

THERE IS A REASON WHY Base Camp and all the other camps above it are situated where they are. The traditional route may not be the shortest way up the mountain, but it is the safest and easiest. (Not that anything is safe or easy on Everest.) Zopa's "shortcut" might have been shorter, but it was ten times more difficult than the regular route. Our first obstacle was a vast field of jagged ice sticking out of the ground like great white shark teeth. Sun-jo and I used our walking poles so we didn't slip and impale ourselves. The Sherpa brothers didn't bother with the poles, forging ahead like they were ice-skating until they were two tiny dots on the horizon. I think Zopa could have easily kept up with them, but he slowed his pace, staying about a hundred yards ahead of us so he could glance back once in a while and make sure we hadn't stumbled and were bleeding out on the frozen fangs.

By the time we caught up to them late that afternoon, Yogi and Yash had the camp set up, food on the stove, and were amusing themselves by throwing their ice axes at a wall of ice that appeared to brush the sky.

My legs were shaking uncontrollably from fatigue. My neck and shoulders felt like they had been worked over by a sledgehammer. My only consolation was that Sun-jo looked more done-in than me. He didn't even have the strength to get the pack off his back. It took us two hot mugs of tea before we could talk.

By the third mug of tea I was able to focus enough to take a good look at the wall. It seemed to run for miles in both directions. I figured the next morning we would follow it until we came to a pass then make our way to the top.

When I mentioned this to Zopa he laughed and pointed directly above us. "This is the pass," he said.

"You're kidding."

He shook his head.

There wasn't a single handhold or foothold for as far as I could see. It made the ice wall I'd been practicing on look like an indoor rock climbing wall.

After dinner Zopa turned on the radio and we listened to the mountain chatter. Three more people had made it to the summit that morning. Eight had turned back within a few hundred feet of the top. A climber had broken her leg up at ABC. The virus seemed to have run its course, and everyone who had stuck it out at Base Camp was rapidly getting better.

I was about ready to call it a day and crawl into my tent when Josh came on the radio making small talk with one of the other expedition leaders up at Camp Four. This was very unusual. Josh was a firm believer that the radio should only be used to transmit important information. He hated it when people used it like a cell phone.

They talked about the weather, the woman with the broken leg, and scheduling summit attempts.

"Heard you had a falling-out with your son," the leader said.

There were no secrets on the mountain.

"Yeah, he left," Josh said. "But we'll patch it up when I get down. He's a good kid. I think Captain Shek was going to try to yank his climbing permit, anyway. Not that I would have let him."

"Is Shek still hunting for that other kid?"

"Yep. Still on the warpath. He detained a porter this afternoon named Gulu. He let him go after a pretty tough grilling, but Gulu didn't know anything. That kid left here weeks ago. Not sure what he's trying to prove. I heard he was

having some more soldiers trucked in. Some of them are climbers. He's going to send them up the mountain to check the higher camps. It's insane. I sent an e-mail to the Chinese government and I have my lawyers checking into other official actions. The Chinese make a lot of money on these permits. Be a shame if one overzealous soldier dried up that revenue source, but what are you going to do? Anyway, good luck at Camp Five. I'll check in with you tomorrow. Out."

Zopa switched off the radio. The entire conversation had been set up for us—at least on Josh's end. We couldn't participate, but we could learn a great deal by listening. None of us liked the idea of the Chinese climbers coming in.

"They won't be able to get past ABC," I said. "They haven't had time to acclimate."

"Perhaps," Zopa said.

"How do we get by them on the way back down?" Sun-jo asked.

Zopa shrugged. But this time I think he really meant it. He didn't know.

BY THE TIME ZOPA kicked Sun-jo and me out of our sleeping bags, Yogi and Yash were already fifty feet up the wall setting ice screws so we'd have something to hook on to. The sun was barely up. They had to have started when it was still dark. We ate quickly, packed, then strapped on our crampons and harnesses. Zopa said he was staying below to tie the packs and would climb last.

A bitter wind blasted the wall head-on, which was good because it pushed us into it. If the wind had been coming from an angle it would have blown us right off the wall.

Ice ax in each hand. . . Dig crampon in. Bury ax. Ice splinters in your face. Pull. Dig other crampon in. Bury ax. . . About sixty-five feet up I clipped onto an ice anchor and took a breather. Yogi and Yash had already reached the top, dropped ropes, and hauled up all the gear.

Zopa had just started up the wall. Sun-jo was clawing his way up twenty feet below me. He seemed to be struggling, which wasn't too surprising considering he had been sick and for the last few days, cooped up in a porter's tent. I waited until he looked up and gave him a wave. He returned it with a grim nod.

I started again, and had gotten up about three steps when I heard the yell. It took me a second to get myself anchored so I could look down. What I saw wasn't pretty. Sun-jo had slipped down about ten feet and was hanging on the edge of a protrusion by one ax. I'd seen the protrusion on the way up and knew it was too far from the wall for him to get his crampons planted in the ice.

"I'm coming!" Zopa shouted up at him, but it would take him at least forty-five minutes to reach him.

Sun-jo wouldn't be able to hold on for more than a few minutes. I was a lot closer, but the only thing harder and slower than climbing up an ice wall is climbing down an ice wall. I looked up, hoping to see Yogi or Yash, but there was no sign of them. They must have already forged ahead to set up the next camp.

I didn't even have time to think about what I was going to do next, which was just as well. I started scrambling sideways across the wall toward the gear rope, thirty feet away. Zopa continued to shout encouragement to Sun-jo. He was

climbing the wall as fast as he could, but he had to know that no matter how fast he went, it wouldn't be fast enough to save his grandson.

When I finally reached the rope I gave it a tug. It seemed solid enough, but I didn't know if it would hold my weight. The brothers might not have anchored it properly because they were just hauling gear with it.

"I'm slipping," Sun-jo said desperately.

"I'll be there in a minute!" I shouted.

"Hang on, Sun-jo!" Zopa shouted, catching on to what I was trying to do. "Don't give up!"

I wanted to test the rope more but there wasn't time. I hooked on to it and gave it all my weight. It stretched a little, but held. I swallowed my heart and crabbed my way back toward Sun-jo. When I got directly above him I quickly hooked the rope to an ice screw I knew was secure and rappelled to him, getting the rope hooked on his harness just as his ax slipped from the ice.

"Got him!" I shouted down to Zopa, then looked at Sun-jo. "You okay?"

He nodded.

He was crying.

So was I. Apparently I had forgiven him.

IT TOOK US another hour to get to the top. Zopa got there about ten minutes after us, looking concerned and relieved.

"Nothing broken?" he asked.

Sun-jo shook his head.

"What happened?"

"My ax broke."

Zopa nodded, then looked at me. "Thank you."

"You can thank Yogi and Yash for securing that rope," I said. The first thing I did when we got to the top was check it. The rope was tied to a carabiner attached to a three-inch ice bolt that wasn't going anywhere. Sun-jo and I could have played Tarzan on that rope all day long.

"But you didn't know that," Zopa said.

"Yeah . . . well," I said, a little embarrassed, "Yogi and Yash know what they're doing."

"Not always," Zopa said. "One of the axes Sun-jo was using today was the same one they were throwing at the wall yesterday afternoon."

Uh-oh. I suspected they were going to hear about that when we caught up to them—and I was right. When we got to camp, Zopa took Yogi and Yash to the side and spoke to them for a good ten minutes. He never raised his voice, but when they came back they looked like he had whipped them.

"TWO TRUCKLOADS of Chinese soldiers got here today . . ." Josh was talking to a different expedition leader who had just arrived at ABC. ". . . along with six military climbers. The place looks like an army encampment."

"Glad I'm up here," the leader said.

"Well, you're not off the hook. From what I hear they're heading up the mountain tomorrow morning to check everybody's papers. If you don't have your passport, visa, and permit they're going to boot you off the mountain."

"We have them. What's his problem?"

"When the truck that Zopa and my son left on yesterday got to the second checkpoint, Zopa and my son weren't on it. The driver claimed they got on a second truck and went another way."

"I hope your son's okay."

"No worries. Zopa wouldn't let anything happen to him. I'm sure they're well on their way to Nepal by now. I thought I'd just give you a heads-up about what's going on down here."

"Thanks," the other leader said. "What about the Chinese climbers? Are they any good?"

"They're gung ho and well equipped. They pulled them off a high-altitude climb, but I'm not sure where they were. I wouldn't be surprised if they tried for the summit while they're up there. I know I would."

"I hear you. It's going to get crowded at the top."

Zopa and the brothers spread a map out and started talking in Nepalese.

"What's going on?"

"Zopa says we can't stay in any of the camps until we reach Camp Five," Sun-jo explained. "They're picking alternative sites."

I looked at the map. We were just about parallel to Camp Two, but seven or eight miles to the north. It would take us at least another day to pull up even with ABC.

We could be up on the summit in less than a week.

CAMP 3½

ZOPA PUSHED US HARD the next two days. We were out of camp before dawn climbing with headlamps. Yogi and Yash were always long gone before we started out, and we didn't see them until we stopped at the end of the day.

I had no idea where we were, but according to my altimeter watch, we were gaining altitude. (Not that I needed the watch: Every breath was painful now.) At the end of the day it was all Sun-jo and I could do to eat a little food, drink, and then crawl into our bags.

On the third morning I was surprised to open my eyes and see sunlight coming through the blue tent fabric. I looked over at Sun-jo and saw that he was staring at the light, too.

We had barely talked the past few days. No time, no breath.

"How are you doing?" I asked.

"Not well," Sun-jo said.

"You've done okay the last couple of days."

He shook his head. "It has been very hard."

That was an understatement. We had done several technical climbs the past forty-eight hours. It had been some of the most difficult climbing I had ever done.

"Any idea where we are?"

Sun-jo sat up with a groan. "Feels like we're on the summit."

He was impossible! "Okay," I said, "so the weather breaks and we make it to the summit and somehow make it down the south side. How are *you* going to get past the Chinese soldiers on the north side?"

"I'm a Nepalese citizen in Tibet with legal papers. Captain Shek has no grounds to arrest me. You saw what happened the last time he tried. I don't think I will be caught, but if I am, the very worst he can do is deport me, which is what I want, anyway. I'll see both of you on the other side."

"I don't think I can make it to the summit," Sun-jo said. "I had a lot of trouble yesterday."

"I'm afraid I've put you in a terrible situation, Sun-jo," Zopa said. "You will have to make it to the summit now."

I thought about offering to stay with Zopa at Camp Four and help him down the mountain after he got better. But this was clearly not in keeping with my mother's instructions to stay selfish. And I *did* want to get to the summit. The debate was resolved by Zopa.

He gave me a monkish smile. "I don't need your help, Peak. But Sun-jo will."

I just stared at him, relieved I didn't have to make the decision and stunned that he seemed to have read my mind. "How—"

Zopa held up his hand. "Sun-jo will not reach the summit without your help," he said. "I need to rest. And so do both of you. We have a hard climb ahead of us."

SUN-JO TOOK ZOPA'S ADVICE. I tried to sleep but couldn't. I joined Yogi and Yash at the fire. Yogi pulled out an oxygen tank and mask out of his pack. He showed me how to attach

the mask to the regulator, then he held up two fingers, indicating I was to set the dial to two liters per minute. Then, using Yash as a model, he showed me how to put on the mask.

When he finished he took everything apart and had me put it all back together. It wasn't as easy as it looked. I had to pull off my outer mitts, and my fingers went numb in spite of the fact that I was still wearing gloves. This reminded me that I still had JR's little video camera in my pack. I had completely forgotten about it. I needed to start filming our trip. (Which should give you a little idea of how the brain functions, or doesn't function, at high altitudes.)

I managed to get the mask hooked up to the tank, then I put the mask on and tried to adjust the straps for a tight fit over my nose and mouth. The mask was cold, uncomfortable, and a little claustrophobic. Yash had a perfect solution to the discomfort. He turned on the oxygen.

In my entire life I had never felt anything so wonderful. The Os flowed into my body like some kind of magic elixir. For the first time in weeks I felt warm, sharp, and strong. The feeling was short-lived because Yogi turned it off almost immediately. Reluctantly, I took off the mask. The Sherpa brothers were smiling at me. Yogi said something in Nepalese, then held up five fingers.

"Got it," I said. "Not until Camp Five."

Theoretically, you could use Os all the way up the mountain. The problem was you would have to use a half dozen Sherpas to carry enough oxygen tanks to get up the mountain. The tanks didn't last that long.

Yogi and Yash left around noon. A couple of hours later

Zopa came out of his tent looking like a corpse emerging from a tomb. Three mugs of hot tea seemed to revive him . . . a little. I packed his gear, then roused Sun-jo, who looked a lot better after his nap.

We started out for Camp Four. This time Sun-jo and I had to wait for Zopa. About halfway there, he put on an oxygen mask and cranked it up. This certainly put a little more spring in his step. I was envious.

CAMPS FIVE AND SIX

BECAUSE OF OUR LATE START, I thought Camp Four was close, but we didn't get to the dreaded wall leading up to it until well after dark.

"We're climbing the wall at night?" I asked, shocked.

Zopa took off his mask. "It's the only way to get into Camp Four unnoticed. Everyone will be asleep."

They would be in their tents all right—the wind was howling and it hadn't stopped snowing all day. But from our last experience I knew they wouldn't be sleeping. If they were like me when I was up there, they would be lying in their sleeping bags wondering if there was enough air to keep them alive through the night.

The last time we were here it took me over five hours to reach the top and I nearly gave up on the way. The weather was worse now—and it was dark.

Yogi and Yash had thrown a rope over the side for us to use.

"You'll need headlamps," Zopa said.

"Right," I said.

Slide the jummar up the rope, step, breathe, jummar, step, jummar, think, look up, think again, step, rest, rest, rest, hug the wall, pray . . . The same routine. But in a strange way the climb was easier, or at least less scary, with the headlamp. The light kept me focused on the ice and rock in front of me. I had no idea where

the top or bottom was until a light appeared over the edge about ten feet above me. It was Yogi, although it was hard to tell, bundled up like he was. I managed to get to the top without his having to grab me. As I rested on my knees trying to catch my breath and not puke, I looked at my watch. I had climbed the wall in less than five hours this time.

Fifteen minutes later Sun-jo came over the top, looking like he was about to pass out. I shouted in his ear that he had made it up the wall a half hour faster than he had the last time. This seemed to cheer him up. He managed to get to his feet.

Zopa was last. He was in terrible shape. It took all three of us to pull him over the edge, and when we got him there he didn't move. I checked his oxygen tank. It was empty. Yogi hurried off and came back with a fresh tank and Yash. They got the Os flowing and carried Zopa to their tent. After an hour or so he recovered enough to open his eyes and drink something. A few minutes later he asked the brothers if they had heard anything from Josh.

The Chinese soldier climbers had reached ABC that afternoon and were planning on staying there a day or two before climbing to Camp Four. They had checked everyone's papers and searched all the tents. The climbers at ABC said the soldiers were in great shape and had made terrific time. There was no doubt they were going to try for the summit.

This seemed like the worst possible news, but Zopa didn't seem at all disturbed by it.

"You will be a day ahead of them. Tonight and tomorrow you will rest. The following morning, before light, you'll climb to Camp Five."

"What about you?" Sun-jo asked.

"Do you really think they are going to be worried about a sick old monk when they get up here? If they really are such good climbers, the soldiers will all want to try for the summit. Which of them will stay behind to escort the old man down the mountain?" He gave a wheezy laugh. "By the time they get back here I will be gone."

"Why can't we just go up to Camp Five when it gets light?" I asked. "We'll be just that much farther ahead of the soldiers."

"There will be a storm in a few hours," Zopa answered. "Tomorrow morning is your window."

THE STORM HIT US MIDMORNING. If we had left when I wanted we would have been about halfway to Camp Five. And we would have died, along with the three climbers who *did* leave that morning. None of them made it to Camp Five, and nobody could help them. The weather was too severe.

I tried to write in my Moleskine and found that I couldn't concentrate long enough to string more than two or three words together at a time. After a while I gave up and managed to get a little sleep, and so did Sun-jo, mostly because there was nothing else to do but lie in the tent. Zopa didn't want us wandering around camp (not that we had the energy), and the storm was so bad, everyone there was hunkered down waiting for it to stop.

About eight o'clock that night it did, suddenly. One moment the wind and snow were threatening to blow our tent away; the next moment it was perfectly calm. I stuck my head outside the tent, along with everyone else in camp, and saw a perfectly clear sky overhead scattered with bright stars.

Yash left for Camp Five three hours ahead of us to get the

camp ready. Yogi stuck his head into our tent an hour before we were to leave and told us to pack our gear. We weren't taking much with us. Most of what we needed would be waiting for us at Camp Five. Yogi and Yash had hauled it up the last time we were at Camp Four.

Before we took off we checked in with Zopa. He was sitting up drinking a mug of tea. He was off the Os and some of the color had returned to his face, but he still looked pretty weak.

"Speed is everything now. If you stay in the death zone too long you will die. If you don't reach the summit by one thirty-five P.M. the day you leave Camp Six, I have asked Yogi and Yash to turn you around. It is better to get caught by the Chinese than it is to die on the mountain."

This seemed to contradict his plan to get Sun-jo over the top to safety, but he was right. From Camp Six you have to reach the summit and return in about eighteen hours. Oxygen or not, there was a limit to how long you could survive above Camp Six. If we made the summit we would have to reach the top camp on the other side in eighteen hours.

"Have Yogi and Yash been to the summit?" I asked. It had been a question on my mind since Zopa had announced he wasn't taking us there himself.

"Of course," Zopa said. "Three times."

"Good," I said. "Does Josh know you're not coming with us?"

Zopa shook his head, then gave us a blessing and said, "I'll see you both in Kathmandu. Now go."

It was clear and bitterly cold as we left the dark camp and started up the north ridge to the summit. It was hard to keep

my excitement in check. A night at Camp Five, a night at Camp Six, then the top of the world.

IT WAS MORE OF A FORCED MARCH to Camp Five than a climb. We hooked on to a series of fixed ropes. Yogi set the pace. I tried a regime of twelve steps, a minute of gasping to recover, then another twelve steps. After an hour it was down to about eight steps, and I'm not sure how many minutes to recover. It was hard to believe that some climbers had made it to the summit without any supplemental Os at all. Josh was one of them, although I suspected on this trip he would be sucking down the Os, if for no other reason than to stay sharp so he didn't lose one of his clients.

The sun came up and gave us the best view of Everest's pyramidal summit yet. It was enormous. Coming off the top was a disk of ice crystals against the blue sky. The sight inspired my sluggish brain to remember the camera, which I had put in my pocket before we left Camp Four. I shouted ahead at Sun-jo to wait up, which he was more than happy to do. When I got to him I took off my outer mittens, pushed the record button, and tried to imitate JR as best as I could.

"What are you feeling right now?" I asked. "You're less than a mile from the highest point on earth." I had him framed perfectly against the summit.

"Frightened," Sun-jo said. "And hopeful. And worried about my grandfather. I had no idea it would be this hard."

That's about all my unmittened fingers could take.

"I can film you now if you like," Sun-jo offered.

"Nah, that's all right. We have to get moving."

About half an hour later we saw our first corpse. Sun-jo

saw it first. I walked up to him as he was staring down at it. Yogi had breezed by as if he hadn't noticed but I bet he had. It was a woman. About fifty feet away was another corpse but I couldn't tell what it was because it was lying facedown.

I had never seen a dead person, let alone a frozen dead person. She looked more like a wax figure than a former human being, and in a way this was even more disturbing to me. She had been there a while if her shredded clothes were any indication. It looked like she had died sitting up and had fallen over on her side. She was only a few hours from her tent at Camp Four. I'm not sure how long we stood there staring, and we would have stood there a lot longer if Yogi hadn't shouted at us to hurry up. After five more corpses I stopped looking.

At noon we came to a steeper part of the north ridge. It was much colder. The fixed ropes were frozen and Sherpas had chipped shallow steps into the ice to make it easier to climb.

Yogi waited for us to catch up to him. He pointed to the tents down at Camp Four, then up to tents at Camp Five and said something in Nepalese.

"Halfway," Sun-jo translated. "Six hours to go."

To make that six hours worse, the wind picked up. We had to bend over as we climbed so we weren't blown off the ridge. My initial excitement was long gone. I think the only thing that kept me going were the Os waiting for me up ahead. I don't know what kept Sun-jo going. Probably the Chinese climbers behind him and freedom ahead.

We got to Camp Five a little before seven: 25,196 feet. It seemed impossible that we could ever go any farther. It was

the end of the world. And it really wasn't a camp. It was a series of cleared platforms stretching up the north ridge for at least a quarter of a mile, with absolutely no shelter from the howling wind. The big platforms could hold five or six tents, the small platforms one or two. Several of the platforms had tents on them, but it was hard to say how many people were up there. I suspected most of the tents were waiting for climbers coming up from Camp Four, or down from Camp Six after their summit attempt.

Our tiny rubble pile was just big enough for two tents pitched on the garbage of the former occupants. Yash had water boiling for tea, but what I was interested in was the mask strapped to his face pumping Os into his lungs. He was moving twice as fast as we were.

I grabbed a tank from the pile, pulled the mask out of my pack, hooked it up, and stuck my face in it. The feeling I had with the first lungful of oxygen is indescribable. *Bliss* is about as close as I can come, but it was way beyond that.

Yash helped Sun-jo set up his rig, and when he got it on we looked at each other and started laughing.

We were going to live. We might even make it to the summit.

"THE CHINESE ARE HEADING UP to Camp Four tomorrow," one of the climbers from ABC told Josh.

"You're kidding!" Josh said. "What about acclimatization?"

"These guys are acclimated. One of our climbers speaks a little Chinese. They told her they were up on K2 when they were ordered to come here. They haven't said it, but I don't

think they're coming back down until they take a shot at the summit. They're like climbing machines. When are you heading up?"

"The day after tomorrow if the weather's good," Josh answered. "I was going to hold off a little longer, but I took my people out for a climb today and they all did pretty well. The virus seems to have run its course."

"We're heading up to Camp Four in the morning. We'll see you on the way back down."

"Good luck."

"Out."

This was probably the last transmission we would hear. I wondered if Josh would be worried when he didn't pass me on his way up.

I asked Sun-jo how he was doing.

"The oxygen helps, but I'm still concerned. I had a lot of trouble today."

"You're not the only one. It's hard up here."

"I have to make it," he said. "For my sisters and my mother."

Those were great reasons to risk your life, I thought. But why was *I* doing it? For Josh's business? For my ego?

Now that my brain had oxygen I found myself really missing the two Peas, my mom, and even Rolf. This got me to thinking about the corpses we saw on the way up here. Who had they left behind? These were very uncomfortable questions to fall asleep on.

THE OXYGEN WAS WONDERFUL, but the masks were a pain in the butt to sleep in. It was hard to find a position where the straps didn't dig into your face. Also, the exhaust system

stank. Small pools of icy slime collected in the mouthpiece valve. When I moved my head slushy spit ran down my neck. Because of this, Sun-jo and I were up early.

We checked and rechecked our gear. Leaving something behind like a spare headlamp battery or a glove could be a death sentence.

Yogi took the lead this time, leaving Yash to take us up to Camp Six. Our first obstacle was a steep snowfield that we had to four-point with ice axes and crampons. Stupidly, I assumed that now that we were on Os, it would be like climbing at sea level. Nothing could be further from the truth.

By the time we reached the top of the snowfield my lungs were screaming for air. I thought there was something the matter with my mask or the tank had run out of oxygen, but everything was working perfectly. The two liters of oxygen didn't simulate sea level; it simply allowed me to stay alive above 25,000 feet. And there was a huge difference between lying in a tent doing virtually nothing and climbing a steep snowfield on all fours. I took the little camera out and filmed Sun-jo crabbing his way up to me. By the expression on his face I could see he was having the same O revelation I'd just had.

"I don't think I can make it." He gasped. "I'm serious, Peak; this is too much."

"We just pushed it too hard going up the field," I said with a confidence I didn't feel. "We'll just have to pace ourselves."

He nodded, but there was fear in his eyes. I knew exactly how he felt. We had passed another three or four corpses on the way up.

A few hours later I stopped to rest and looked at my altimeter watch. We had just passed 26,000 feet and were

officially in the death zone. Every minute from now on we were dying a little.

We stumbled into Camp Six like three zombies. Yogi had the tents set up, but he didn't look much better than we did. He told Sun-jo to get our stove going to boil snow and drink as much water as we could. The very idea of drinking or eating anything made my stomach lurch.

I turned on the video camera and shot Sun-jo lighting the stove, or trying to light the stove. It must have taken him fifty strokes to get the cigarette lighter going in the thin air. When it finally ignited his thumb was bleeding like he had sliced it open with a knife.

We gaged down as much water and food as we could, then wrapped up in our sleeping bags to wait. Sleep was out of the question.

The inside of the tent was filled with a thin layer of frost from our breath. Every time one of us moved, the freezing crystals fell on our faces.

They say that when you die your life flashes before your eyes. Mine was passing before my eyes in slow motion like a horror movie. I think it was the corpses that did it. I thought of Mom falling off that wall, the boy I'd never met falling off the Flatiron Building, Sun-jo hanging by a thread on that ice wall, and Sun-jo's father saving my father then dying of heart failure. . . .

The only thing that stopped the depressing playback was the tent flap opening and the appearance of Yogi's masked face.

"We go," he said.

Well, not quite. It was more like: "We get ready to go." They made us drink more water, then told us to do our

toilet, which is a lot easier said than done at thirty degrees below zero. Two hours later we were ready.

We left for the summit of Mount Everest.

I looked at my watch. It was 1:35 A.M. We had twelve hours to get there.

TOP OF THE WORLD

OUTSIDE CAMP SIX we picked our way across two snowfields. Yash led the way with Yogi sticking close to us. On the far side of the second field we started to encounter bare rock. I kept my eyes on Yash's headlamp. He was probably 150 yards ahead of us. Breathing was difficult and it was freezing out, but I started to think this might not be as bad as I thought. It was certainly no worse than what we had already been through.

Then to my utter shock, Yash's headlamp started to rise from the ground. I blinked several times, thinking it was some kind of optical illusion. It wasn't. He was climbing a steep wall.

"Yellow Band!" Yogi shouted above the howling wind. "Careful!"

We started up. Large chunks of yellowish sandstone broke off with almost every handhold, and the crampons strapped on our boots were worse than useless. They're made for ice, not rock, but there wasn't time to take them off. At Base Camp it would take three minutes to shuck the crampons. Up here in the thin air, it might take half an hour or longer. We didn't have a half hour to spare. And we would have to put them back on the next time we came across ice or snow, which takes longer than taking them off.

There were ropes, but most of them were rotten, flapping

uselessly in the wind. About an hour into the climb I grabbed one to help me over a difficult pitch and it popped loose from its anchor. I barely caught myself before I keeled over backward. I didn't touch another rope on the way up.

There were three steps leading to the summit and this had to be the first. But if that was the case, why had Yash called it the Yellow Band? *Must be the Sherpa nickname for it*, I thought.

Five hours later I found out I was wrong.

We got to the top just as the sun was coming up and there it was: the ridge. It looked like a gigantic dragon's tail with switchbacks and scales and complex rocky steps. I counted the so-called steps. One . . . two . . . crap . . . three. The Yellow Band was the Yellow Band. The first step was yet to come.

Yash and Sun-jo caught up to me a few minutes later. I taped them resting with their hands on their knees, then swung the camera around to the summit. Yash pointed to his watch and started toward the base of the first step.

Yogi was sitting on a rock waiting for us. He checked our oxygen tanks, made us drink something, then pointed up.

The first step was about sixty-five feet. It was 7:00 A.M. and minus thirty-five degrees out. Zopa was right about the weather again. There wasn't a cloud in the sky, but that could change in a matter of minutes.

The first ten feet led up a crack on the left side of the cliff. Next came a traverse across an unstable ledge, made much harder by our weakened legs. (Mine were shaking almost uncontrollably the entire traverse.) The final part of the climb was a wild scramble between two boulders.

We got to the top of the first step at 8:30 A.M.

The second step was twice as steep and twice as high as

the first. Before we attempted it, Yogi changed all of our oxygen tanks. Both Sun-jo and I nearly passed out while we waited for him to reconnect the precious Os.

There were aluminum ladders attached (kind of) to the wall of the first section. They moved and twisted under our weight and made a terrible scraping noise against the rock. Climbing the slippery rungs wasn't made any easier by wearing crampons. It was like trying to climb a ladder with ice skates. I was delighted to get off the ladders, but the final move to the top was much worse. It was a tension traverse where you could only use your arms, then swing up to the top by a bunch of old ropes tied to a sling. I wouldn't have thought it possible, but I watched Yogi do it without a hitch. Sun-jo was right behind me. He looked as sick about the move as I did.

I followed Yogi's route move for move, but when I grabbed the rope my crampon slipped and I found myself dangling by the rope like a dead fish with absolutely no momentum to get me to the top of the step. In addition to this I had gotten twisted around with my back to the wall.

I glanced over at Sun-jo and Yash. They stared back at me helplessly. There was nothing they could do. I looked up. Yogi was leaning over the ledge trying to reach the sling so he could pull me up. He wasn't even close. We hadn't brought any rope with us. The extra weight would slow us down and that could kill us.

I knew the longer I hung there the more fatigued my arms would become. If I waited too long for a solution, I wouldn't have the strength to execute it. I had to move. Now!

I flipped back around, smashing my face into the wall, then drove the front spikes of my crampons into the hard

rock. One of them stuck, and putting weight on that leg, I was able to relieve the pressure on my arms. Holding as tight as I could with my left hand, I let my right hand go. I pulled off the outer mitten with my teeth and let it drop, then shook the arm out. (I had another pair of mittens in my pack.) I repeated the procedure with my left arm. I was going to need all the strength I could in my arms for the next move. And I hoped Yogi was paying close attention above because I was going to need his help.

I walked up the wall with my crampons until I was in a < position, then I basically stood up, hoping the crampons held. They did. At the last second I let go of the rope with my left hand, hoping I could stretch it high enough for Yogi to grab. He grabbed it, but he was still going to need help getting me up. He had taken off his outer mitts, too, and had me pretty solidly. I let my right hand go and flailed away blindly for a handhold. I found a crack, just big enough to dig the very tips of my sore fingers into. I pulled up with all the strength I had. If it didn't work, Yogi was going to have to let me drop. When I was as high as I thought I could go I brought my right knee up to my chest and tried to get my foot into the sling. I barely snagged it, but it was enough. All I had to do now was stand up and I would be within inches of the top.

Yogi dragged me over the edge and he and I lay there on our backs gasping for breath. He reached over and cranked my tank up to four and I did the same for him. Even with the extra oxygen it took us a good five minutes to catch our breath.

I wondered what was going through Sun-jo's mind after he saw that. Apparently, he had learned by my mistake

because a few minutes later he swung up over the edge like a spider monkey. Yash was right behind him.

They let me rest for another fifteen minutes. I needed it. Yogi didn't turn my oxygen down until we were ready to leave. I needed that, too.

The third step was the easiest of the three for me, even though it came higher in the climb. Compared to what I had just been through, it was a breeze.

When we got to the top we saw another corpse. He was lying on his back with one arm splayed out and the other hand buried in the pocket of his down parka. The corpse looked pretty fresh. It might have been one of the German climbers who had died when we were at ABC. There was no sign of the other climber he had been with. I wondered if he had died on the way up to the summit, or the way down. I wondered how many people were waiting for him to come home. *No one climbs a mountain thinking they're not coming back down.* I looked away from the dead climber, trying to shut out Mom's warning.

Beyond the corpse lay the summit pyramid's ice field, then the summit ridge.

Yogi pointed at his watch, then held up two fingers. Two hours left.

We clipped on to ropes and started across the ice field. I don't know about Sun-jo, but this is when I shifted into summit fever. At this point I should have been completely spent, but instead I was totally juiced. Mom's warning disappeared into thin air. Poof! Nothing was going to stop me from getting to the top.

The snowfield became steeper, curving around into what I thought would be the summit, but instead we ran into fresh

avalanche debris. Some of the chunks were as big as school buses. I swore. To come all this way only to be stopped by an avalanche? It would take us hours, if not days, to scramble over the debris.

Yogi pointed at the debris and shook his head.

No kidding, I thought, staring at the debris bitterly. He yanked on my sleeve. I thought he was telling me that we had to go back now. That it was over. I was going to shout that we had to try for Sun-jo's sake, even though I knew it was hopeless.

But Yogi wasn't trying to turn me around. He was pointing at another rock cliff flanking the final buttress. The debris-filled ice field was not the route to the summit.

Once again we had to traverse a narrow ledge along the face, clipping on to a rope that looked like it had been there for three hundred years. About a hundred and fifty feet along the ledge we ran into an outcropping that took a lot of finesse, and time, to get around. At the end of the traverse the route stepped up in a series of small ledges, which took us about twenty minutes to climb. We emerged onto the upper slope of the summit pyramid ice field past all the avalanche debris.

The wind was really blowing now. Yash led us to the shelter of an outcrop, where we rested for a few minutes before our final push. Yogi pointed at his watch again and stood. I took up the rear and recorded him, Sun-jo, and Yash heading for what I thought was the summit. It wasn't. When we reached the top of the ice field the real summit was revealed. The colorful prayer flags on the summit pole were fluttering in the wind 650 feet away.

We stopped again to rest, but I cut mine short.

"I'm pushing ahead!" I shouted above the deafening wind. "I'll film you coming up!" This wasn't exactly the truth. The real reason was that I couldn't wait to get to the top.

600 feet...

Two football fields. At nearly 29,000 feet it felt more like twenty miles.

Three steps... rest... three steps... rest... two steps... rest...

I discovered it was best to avoid looking up at the summit. Every time I peeked it appeared farther away, as if I were walking backward. Sun-jo, Yash, and Yogi were about a hundred feet behind me moving at the same snail's pace. I shot them for a couple minutes, then started out again.

100 feet...

90 feet...

I stopped and checked my Os, thinking the tank must be empty. It was half full, hissing out two liters per minute, which didn't seem nearly enough to keep me alive.

80 feet...

50 feet...

I looked at my watch. 1:09 P.M. Twenty-six minutes to turnaround time. I stopped to rest. I was standing at 29,003 feet, higher than any other mountain on earth: 32 feet to go.

It was cold and windy, but the weather was rarely better at this altitude. I could see for hundreds of miles in every direction. "Beautiful" doesn't describe the view, nor does "majestic." The closest word I could think of was "divine," but even that fell short of what it was like.

Sun-jo had made up some time. He was less than twenty feet away from me. Yogi and Yash were walking on either side of him. I wanted to turn around and finish the climb, but in-

stead I took out the camera and recorded my team coming up. I could see now that Sun-jo was struggling and Yash and Yogi were actually helping him along. It was 1:19 by the time they reached me. Sun-jo fell down on his knees and was having difficulty breathing. I checked his oxygen tank gauge and saw they had already cranked it up to four liters per minute.

I gave him some time to rest, then squatted next to him. "You can do this, Sun-jo. It's only about thirty feet away. Look!" I pointed to the ridge pole.

He gazed up at the colorful prayer flags snapping in the wind and gave a dull nod, but he didn't move.

"After you touch the pole," I said, "it's all downhill."

Sun-jo shook his head. "I don't think I can do it."

"You have to do it! For your sisters. For yourself."

He continued to shake his head. I looked at Yogi and Yash. They were in as bad a shape as Sun-jo. Getting Sun-jo this far had nearly done them in. I looked at my watch. Twelve minutes to turnaround time. Even if we left right that second, I wasn't sure we would make the summit by 1:35.

"You go," Sun-jo said weakly. "I'll start back down."

"You can't go down the north side. The Chinese are waiting for you."

"I will get around them."

He and I both knew this wasn't true. I looked down the mountain. Two other climbing parties had topped the third step and were winding their way up the dragon's tail. They must have gotten a late start or had run into problems along the way. If the weather held they might be okay.

You can never tell who the mountain will allow and who it will not. . . . Sun-jo will not reach the summit without your help. . . .