

# **Summit Dreams**

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I've wanted to climb Everest since I was sixteen, but it isn't until I'm hanging from a meat hook in the ceiling by my wrists, elbows bound behind my back so tightly that my shoulder blades are touching, that I finally decide to try.

Both arms are taut, shoulders hanging gruesomely out of their sockets, elbows swollen to lumpy red baseballs. A veil of tears and sweat and blood obscures the knobby walls and the crooked wooden table. Gutface screams at me, splattering my face with globs of spit and a mist of hot wet breath. He wants me to write my biography for him. I scream back, but that's just because it hurts so damn much, and all I can feel is the fire pumping through the veins in my arms, my spine threatening to snap, the fibers in my muscles tearing to shredded ribbons. I want to die. God, let me die. Let me die.

God's not listening. Or he isn't there. The pain doesn't relent.

Gutface slaps me. He yanks the lever on the winch and I collapse to the concrete floor. Nerves explode everywhere. I cry.

"Your biography, criminal! You write your biography!"

I sob at his blurry dark face. Strings of snot wave from my broken nose. He kicks me. I fall prone and bury my face in the concrete floor.

That's when I have the thought; not so much a coherent idea, then, just an image. The cool concrete kisses my face and for an instant I am lifted out of the delirium of pain, into the bliss of memories from a life that once I supposedly lived. Needles of snow blow against my face. Wind whips my hair back against numb ears. White powder crunches underfoot with each clumsy step of the snowshoes.

Muscles burn, but it's a pleasant sensation, not like the ropes and meat hook; now they burn with raw physical exertion, my strength against the mountain's, one man seeking to conquer the world. I thrust my ice ax into the snow, lean on it, squint and look up through the blur of swirling white to see the summit not far away. Towers of bright granite poke up through the glacier. Rainier, that had been. She was the last mountain I climbed before Captain Jack Konrad died, and prisoner Jack Konrad woke up in this godforsaken Vietnamese hell.

Then Rainer is gone and Gutface is shaking me, screaming about my biography, and I cry some more. When he threatens to hang me from the meat hook again I break down and say I'll do it. He gives me a pencil and paper, and I scribble a few vague half-truths about a life that seems like a fading dream. I cry again, because I've broken. After a final bit of roughing me up, he snatches the paper away and drags me back to the cell. I pass out somewhere along the way.

"How was quiz?" Roger whispers in the darkness after lights out.

"I broke."

Silence for a while. Then, "Well, damn, it happens to all of us sometimes. They give you the ropes?"

"Yeah."

I don't want to talk, so I roll over on my side on the stone slab that serves as a bed. Every bone, muscle, and ligament in my body screams at me. Someone is pounding my head with a sledgehammer from the inside. I close my eyes, hoping the throbbing will go away, but all I can concentrate on is the furious pain.

“Don’t go under on me, Jack,” Roger says. “We gotta’ get back up when the bastards knock us down.”

I hate that iron resolve of his, that naïve hope and belief in the human spirit. I don’t want his encouragement, I want him to leave me alone! Just let me rot in the shadows! All his cheery optimism has given me is a lot of false hopes and shattered dreams; month after month he shares his “gut feelings” that we’ll be released soon, and after two years I’m still in this cell. When will he face reality? All we are is withered sacks of broken bones and mosquito-tortured skin. Our lives consist of interrogation and torture, or rotting in our cell turning maggot-infested chunks of spoiled meat into diarrhea. God, I hate this place. What have I become? What is this purgatory?

“Jack,” Roger whispers.

I clutch my face in my hands, trying to wipe away the rivulets of poisoned black thoughts cascading through my mind. How can I let myself think such terrible things? I was never like this before. God, what’s happening inside my head? I haven’t gone crazy yet, but have I become something even worse? Swirling vertigo grips me. I’m staring down into the abyss.

“Come on, pull yourself together,” Roger snaps. “Forget all this crap for a minute. Forget Hanoi. You’re Captain Jack Konrad, remember? You’re better than all this.”

The vertigo fades, and I’m left flat on my stone slab, gasping. “Sorry,” I stammer. “Thanks. It’s-I’m just letting it get to me. Sorry.”

“Hey, relax. None of us is an island.”

He suddenly explodes into a spasm of coughing that leaves him curled up on his slab, clutching his chest, leaning over the edge to spit phlegm and blood on the cell floor. It lasts almost five minutes. When it ends he calmly lies back down, as if nothing at all had happened. We're both used to it by now. I lie in silence for a while, staring at the grimy stone wall.

"I'm going to climb Everest," I say.

"Everest." He doesn't sound enthused.

"I know you're not big on the imagination games, but I need it, Roger. I can't keep living like this. I need somewhere to go. Something to do."

He sits up in bed. "I've got real work you can do. We need to memorize social security numbers for all the prisoners, and George still needs help compiling that intel on the--"

"No, Roger. Nothing to do with Hanoi. I need out."

Silence. I know Roger's disappointed. "Do what you've got to do, then," he finally says, a bitter edge in his voice.

"I wish you'd go with me, Roger. Mountaineering is-cleansing. Pure. I think it'd do us both some good. We'll take Tom--"

"No, no, I've got too much to do already. You go. Take Tom with you, though. He's ready to break: really break, I mean. You and I have our moments, but we've managed to keep our heads above the surface. Tom's gone below. Deep. Maybe you can pull him out."

I nod slowly. "Okay. Okay, then. Me and Tom."

1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Tom McLaughlan has been at the Hanoi Hilton less than a month. Those first weeks are always the worst. The gooks interrogate and torture you every day, they lock you up in solitary confinement, and they feed you all the propaganda about your war crimes against the women and children of Vietnam. That first month makes or breaks you. Roger and I survived. Tom-well, I just don't know. He's sinking fast.

Five weeks ago Tom was a hotshot F-4 pilot, newly married to a pretty young wife, fresh out of pilot training with a zeal for the war. Then he goes and gets shot down on his first combat mission, his backseater gets beaten to death by the villagers who find them, and now he's rotting in his own feces in a cell in North Vietnam. Nothing else on earth can shake up your identity that fast.

I reach out an arm and rap on his wall. *Rat-tat tat-tat-tat*. Shave and a haircut: it's how we begin our conversations.

The reply takes a long time to arrive. I start to think Tom has already gone to sleep, and I'm getting ready to give up and go to sleep myself, when a single abrupt knock resonates through the wall. No two bits, just an annoyed rap to let us know he's there and breathing. Funny how much you can tell about a man by the way he taps. There are slow taps, fast taps, loud taps, soft taps, taps drawn out like eerie wails, taps so rapid and fluid that you can sense the bubbling excitement. Tom's taps are usually weak, half-hearted. Roger and I taught him the code, but he's never bothered to learn it very well, just hashes his way through it enough to get his point across. It's like talking to a ghost. He's despair incarnate, this man who I've

never seen, this phantom rapping hand on the other side of the wall. My mental picture of him has no face.

I tell him about Everest. He doesn't tap back, but I know he's listening, so I tap and tap and tap for both of us. I say I'll start planning the trip tomorrow, if he wants to join me. Eventually I run out of things to say, so I say goodnight, and he sends back a single tap signifying his own harsh, clipped goodbye.

"You're making a big gamble," Roger says in the darkness afterward. I thought he was asleep.

"How so?"

"That man's life is in your hands. You kick him into gear, he'll pull through this and stand as strong as the rest of us. You fail, he'll break within the week."

"So what do you suggest?"

"Forget this Everest thing, and help him keep a grip on real life."

"If I forget Everest, I'll be the one who breaks within a week."

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For the next month I spend almost two hours a day making preparations. I book a flight to Nepal, list and buy all the equipment I'll need, and plan my route up the mountain. To get in shape I go for day hikes up and down the Colorado Fourteeners I knew so well as a cadet at the Air Force Academy. More than the others, this last activity has some correlation in real life; I walk several miles a day just by going in little squares around the perimeter of my cell. Frequently I tap away on Tom's wall, letting him know what's going on, asking him if he wants to help plan the expedition. He expresses little interest.

Roger just sits on his bunk and watches me when I go for my hikes or sit for hours at a time with my eyes closed. He doesn't say anything, but I know he thinks I'm wasting my time. We're too good of friends to let it divide us, but there is a new degree of tension underlying our relationship.

A month after I first begin the planning, I board my plane and make the long flight to Nepal, where native Sherpas lead me to Everest base camp. I'll be spending another month here before I make the final ascent.

YOU SURE YOU DONT WANT TO CLIMB? I tap to Tom.

*Rap.* Go away.

That night I'm torn from sleep by a staggering roar. The entire cell lights up. I hear Roger curse, see him scramble upright in bed when the next flash dazzles our room.

"What's going on!" I shout.

We hear the whine of jet engines. "Hey, those are Thuds!" Roger shouts. An instant later explosions ripple through downtown Hanoi beyond our window. The ground shakes. Dirt and bits of rock fall from the ceiling.

"Holy mother of God, do you think they know we're here? They almost hit us!"

Roger grins crazily. "If they do hit, you won't have anything to worry about, now will you?"

I shake my head. Roger's crazy.

“You know what this means!” Roger shouts. “We’re bombing Hanoi again. I bet we’ll have the gooks at the bargaining table within weeks. We could be home by Christmas.”

That does it. The excitement and drama of this particular moment ebb away. I’m left feeling bitter. Someone once wrote that it’s not the pessimists who make prison life unbearable; it’s the optimists.

The jets are gone within ten minutes. They come back almost every night for the next week. The North Vietnamese don’t like that very much. We hear no word of being released.

INTEL SAYS NEW TORTURE BEGINNING THIS WEEK. WANT  
PROPAGANDA. BOMBINGS MAKING GOOKS DESPERATE. BE READY.

The message comes through Roger’s wall from our Flight Commander, who in turn got it from the camp Senior Ranking Officer, who in turn got it from some other prisoner that passed the snippet up his chain of command.

I CANT DO THIS AGAIN, Tom taps when I pass the message along to him. That’s followed by a whole ruckus of *thumps* and *bangs* that most definitely isn’t tap code; it sounds like he’s kicking around his waste bucket and screaming and banging the walls.

COME TO EVEREST, I plead.

The banging stops after a while. Later, much to my astonishment, he taps back that he’ll come. And then we’re no longer in our cells. We’re sitting around

in my tent at Everest base camp, at 17,500 feet. Tom is lying on my sleeping bag staring at the ceiling. I sit next to the camp stove, cooking dinner.

“Nice joint,” he says, looking around.

“Beats the alternative,” I say, and we both know what I mean. “Hey, I hear the Norwegian team is throwing a party tonight. Should we join them?”

He agrees that sounds just fine, so we pull on long underwear and boots and trudge outside through the snow toward the Norwegian tent. I point out all the sights along the way. I know the details of everyone staying in the camp, right down to what color their tents are and what kind of beer they like. The Norwegians are the biggest partiers.

Soon we’re chugging down cold beer, listening to pounding music, laughing and dancing with the pretty Amazon on the German team. The flames of an open campfire lick the cobalt sky. Everest looms blue and white against the twilight and the first glaring stars. There’s no atmosphere this high to diminish the night, just the cold stark clarity of a world more ancient than time.

We dance and dance and dance. Someone has a harmonica. Softly, as if from a distant world, I can hear Tom rapping on the walls. Not typing in code, just playing a steady rhythm of *boom-chaka-chaka-boom-chaka-chaka* on a drum as we dance to it. Dance and dance and dance, firelight glowing off our bodies, hands waving in the air, primitive and free. The fire crackles and explodes. Sparks swirl and fly through the air until they vanish above our heads.

The song goes on and on, this ritual of appeasement to the Mighty Mountain. Everest just watches: cold, silent, eternal. She takes no notice of our

foolishness. When it's over we collapse in the snow and lay panting. I blink up at the stars. Everest is there in front of me. It stares curiously back. Taunting. It has Gutface's features.

I get mad and throw my half-empty beer bottle at it. "Leave us alone!" I shout, but it's just a twisted spire of snow and granite again. "We'll climb you, you bastard! You can't beat us!"

Then I'm drifting off to sleep in the dry powdery snow, and when I wake up I'm back in my cell.

Roger is sitting on his slab staring at me. I sit up with a start. "What?" I ask. "Tom's really climbing with you now?"

I nod slowly. He shrugs, lays down, rolls over to look at the wall. "I'd better go with you guys, then. I don't want to miss the action."

I guess optimists can't stay angry long.

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Roger's just in time to make our first acclimation climb. We have five camps on the mountain, and we plan to work in stages up to each one. First an acclimation climb to camp two, then back down. A few days later we'll make another acclimation climb to camp three, then back down. Same thing to camp four and then, on the final climb, we'll push up through camp five to the summit.

Today's climb isn't bad, except for the Khumbu Icefall. It's a terrifying place, a shattered glacier of ever-shifting chunks of ice framed above by huge overhanging blocks that could come crashing down at any minute. I explain what it looks like to Roger and Tom, then we take our time crossing. I lead, laying anchors and a

fixed rope as I go. The fixed hardware should make the Icefall easier to cross on the next three climbs.

Roger has one of his coughing spasms halfway across the Icefall. His ice tools are embedded in the ice, crampons thrust toe-down into a narrow shelf, face pressed up against the gleaming blue. When the coughing starts he loses his grip on the ice tools, wheels backwards enough to dislodge his spiked toes, and plummets off the shelf. The rope goes taut and yanks me off my feet. I swing wildly around and throw my ice ax into the snow. The fall yanks me right to the edge of the crevasse before the ax stops me. When we finally stop I'm lying facedown in the snow, body pressed down on my ice ax, boots lodged deep in the snow to brake me. Roger dangles beneath me on the end of the rope. Tom, still on the other side of the crevasse, calls across to see if he can help. He's too far away.

"Come on, Roger, this part was supposed to be easy!" I chide, hanging desperately to my ax, wondering how I'll pull him back up.

He replies through clenched teeth, tears in his voice. "It's my ribs, Jack. I think I hurt them just now, coughing. For real, I mean. Damn it!"

Everest starts to dissolve and I see the dark stone of my cell. "Do you need me to look at it?"

"No, no! Get me out first." I smile, even as my body is being pulled in two directions by the ax and rope. Neither of us wants to go back to Hanoi. We'll take the Icefall, thank you very much.

"You need to support your own weight for a minute," I call back down. "I can't pull you up unless I can get back on my feet."

He fumbles around below. My face is still buried in the snow. I can't see anything.

"Come on Roger!" I shout. My arms are starting to burn.

"I'm trying!" he shouts back.

Suddenly he yells "Oh!" and the tension on the rope goes slack.

Unbalanced, I sink backward into the snow and lie gasping. I get to my knees and see a short dark figure at the edge of the crevasse. He's leaning backwards, feet braced in the snow, the rope wrapped around both hands and his waist. He's inching backwards, one short step at a time, hoisting Roger out of the crevasse. He has tan weathered skin, narrow dark eyes, muscles bulging beneath a tattered thin coat. I know immediately who he is: a Sherpa, one of the natives of Nepal who serve as guides for climbers. They're strong as hell, and thousands of years of life in the Himalayas have given them unbelievable endurance against the cold and altitude. He's a comforting sight, but unexpected. I hadn't planned on bringing a Sherpa on the climb. He just sort of appeared.

I try to imagine him away, but he's still there. The believability of my illusion starts to crumble. I don't want a Sherpa here. Of course Roger and Tom have their own mental version of the climb, which doesn't include a Sherpa, so I just won't tell them. As far as they're concerned it's only the three of us still.

"I'm pulling you up, Roger," I say. I grab hold of the rope behind the Sherpa and we pull together, stumbling backward over each other's feet, boots crunching deep in the snow, until at last Roger appears over the edge. The Sherpa pulls Roger another few feet, then tosses the rope down in the snow. He looks at Roger, looks

back at me, then trudges on up the mountain path. I watch him go, out of the Icefall and hopefully out of my imagination.

We bring Tom across uneventfully. He retrieves Roger's ice tools on the way, which are still embedded in the icy wall. Once we're all on the uphill side we make good time to camp one, and call it quits there. We're too exhausted to make camp two, and Roger's shaken from his fall.

That evening I'm lying on the stone floor, trying to do pushups. I was up to four hundred sixteen repetitions before the rope torture. That dropped me back down to twenty. I'm trying to build back up, even though I know the next wave of torture can't be long in coming. American planes are still bombing Hanoi regularly.

Roger sits on his bunk, bony knees drawn up to his chest, staring blankly at the floor. He hasn't been himself this afternoon. I think the climb really got to him. He broke a rib in his coughing spasm.

"I guess that's that," I say between pushups. They're the first words we've exchanged in a couple hours.

"What's what?"

"I guess that's it for you climbing with us. Don't worry, I won't be hurt if you don't want to go back."

He shakes his head slowly. "Don't worry about the climb, Jack, the fall, everything; I mean, we were just playing, right? That part was okay." He pauses, as if uncertain whether he should continue. I've never seen him this disconcerted.

Finally he says, "I hallucinated today. Never done it before, but when we were climbing Everest, my mind started playing tricks. We're all worried about madness here, but this is the first time I've been *really* worried."

I look up at him, concerned. After three years of captivity Roger is as strong as ever, and he's the last person I'd expect to lose his mind. "It's not hallucinating if you're already using your imagination, is it? You just got a little carried away, that's all. You felt how real the dream is. If you start seeing things in the cell, then I might worry."

He shakes his head slowly. "When you were pulling me up I saw someone else. I don't know who he was. Not Vietnamese, but dark-skinned like that. Maybe Chinese. He was pulling on the rope."

I collapse half-way through a pushup, pull myself upright, and gape at him. "A Sherpa?" I ask.

He squints. "What?"

"A Sherpa. They're natives of the Himalayas. Western climbers use them as guides."

"Maybe that's it," Roger says thoughtfully. "I don't remember ever hearing about them before, but I must have, a long time ago. Otherwise I wouldn't remember, right?"

Except I saw the same Sherpa. Shivers run up and down my spine. I think about saying something, maybe comparing notes about what this Sherpa looks like, but I don't. We should forget it. Maybe we *are* all going crazy.

I do another pushup, concentrating on the hard tangible floor under my fingers and the reality of the searing pain.

By morning Roger's feeling better, and he decides to keep with us. The next two climbs, spread across two weeks, are less eventful than the first. We make it up to camp four at 27,000 feet where the air is painfully thin. That night we camp there, but it's so cold and our lungs are so starved that we can't fall asleep. We lie awake trying to breathe, consciously telling the blood to keep pumping through our arteries. In the morning we hike back down to base camp. Rich oxygen fills our lungs again. We're giddy with excitement. We've finished our preparations. Soon we'll make the final ascent.

The day before that climb starts Tom gets hauled off to quiz. We hear the turnkeys come for him, hear his screams and curses as they haul him off to the Knobby Room. He's gone almost all day. Roger and I try to go back to Everest, but it's hard to immerse ourselves in that illusion when we know where our neighbor is. We mope around the cell, waiting. Praying. Hoping Tom won't break. It's been weeks since the last wave of torture, weeks Tom's been recovering with us, but his life still hangs from a silver thread. He's still deep in despair.

I hear them bring Tom back before dinner. I tap shave-and-a-haircut his way, but he doesn't reply. Can't or won't.

"We'd better postpone our climb one more day," I tell Roger. "I don't think he'll be ready tomorrow."

He agrees.

“Roger, do-do you think he broke?”

Roger frowns at me. “We’ll talk to him in the morning and find out.”

But the next morning they take Tom again.

Evening. We hear Tom’s door open as they bring him back. Turnkeys yell in Vietnamese, knock him around, slam him up against the wall. We hear the thumps. Tom moans and cries. After the turnkeys are gone I tap a word of encouragement. He doesn’t tap back.

“We’re losing him,” Roger says.

Tom gets hauled away again the third morning. Three consecutive days of torture.

“He’ll break,” I say.

Roger nods. “Everest tonight. It’s his only hope.”

Last night’s sounds repeat themselves that evening. We hear shouting, Tom sobbing, the guards repeatedly slamming his body up against our wall. When it’s over Roger sits down on the bunk beside me. We lean up against the slimy cold wall so we can tap, and tell Tom that it’s time to climb.

Everest. Naked white against the bluest sky I’ve ever seen. A mist of snow spins away from the distant summit like volcanic steam. Majestic, this fortress of snow and frozen rock. Nature’s greatest adversary, timeless, sovereign, patiently waiting for those fools who would challenge her.

We stand outside our tent and stare up at it. Three days to summit. Camp three the first day, camp five the second day, summit the third. Today and tomorrow will be cake. We've already been as high as camp four.

Roger starts forward through the snow. I trudge after him. My mind is on Everest but

my hands rap away on the cell wall. I'm listening for Tom, but he doesn't reply. Once his cries subside all is quiet. Roger and I keep tapping anyway, telling him about our climb, hoping he'll join us or at least take comfort in knowing that we're really pulling this thing off. Anything to get his mind off the torture. What better than

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sun sparkling, like handfuls of diamonds strewn in the thick powder. The sharp cold air bites our skin. Ice crystals and powder get mashed underfoot with each heavy step of the crampons, *crunch crunch crunch crunch*. It's a beautiful day. Two more days of this and we'll summit with no problems.

Roger and I push forward, through the Icefall, up through camp two and on toward camp three. On the way Roger whoops with joy and points back, and there's Tom limping on up the trail behind us, skin pale and blue, an animated cadaver.

He stops a little ways off. "Still got room for me?"

Roger grins and says, "Any time, buddy, any time." Tom hikes up to us and we keep pressing up, listening to the

*Rat tat tat. Rat tat. Rat tat tat.* It's such a beautiful sound. Tom is with us again. We tap almost as fast as we can think.

When we reach camp three we open our eyes and we're back in the cell. It's late. We're up way past lights out. Without daylight pouring through our window bars the cell is black, so I can't see Roger's face, but I can sense the smile there.

"He's still with us," Roger says.

"Yeah. Yeah he is."

The next day they don't come for Tom. He needs a day off, I guess. Instead they take Roger. He's back that afternoon, face bloody and bruised, wrists cut deeply from the ropes. He's so weak that he can't crawl onto his bed by himself. I have to help him.

"Gotta' get to camp five," he wheezes once he's on the bed.

So we climb.

We climb most of the night, then collapse into our sleeping bags-our stone slabs in our cells-sometime well after dark. In the morning when the turnkeys wake us we're exhausted, but we immediately go back to Everest. Summitting will take all day. We prepare our gear by the light of kerosene lanterns. Each of us grabs two oxygen bottles. Then we're outside in the frigid cold, gasping for breath, staring up at the dark silhouette of rock and snow against the paling blue sky.

"We're going to do this," I say, clapping Roger and Tom on the back.

Roger grins. Tom doesn't respond, just trudges forward in the deep snow, the expression on his face as frozen as Everest. I can sense it in the way he taps. He hasn't given up yet, but he seems defeated. Hollow. Gutface and Possum really did a job on him.

"Just think," I say to Tom. "Today you'll be on top of the world."

"I'm in goddamn Hanoi," he says back, and pushes on ahead.

A boom roars through the mountains, echoes away into oblivion, the shattering ripping sound of breaking ice. Roger and I look to each other, look up, see huge blocks of ice shearing away from a cliff up ahead. The blocks plunge into the snow with a *crack* that shakes the ground and suddenly snow is spilling down the bowl towards us.

"Avalanche!" I shout.

Something hits me in the face and

then Gutface shouts, "Quiet!"

He's in my room. The door is swinging on its hinges. Gutface grabs my collar and drags me to my feet. He slams me against the door trying to get me through the doorway. The door cracks against the stone wall again. Avalanche. Slamming doors.

Possum is in the hallway. He sneers at me as Gutface drags me past, then ducks into my cell. I hear him shouting at Roger.

"Keep climbing!" I shout. "Keep climbing! Make the summit!"

Gutface slaps my face and yells to shut up. He yanks me through the doorway into the Knobby Room. The rusty gray meathook on the ceiling frowns down at me. Assorted blades, ropes, and other nastier implements adorn the walls between the rows and rows of knobs which are supposed to make the room soundproof. Gutface kicks me behind the knees and I topple to the floor. He grabs my scalp with one hand, yanks me up until I'm forced to rise groaning up off the floor, then shoves a pebble underneath my knee. He lets my hair go and I drop back onto my knees. The pebble jars my exposed knee with a sharp stab of pain. He makes me put my arms in the air.

"You wait," he says, and leaves.

I groan and wheel around to see Possum dragging Roger past. A minute later I hear a third prisoner fighting his captors. It must be Tom.

He'll break, I know he will.

"Climb, Tom!" I shout.

He's too busy cursing and screaming to pay attention to me. I still can't see him-he's in the hallway somewhere-but the sound of his voice makes me shudder. The phantom, rapping hand starts to assume an identity. This is the voice of the man who will break.

I close my eyes, wincing at the sharp pain of the pebble

and finally pull myself to my feet. I escaped the path of the avalanche by scrambling up this escarpment, and now I'm watching the white sheet glide past beneath me. A near miss.

My knee is killing me. The fabric of my pants is torn there. I must have knocked it on the escarpment during my escape from the avalanche. I clench my teeth and start climbing again.

I can't see Roger or Tom. They have to be out there somewhere, but it's impossible to know where. In real life no self-respecting mountaineer would climb alone, but the rules don't apply in this bizarre semi-lucid dream. I'm alone now, alone in this vast white desert of my imagination. All I can worry about is myself, and hope the others find their way.

There is freedom in climbing solo. By necessity the shared hallucination remained a general, vague thing, something each of us could understand—even Tom, who'd never even seen pictures of Everest. Our dream was dictated by the least common denominator. But now-now the chains have been broken and I'm free to delve into that sparkling, beautiful, terrible world of Mallory and Hillary. I notice how the sun glares off the snow, how the wind has blown grooves and indentations into the rolling white, the sweeping gallery of blue and white peaks far below. I taste the frigid dry air, feel the burning in my throat and nostrils, feel the sharp needles of pain in my lungs with each gasping breath. The mountains below stretch away to a vast and distant horizon.

But I can't stop now to admire the beauty. I must climb, climb! The pain in my knee is burning now. Oh, God, it hurts... I can't climb, this voice is lying to me, I'll just hurt myself if I keep it up. I need to stop. I need rest.

I flop down in the snow, grimacing in pain, and now the awesome lonesomeness turns to fear. I'm alone in the farthest heights of the earth. If I die

here, who will find me? The mountain seems to rise up out of the ground, loom over me, threaten to crush me with its tons of rock and snow.

And then, suddenly, there's a small dark figure walking into view several hundred yards ahead of me. He swings an ancient wood-handled ice ax loosely in one hand, stops, and looks down at me. With his other arm he waves, beckoning me. Then he turns his back on me and resumes walking up the hill. In a moment he's out of sight behind an outcropping of black rock.

I blink. The Sherpa again.

My knee is on fire, but somehow I stagger to my feet and keep walking.

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"We talk now," Gutface says. His face is shrouded with sweat. There's a look in his eye I haven't seen before: fear. He's desperate. He needs information. His hands shake when he grabs my shirt and lifts me off my knees. "Get up!"

I scramble to my feet. The pebble is half-embedded in my flesh. I rip it away and throw it to the ground. I'm crying with relief.

He gestures to a chair. I sit.

"You make videotape!" he says. He sounds like he might cry, he's so angry. "You talk about criminal air pirates bombing hospitals and children. Make it, we give you better food, move you to group cell. Don't make it, we talk more."

It's a familiar routine. He plays nice, we talk for a couple hours, I give him nothing. When he gets angry the abuse starts, and before I know it I'm getting the ropes or tourniquets. There is no fear today. I know what to expect. I'll play my role, while he plays his.

So he asks questions, and I dodge them and dance around them almost without thinking, and before long my mind is slipping back to Everest.

I don't know how high I am now, but the air is getting thinner, and my legs are burning with fatigue. The majesty of this solo world is starting to ebb as I think of Roger and Tom, lost somewhere apart from me. It was never supposed to be like this.

But when the despair starts to overwhelm me I catch a glimpse of the Sherpa up ahead. From time to time he glances over his shoulder at me, and in those glances I know that this is no longer my fantasy. I'm just along for the ride, doing the best that I can, while he calmly and assuredly leads the way.

"You make video or not!" Gutface shouts. "I tired of talking. Get up. Get up!"

I stagger out of the chair, only to find Gutface's hand on my shirt dragging me to a corner of the room. He hurls me down to the floor. I land on my hands and knees. Then I feel a ribbon of cold wire around my neck. "You make video?"

"No," I say.

Gutface yanks back and twists. The wire cinches down around my neck, hoisting my whole body backward toward him. Air explodes out of my throat in a wheezing rattle. For a moment I'm too overwhelmed by the razor-sharp tug of the wire to notice anything else, then the realization strikes that I can't breathe. I

wheeze, choke, gasp for breath. My hands grope at my neck. Stars explode in front of my face. The world is darkening.

Darker, darker. Everest is a graying blur in front of me. I'm on my knees in the snow, clutching desperately at my oxygen bottle. My gloved hands fumble over it, find the pressure gauge. Empty. Everest rolls up into a little portal at the center of my vision, black around the edges.

I collapse, knees and hands plunging into the deep snow, the oxygen bottle forgotten. I reach up and claw at my neck with my fingers. The darkness is total now, except for-there, in the distance, a light coming toward me. God is listening this time! I reach out and

Gutface lets me go and I fall forward onto my face, sucking in a wet gurgling draught of musky air. I inhale blood and phlegm with the air and vomit back onto the floor. My fingers claw at the stone.

Before I can take another breath Gutface has the cord back around my neck, his knee in my back. The terror of airlessness rushes back. My vision swims. I start to faint, knowing that if I do I will never wake up.

"You make video!" Gutface screams.

Oh God, oh God, oh God! The Code of Conduct flashes through my jumbled thoughts: *I will make no oral or written statement...*

We're talking about my life-!

*... disloyal to my country and its allies...*

FOR THE LOVE OF GOD, I'M GOING TO DIE!

And then the real world is gone.

I come to facedown in the snow. The wind howls over the slope, spraying me with a perpetual shotgun blast of powder. I can't feel that side of my face. Hands are moving over my body. I try to reach back and swat them away, but my body won't respond. My muscles simply don't work. Somehow I can look down on myself from the outside, lying there like a rag doll. The Sherpa is standing over my body.

This is it. I've frozen to death, and I'm lying here staring at my own corpse. I must be dead in Hanoi too. I've heard a lot of crazy things about what happens after you die, but never this. Never stuck at 28,000 feet on Everest watching a Sherpa loot my frozen corpse.

But then I blink, and he's rolled me over on my back, and I'm looking up at him. He helps me to my feet. Up close, his face isn't at all what I expect. It's round, almost chubby, like a child's. His whole body is homely that way. He hands me my oxygen mask, a fresh bottle attached. I slip it over my mouth and nose and drink in the thick air.

"You always climb alone?" he asks, extending an arm. I take it, and he pulls me up. "You die alone."

"We got separated. Roger-he's with Possum. I don't know where."

"Roger the tall one with broken back, yes? He's fine. Climbing strong ahead of you. I show him the way."

“And Tom,” I whisper, bewildered. “What about Tom?”

“Tom... which was he?”

“He was—I can’t describe him. I’ve never seen his face. But there were only three of us, so you can find him, can’t you? I don’t think he’ll make it on his own.”

The Sherpa looks down the mountain, the roaring wind tugging at the bits of black hair that poke out from below his cap. I follow his gaze but don’t see anything, just desolate white slopes below. The blowing snow has already covered our tracks.

“I go find him,” the Sherpa says. He starts to go.

“No! Wait!” I grab his shoulder. “Don’t bring him here.”

He peers curiously up at me. “Why not? You want to climb *Chomolungma*, yes?”

I blink. “Yes, but that was before. This—” I sweep my arm around. When he squints at me I say, “I am dead, right? You’re some kind of angel of death?”

“Angel? Angel! Ha-ha!” He starts walking downhill, big round arms flopping loosely at his sides. Over his shoulder he calls, “You not dead, my friend. Now go!” He makes a shooing gesture. “Go climb! Roger’s waiting. I bring Tom.”

He sits down in the snow and glissades down the slope, dragging his ice ax as a brake. I watch him get smaller and smaller before turning to look up the mountain again. I’m too fatigued, in too much pain, to ask questions. All I can do is climb.

Hillary Step. The last obstacle to the top. Ropes hang down this steep pinnacle of rock and ice, left by Sherpas who climbed at the start of the season. At the top of the Step is-nothing. Just a short trail to the summit, then the bluest sky I've ever seen, flecked with wispy cirrus. I look at my oxygen bottle: almost empty. My legs drag like sacks of potatoes with each step.

Step, rest fifteen seconds, gasping for breath. Step, rest fifteen seconds. With each step I lean on the ice ax. I taste warm blood from my cracked lips. My vision is a blur. I can't feel my face or fingers or toes.

After a painful count of little steps I'm at the base of the Hillary Step. God, it's so huge! I shrink back, fall over, land on my butt in the snow and stare up at it. No more energy. I won't make it. Behind me is the whole world, white and forlorn, so far below. I could just throw myself down the slope, down into that vast wilderness and there would be no more pain, just the exhilaration of the entire world rushing past my face. Down, so seductive... just let go... stop the pain...

Yes. Yes. Yes.

My grip on the ax loosens.

If I let go, I will fly. This is my dream, after all. Fly down the hill, fly away from this godforsaken mountain and back into the world I came from.

And then I hear the whisper of my name in the roaring wind. Everest is calling me. Calling me home.

"Jack! Jack!" It's Roger's voice, somewhere above me. I look up and there he is, perched on top of the Hillary Step, waving. "Keep coming, Jack, we've got this bastard! Don't let go now!"

I wobble in place, gaze alternating between him and the downhill slope. Then I see the Sherpa way down there, Tom leaning on his shoulder, the two of them stumbling together up the slope.

“If you can’t make it up,” Roger shouts, “what will Tom do? Push to the end, Jack! Show him he can do it!”

The two figures are distant below, but I can see Tom looking up at me. He has a face now; eyes as blue as the mountain sky, hard and cold with agony, tight lines marking the despair on a face narrow with sickness and malnutrition. If not dead already, he is on the verge of it. From across the expanse his eyes search mine.

“What’ll it be, Jack?” Roger shouts.

I stagger to my feet, straining every muscle, and tie the dangling rope to my harness. Roger pulls the rope taut from above. I thrust my ice tools into the wall of snow, jam the crampons in below, and start the climb. Every move is a lesson in pain and endurance; every thrust of the tools, every stab of my toes, requiring more strength than I think I have. But somehow I keep climbing, and Roger keeps pulling. The world dissolves around me until all I feel is the wrenching labor of each move, leg, arm, leg, arm. Then I feel hands on my collar and Roger sliding me over the lip onto a flat sheet of snow-covered ice. I lay gasping and crying at the edge. Roger helps me to my feet and we stagger up the last easy stretch to the top. The top of the world.

Roger and I plop down in the snow and look over the edge. I am the tallest man in the world. Himalayan peaks pepper the horizon in every direction until

they vanish into a grayish haze where they meet the sky. Streaks of fluffy clouds sail by thousands and thousands of feet below.

“We did it,” Roger says beside me. “After this, what can stop us?”

“We need Tom,” I say. So we hike back down a short ways, and watch while the Sherpa guides Tom up the last slope to the Hillary Step. I look at Roger, wondering if he sees it too. The look he gives me back says yes. Once at the Step, Tom clips into the rope. Roger belays him while Tom makes that last, desperate climb. I cheer him on. When he’s over the top he collapses on the ground between us, and we both hug him and pull him upright and guide him to the summit. A little color fills that pale, stricken face. A hint of a smile appears on his bleeding lips.

“I climbed Everest,” he says. We all laugh, drunk on the altitude and thin air and the sight of a world far below that belongs all to us.

I wake up on my back on the floor of the Knobby Room. My head is in Roger’s lap. He’s dabbing my face with a wet brown rag. I don’t see Gutface or Possum.

“I’m not dead,” I say.

“Of course not. We climbed Everest, remember? At least, I hope you remember. You talked all the way to the top.”

My throat is parched. My lungs burn. I remember the wire cinched around my neck. “What-how-”

“Possum was giving me the ropes next door, when Gutface came in all frantic. He called Possum out. A minute later they came back for me, and put me in here with you. Gutface thought you were dead. So did I, at first. Then-then you started breathing again. You’re a lucky man. They left me here to revive you.”

“What about Tom?”

Roger shakes his head slowly. “When they opened the door I could hear him screaming somewhere. God knows what they’re doing to him.”

“Had he broken?”

“I don’t know, but-it didn’t sound good.”

“When we were up there, Roger, did you see-I mean did he-”

“Did he get to the summit?”

I nod. Roger looks at the wall. “Yeah. Yeah, he did. One of those Sherpas helped him.”

We look at each other, inquiry in both our eyes. I nod slowly. Roger’s eyes widen a little, then he looks at the floor. Finally he clears his throat. “You gave Gutface a scare when you passed out like that. They’ve realized they can’t break us without killing us.”

“Thank God,” I whisper.

The door opens and Possum steps inside. He jabs a thumb up in the air. We stand, leaning on each other.

Possum leads us into the hallway back to our cell. We’re just passing a cross hallway when I catch a glimpse of motion. I hesitate long enough to see another

turnkey leading a prisoner out of another door. Golden hair flashes in the sunlight spilling through a hole in the roof. Recognition dawns in his blue eyes. He salutes, and I salute back. Then he thrusts one curled hand up toward the wall, a perfect gesture of a swinging ice ax. He winks at me, then his turnkey grabs him by the arm and drags him off down the hallway.

The glimpse is enough. Tom didn't break. Now, I know, he never will. Neither will I. We've stood on top of the world, and after that, what can they do to us?