries of life, death, time, summits, all seemed to have that in common—that infinity towards which we all tend by force and from within, willingly or not. That unknown was so hauntingly present. It was the bond that tied us together.

Although Ray's body was disintegrating below the South Summit of Everest, another part of him was still alive. He had left for a world unknown to us, but no longer unknown to him. He had departed in the company of the White Death for a world I had had only glimpses of, but a real world nonetheless.

Now Kathy would spend the night with us where she would have friends. The moon was high above Pumori, reflecting its yellow beams on the West Shoulder of Everest. Kathy wanted to take pictures of that mountain and learn where on it Ray had died. We gave her photographs and explained them to her. Against this tragic backdrop, Everest loomed innocent and pure.
'Let's go to China!' I smirked.
'I've always wanted to go to the Lhola,' Doug joined in with undisguised excitement in his voice.

On the 5th of October we were back on the route to the Lhola, scrambling up a rocky ledge when several loud explosions filled the air above our heads. Bits of rock whistled past our faces. One of them found its target and struck me in the forearm. The raining debris was gone just as suddenly as it had appeared. I could not see whence the rock issued nor whither it was destined. We were on a spur of fair quality rock, but for some inexplicable reason a large boulder the size of a compact car had up and exploded, making its way toward us with all the intensity of purpose of a hidden force.

The farther we progressed up the spur, the looser the rock became until the objective danger of rockfalls mounted a tension exceeding what we had experienced on the upper reaches of the tormented Everest icefall. The technical difficulty of the climbing was also increasing, but we were now on the scent of the Slavs, following their fixed rope and aluminum ladders.

The last steep section of the spur was a three hundred foot vertical dihedral spanned from bottom to top by a long aluminum ladder, bordered on either side by a mass of rotten rope. To reach the foot of the dihedral required a traverse across a chute, down which we had just seen a jumble of rock come coursing. Rocks hit the chute intermittently. It was as though some mischievous imp were flinging them from higher up to dislodge us from our perch.

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'Merde!' I confessed to Doug. 'What amazes me is that they said they had found a way up Everest that avoided the danger of the icefall,' Doug incredulously. 'This is worse than the icefall!' It took a full hour to negotiate the exposed chute and to move up to the dihedral, which we accosted by means of the Yugoslav ladder. As we ascended, we heard yet another loud explosion and turned to see a cloudy cannonade of rock and debris rumble down from the innocent-looking chimneys to our left, gain momentum, build up to a crescendo of sliding boulders before passing us by, then go hurrying down the chute we had just traversed. 'That could have been us,' we telegraphed each other. Now several unappetizing bulges of loose rock. One last malignant tumor—a rather large area of fresh rock recently opened by a master surgeon to expose a handsome set of deciduous teeth. The complete upper crust and body of that rocky hump had been vomited up, sending tons of rock down Lhola's face some short time previous to our coming. From my diary:

I now lead across and up the vertical sculpture, a puzzle of rock wedges loosely imbricated. I maintain my balance with a play of arms, shifting legs below. I must think and move ahead, move and think ahead. I secure a foothold. It holds. Now half my body on top of it, it gives about an inch, but the wedge remains in place. Now all my weight. I secure two fairly reliable hand holds and I am already two feet to the right, shifting myself from one asperity to the next. When I apply traction to a slate of rock, it
comes out in my hand. I push it back into place. My arms raise from one projection to the next. This one holds. That one does not. I progress rightward edging as fast as possible across the rotten brick wall, finally reaching a ledge where I can rest. The safety is minimal. No protection in the traverse. Doug belays me from far back there. I think of Dougal Haston and his posthumous book Calculated Risk. That's what it is! I climb around the corner of the brick wall and mantel very gently over the loose rock onto a terrace of safe and solid ground. I fix a peg and belay Doug, who leads up the next pitch, a narrow snow spur. Finally we're on top of the Lhola.

For the first time the naked features of the North undressed themselves before our human eyes—the North Col of Everest, the North Ridge, the North Peak, and the Rongbuk Glacier below. One foot in Tibet and one in Nepal, how artificial and contrived the boundary seemed between our legs.

'The Lhola sloped gently down into Tibet, an airport of snow.

'How would you like to ski down to the Rongbuk Monastery?' I asked Doug, assuming the tuck of a downhiller.

'I've always wanted to come up here,' he kept repeating, completely absorbed in the panorama.

It would have been pleasant to spend a few days on Lhola's bosom, dickering around and exploring, enjoying the northern features of Everest, which have played such a significant role in the earliest attempts on the world's highest mountain.
A first reconnaissance of Everest was undertaken in 1921 via the Rongbuk and Eastern Rongbuk Glaciers. Early attempts on the mountain itself were initiated on the North Col, which we could now see, separating the two glaciers and connecting the North Peak with the North Ridge of Everest. The North Ridge extended all the way to the summit in a long easy-angled projection, a particularly suitable Alpine style route to the summittal pyramid. The first attempt on Everest came in 1922 from the East Rongbuk Glacier up the North Col and ended in failure. Many climbers are familiar with the 1924 attempt when Norton reached an altitude of over 28,000 feet without oxygen, to be followed by Mallory and Irvine who did carry oxygen. No one knows whether Mallory and Irvine succeeded in reaching the summit. Perhaps they did, but if so, they lost their lives in the accomplishment. It was Norton's contribution without oxygen that should have set an example for a natural course of evolution in the Himalayas. Instead, history took a somewhat unnatural turn: The summit of Everest at any cost—that became the objective. Which country would reap the honors and prestige that were purportedly to follow?

Doug and I looked for a sign of human presence on the North Col and along the North Ridge above. In Kathmandu we had heard a rumor that the Japanese had been granted permission to attempt Everest from Tibet via the North Col. Some Sherpas and Nepalese had lent credence to this
rumor by remarking that the attempt would take place this year, instead of the following year as we had originally been informed. But we could see nothing. No tents. No tracks. Not even a yeti.

Nor could we see any trace of the Yugoslavs on the Lhola or up the Western Ridge. Perhaps they had cleaned up all their equipment. Perhaps it was buried under the snow.

Looking back across the Western Cwm, I could see tiny ants moving through the icefall—probably the Poles ferrying loads to their higher camps. Across the icefall itself there was a good view of Nuptse. I looked back up the West Shoulder of Everest and fancied the idea of climbing it with Doug. Everest before Nuptse again incited my innards. Was I being smitten by the Everest virus a second time?

The winds were issuing from the west, blowing a veil of clouds into Tibet, silky veils embroidered with air laid on her arms. I sat down and watched. She unfurled the sails and pointed them towards me before opening them gently and widely at her sides. Heavy chains of gold plunged down her neck into the cleft below, squeezed between two hills of milky flesh, concave and smooth, ochre in color around her summits. Through her rounded lips white ivory flowed like a boat out of her soul. She has the eyes of space—Chomolongma, the Goddess of the Winds. The native name for Everest was far more appropriate. Had Everest the surveyor ever set foot on Chomolongma, or, for that matter, feasted his eyes upon this goddess of the winds?

*   *   *
Some three hours later Doug and I were back in base camp discussing the relative merits of large and small climbing enterprises. 'I think we see expeditions in better perspective looking back. Even Kangchenjunga was too hard core for me. Wasn't the '75 Everest expedition too heavy for you Doug?'

'It was enjoyable and there were some nice people. But it was a real feeling of freedom when Dougal and I left the fixed ropes to do some climbing.'

I knew that Dougal Haston had been Doug's favorite climbing companion. Perhaps deep down Doug longed to carry on climbing with Dougal. Had their friendship budded with their ascent of Everest, 'the hard way'? It seemed that their relationship had not been given a chance to blossom. One of the buds had been cut off and buried under a mound of snow in the Alps. But now the discussion shifted to the faces we had met floating about base camp. German, Polish, ourselves, it seemed that sometimes we were here without really being here. And when we were at home, we were at home without really being there. The problem cried out for resolution: To be here and feel at ease and comfortable, all here, with no presumption of guilt, in order to perform well, and when at home, to be completely at home, body and soul, not wishing to be here in the mountains. From my diary:

Doug dislikes living in the city. When he is there, he longs to be here, and when he is here, he thinks of the comforts of home. We all have a tendency to romanticize home and friendship when we are far away, and in equal turn we romanticize the mountains and adventure when we are at home. We should know that it is not perfect on either side, but we do not.
'How crazy it is to come back to this place,' Doug said the other day. He must have been to Everest base camp four or five times. But it seems as important for him to come back here as it is for him to stay at home. His home is in Nottingham, his cavern, his comfort. In the mountains there is a home for him too, his lodge, his hunting ground. Yes, he must forever hunt. Just like me.

On the 6th Doug decided to go down to see his wife in Khumjung. He thought she might be worried with the news of the German tragedy. His daughter was not acclimatizing well and he wanted to check on her too. It seemed that Doug needed to take a break after the German tragedy, perhaps coaxed along by the unexplained rock explosion we had experienced on the route to the Lhola.

Mike had already set out with Kathy Genet to Syangboche where he would try to arrange her flight out. He himself would continue on to Namche Bazar where he would marry Samje and enjoy a few more days rest before returning.

So on the 6th I found myself all alone in base camp. I went to the Germans, who were clearing their site, looking for some gas cartridges for a trip planned to Makalu in the fall of 1980. Possibly I would be able to pick up some ice screws, ropes, and other odds and ends at a bargain rate. I met and talked with the German leader, Dr. Schmatz. He was proud—the first Swabian expedition to Everest—the first couple on the summit—the oldest man, himself, on the summit—all members of his team on the summit. But what about the tragedy?

The doctor noted that his wife had taken his camera to the summit with his film and that now she had his pictures
there and perhaps we could pick them up if we ourselves made it to the top in the coming days.

Back to my tent. Alone. All alone. Except for her. And her too—I turned to Everest, to Chomolungma, and dwelled on the thought of climbing that mountain. I dreamed about bouncing across those snow slopes, light, soaring into the steep landscape, which lay back for me like a consenting lover. I walked into the relief and it slid by me, creating friction around us that cooed of a stream of air on top of purring sails in the wind, sharp and deep, high and low, moving up and down, fusing and disengaging, in a melody of tender notes, a beautiful dream.

I was suffering a relapse. What had once settled into remission reappeared with renewed vigor. My desire to climb Everest was again upon me, in full strength.

The more I thought about soloing that mountain, the more difficult I found it to contain my emotions. At the thought of preparing my pack and leaving like a robber for Everest, my stomach palpitated, my intestines vermiculated, my eyes dilated and my sight acuminated. The muscles of my legs tightened like steel. Mind and body focused toward a goal which seemed mine alone. Waves pulsed up and down, inside and out, alive with tactile sensitivity, set in motion by a complex chemistry boiling within. I really had the bug.

Before he left, Doug suggested that I accompany him to Namche Bazar to attend Mike’s wedding. But I wanted to stay in base camp. He also suggested a walk around on the moraines and terraces bordering the Khumbu Glacier to take pictures of the intense Himalayan landscape. Those thoughts depressed me. They were the trough of the wave. The idea of leaving for Everest was exhilarating. Just the thought of it made me explode in laughter. It was the crest of the wave.
I was pushed, then pulled, finally crushed by the flow of emotions. Completely overcome, in order to survive I accepted to be me. I would try it alone. And with that decision the flow regulated itself at the top of the wave.
I wanted to be autonomous and take with me all the necessary gear for a week alone on the mountain—tent, stove, gas cartridges, food, clothing, technical gear. I prepared my pack with the same attention to detail as for a solo in the Alps, selecting only those things which were absolutely necessary, packing, and double-checking all the items, reviewing in my mind the weather and the snow conditions on the mountain, keeping busy all the time with my hands. The pack came to something over forty pounds. The weather was beautiful and stable. There was little wind high up. The snow conditions on the mountain seemed ideal and safe for a fast solo ascent. I would climb and stop when tired. It would take one day to Camp II, one to the Yellow Band, one to the South Col, one to the summit and back to the Col, one back to Camp II, and one to base—in all, six days mandatory. I included two extra days of solid food, another week of gas cartridges, powdered soup and drinks. And an extra picture of Norma.

On the 7th of October at five in the morning, I moved into the icefall for my solo bid on Everest only to meet the German and Polish equipment. Already a setback for autonomy. Dependent from the word go.

'Hey listen you. Just let me go by quickly. I have nothing against you—I'm just passing through.'

Progressing fast, almost a part of the terrain itself, I conferred with the unstable seracs threatening the route,
pleading for mercy on my way up to Camp I. The freezing air bit into my cheeks, but I perspired profusely, moving along quickly. I arrived in Camp I in two and a half hours and pushed along the wide corridor toward Camp II, speaking now with the huge yawning crevasses that cut the cwm between I and II.

'Foi de bleu! Quelle bouerne!' I said in patois. 'I won't come down to see you!'

I stopped to listen. No answer from the depths of those black holes. I continued, small and alone, up the Milky Way of the Western Cwm, through a nebula of snow crystals in the gleaming reflection of a bright star overhead—a Himalayan universe expanding into the upper reaches of the glacier at the feet of the North Face of Lhotse and the Southwest Face of Everest.

Another three hours and I arrived in Camp II. No privacy here. A crowd of beings swarmed hither and thither—Sherpas cleaning up for a German evacuation of Everest—a highly organized pillage. Each foot soldier collected a huge load of equipment to take down to base camp. Selecting the most valuable pieces to take along, they threw the less desirable items into the crevasses all around. Two Sherpas were at work on the kitchen tent, cutting and stripping the material from its sides, leaving the remains as a skeleton for burial in one of the crevasses. Others loaded themselves to the gills with more than a hundred pounds.

I sat back on my pack and looked on, interceding only when a huge pile of food began moving crevasseward. I asked for it on behalf of my team and the Sherpas gave it up willingly and were soon on their way down to Camp I. Behind them in the solitude of Camp II, a scarred battlefield of aluminum poles, snow stakes, and black rec-
tangular patches of dirty snow where tents once stood. The massive assemblage of gear and garbage had vanished, now out of the picture, cleaned up from the surface. But, in reality, some of it was present, down in the crevasses, all around the camp, spoiling an inner beauty and leaving a pitiful scene should one venture to look down into the bowels of the Western Cwm, a part of the Khumbu Glacier, whose waters we drank only a few miles down in base camp. And here I was, me, the pure one, making use of the equipment abandoned by the Germans, accepting their food, but still judging them harshly.

Should I pitch my tent beside the tent we already had in place at Camp II? To do so would be autonomy in the purest sense. Without further ado I moved into the tent that was already established. Two Poles soon visited me in my autonomous surroundings.

'Hello? Hello?'

Hell.

Two desiccated but smiling faces approached my tent, their bodies clad in mountaineering garb of the '30's.

'How are you doing on Lhotse?' I asked, inviting them in for some herb tea.

'We've already put one team on the summit. One went without oxygen. Tomorrow our second team will be in position.'

'Good luck! So you're leaving soon?'

'If we are successful. It's already more than two months. And what are you doing here alone?'

'Just wanted to see how it was up here.'

'You can come to our tent and have tea with us.'

'Well, thanks, but . . . '

'We have good sausage from the Germans!'

'Well, okay. You talked me into it.'
The Polish doctor had already been in Camp II for several days and was now in the tent melting snow—a convenience for me in case of a medical problem? A Polish woman was also present. What more could one want on a solo ascent? A radio, of course—and the Poles had that too. The doctor had just received news of newcomers in base camp. I knew they were the Kangtega boys, who had come to climb Everest with us. They had arrived early.

In the Polish tent I talked on the radio with Alan Rouse and invited him and Brian to accompany us on Nuptse and suggested that they come up to Camp II the next day with technical gear to begin to acclimatize for the impending climbs. I would be doing some more acclimatization on my own and would meet them later in base camp.

After a comfortable night in II, I left early for the North Face of Lhotse, the route to the South Col. ‘Allez, tu viens?!’ I said to my fat pack Herman. The weather was clear and cold as we approached the bergschrund at the foot of the face.

Progressing slowly above 21,000 feet, I could feel Herman’s heavy weight on my back. He grounded me to the terrain. A party of three Poles soon overtook me and passed us by. With their little packs they started jumaring up the umbilical cord stretched across the bergschrund and the slopes above. I crossed the bergschrund a few feet to the left of the fixed ropes and started climbing solo some yards to the left of them. Cramponing on the thirty to forty degree slope in the direction of the Yellow Band was easy and boring—repetitive moves and uninspiring terrain. But a glance around and down the immense corridor behind me, between the North Face of Nuptse and the Southwest Flank of Everest, that was spectacular.
Looking back, I was six feet closer to the fixed rope, which had been laid along the best line up the chute. More uninspiring climbing. Back down the long corridor my eyes slid along the impressive gallery and came to rest on Pumori and Gyachung Kang in the distance. I gazed back again to find I was only three feet from the fixed rope.

Someone high up on the Southwest Face of Everest seemed to stare down upon me. She saw me climbing up alone on the mountain, a tiny ant with a heavy load. She did not even see the rope. If I disappeared, my friends in base camp would not even know where to find my remains. Only she high above would ever know. The irony of the equipment made me smile. I clipped my jumar onto the fixed rope.

I moved on up the fixed rope. Ten minutes passed. Then ten more minutes of pulling up. If in my dreams down in base camp I had soared, in reality I moved slowly. Twenty more minutes passed. I pulled up more slowly now. 'But Georges, how is it that you happened to have that jumar hanging from your harness conveniently ready to be clipped onto the rope?'

'Well, I just brought it along for the icefall and for the glacier in case of a fall into a crevasse.'

'Unless someone throws you a rope down, the jumar does you no good in a crevasse, does it now?'

'T'es d'accord?' I asked the South Summit, towering in the skyline above the South Col.

I started up and then paused to take a leak. The color was white, a good sign. I was ingesting sufficient liquids and acclimatizing well. I melted some snow and replenished my system, then carried on.

Pulling up with the aid of rope and jumar, my rhythm began to syncopate, my speed to diminish. Hard work—no
one to commiserate with, except for Herman, weighing heavily on my back, and the high one up there looking down her summit at me.

The rhythm stayed slow. The mountain stayed steep. It would not lie back as in my dream. As the hours wore on, so did I until I finally bypassed a platform in the early afternoon at around 24,000 feet, the site of German Camp III, all cleaned up except for a few snow stakes here and there and bits of garbage strewn about. I had been on the move for more than seven hours with fat Herman. My back was aching.

A half hour later, the Yellow Band was just above me to my left. I bent down, hung on the rope by my jumar. A pain stabbed through my neck, first at intervals, now continuously. A muscle spasm at its nape. I would have to stop and spend the night at this elevation.

I traversed right, following a line of fixed ropes which led me to a series of platforms and onto a balcony of ice where the Poles had set up their Camp III. There were a couple of two-man tents pitched on a narrow saddle. I unloaded Herman, now surrounded by three smiling Polish faces.

'I'll just pitch my tent here for the night,' I told them.
'No, no. We're just three in two tents. You must sleep in one of our tents. Come and have some tea.'
'It'll just take five minutes to pitch my own tent.'
'No, no. You are our guest.'

I laughed. Did I really want to pitch my own tent and be autonomous? If so, I could have found another spot away from the Poles. But I had been drawn to the Poles like a moth to a flame. So far my solo attempt on Everest had turned into an attempt at being solo.
That evening the shield of Gyachung Kang played in the flames of the sunset, while the flames of my body played in my neck. I lay in my sleeping bag, tired but unable to sleep. Muscle spasms twitched in my back. I turned. Torti colis wrenched at my neck. I tossed. A headache throbbed at the back of my skull. I started. At last, finally, I fell into an uncomfortable chasm of restless sleep.

A torrent, a mushy torrent of cubes, and I was inside mine—a prison cell of red transparent walls. I could see Norma inside her blue cell not far from mine. Our two cubes came together, magnetized in a common wall of glass. We looked at each other, but could not hear. Through the wall of glass we gestured, mimed, and yelled. Laughs and cries—the only sharing moments as we splashed against the wall, half an inch apart, grimacing against the window, smashing our noses, gnashing our teeth, making faces, our hands groping on the glassy wall held close to our bodies, looking into each other’s eyes and crying through the barrier. We had to keep our cubes going, pushing with all our strength against the walls. I ran against a wall to make both cubes roll onto the next face. The torrent threw us against a barrier of rocks, a huge mountain, rising high above us. ‘Let’s get out,’ I yelled to Norma. I ran as fast as I could and threw myself into the walls. Norma pushed as hard as she could on one wall after another. We both worked hard and slowly moved out of the mushy torrent into the light of day. As we gained height, the walls of our cubes grew thinner. We floated up in cubic bubbles and as the summit of the rock approached, the air grew thin. The sun grew stronger. Then suddenly our bubbles popped.
A flash of pain in my head, a popping sensation, as I awoke, with my arms clinging to the inner boots held tightly against my chest inside my sleeping bag. The nape of my neck was still on fire. The ache in my back had not subsided. There was only one way to feel better and that was to go down. A depressing thought, once more enlivened by the comical truth: I would be returning to Camp II to carry back the food and gear that I had hardly touched while I played the lead role in the solo comedy on Everest.
Nuptse
We Approach His Foot

4:00 a.m. Sunday, 14 October. Breakfast Menu

porridge avec powdered milk
cheese omelette à la Nepalaise
English tea au lait et sucre

Then up the icefall to Camp I.

In Camp I a graceful limb of Nuptse is already past us on the right. My eyes must be playing tricks on me, for the image shifts. That smooth leg now takes on the form of a tail—the tail of a huge animal. Yes, and its head is plunged into the North Face of Lhotse. I can see his flank replete with scales, some rocky and some icy. They glisten and reflect under the morning sun. Is he moving? That long crest running for miles up and down over the varied summits of Nuptse reminds me of the pronged spine of a stegosaurus, hopefully asleep. Nuptse is in truth a monstrous stegosaur. A little avalanche of snow trickles down from his face below the West Summit. It comes from just under one of the scales, revealing that the monster reclines in a state of half-sleep like a huge grizzly, groggy from his winter snooze. He has been hibernating in his wall-less winter cave. I wonder whether we will be able to set foot on his abdomen to climb to the top of the spine and return without disturbing him. Eying his north flank, I
know that luck will have to be on our side because we are four fleas dwarfed by his immensity. But where do we belong if not in the furry white scales of the stegosaur?

We trek up the Western Cwm across the horrible crevasses to Camp II at 21,000 feet. No more Polish ants. No more German bees. Just us, walled in by the three prehistoric reptiles, the stegosaur to our right, the brontosaurus Lhotse to our fore, and the dinosaur Everest to our left. We have the Western Cwm to ourselves with the sky for our roof and the sun, moon, and stars our lights.

Alan and Brian mount their tent next to ours. They are good neighbors and we dine together in the night. Shop talk fills the air along with the smell of camomile tea, powdered potatoes, and kippers.

The next day, fearing wind and snowstorms, we re-mount our tents and secure them with much care, anchor them with some of the aluminum snow stakes abandoned by the Germans, and surround them with cardboard boxes full of German food. We unpack some of the expensive powdered goods to use as sandbags for a wall against the wind and cold. I discuss the dinosaur and the stegosaur with my fellow fleas. The South Buttress of Everest and the North Face of Nuptse both present a challenge. The climbing seems even more varied on Nuptse and we do not yet know whether the Ministry of Tourism will allow a descent via the normal route of Everest. It is therefore decided—we will attack the North Face of Nuptse. The stegosaur will be our host, although this flea is still troubled. I write in my diary.

The others have not been as high as I have and are not acclimatized as well. Doug fears that we may not finish on Everest without good acclimatization for all at 26,000. There is pressure to act as a group in a concerted push on Nuptse first. Then Everest. I wonder if we are not jeopardizing our chances on Everest.
On the 16th Doug, Alan, and I follow our old trail to the foot of the stegosaur to fix a tricky section of serac barriers, our first obstacle. Brian stays in Camp II indisposed. He will prepare some food so that we will not have to cook when we return. Already from our previous reconnaissance Doug and I have a good idea of where the route should cross the icefall.

Doug breaks the trail across some big chunks of ice covered with powder. We are all concerned with the threat of avalanches from the side of our sleeping steg, not to mention the danger of the towering seracs in the Nuptse icefall. We must fix the section through the icefall to insure rapid progress for our return.

My turn to lead up a vertical section. It is an ice flake. Apply the techniques of waterfall traction to climb the serac. I advance slowly, using ice screws for protection. About halfway up an overhanging crack opens into a chimney which runs diagonally to the top of the serac. The ice is poor. A direct mantel is impossible. I must drive in an ice screw on the upper left section and pendulum into the crack, but I cannot place an icescrew at my level because the ice is not firm. I need a third axe, so Doug relays me his on the rope. I plant it deep in the rotten ice, testing it with my foot. It holds. I use it as a platform and step lightly with my crampon while I extend my arms high and grapple to obtain a hold with my two axes. Way up I place the screw, clip on a karabiner, and run my rope through it. Then I tension across into the crack and breathe heavily. Slowly the crack grows into a chimney where I secure a belay just under a huge overhanging serac. The others jumar up quickly, seeing that there is no other spot for the belay.

Alan moves into the lead and breaks trail in the powder that has accumulated between the walls of seracs. He follows a corridor to the right under the menacing
overhang of ice and then climbs up and around into a snow slope which leads to higher ground. He crampons up another serac to the right, crosses a snow bridge, and leads out of the first dangerous section.

Walking in a snowy cwm, we regroup in front of another obstacle, an ugly lesion which cuts across the breadth of the cwm. Peering down the edge of the crevasse we see massive chunks of ice—a means of access to the opposite wall? They appear unstable and even if they can be negotiated, the opposite wall is not appetizing. There should be a better way across.

To the left the crevasse widens and becomes much enlarged—hopeless. To the right it develops into a section of tormented seracs and smaller caverns. We do not relish more seracs, but we must cross somewhere. We skirt to the right, snaking our way through the seracs until we finally reach the crevasse’s narrowest width, a lesion seven feet wide. Doug moves to its edge. He looks down and across to the opposite wall. I can see the wheels turning in his temple. To cross over he must step onto a very thin snowbridge and let himself fall across the remaining distance, catching the other side with his ice axes. He backs off. Alan steps up and goes through the same motions. He too backs off. Now me. I look down into the bottomless chasm and go through the moves in my mind. None of us can summon the courage or stupidity to try it.

We look for other places to cross, eventually returning to our starting point. We want to set a trail through this tricky section today, but time is flying. No one seems eager to try the crevasse via the ice chunks below, so I grit my teeth and volunteer. My muscles tense up like steel as I downclimb the proximate section, face against the wall, kicking down chunks of powder snow, finally reaching the
limits of the sunlight, then descend below. I crampon between two walls of clean blue ice, moving on a snow bridge leading to a huge chunk of ice in the middle of the crevasse. The black pit is endless on either side. Fixing an ice screw to the foot of the ice chunk, I clip on and execute a quick pendulum to arrive in position for traction up its wall. Good ice, at first. Now it becomes unreliable. Lots of powder must be cleared before I can safely continue on a stable surface. I mantel over the top of the ice chunk and see my way to the opposite wall of the crevasse via smaller chunks of ice covered with snow. I secure a snow stick and belay Alan to the top of the giant chunk. From there I carry on tightrope walking over the eggs, hoping that nothing breaks beneath my feet.

I arrive at the wall and kick into it, frontpointing up several feet to a point below the overhanging lip, fixing ice screws to guard against a fall. There is now a transition from hard ice to snow which makes this the most difficult, but at the same time interesting, part—getting through the overhang. I enjoy the final problem and crouch against the snow, holding tight on one axe while I dig with the other. Snow spews into my face and into my collar and sleeves. My arms begin to ache more and more until I finally plant the other axe over the top and edge up to the lip. I embed five inches of shaft into the crusty layer of snow, then the shaft of the other axe, and pull myself up and over the top. I am drenched from the snow and the perspiration; my breath is ragged. But the crevasse is behind me.

Another snow stick is secured and the others come bouncing across and jumar up. We are back in the cwm on easy terrain and check a bit higher up the slope to see that the cwm carries on in a shallow couloir toward the foot of the face—technically easy ground, though exposed to
We Approach His Foot

avalanche danger. By fixing the icefall, we have guaranteed a rapid approach to the bergschrund for the following day.

It is dinnertime when we arrive back in Camp II. Brian has prepared five bags of food for the coming days. He has also conscientiously prepared the evening’s dinner. He mentions how he has been unable to work outside because of strong winds blowing down from the South Col of Everest. The three of us have not felt the winds at the foot of Nuptse, a good sign. The Western Cwm is a giant funnel which sweeps the winds down its crease toward base camp, leaving the face of Nuptse alone.

On the 17th of October we four hop back to our high point of the previous day. Doug and I continue breaking the trail up the cwm to a saddle which leads to the bergschrund. Crossing to the right on a balcony of snow, the consistency suddenly changes from powder to wind-pack and crust. This saddle is the terminus of dejection cones descending the sides of our objective. We are in the path of powerful avalanches but rejoice in the knowledge that Nuptse sleeps and is not laden with fresh snow. The conditions are perfect.

The bergschrund girds the face ahead. There is a black shadow which clues us to a potential spot for a snow cave. Doug starts up toward the bergschrund while I belay him. We separate as he takes out the slack in the rope. I plan to follow at one hundred feet, but quickly a fracture line forms along his track and the whole snowpack of the lower slope releases its cushion of air and collapses; a foot of the surface layer slides down the slope below, but Doug is safe ahead. I pull more rope from my pack to put more distance between us. That way less weight will be put on each section we traverse.
It is easy to get down into the bergschrund. In the wall of the lower lip the snow is perfect for caving, not too hard, not too soft. Soon Brian and Alan are with us. We take turns digging and cooking tea. Our first hole in the stegosaur takes shape at 22,000 feet. This will be a solid outpost for attack and retreat up his side.

All four of us can stand up and lie down comfortably side by side in our cave. We have no tents and plan to rely only on snow caves. They involve work, but once established, they offer a more comfortable and reliable shelter, a lesson learned on Kangchenjunga.

'Heh love, can you pass the tea this way.'

'All right youth, throw me some fudge this way.'

British slang is passed back and forth with the food and drink. We are comfortably ensconced in our cave. Outside the lights go out as we lie in our sleeping bags, very happy fleas, anxious for the night to pass.
The Route Up
Our Stegosaur
We Crawl Up His Rib

We agreed on a line of ascent back in Camp II. It breaks down into three major sections corresponding to the anatomy of our stegosaur: First, a rib of snow to the left of the major arm, the North Ridge, shortcutting the ridge itself; then a steep section of mixed scales—rock, snow and ice—leading for some 1,200 feet back to the main ridge; then, finally, the ridge itself which climbs in steps for another 1,500 feet to the upper spine of Nuptse, which in turn leads to the main prong—the summit. From Camp II on the Western Cwm the entire route appears extremely difficult, and even though I have seen the ridge in profile from Camp III on my way up Everest, we still cannot evaluate the relative difficulty with any accuracy. We must get into the face to find out.

The night crawls by and we are up early. Today we will fix our three ropes as far as possible up the snow rib and then return to spend another night in the cave before we move swiftly back up for an Alpine style ascent. Doug crampons in the lead, up a forty-five degree ramp on the snow rib. We ferry heavy packs behind. After a few pitches we run out of rope. I take out the Charlet-Moser killer axe and start assaulting the scales to make a platform for our packs and for us to rest. What normally takes over an hour with a regular axe is finished in only fifteen with the killer. No movement from our stegosaur. He is still unaware of our presence. Ice screws are placed and we secure our packs to them. We turn around and rappel down, crawl down the bergschrund, and reenter our cave for a second night.
To make as much progress as possible we must leave early the next morning and we do. Up the ropes we jet with our headlamps glowing in the morning darkness, reach our high point of the previous day and bypass the platform upon which the killer is cached. Alan takes the lead, belayed by me, while Brian and Doug bring up gear and rear. Every two hundred feet we set an anchor—a piton, an ice screw or a snow stake—in anticipation of our evacuation by means of rapid rappels down the face. I have a stock of yellow fabric which I have cut from the German tent abandoned at Camp II. I tie bits of it to the anchors as a point of reference for easy location on our return. They will prove invaluable if we have inclement weather and are forced to retreat in it.

Alan is leading the last pitch of the snow rib, heading for the mixed above. Now it is half ice, half snow, steepening and rearing up, but Alan climbs with apparent ease, belaying at the foot of the mixed ground.

From below the mixed appeared extremely difficult and time consuming. The rock is vertical, from one step to the next. But now that we are here, we see that they are striated with ramps, substituting the technical problem for one less difficult—that of route finding. There's Alan wending his way through the first step of rock, progressing rapidly. Now he's out of sight, disappearing into a snow ramp above, very flea-like, scurrying through the scales of our stegosaur. He must still be moving because the rope keeps uncoiling in my hands, like a snake. Doug and Brian move up and we three wait for Alan to establish his belay. We wait longer. We are still waiting. All we hear is the sound of a hammer beating out rhythms high above. Has Alan stopped to sculp a statue in the rock?

'I'm trying to put something in. Bad rock here! No crack either. Snow and ice bad too!' Alan yells.
Nothing to do but wait.

'Okay, you can jumar now, but don't put much weight on the rope,' Alan instructs.

It is a difficult instruction to follow. But I climb up beside the rope in the rock, pulling ever so gently so as not to upset the belay. Soon I am up to find a complex system of anchor points, a knife blade in the rock here, an ice screw there, a snow stake over there, all precariously secured but working against each other and with each other. It looks so scientific and it is supposed to hold, Alan says.

We climb all day long. It's always the same—straightforward up the ramps across the rock bands—up, up, up, with great difficulty finding reliable anchors. Finally we regroup on the first large névé between two rock steps. A suitable spot for a second snow cave!

It is 3:00 p.m. Since 1:30 we have been in the shadow of the upper crest. The temperature has fallen drastically in the shade and now it is very cold. We must plan ahead to protect the life in our toes and fingers throughout the intensely cold hours of the coming night. We also want to progress as far as possible up the face today. Doug and Alan will go to work on the snow cave. Brian and I will run out as much rope as we can to insure another quick start the next morning. We are already in the upper part of the mixed section, about five hundred feet from the beginnings of the main North Spur, a giant leg of our sleeping beast.

Brian belays me below while I pull up to the rock step above, detouring a steep section, then climb to the top of the rock. I find myself at the foot of some short snow chutes along which I traverse diagonally toward the North Spur. I belay Brian across.
'Cold.'
'What do you mean cold. Bloody freezing.'
'Do you wanna jet?'
'There's still some time before dark.'
'Then let's fix the rest.'

I lead up, a bit closer to the ridge; the snow becomes progressively rotten. I can make out the other side, a steep wall of mixed ground and an impressive scene for an uninviting glissade of 3,000 feet. The snow has become so rank that I find myself in an impossible position. It is as difficult to move down as it is to move up. I slowly traverse a chute which reminds me of the spooky snow on Kusum Kanguru, where I have already exposed too much flesh. Here again I am a long way from the belay below, more than one hundred and fifty feet away, without protection, but this time I am at the end of my tether. I thought I had enough rope to fix to the ridge. Wrong! The only thing to do is to secure a belay, somehow. I must do so if I expect to return in the spooky snow, but there is no good spot to fix a belay. I begin to dig a trench to find suitable ground to support an anchor. No luck at all. What should I do? Inspired by Alan's example, I come up with the idea of combining my ice axe, my ice hammer, and a snow stake to which I secure my rope.

'Off belay!'

Brian starts downclimbing the second rope to the snow cave and I rappel gently down the upper rope. It is dusk. Doug and Alan have done a beautiful job on the snow cave. The ice is taking on the shape of a beautiful lodge overlooking the amphitheater of the Western Cwm. It vies in splendor with the opera house in Naples. Only Norma is missing.
Sitting back in the snow cave, we watch the colors of the evening changing against the background of the Southwest Face of the dinosaur. Our elevation must be somewhere around 24,000 feet, but it is not certain since we do not have an altimeter. There should be only 2,000 vertical feet to the summit. The climbing has been tricky, but technically much easier than expected. The rate of progression has been fast, much faster than expected. I tell my brothers that the ridge looks fairly straightforward where I have studied it from my high point near the Yellow Band. I have also seen it from Camp III on Lhotse with the Polish ants. The only problem is the consistency of the snow.

Inside the atmosphere corresponds to what I would expect of cavemen. It is animated by coughs from Alan and Brian who are suffering from bronchitis, by smoke from Doug's cigarette, and by the smell of fish on the stove. I am struck by the difference between the romantic view held by outsiders and the actual harshness of the real thing. We discuss two courses of action and bat ideas around the cave. Go heavy and establish another snow cave higher up. Go light and attempt an all out push to the summit in one day with a possible bivouac on the descent. We opt for the second alternative. The coughing, spitting, farting, smoking, and swearing continues unabated into the evening. I doze off. At times the wind finds its way into the cave, caressing the small exposed portions of my face.

It must be morning. Did I really sleep or was it just twilight sleep? Am I really awake? Yes, that's Doug lighting the stove and scraping a pan full of snow from the wall with his torso still tucked into his sleeping bag. I am anxious to start but I savor these last minutes in the warmth of my cocoon, waiting for the snow to melt. We have all slept with our
clothes on to stay warm and to get an early start. My inner boots are still asleep between my legs where they have not had a chance to freeze. I wake them up by holding them over the stove and then put them on, kicking off my down boots. Brian changes his socks and I put on a special thermolactyl undershirt. Hot tea is passed around, some cookies and granola. The inner boots are now followed by my pillow, the shell of the plastic boots. Then the over-boots and the crampons. Rolling the sleeping bag away, I put on the gortex overalls and check the mitts and gloves inside the down suit, making sure there is an extra, warm pair inside. Out for a shit—it is bitter cold, like jumping out of a hot shower into a pool of ice. I come back telling the others how cold it is outside; it's someone else's turn to have a peek at how his food will emerge looking like it did when it was put in the other end. The gear is packed up. *Don't forget the cream for your face, very important, and lots of it. Let's get out of this rat hole and be on the move.* We do, knowing all the time that it will look like a castle the next time we see it.

The morning is biting cold when we clip onto the rope. Jumaring up to my high point, Brian leads the remaining section to the North Spur. From here on, we move in parties of two, Brian and me, followed by Alan and Doug. On the ridge the snow conditions are sounder. We can move together in long stretches with no need for belays. Other steeper sections require belays on snow stakes. Brian and I exchange leads. We are gaining elevation fast, surprisingly fast, wending our way up toward the summittal steps, trying to appreciate the distance which separates us from the top of the mountain.

The angle of the ridge eases off for a while and then steepens before the terminal crest. The summit itself is
loaded with cornices of snow overhanging on our side, where they have been pushed and molded by the predominant west winds. Below the peak, fluted snow ramps tower over the rock steps which we approach via the thin exposed northern ridge.

It is a pleasant sensation to climb along this ridge. It reminds me of the Kufner Ridge on the Mont Maudit in the Alps. Pépé once said if your partner should fall on a ridge such as this, you must throw yourself down the other side to check and to counterbalance his weight. Otherwise it is sure you will both die. My grandfather had seen several such accidents and he knew what he was talking about. Once on the traverse of les Courtes a party of two approached from the rear, walking far apart, the more experienced climber in the lead—a mistake there, where it was possible to have the weaker out in front to be watched. The climber in the rear must have become entangled in his crampons—the way it usually happens—and fell to the Argentière side, gathering speed so fast that by the time he let out a scream, it was too late. Grandfather turned his head to see the leader catapulted into space, launched into the orbit of the Argentière valley below. Two of my friends, husband and wife, fell to their death in the exact same way, from the Col de la Grande Rocheuse on l'Aiguille Verte. A mistake here could always have serious consequences. Even so small a detail as a twisted knee can assume a new dimension here. In addition to the inevitable summit failure, it could also jeopardize the injured flea's chance of getting down alive and pose a threat to the others. The descent would be seriously retarded, the strength of the party weakened and debilitated, the exposure time accentuated and hence the vulnerability to weather, frostbite, and avalanche danger increased.
Brian and I break the trail in close proximity without belays, but with extreme caution. Doug and Alan apply a different technique, belaying one another all the way up. Look over there! Through the window framed by the lower depression between Lhotse and Nuptse the hungry tyrannosaurus Rex rears its head, as though looking for a meal. It is Makalu, the world's fifth highest mountain, the 'black peak'.

We finally come to a mixed section where Brian and I stop to melt some snow. But we do not have a complete cooking set and must wait for Alan and Doug to catch up. I decide to lead up to save time, compensating by eating snow myself. The climbing becomes more difficult, steeper, involving rock moves. The snow on the rock slabs is windpacked, dangerous. Down below Doug exchanges places with Brian and ties onto my rope. While I belay, he moves up to lead the next pitch and Brian and Alan come up to me. I climb up to Doug and take the lead again.

We are out of the mixed ground on the terminal snow-fluted ramp leading to the topmost spiny fin. Once reaching it, we will turn left and climb the remaining one hundred and fifty feet to the main summit. But now the weather is changing. We have had no signs of bad weather in the morning. The clouds move in nevertheless, quickly, pushed by a west wind. I see Doug climbing just above me in the skyline, a halo of rainbow colors enveloping his outline. Now I see more of the west pillar of Makalu in profile. He is devouring a lenticular cloud stretched out over his head. Time is once again racing.
Doug stops a few feet below the high point of the North Ridge, his eyes peeping over the spiny main ridge down over the south flank of our host. He starts digging a trench to secure a belay and soon I am by his side looking over into the Khumbu Valley below, down the staircase of our approach of just twenty days past.

We are on top of his back. We have climbed the North Face! Just us tiny little fleas with our tiny little legs and huge appetites and egos. All that remains is the summittal prong of his spine some one hundred and fifty feet leftward along the thin spiny ridge which links the three summits. The consistency of the snow is poor. Doug's trench is only slightly less than his height, indicating that everything on the ridge is sugar. And the anchor Doug has placed in the deep trench is not even secure.

I move into the lead and mantel over the top onto the steep south flank. I start up the thin half moon knife blade just below the first cornice, cramponing with one foot on the south flank of Nuptse, one foot on the north, literally riding the stegosaur, hoping that he will not buck me off, my feet at ten past ten. Merde. He is waking up! The stegosaur moves. Every time I kick a step into his flesh the whole ridge shakes.

'Fucking hell!' I yell.

'It's trembling down here too,' Doug echoes from back in the trench.
Here I am on a thin ridge of sugar which may give way any second. I must not kick too strongly with my crampon. I decide to push my luck another step or two—I am so close to the summit. I edge closer to the cornice, planning to veer right, with Doug belaying from the trench. As I kick with my crampons this time, I feel the seismic vibrations set in motion. They propagate into the cornice ahead of me. One more cautious kick on the north side. I feel the huge cornice tremble, anxious to topple down the side. I stop dead in my tracks, remain stationary for a minute, then instinctively back off as though I have stumbled onto a sleeping tiger. I know that the stegosaur is alive. The last little stretch of icing on this piece of cake will not yield itself to any flea who values his life.

If the cornice goes, the wave will trigger the collapse of all the sugar on the ridge, taking us with it. Better to back off than to die climbing the last few feet. I slowly back down the ridge to Doug, stopping to take some pictures of my tracks. I move back to the trench and pause to look around. *There's Tramserku and Kangtega. So that's it there between the two—Kusum Kanguru!* I see Ama Dablam, our closest neighbor to the southeast and think of the French. They may be on the summit by now. Looking down the South Face of Nuptse I see two beautiful green lakes, perhaps a nice location for a Nuptse South Face base camp. To the right I see Cholatse, still unclimbed. Then Tawoche, last climbed by Yannick. Is that haze in the distance Dhaulagiri? Or perhaps Annapurna? Yes, that's Cho Oyu to the southwest of Gyachung Kang. To the north, behind the West Shoulder of Everest, a sentinel of the Rongbuk Glacier stands proudly—Changtse, the guardian of forbidden Tibet.
The clouds usher in from the west. They look threatening as the wind picks up. It is growing cold. We must not tarry. Doug and I grasp hands and he commences to downclimb while I belay him from the trench. Alan and Brian remain just below. Now they turn around. We want to lose as much elevation as quickly as possible and hopefully reach the snow cave. All conditions seem to point to a storm. The summits of Everest and Lhotse are masked in a layer of mist.

We downclimb the upper ridge, rappelling when we encounter steeper pitches. With each passing minute the weather deteriorates. I crampon quickly ahead of Doug. A race against time is set in motion. A bivouac in the storm is unappealing. We must move fast, taking care not to make a mistake during our retreat down the ridge.

There—just below—the site of our snow palace. We have outrun the storm.

Sitting back in the snow cave on the previous night I could see the West Shoulder of Everest with stars over Tibet. Tonight, no stars. Even worse, no West Shoulder. For the first time I feel an instinctive concern for the future of our descent. The prospect of heavy snowfall during the night is alarming. Snow will accumulate on the ramps of the mixed section below and on the ridge above, positioning us in the middle of a 4,000 foot face covered with whipped cream.

I scratch the bad thoughts out of my hair. The wind is changing directions, coming from the north, blowing spindrift into our den. We all set to work closing off the entrance with snow, like bees sealing off chambers containing newly laid eggs. At least the north wind offers hope that the clouds may be dispersed during the night.
We leave a small opening in our entranceway for ventilation. Even though the hole is small, during the night the wind brings in sufficient spindrift to blanket our sleeping bags, leading us to suspect the worst—that there has been considerable snowfall during the night.

3:30 a.m. The sky is overcast, windy, and gray. We want to outrun whatever snow may fall in the day. It is bitter cold when we push through our egg chamber, but we are relieved to find only a few inches of snow on the mountain.

In a series of long rappels, retracing our way down by following the yellow flags tied to the anchors, we descend fast, constantly moving toes and fingers, rubbing ears and nose, to avoid frostbite. The dark vault overhead is lighting up by the time we land at our first snow cave at noon. The weather has begun to clear. Nevertheless we want to get off the mountain as quickly as possible. We will not remain another night. We strike out the same day, cross the icefall, and make our way back to Camp II on the Western Cwm. Alan has suffered frostnip on his toes and Brian has a touch of frostbite on his fingers. But it is not serious. All in all the climb has gone off without a serious hitch and we are satisfied.
Back in Camp II we luxuriate on the food left behind by the German bees, gorging ourselves on jams, paté, soups, drinks, sauerkraut, sausages, honey, and rye bread—too much to permit a comfortable night's rest.

During the night I again grow concerned about the dinosaur. If we go back to base camp to rest up, it may jeopardize our chances to climb the great beast. I talk it over with Doug.

'There's plenty of food here. Let's rest up and go for the South Buttress of Everest.'

'We can't rest here. Alan and Brian need to go down and recover from their frostbite.'

'Maybe they can go down alone?'

'We could all use the rest down in base camp.'

'I'm afraid we're not going to come back up for Everest once we go down. It's getting late.'

'The West Ridge, that's the route to go Alpine style. We need to rest and plan from base camp.'

I too am tired from the Nuptse climb, although I am feeling good, better than ever before. I fear that we will not be able to squeeze in Everest if we go down, but it is the reasonable thing to do.

On the 22nd we clear up Camp II and evacuate, packing up all the German food which we cover with a nylon sheet and tie down with bits of rope for a future party. Heavily loaded, we start down the Western Cwm. It is
immediately obvious that the glacier has been moving since we last saw it. A crevasse we have stepped across while coming up now yawns at us wide open. We must téléphérique our packs across.

We stop at Camp I for tea, relaxing and pretending that the dreaded icefall does not lie ahead, but soon it is time to face up to reality.

We can see no trace of equipment on the upper section of the chaotic icefall. Worse than bad. Except for the immense cavity, the icefall gives the appearance of a totally different place.

First, we must jump several crevasses. In parties of two, one person takes speed and jumps while the other belays. Then the other jumps while the first belays. We must now detour some crevasses which were small enough to jump just nine days ago when we came up.

At last we stand looking out at the immense canyon. It seems insane to put ourselves into it. But finally we start climbing down.

'It looks really bad,' someone says.

My heart is pounding. 'No way up the opposite wall.' Somebody else confesses what we all feel. 'I don't want to go down,' he says.

'Maybe we could explore down farther,' I suggest, looking back up the lip of the giant crevasse. 'There's a route in that crack over there.'

'It would take a long time.'

'And we don't know what follows that serac.'

'Maybe we ought to go back to Camp I and cross the glacier. Then come down on the other side along the West Shoulder.'

'I think we should continue here,' Alan says firmly. 'We have an idea of where to go at least,' he points out.
We all look at each other, waiting for someone to lead down to the wall on the other side of the canyon.

'Let's explore that lip on the left,' someone suggests. 'There might be a way around the crevasse over there.'

Doug and I move into the lead, detouring a large serac. I put in an ice screw for protection while Doug passes me. Then I belay him over the lip of the huge crevasse.

'Give me a tight rope, Georges! Give me a tight rope!'

'It's up to you, Doug, just have a look.'

Twenty feet later, 'Up rope! Tight!'

I belay him back up and he pulls over the lip with his axes.

'No way. It's all cracking up down there.'

Brian and Alan, spectating from above: 'Just abandon your packs and go around that snow ramp! Have a look!'

Again Doug goes in the lead, moving cautiously up to a snow bridge. He moves to the edge. One foot forward—then back. Testing the snow with one foot again—same foot back again. Deep breath—then down on all fours, feeling the snow with his hands—then slowly forward—now backing up again, like a dog—now standing up. All this, below a huge menacing serac, eager to topple on both of us. Doug steps onto the bridge cautiously and walks gingerly, stepping over a crevasse and onto a second snow bridge. Now he makes a few quick steps and disappears from my view over a little hump of snow into a slope behind.

'Slack! Slack!'

I give him more slack.

'Up rope! Tight! Up rope!'

I belay him back.

'No way!'
We regroup, again survey the canyon, and study the wall on the opposite side. There is no difficulty getting down into the canyon itself with its floor of freshly toppled seracs and large unstable ice chunks. But there is the seemingly insuperable problem of the opposite wall.

We fix our eyes on that wall. The point where I last climbed the wall returning from my solo comedy to the Yellow Band is the shortest from the floor of the canyon to the lip above. But the diagonal ledge I scaled has collapsed. It is now a smooth wall of blue ice. To the left, the wall is twice the size with no weaknesses. Just to the right, there is a ledge which leads up into the wall, but above the ledge there is an overhanging section of ice leading up to the top of the crevasse. Further right, large flakes seem impassable.

The point of weakness, if there is one, is the overhanging section with the ledge below and the snow ramp above. We all come to a silent recognition that this is the only way out. It is now a question of who will go down into the canyon, cross the blocks, and tackle the difficult overhang.

Silence. More silence. Each of us is withdrawn into himself. No eye contact. Then a calm voice from behind.

'Doug, you have more experience aid-climbing than any of us,' it says. 'You two leave your packs and we'll ferry the loads across.'

Alan has solved the immediate problem. But now the real problem persists.

'Give me the ice screws and snow stakes, and the slings,' Doug announces with resolution.

Doug and I move down into the canyon, over, up one block of ice and down another.

'CR-R-Rack . . . CR-R-Rack,' the noise originates deep down below and surfaces from the black holes between
The ice chunks. The icefall is alive.

'Tight rope!' Doug yells, while he pulls himself up, getting one foot into the sling he has tied to the ice screw. Then, stretching up as far as he can reach, while I hold him from below, he places a second ice screw, a karabiner, a sling, . . . , finally moving over the overhang.

'Is it easier to the right or to the left?' Doug yells back to Alan and Brian, who have a better view.

'Go left! It's shorter.'

Doug carries on up the wall. He is close to the lip when he notices something strange.

'It's just a bloody flake! This is just a flake!' he screams as he quickly jams in snow stakes and mantels over the lip into the snow slope above.

The pressure is now off Doug, but I am still under it, directly under it, trying to convince myself that I should enjoy the beautiful setting—Pumori at the end of the canyon looking west—an immaculate palace of ice. But I cannot shake off the nervous tension.

Doug fixes the rope above. I never jumared so fast in my life and I clean up the pitch at the same time, recovering the ice screws, slings, and snow stakes. I cross over the fissure, and sure enough, what we have climbed is a flake which may collapse at any moment. I arrive on top to find Doug unroped. I see that he has untied himself as soon as he has fixed the rope, for he will surely be pulled down if the flake collapses. I imagine the scene. It is tragic. At the same time funny.

Brian and Alan must now approach the flake and ferry the loads across. We soon establish a pulley system to bring the packs up. I am at the edge of the canyon quickly pulling up the packs while Doug helps and takes in the slack. I pull hard and feel something pop in my back. Brian
and Alan have been standing under the objective danger and soon they jumar up. We rappel down the other side of the seracs to find none of the German or Polish equipment in place. Only an occasional ladder jutting out from a pillar of ice high above the surface. We must fend for ourselves.

We approach what looks like a crevasse. It is a veritable crater, some two hundred and fifty square yards. So impressive that each of us has to move up to the edge to peer down. A flag indicates that the German route has once crossed here before the crevasses opened up. The realization is not reassuring. We must get out before one has us for supper.

We circumvent the crater by moving left to a staircase of seracs. A narrow chute spills down the stairs and crosses two large crevasses. We must rappel down the chute, a hundred and fifty feet. An ice screw is needed—more equipment expended, but there is no other choice. We fix the screw and rappel on our asses to avoid sinking in the snow. No base now at all. We begin to sink down in the sugary snow, crawling, squirming and ramping along in the mush. The snow bridge begins to sink, slowly—quick-sand. Which one of us will be swallowed up first? We are surrounded by freshly fallen ice, hours old. A wall of seracs threatens us, overhanging. If the towering pinnacles go, we are doomed. We take off and crampon like hell to escape the seracs, which are eager to fall with the next shake of the glacier. Our packs weigh heavily and slow us down. We hasten to quit this unpredictable world, where no rules apply.

I hear seracs falling, churning up the terrain behind us, where we have crossed just twenty minutes before. Hurrying through and around the icy debris to the other side of the bowl, I read my brothers' faces, knowing that mine is
just as tortured. Glassy-eyed, we are irritable, on edge, our cerebellum outside of our skull—still completely present, but an impotent partner with the mountain.

We now arrive at a suicidal section of the icefall—the Eggshell. It is an egg which fell and hit the floor, smashing into hundreds of pieces. All of its parts originally fit together. But now it is an open puzzle: Which pieces fit with which? Which path leads through the puzzle? In places we jump from one piece to the next. In others, it would be possible to connect the pieces with a long ladder. But we have no ladder. We must rappel down and climb up from one piece to the next. Deep down between the blocks of ice, sometimes a hundred feet or more, in the noisy entrails of the glacier, we know we may be smashed by a serac falling in our line. We know that the glacier will move and that chunks of ice the size of houses and buildings disappear without warning. There in the black atmosphere of the Eggshell, deep underground, we know that somewhere on this planet there is something better to look forward to.

We have been on the move for hours as we near the nose of the Eggshell, standing on a chunk of ice facing another ice block one level higher than our own. A crevasse separates us, six feet wide. Bottomless, black. Must we turn around and retrace our steps to find another route? No—Brian approaches with his axes and steps back. He does not even stop to reflect—unloads his pack, and returns to the edge. Unflinchingly he falls across with his axes outstretched—a diver. He falls into the projection of ice on the opposite wall with the shaft of his axe, a human bridge spanning the crevasse. Now he withdraws the shaft of one axe, turns it around and imbeds its blade into the ice. Next he does the splits and kicks a crampon into the
opposite wall, and then climbs up the remaining three feet of the wall. He secures a rope on an aluminum snow stick, and we *télépherique* the packs across. Brian gives us a tight rope and belays us. When I fall across the crevasse with my arms outstretched, I realize that Brian has done something outstanding. I climb up the opposite wall.

'Vraiment bravo!' I tell him.

More difficult route finding follows. Down and up, up and down, up and around, around and down, seracs falling all around, all around seracs, until we finally pull our exhausted carcasses up and clamor out of the icefall. It is impossible to contain our emotions. I am now down on my knees, crying, releasing the tension that has welled up inside.

We are no longer fleas—we are men.
Coda

The Final Summit

It is like a strange flower.
A flower that laughs
And when she does
There are bubbles of bright, transparent, pure love
That explode and splash all around
They hit you in the face
And you eat them.
And it feels like warm marshmallows.
Then you're happy, that's all.
Intermission

Walking down the last moraine toward base camp, I saw Norma's silhouette half walking half running toward me, laughing. It just couldn't be true! Could she be so thoughtful and loving? Could she really favor me with such a pleasant surprise? Would she come without telling me? No, it was not Norma. It was Ariane, Dougal Haston's friend, who had come up to base camp with another friend, Nena. They had seen us coming down the icefall and had come to greet us. Tappa was also coming. Such a warm welcome.

I was so happy to see them. But happiness is too often coupled with sadness. I was certain that Ariane was thinking of Dougal, who was no longer with us. How nice it would have been if he too were now coming down from the North Face of Nuptse, down off the route that he had planned with Doug only four years previous. If only he could have come back to life and been with us now, for Ariane, for Doug, for all of us.

Back in base I washed up and changed my clothes, then moved in with the others for a dinner celebration. We must have been eight around the foot locker which served as our table. We drank some whisky while music poured into the air. Lots of lazy, groggy talk, not really knowing what we were talking about. Everybody happy. Everybody and everything looking beautiful. How stupid I must be to have to suffer in order to realize how nice things are down in the world of people. Yet I do not realize until I have been taken away from this world for these communions with the mountains.
The next day we rested. We spread the mattresses outside and enjoyed the sun and listened to music and talked. Extremely relaxed. Extremely happy. Warmth poured into our bodies and our minds. The comfort of the tent, the food, the laughs, the music, people interacting. Life suddenly takes on a fresh and meaningful significance after an encounter with harshness. We cannot see and feel how good it is until we step out of it.

That evening I wrote in my diary.

*Joy in base camp. I am full of emotions which I cannot control. I do not know in which way to direct them. I am afraid that I really like climbing.*

Mike Covington was back in base camp a married man. Doug's family was also there. Rosie was just a year old, perhaps the youngest person to ever set foot in Everest base camp. We had been in the Himalayas now for two months and it was pleasant to be back in the company of women—Jan, Ariane, and Nena. I had met Nena in Kathmandu with the New Zealanders who were to attempt a route on the West Face of Ama Dablam. I took her for a Nepali at first; she was so tanned. But she was in fact an American, very alert, very attractive, so full of energy. I liked her.

She sat close by, along with Brian, Alan, Ariane, Jan, Doug, and the children. I was tucked halfway in my sleeping bag reading Hunter's *Streets of Gold* with Bruch's violin concerto playing in the background.

*Jazz: It's jumping in the middle of the ocean. It ain't swimming out gradually, it's jumping right out to where you can't see no land no more, it's*
using everything you know to stay afloat and to swim however far out you think you can, and then like magic you get whisked right back there to shore again, and you wrap it all up with a big yellow ribbon, and there you are and you feel good and clean and happy all over, and there ain't many things I know that can make you feel that way in life, there just ain't many I know of.

Was this book about climbing?

One of the characters in the book was a girl named Davina. I had been searching for a good name for a daughter. The thought of having a child with Norma had been growing on me. Perhaps Davina would be the name we would choose.

I noticed that Nena was close enough to touch through my sleeping bag, with my foot. She was looking in the opposite direction. I studied her face in profile. I liked the way she dressed—Icelandic sweater, just like mine. How is it that she chose to sit next to me? When she greeted me in base camp, we hugged, like everyone else, but she had squeezed my hands warmly.

'Why do you gaze so fondly on that woman?' I asked myself. 'It's not fair.'

That evening we feasted and toasted our success. Rum, rakshi, whisky, and chang. We listened to more music—Jean-Michel Jarre's Oxygène, apropos to the occasion. I walked out into the night, to the sound of the music, toward the Polish camp, now abandoned. I was intensely there, intensely alive. Stars twinkled in the dark blue sky overhead. The mountains broadcasted their powerful presence—an avalanche in the distance.

A cool breeze wafted down the moraine and brushed my hands and face with a harsh tenderness. I was slightly
tipsy from the alcohol. Then, Nena from out of nowhere—by my side. We found a glacial table and started dancing to Donna Summer’s music. The music, the rhythm, the moves, the twists, the turns, all heightened to build an atmosphere of mutual physical attraction. A lot of me wanted to be with Nena, but I was in love with Norma. I felt guilty for feeling so good. I could not let myself go. We walked together and talked on the glacier. We talked for hours. We said good night, and Nena went to her tent while I returned to mine.

After warming our toes and spirits in base camp, we again discussed Everest. It was now the 25th of October and we were well rested. But if the climate here in base camp was charming, high up on Everest the winds were blowing strong. Every morning a huge cloud blew in from the north to arrive over Lhotse. There was no doubt it was cold high up.

Nuptse was growing on us. As we looked back on our work, we took more pride in our accomplishment on the North Face. With distance a larger part of our ambition was fulfilled; much of our previous drive had waned.

Doug was somewhat superstitious about the West Ridge. It was not just the physical aspect of undertaking it. It was something else. He had seen Ang Phu’s mother down in Khumjung, and Ang Phu had died in the spring of ’79 on the West Ridge of Everest. Doug had also found Gerard’s boot on our reconnaissance to the Lhola. We had had a close call with the rockfall there too. We had taken too many chances already in the icefall. We had taken too many risks on Kusum Kanguru. Better to get out now while the going was good. Come back another time.

Usually by the end of October or beginning of November, it is impossible to finish up on a big mountain because of the high winds and the sudden changes of
weather. We already had had a good climbing season. All the evidence converged to argue against an all-out push on the West Ridge. It was agreed. It was the right decision.

Late in the day I had a talk with our cook Nima.

'Dead people on the glacier,' Nima said to me under the kitchen tarpaulin in a subdued voice.

'What do you mean Nima?' I asked. 'Do you mean bodies?'

'Yes, over there, walking with Sella,' he pointed toward the Lhola. 'Clothes, bones, people.'

'Come and show me.'

We walked toward the Lhola in the lower reaches of the icefall where Doug and I had passed some days ago. It took us a while before we saw anything, slogging up and down and around the blades of ice and the crevasses. Then, there on a little saddle, a small area of blue and yellow stood out against the background of pure white snow and ice. We drew nearer. The remains of a body could now be seen, very white, very clean. The clothing had been washed by the elements, through many seasons. The colors had faded from the action of the snow and were bleached by the strong rays of the sun. Bits of a climbing jacket remained, a shirt, and some gaiters. All wore French brand names. Stuck in the ice was a Charlet-Moser crampon—origin, Chamonix. The bones were large. Too large to fit into a Sherpa. The large bones, the French clothing, the Chamonix crampon—everything indicated that this was a Frenchman.

I dug up the crampon, took two buttons from the shirt, and returned to the tent where I took out Gerard's boot, which Doug and I had found on our way to the Lhola. The crampon fit the boot exactly, confirming my suspicion. I cleaned off the rust and packed it along with the buttons
and the piece of leather inside the boot carrying the initials GDX.

I had not known Gerard well, so why should I be so concerned? He had given me his altimeter back in Chamonix before he left for Everest. Perhaps it was the magnetism of that man and his strong presence that affected me. I looked up toward the West Shoulder of Everest where he had met the White Death and then back down to the Khumbu Glacier where he now reposed. I shifted around those few items in my hands and thought back. When he was alive there was a certain inexplicable presence about him. When he moved, there was something that moved with him. It seemed natural that his remains and his presence should carry on, moving down with the Khumbu Glacier, powerful and bright, as he was himself when I saw him last.
Walking down the Khumbu Valley from Everest Base Camp, I felt better than I had ever felt before. I carried a heavy pack. My legs churned like a locomotive. My head sat on top of a machine, looking here, looking there, feeling no pain. It would be fun to climb Cholatse over there, or that one, or that one way over there. To be so happy, one of these days you’re going to get it behind the neck.

Looking back toward Nuptse, I sensed that it was the first Himalayan ascent where I had felt lots of reserve near the summit. I had not had to exert my all. I could have gone on and on. I had been confident throughout the climb.

Farther down the valley we heard bad news from the Sherpas. One of the New Zealanders had been killed on Ama Dablam after an unsuccessful attempt on Kusum Kanguru. The three other members had been injured and were presently lying in the hospital. They had attempted an extremely dangerous route up the West Face, making their way up through walls of seracs. One had fallen, setting off an avalanche of snow and ice which swept down the face. One anchor had held all four climbers on the mountainside. Three had been lucky. An Austrian party had done an outstanding job of rescuing them from the mountain.

Alan mentioned that Nicolas Jaeger, with whom he had done some climbing in Peru, had applied for authoriza-
tion to climb the South Face of Lhotse. This huge wall is one of the most difficult in the world and makes any side of Everest pale in comparison. It is perhaps the challenge of the future, 'a problem for the year 2000,' as Messner has put it. The face itself is over 10,000 feet of vertical with the most expansive overhang of all the world's mountains, some 3,000 feet, high up on the wall. Though some have tried, none have succeeded on Lhotse South Face.

The five of us wanted to have a look at this impressive wall before leaving the Khumbu Valley. We split off, moving southwest down the Khumbu Glacier. Then shortcutting the normal route, we climbed over the hill between Pheriche and Dingboche. Above Dingboche we could make out the great South Face of Lhotse in the distance. I shuddered to think of anyone attempting it.

'I'm sure glad I'm not going there,' I said to Alan.
A few days later we were back in Kathmandu enjoying Chinese and Nepalese food. I went to the telegraph office to place a telephone call to Norma. I plopped down my three hundred rupees for a three minute call. It would have to go through Delhi to Japan where it would be transmitted via satellite to the U.S. The call was placed and I waited. But it did not go through, even after repeated attempts. I would just have to return the next day.

Mike had disappeared from the hotel where we were lodged. Since Samje arrived in Kathmandu before us, he must have gone to find her to help her with the formalities of passport and visa for the U.S. There were rumors in the air that something was wrong with Sherpington. He had always seemed a weak baby. Now when we saw Mike and Samje again I looked for the little bundle that was always held close to one of them. It was no longer there. Both parents looked naked and old. Sherpington had died a few hours earlier.

The next day I showed up at the telegraph office again. My call went through.

'Hello Norma.'

'Georges?'

'It's so good to hear your voice again Norma.'
Even from such a distance I could sense a coldness that I had only once before experienced. *What's the problem? What's happening?* With my head bowed low, I left the telegraph office and as I walked back on the uneven stone pavement, lost in my thoughts, I stumbled into a wheelbarrow pushed by a man. His clothes were in pieces, his hair matted in dirty strands. He wore a fiery knowing grin across his lips and eyes, accented by the darkness of his skin. With a sweeping gesture of his gnarled hand, he invited me to get in.

'Too soon. Too soon,' I told him.

We waited two more days in Kathmandu for our equipment to be flown back from Lukla. During that interval I purchased presents for Norma and family.

One night a number of us got together for dinner. We sat at the round table. I talked to Nena, who was sitting next to Doug. Pushed by an impulse, I kicked off my shoe and placed my foot on Nena's—then on the floor. No reaction. I again touched Nena's foot with mine. I could see no reaction. *What's wrong?* Once again.

'That's *my* foot, Georges!' Doug bellowed

'Oh I'm sorry Doug. I thought it was the table.'

We all laughed.

Two days later I was on the plane to Delhi. Several days later I was back in France. I phoned Norma again. My presentiment proved correct. I had been so sure of myself, of Norma, of our relationship, but I had forgotten about time. When I got back to the States, Norma returned the wedding ring I had placed on her finger before I left for Broad Peak. I returned the key that she had given me in France when she said she would wait.
I had planned to spend the coming spring and summer with Norma, but now it is not possible. I wrote to Nicolas Jaeger and he invited me for the South Face of Lhotse in the spring of 1980. It seems like an impossible challenge for two climbers. But who is to say what is impossible?

* * *

†Note added in proof: Nicolas Jaeger never returned from the Himalayas. He was last seen high up on the South Face of Lhotse Shar, above 26,000 feet and still climbing.
There are mornings at the birth of daylight,
Between darkness and brightness, sorrow and joy,
Even for marionettes.
Eh! Whoever pulls the strings, I want a word with you.
It’s about a dream I had.
I dreamed I caught my breath from the lungs of my lover
But she disappeared and I suffocated
We traveled, her hand in mine, through the alleys of life
Under the shadow of the trees, jumping,
Dancing in the moonlight.
We stopped to spend the late night in a nice looking house.
But it was full of ghosts—
The panels of images and unrealities relayed each other
Like the background behind the frame of our own actions.
In our turn we became ghosts—or were we real?
When were we? Where are you? Is it true?
How can the background of the painting be so easily altered
Without touching the frontal motifs?
Could it be only the lighting that changes?
Whoever the manipulator is, I want a word with you.
Thank you, or, Sorry for you.
We may be marionettes,
But we feel
There are painful mornings when it feels.