

## *Into Thin Air* by Jon Krakauer

Straddling the top of the world, one foot in Tibet and the other in Nepal, I cleared the ice from my oxygen mask, hunched a shoulder against the wind, and stared absently at the vast sweep of earth below. I understood on some dim, detached level that it was a spectacular sight. I'd been fantasizing about this moment, and the release of emotion that would accompany it, for many months. But now that I was finally here, standing on the summit of Mount Everest, I just couldn't summon the energy to care.

It was the afternoon of May 10. I hadn't slept in 57 hours. The only food I'd been able to force down over the preceding three days was a bowl of Ramen soup and a handful of peanut M&M's. Weeks of violent coughing had left me with two separated ribs, making it excruciatingly painful to breathe. Twenty-nine thousand twenty-eight feet up in the troposphere, there was so little oxygen reaching my brain that my mental capacity was that of a slow child. Under the circumstances, I was incapable of feeling much of anything except cold and tired.

I'd arrived on the summit a few minutes after Anatoli Boukreev, a Russian guide with an American expedition, and just ahead of Andy Harris, a guide with the New Zealand-based commercial team that I was a part of and someone with whom I'd grown to be friends during the last six weeks. I snapped four quick photos of Harris and Boukreev striking summit poses, and then turned and started down. My watch read 1:17 P.M. All told, I'd spent less than five minutes on the roof of the world.

After a few steps, I paused to take another photo, this one looking down the Southeast Ridge, the route we had ascended. Training my lens on a pair of climbers approaching the summit, I saw something that until that moment had escaped my attention. To the south, where the sky had been perfectly clear just an hour earlier, a blanket of clouds now hid Pumori, Ama Dablam, and the other lesser peaks surrounding Everest.

Days later—after six bodies had been found, after a search for two others had been abandoned, after surgeons had amputated the gangrenous right hand of my teammate Beck Weathers—people would ask why, if the weather had begun to deteriorate, had climbers on the upper mountain not heeded the signs? Why did veteran Himalayan guides keep moving upward, leading a gaggle of amateurs, each of whom had paid as much as \$65,000 to be ushered safely up Everest, into an apparent death trap?

Nobody can speak for the leaders of the two guided groups involved, for both men are now dead. But I can attest that nothing I saw early on the afternoon of May 10 suggested that a murderous storm was about to bear down on us. To my oxygen-depleted mind, the clouds drifting up the grand valley of ice known as the Western Cwm looked innocuous, wispy, insubstantial. Gleaming in the brilliant midday sun, they appeared no different than the harmless puffs of convection condensation that rose from the valley almost daily. As I began my descent, I was indeed anxious, but my concern had little to do with the weather. A check of the gauge on my oxygen tank had revealed that it was almost empty. I needed to get down, fast.

The uppermost shank of the Southeast Ridge is a slender, heavily corniced fin of rock and wind-scoured snow that snakes for a quarter-mile toward a secondary pinnacle known as the South Summit. Negotiating the serrated ridge presents few great technical hurdles, but the route is dreadfully exposed. After 15 minutes of cautious shuffling over a 7,000-foot abyss, I arrived at the notorious Hillary Step, a

pronounced notch in the ridge named after Sir Edmund Hillary, the first Westerner to climb the mountain, and a spot that does require a fair amount of technical manoeuvring. As I clipped into a fixed rope and prepared to rappel over the lip, I was greeted by an alarming sight.

Thirty feet below, some 20 people were queued up at the base of the Step, and three climbers were hauling themselves up the rope that I was attempting to descend. I had no choice but to unclip from the line and step aside.

The traffic jam comprised climbers from three separate expeditions: the team I belonged to, a group of paying clients under the leadership of the celebrated New Zealand guide Rob Hall; another guided party headed by American Scott Fischer; and a non-guided team from Taiwan. Moving at the snail's pace that is the norm above 8,000 meters, the throng laboured up the Hillary Step one by one, while I nervously bided my time.

Harris, who left the summit shortly after I did, soon pulled up behind me. Wanting to conserve whatever oxygen remained in my tank, I asked him to reach inside my backpack and turn off the valve on my regulator, which he did. For the next ten minutes I felt surprisingly good. My head cleared. I actually seemed less tired than with the gas turned on. Then, abruptly, I felt like I was suffocating. My vision dimmed and my head began to spin. I was on the brink of losing consciousness.

Instead of turning my oxygen off, Harris, in his hypoxically impaired state, had mistakenly cranked the valve open to full flow, draining the tank. I'd just squandered the last of my gas going nowhere. There was another tank waiting for me at the South Summit, 250 feet below, but to get there I would have to descend the most exposed terrain on the entire route without benefit of supplemental oxygen.

But first I had to wait for the crowd to thin. I removed my now useless mask, planted my ice axe into the mountain's frozen hide, and hunkered on the ridge crest. As I exchanged banal congratulations with the climbers filing past, inwardly I was frantic: "Hurry it up, hurry it up!" I silently pleaded. "While you guys are screwing around here, I'm losing brain cells by the millions!"

Most of the passing crowd belonged to Fischer's group, but near the back of the parade two of my teammates eventually appeared: Hall and Yasuko Namba. Girlish and reserved, the 47-year-old Namba was 40 minutes away from becoming the oldest woman to climb Everest and the second Japanese woman to reach the highest point on each continent, the so-called Seven Summits.

Later still, Doug Hansen—another member of our expedition, a postal worker from Seattle who had become my closest friend on the mountain—arrived atop the Step. "It's in the bag!" I yelled over the wind, trying to sound more upbeat than I felt. Plainly exhausted, Doug mumbled something from behind his oxygen mask that I didn't catch, shook my hand weakly, and continued plodding upward.

The last climber up the rope was Fischer, whom I knew casually from Seattle, where we both lived. His strength and drive were legendary—in 1994 he'd climbed Everest without using bottled oxygen—so I was surprised at how slowly he was moving and how hammered he looked when he pulled his mask aside to say hello. "Bruuuuuuce!" he wheezed with forced cheer, employing his trademark, fratboyish greeting. When I asked how he was doing, Fischer insisted he was feeling fine: "Just dragging ass a little today for some reason. No big deal." With the Hillary Step finally clear, I clipped into the strand of orange rope, swung quickly around Fischer as he slumped over his

ice axe, and rappelled over the edge.

It was after 2:30 when I made it down to the South Summit. By now tendrils of mist were wrapping across the top of 27,890-foot Lhotse and lapping at Everest's summit pyramid. No longer did the weather look so benign. I grabbed a fresh oxygen cylinder, jammed it onto my regulator, and hurried down into the gathering cloud. Moments after I dropped below the South Summit, it began to snow lightly and the visibility went to hell.

Four hundred vertical feet above, where the summit was still washed in bright sunlight under an immaculate cobalt sky, my compadres were dallying, memorializing their arrival at the apex of the planet with photos and high-fives-and using up precious ticks of the clock. None of them imagined that a horrible ordeal was drawing nigh. None of them suspected that by the end of that long day, every minute would matter.

In May of 1963, when I was nine years old, Tom Hornbein and Willi Unsoeld made the first ascent of Everest's daunting West Ridge, one of the great feats in the annals of mountaineering. Late in the day on their summit push, they climbed a stratum of steep, crumbly limestone, the infamous Yellow Band—that they didn't think they'd be able to descend. Their best shot for getting off the mountain alive, they reckoned, was to go over the top and down the Southeast Ridge, an extremely audacious plan, given the late hour and the unknown terrain. Reaching the summit at sunset, they were forced to spend the night in the open above 28,000 feet—at the time, the highest bivouac in history—and to descend the Southeast Ridge the next morning. That night cost Unsoeld his toes, but the two survived to tell their tale.

Unsoeld, who hailed from my hometown in Oregon, was a close friend of my father's. I climbed my first mountain in the company of my dad, Unsoeld, and his oldest son, Regon, a few months before Unsoeld departed for Nepal. Not surprisingly, accounts of the 1963 Everest epic resonated loud and long in my preadolescent imagination. While my friends idolized John Glenn, Sandy Koufax, and Johnny Unitas, my heroes were Hornbein and Unsoeld.

Secretly, I dreamed of climbing Everest myself one day; for more than a decade it remained a burning ambition. It wasn't until my mid-twenties that I abandoned the dream as a preposterous boyhood fantasy. Soon thereafter I began to look down my nose at the world's tallest mountain. It had become fashionable among alpine cognoscenti to denigrate Everest as a "slag heap," a peak lacking sufficient technical challenge or aesthetic appeal to be a worthy objective for a "serious" climber, which I desperately aspired to be.

Such snobbery was rooted in the fact that by the early 1980s, Everest's easiest line—the South Col/Southeast Ridge, or the so-called Yak Route—had been climbed more than a hundred times. Then, in 1985, the floodgates were flung wide open when Dick Bass, a wealthy 55-year-old Texan with limited climbing experience, was ushered to the top of Everest by an extraordinary young climber named David Breashears. In bagging Everest, Bass became the first person to ascend all of the so-called Seven Summits, a feat that earned him worldwide renown and spurred a swarm of other amateur climbers to follow in his guided bootprints.

"To aging Walter Mitty types like myself, Dick Bass was an inspiration," Seaborn Beck Weathers explained during the trek to Everest Base Camp last April. A 49-year-old Dallas pathologist, Weathers was one of eight paying clients on my expedition. "Bass showed that Everest was within the realm of possibility for regular guys.

Assuming you're reasonably fit and have some disposable income, I think the biggest obstacle is probably taking time off from your job and leaving your family for two months."

For a great many climbers, the record shows, stealing time away from the daily grind has not been an insurmountable obstacle, nor has the hefty outlay of cash. Over the past half-decade, the traffic on all of the Seven Summits, and especially Everest, has grown at an astonishing rate. And to meet demand, the number of commercial enterprises peddling guided ascents of these mountains has multiplied correspondingly. In the spring of 1996, 30 separate expeditions were on the flanks of Everest, at least eight of them organized as moneymaking ventures.

Even before last season's calamitous outcome, the proliferation of commercial expeditions was a touchy issue. Traditionalists were offended that the world's highest summit was being sold to rich parvenus who, if denied the services of guides, would have difficulty making it to the top of a peak as modest as Mount Rainier. Everest, the purists sniffed, had been debased and profaned.

Such critics also point out that, thanks to the commercialization of Everest, the once hallowed peak has now even been dragged into the swamp of American jurisprudence. Having paid princely sums to be escorted up Everest, some climbers have then sued their guides after the summit eluded them. "Occasionally you'll get a client who thinks he's bought a guaranteed ticket to the summit," laments Peter Athans, a highly respected guide who's made 11 trips to Everest and reached the top four times. "Some people don't understand that an Everest expedition can't be run like a Swiss train."

Sadly, not every Everest lawsuit is unwarranted. Inept or disreputable companies have on more than one occasion failed to deliver crucial logistical support—oxygen, for instance—as promised. On some expeditions guides have gone to the summit without any of their clients, prompting the bitter clients to conclude that they were brought along simply to pick up the tab. In 1995, the leader of one commercial expedition absconded with tens of thousands of dollars of his clients' money before the trip even got off the ground.

To a certain degree, climbers shopping for an Everest expedition get what they pay for. Expeditions on the northern, Tibetan side of the mountain are considerably cheaper—the going rate there is \$20,000 to \$40,000 per person—than those on the south, in part because China charges much less for climbing permits than does Nepal. But there's a trade-off: Until 1995, no guided client had ever reached the summit from Tibet.

This year, Hall charged \$65,000 a head, not including airfare or personal equipment, to take people up the South Col/Southeast Ridge route. Although no commercial guide service charged more, Hall, a lanky 35-year-old with a biting Kiwi wit, had no difficulty booking clients, thanks to his phenomenal success rate: He'd put 39 climbers on the summit between 1990 and 1995, which meant that he was responsible for three more ascents than had been made in the first 20 years after Hillary's inaugural climb. Despite the disdain I'd expressed for Everest over the years, when the call came to join Hall's expedition, I said yes without even hesitating to catch my breath. Boyhood dreams die hard, I discovered, and good sense be damned.

On April 10, after ten days of hiking through the steep, walled canyons and rhododendron forests of northern Nepal, I walked into Everest Base Camp. My

altimeter read 17,600 feet.

Situated at the entrance to a magnificent natural amphitheatre formed by Everest and its two sisters, Lhotse and Nuptse, was a small city of tents sheltering 240 climbers and Sherpas from 14 expeditions, all of it sprawled across a bend in the Khumbu Glacier. The escarpments above camp were draped with hanging glaciers, from which calved immense serac avalanches that thundered down at all hours of the day and night. Hard to the east, pinched between the Nuptse wall and the West Shoulder of Everest, the Khumbu Icefall spilled to within a quarter-mile of the tents in a chaos of pale blue shards.

In stark contrast to the harsh qualities of the environment stood our campsite and all its creature comforts, including a 19-person staff. Our mess tent, a cavernous canvas structure, was wired with a stereo system and solar-powered electric lights; an adjacent communications tent housed a satellite phone and fax. There was a hot shower. A cook boy came to each client's tent in the mornings to serve us steaming mugs of tea in our sleeping bags. Fresh bread and vegetables arrived every few days on the backs of yaks.

In many ways, Rob Hall's Adventure Consultants site served as a sort of town hall for Base Camp, largely because nobody on the mountain was more respected than Hall, who was on Everest for his eighth time. Whenever there was a problem—a labour dispute with the Sherpas, a medical emergency, a critical decision about climbing strategy—people came to him for advice. And Hall, always generous, dispensed his accumulated wisdom freely to the very rivals who were competing with him for clients, most notably Fischer.

Fischer's Mountain Madness camp, distinguished by a huge Starbucks Coffee banner that hung from a chunk of granite, was a mere five minutes' walk down the glacier. Fischer and Hall were competitors, but they were also friends, and there was a good deal of socializing between the two teams. His mess tent wasn't as well appointed as ours, but Fischer was always quick to offer a cup of fresh-brewed coffee to any climber or trekker who poked a head inside the door.

The 40-year-old Fischer was a strapping, gregarious man with a blond ponytail and manic energy. He'd grown up in New Jersey and had fallen in love with climbing after taking a NOLS course as a 14-year-old. In his formative years, during which he became known for a damn-the-torpedoes style, he'd survived a number of climbing accidents, including twice cratering into the ground from a height of more than 70 feet. Fischer's infectious, seat-of-the-pants approach to his own life was reflected in his improvisational approach to guiding Everest. In striking contrast to Hall—who insisted that his clients climb as a group at all times, under the close watch of his guides—Fischer encouraged his clients to be independent, to move at their own pace, to go wherever they wanted, whenever they wanted.

Both men were under considerable pressure this season. The previous year, Hall had for the first time failed to get anybody to the top. Another dry spell would be very bad for business. Meanwhile Fischer, who had climbed the peak without oxygen but had never guided the mountain, was still trying to get established in the Everest business. He needed to get clients to the summit, especially a high-profile one like Sandy Hill Pittman, the Manhattan boulevardier-cum-writer who was filing daily diaries on an NBC World Wide Web site.

Despite the many trappings of civilization at Base Camp, there was no forgetting that we were more than three miles above sea level. Walking to the mess tent at

mealtime left me wheezing to catch my breath. If I sat up too quickly, my head reeled and vertigo set in. I developed a dry, hacking cough that would steadily worsen over the next six weeks. Cuts and scrapes refused to heal. I was rarely hungry, a sign that my oxygen-deprived stomach had shut down and my body had begun to consume itself for sustenance. My arms and legs gradually began to wither to toothpicks, and by expedition's end I would weigh 25 pounds less than when I left Seattle.

Some of my teammates fared even worse than I in the meagre air. At least half of them suffered from various intestinal ailments that kept them racing to the latrine. Hansen, 46, who'd paid for the expedition by working at a Seattle-area post office by night and on construction jobs by day, was plagued by an unceasing headache for most of his first week at Base Camp. It felt, as he put it, "like somebody's driven a nail between my eyes." This was Hansen's second time on Everest with Hall. The year before, he'd been forced to turn around 330 vertical feet below the summit because of deep snow and the late hour. "The summit looked sooooo close," Hansen recalled with a painful laugh. "Believe me, there hasn't been a day since that I haven't thought about it." Hansen had been talked into returning this year by Hall, who felt sorry that Hansen had been denied the summit and who had significantly discounted Hansen's fee to entice him to give it another try.

A rail-thin man with a leathery, prematurely furrowed face, Hansen was a single father who spent a lot of time in Base Camp writing faxes to his two kids, ages 19 and 27, and to an elementary school in Kent, Washington, that had sold T-shirts to help fund his climb. Hansen bunked in the tent next to mine, and every time a fax would arrive from his daughter, Angie, he'd read it to me, beaming. "Jeez," he'd announce, "how do you suppose a screw-up like me could have raised such a great kid?"

As a newcomer to altitude—I'd never been above 17,000 feet—I brooded about how I'd perform higher on the mountain, especially in the so-called Death Zone above 25,000 feet. I'd done some fairly extreme climbs over the years in Alaska, Patagonia, Canada, and the Alps. I'd logged considerably more time on technical rock and ice than most of the other clients and many of the guides. But technical expertise counted for very little on Everest, and I'd spent less time at high altitude—none, to be precise—than virtually every other climber here. By any rational assessment, I was singularly unqualified to attempt the highest mountain in the world.

This didn't seem to worry Hall. After seven Everest expeditions he'd fine-tuned a remarkably effective method of acclimatization. In the next six weeks, we would make three trips above Base Camp, climbing about 2,000 feet higher each time. After that, he insisted, our bodies would be sufficiently adapted to the altitude to permit safe passage to the 29,028-foot summit. "It's worked 39 times so far, pal," Hall assured me with a wry grin.

Three days after our arrival in Base Camp, we headed out on our first acclimatization sortie, a one-day round-trip to Camp One, perched at the upper lip of the Icefall, 2,000 vertical feet above. No part of the South Col route is more feared than the Icefall, a slowly moving jumble of huge, unstable ice blocks: We were all well aware that it had already killed 19 climbers. As I strapped on my crampons in the frigid predawn gloom, I winced with each creak and rumble from the glacier's shifting depths.

Long before we'd even got to Base Camp, our trail had been blazed by Sherpas, who had fixed more than a mile of rope and installed about 60 aluminium ladders over the crevasses that crisscross the shattered glacier. As we shuffled forth, three-quarters

of the way to Camp One, Hall remarked glibly that the Icefall was in better shape than he'd ever seen it: "The route's like a bloody freeway this season."

But only slightly higher, at about 19,000 feet, the fixed ropes led us beneath and then over a 12-story chunk of ice that leaned precariously off kilter. I hurried to get out from beneath its wobbly tonnage and reach its crest, but my fastest pace was no better than a crawl. Every four or five steps I'd stop, lean against the rope, and suck desperately at the thin, bitter air, searing my lungs.

We reached the end of the icefall about four hours after setting out, but the relative safety of Camp One didn't supply much peace of mind: I couldn't stop thinking about the ominously tilted slab and the fact that I would have to pass beneath its frozen bulk at least seven more times if I was going to make it to the top of Everest.

Most of the recent debate about Everest has focused on the safety of commercial expeditions. But the least experienced, least qualified climbers on the mountain this past season were not guided clients; rather, they were members of traditionally structured, non-commercial expeditions.

While descending the lower Icefall on April 13, I overtook a pair of slower climbers outfitted with unorthodox clothing and gear. Almost immediately it became apparent that they weren't very familiar with the standard tools and techniques of glacier travel. The climber in back repeatedly snagged his crampons and stumbled. Waiting for them to cross a gaping crevasse bridged by two rickety ladders lashed end to end, I was shocked to see them go across together, almost in lockstep, a needlessly dangerous act. An awkward attempt at conversation revealed that they were members of a Taiwanese expedition.

The reputation of the Taiwanese had preceded them to Everest. In the spring of 1995, the team had travelled to Alaska to climb Mount McKinley as a shakedown for their attempt on Everest in 1996. Nine climbers reached the summit of McKinley, but seven of them were caught by a storm on the descent, became disoriented, and spent a night in the open at 19,400 feet, initiating a costly, hazardous rescue by the National Park Service.

Five of the climbers—two of them with severe frostbite and one dead—were plucked from high on the peak by helicopter. "If we hadn't arrived right when we did, two others would have died, too," says American Conrad Anker, who with his partner Alex Lowe climbed to 19,400 feet to help rescue the Taiwanese. "Earlier, we'd noticed the Taiwanese group because they looked so incompetent. It really wasn't any big surprise when they got into trouble."

The leader of the expedition, Ming Ho Gau—a jovial photographer who answers to "Makalu"—had to be assisted down the upper mountain. "As they were bringing him down," Anker recalls, "Makalu was yelling, 'Victory! Victory! We made summit!' to everyone he passed, as if the disaster hadn't even happened." When the survivors of the McKinley debacle showed up on Everest in 1996, Makalu Gau was again their leader.

In truth, their presence was a matter of grave concern to just about everyone on the mountain. The fear was that the Taiwanese would suffer a calamity that would compel other expeditions to come to their aid, risking further lives and possibly costing climbers a shot at the summit. Of course, the Taiwanese were by no means the only group that seemed egregiously unqualified. Camped beside us at Base Camp was a 25-year-old Norwegian climber named Petter Neby, who announced his

intention to make a solo ascent of the Southwest Face, an outrageously difficult route, despite the fact that his Himalayan experience consisted of two easy ascents of neighbouring Island Peak, a 20,270-foot bump.

And then there were the South Africans. Lavishly funded, sponsored by a major newspaper, the source of effusive national pride, their team had received a personal blessing from Nelson Mandela prior to their departure. The first South African expedition ever to be granted a permit to climb Everest, they were a mixed-race group that hoped to put the first black person on the summit. They were led by a smooth-talking former military officer named Ian Woodall. When the team arrived in Nepal it included three very strong members, most notably a brilliant climber named Andy de Klerk, who happened to be a good friend of mine.

But almost immediately, four members, including de Klerk, defected. "Woodall turned out to be a total control freak," said de Klerk. "And you couldn't trust him. We never knew when he was talking bullshit or telling the truth. We didn't want to put our lives in the hands of a guy like that. So we left."

Later de Klerk would learn that Woodall had lied about his climbing record. He'd never climbed anywhere near 8,000 meters, as he claimed. In fact, he hadn't climbed much of anything. Woodall had also allegedly lied about expedition finances and even lied about who was named on the official climbing permit.

After Woodall's deceit was made public, it became an international scandal, reported on the front pages of newspapers throughout the Commonwealth. When the editor of the Johannesburg Sunday Times, the expedition's primary sponsor, confronted Woodall in Nepal, Woodall allegedly tried to physically intimidate him and, according to de Klerk, threatened, "I'm going to rip your fucking head off!"

In the end, Woodall refused to relinquish leadership and insisted that the climb would proceed as planned. By this point none of the four climbers left on the team had more than minimal alpine experience. At least two of them, says de Klerk, "didn't even know how to put their crampons on."

The solo Norwegian, the Taiwanese, and especially the South Africans were frequent topics of discussion around the dinner table in our mess tent. "With so many incompetent people on the mountain," Hall frowned one evening in late April, "I think it's pretty unlikely that we'll get through this without something bad happening."

For our third and final acclimatization excursion, we spent four nights at 21,300-foot Camp Two and a night at 24,000-foot Camp Three. Then on May 1 our whole team descended to Base Camp to recoup our strength for the summit push. Much to my surprise, Hall's acclimatization plan seemed to be working: After three weeks, I felt like I was finally adapting to the altitude. The air at Base Camp now seemed deliciously thick.

From the beginning, Hall had planned that May 10 would be our summit day. "Of the four times I've summited," he explained, "twice it was on the tenth of May. As the Sherpas would put it, the tenth is an 'auspicious' date for me." But there was also a more down-to-earth reason for selecting this date: The annual ebb and flow of the monsoon made it likely that the most favourable weather of the year would fall on or near May 10.

For all of April, the jet stream had been trained on Everest like a fire hose, blasting the summit pyramid with nonstop hurricane-force winds. Even on days when Base



Camp was perfectly calm and flooded with sunshine, an immense plume of wind-driven snow was visible over the summit. But if all went well, in early May the monsoon approaching from the Bay of Bengal would force the jet stream north into Tibet. If this year was like past years, between the departure of the wind and the arrival of the monsoon storms we would be presented with a brief window of clear, calm weather during which a summit assault would be possible.

Unfortunately, the annual weather patterns were no secret, and every expedition had its sights set on the same window. Hoping to avoid dangerous gridlock on the summit ridge, Hall held a powwow in the mess tent with leaders of the expeditions in Base Camp. The council, as it were, determined that Göran Kropp, a young Swede who had ridden a bicycle all the way to Nepal from Stockholm, would make the first attempt, alone, on May 3. Next would be a team from Montenegro. Then, on May 8 or 9, it would be the turn of the IMAX expedition, headed by David Breashears, which hoped to wrap up a large-format film about Everest with footage from the top.

Our team, it was decided, would share a summit date of May 10 with Fischer's group. An American commercial team and two British-led commercial groups promised to steer clear of the top of the mountain on the tenth, as did the Taiwanese. Woodall, however, declared that the South Africans would go to the top whenever they pleased, probably on the tenth, and anyone who didn't like it could "bugger off."

Hall, ordinarily extremely slow to rile, flew into a rage over Woodall's refusal to cooperate. "I don't want to be anywhere near the upper mountain when those punters are up there," he seethed.

"It feels good to be on our way to the summit, yeah?" Harris inquired as we pulled into Camp Two. The midday sun was reflecting off the walls of Nuptse, Lhotse, and Everest, and the entire ice-coated valley seemed to have been transformed into a huge solar oven. We were finally ascending for real, headed straight toward the top, Harris and me and everybody else.

Harris—Harold to his friends—was the junior guide on the expedition and the only one who'd never been to Everest (indeed, he'd never been above 23,000 feet). Built like an NFL quarterback and preternaturally good-natured, he was usually assigned to the slower clients at the back of the pack. For much of the expedition, he had been laid low with intestinal ailments, but he was finally getting his strength back, and he was eager to prove himself to his seasoned colleagues. "I think we're actually gonna knock this big bastard off," he confided to me with a huge smile, staring up at the summit.

Harris worked as a much-in-demand heli-skiing guide in the antipodal winter. Summers he guided climbers in New Zealand's Southern Alps and had just launched a promising heli-hiking business. Sipping tea in the mess tent back at Base Camp, he'd shown me a photograph of Fiona McPherson, the pretty, athletic doctor with whom he lived, and described the house they were building together in the hills outside Queenstown. "Yeah," he'd marvelled, "it's kind of amazing, really. My life seems to be working out pretty well."

***Later that day, Kropp, the Swedish soloist, passed Camp Two on his way down the mountain, looking utterly worked. Three days earlier, under clear skies, he'd made it to just below the South Summit and was no more than an hour from the top when he decided to turn around. He had been climbing without supplemental oxygen, the hour had been late—2 P.M., to be exact—and he'd believed that if he'd kept going, he'd have been too tired to descend safely.***

***"To turn around that close to the summit," Hall mused, shaking his head. "That showed incredibly good judgment on young Gòran's part. I'm impressed." Sticking to your predetermined turn-around time—that was the most important rule on the mountain. Over the previous month, Rob had lectured us repeatedly on this point. Our turn-around time, he said, would probably be 1 P.M., and no matter how close we were to the top, we were to abide by it. "With enough determination, any bloody idiot can get up this hill," Hall said. "The trick is to get back down alive."***

Cheerful and unflappable, Hall's easygoing facade masked an intense desire to succeed—which to him was defined in the fairly simple terms of getting as many clients as possible to the summit. But he also paid careful attention to the details: the health of the Sherpas, the efficiency of the solar-powered electrical system, the sharpness of his clients' crampons. He loved being a guide, and it pained him that some celebrated climbers didn't give his profession the respect he felt it deserved.

On May 8 our team and Fischer's team left Camp Two and started climbing the Lhotse Face, a vast sweep of steel-hard ice rising from the head of the Western Cwm. Hall's Camp Three, two-thirds of the way up this wall, was set on a narrow ledge that had been chopped into the face by our Sherpas. It was a spectacularly perilous perch. A hundred feet below, no less exposed, were the tents of most of the other teams, including Fischer's, the South Africans, and the Taiwanese.

It was here that we had our first encounter with death on the mountain. At 7:30 A.M. on May 9, as we were pulling on our boots to ascend to Camp Four, a 36-year-old steelworker from Taipei named Chen Yu-Nan crawled out of his tent to relieve himself, with only the smooth-soled liners of his mountaineering boots on his feet—a rather serious lapse of judgment. As he squatted, he lost his footing on the slick ice and went hurtling down the Lhotse Face, coming to rest, head-first, in a crevasse. Sherpas who had seen the incident lowered a rope, pulled him out of the slot, and carried him back to his tent. He was bruised and badly rattled, but otherwise he seemed unharmed. Chen's teammates left him in a tent to recover and departed for Camp Four. That afternoon, as Chen tried to descend to Camp Two with the help of Sherpas, he keeled over and died.

Over the preceding six weeks there had been several serious accidents: Tenzing Sherpa, from our team, fell 150 feet into a crevasse and injured a leg seriously enough to require helicopter evacuation from Base Camp. One of Fischer's Sherpas nearly died of a mysterious illness at Camp Two. A young, apparently fit British climber had a serious heart attack near the top of the Icefall. A Dane was struck by a falling serac and broke several ribs. Until now, however, none of the mishaps had been fatal.

Chen's death cast a momentary pall over the mountain. But 33 climbers at the South Col would be departing for the summit in a few short hours, and the gloom was quickly shoved aside by nervous anticipation of the challenge to come. Most of us were simply wrapped too tightly in the grip of summit fever to engage in thoughtful reflection about the death of someone in our midst. There would be plenty of time for reflection later, we assumed, after we all had summited—and got back down.

Climbing with oxygen for the first time, I had reached the South Col, our launching pad for the summit assault, at one o'clock that afternoon. A barren plateau of bulletproof ice and windswept boulders, the Col sits at 26,000 feet above sea level, tucked between the upper ramparts of Lhotse, the world's fourth-highest mountain,

and Everest. Roughly rectangular, about four football fields long by two across, the Col is bounded on the east by the Kangshung Face, a 7,000-foot drop-off, and on the west by the 4,000-foot Lhotse Face. It is one of the coldest, most inhospitable places I have ever been.

I was the first Western climber to arrive. When I got there, four Sherpas were struggling to erect our tents in a 50-mph wind. I helped them put up my shelter, anchoring it to some discarded oxygen canisters wedged beneath the largest rocks I could lift. Then I dove inside to wait for my teammates.

It was nearly 5 P.M. when the last of the group made camp. The final stragglers in Fischer's group came in even later, which didn't augur well for the summit bid, scheduled to begin in six hours. Everyone retreated to their nylon domes the moment they reached the Col and did their best to nap, but the machine-gun rattle of the flapping tents and the anxiety over what was to come made sleep out of the question for most of us.

Surrounding me on the plateau were some three dozen people, huddled in tents pitched side by side. Yet an odd sense of isolation hung over the camp. Up here, in this godforsaken place, I felt distressingly disconnected from everyone around me—emotionally, spiritually, physically. We were a team in name only, I'd sadly come to realize. Although we would leave camp in a few hours as a group, we would ascend as individuals, linked to one another by neither rope nor any deep sense of loyalty. Each client was in it for himself or herself, pretty much. And I was no different: I really hoped Doug Hansen would get to the top, for instance, yet if he were to turn around, I knew I would do everything in my power to keep pushing on. In another context this insight would have been depressing, but I was too preoccupied with the weather to dwell on it. If the wind didn't abate, the summit would be out of the question for all of us.

At 7 P.M. the gale abruptly ceased. The temperature was 15 below zero, but there was almost no wind. Conditions were excellent; Hall, it appeared, had timed our summit bid perfectly. The tension was palpable as we sipped tea, delivered to us in our tents by Sherpas, and readied our gear. Nobody said much. All of us had suffered greatly to get to this moment. I had eaten little and slept not at all since leaving Camp Two two days earlier. Damage to my thoracic cartilage made each cough feel like a stiff kick between the ribs and brought tears to my eyes. But if I wanted a crack at the summit, I had no choice but to ignore my infirmities as much as possible and climb.

Finally, at 11:35, we were away from the tents. I strapped on my oxygen mask and ascended into the darkness. There were 15 of us in Hall's team: guides Hall, Harris, and Mike Groom, an Australian with impressive Himalayan experience; Sherpas Ang Dorje, Lhakpa Chhiri, Nawang Norbu, and Kami; and clients Hansen, Namba, Weathers, Stuart Hutchison (a Canadian doctor), John Taske (an Australian doctor), Lou Kasischke (a lawyer from Michigan), Frank Fischbeck (a publisher from Hong Kong), and me.

Fischer's group—guides Fischer, Boukreev, and Neal Beidleman; five Sherpas; and clients Charlotte Fox, Tim Madsen, Klev Schoening, Sandy Pittman, Lene Gammelgaard, and Martin Adams—left the South Col at midnight. Shortly after that, Makalu Gau started up with three Sherpas, ignoring his promise that no Taiwanese would make a summit attempt on May 10. Thankfully, the South Africans had failed to make it to Camp Four and were nowhere in sight.

The night had a cold, phantasmal beauty that intensified as we ascended. More stars than I had ever seen smeared the frozen sky. Far to the southeast, enormous thunderheads drifted over Nepal, illuminating the heavens with surreal bursts of orange and blue lightning. A gibbous moon rose over the shoulder of 27,824-foot Makalu, washing the slope beneath my boots in ghostly light, obviating the need for a headlamp. I broke trail throughout the night with Ang Dorje—our sirdar, or head Sherpa—and at 5:30, just as the sun was edging over the horizon, I reached the crest of the Southeast Ridge. Three of the world's five highest peaks stood out in jagged relief against the pastel dawn. My altimeter read 27,500 feet.

Hall had instructed us to climb no higher until the whole group gathered at this level roost known as the Balcony, so I sat down on my pack to wait. When Hall and Weathers finally arrived at the back of the herd, I'd been sitting for more than 90 minutes. By now Fischer's group and the Taiwanese team had caught and passed us. I was peeved over wasting so much time and at falling behind everybody else. But I understood Hall's rationale, so I kept quiet and played the part of the obedient client. To my mind, the rewards of climbing come from its emphasis on self-reliance, on making critical decisions and dealing with the consequences, on personal responsibility. When you become a client, I discovered, you give up all that. For safety's sake, the guide always calls the shots.

Passivity on the part of the clients had thus been encouraged throughout our expedition. Sherpas put in the route, set up the camps, did the cooking, hauled the loads; we clients seldom carried more than daypacks stuffed with our personal gear. This system conserved our energy and vastly increased our chances of getting to the top, but I found it hugely unsatisfying. I felt at times as if I wasn't really climbing the mountain—that surrogates were doing it for me. Although I had willingly accepted this role in order to climb Everest, I never got used to it. And I was happy as hell when, at 7:10 A.M., Hall gave me the OK to continue climbing.

One of the first people I passed when I started moving again was Fischer's sirdar, Lopsang Jangbu, kneeling in the snow over a pile of vomit. Both Lopsang and Boukreev had asked and been granted permission by Fischer to climb without supplemental oxygen, a highly questionable decision that significantly affected the performance of both men, but especially Lopsang. His feeble state, moreover, had been compounded by his insistence on "short-roping" Pittman on summit day.

Lopsang, 25, was a gifted high-altitude climber who'd summited Everest twice before without oxygen. Sporting a long black ponytail and a gold tooth, he was flashy, self-assured, and very appealing to the clients, not to mention crucial to their summit hopes. As Fischer's head Sherpa, he was expected to be at the front of the group this morning, putting in the route. But just before daybreak, I'd looked down to see Lopsang hitched to Pittman by her three-foot safety tether; the Sherpa, huffing and puffing loudly, was hauling the assertive New Yorker up the steep slope like a horse pulling a plough. Pittman was on a widely publicized quest to ascend Everest and thereby complete the Seven Summits. She'd failed to make it to the top on two previous expeditions; this time she was determined to succeed.

Fischer knew that Lopsang was short-roping Pittman, yet did nothing to stop it; some people have thus concluded that Fischer ordered Lopsang to do it, because Pittman had been moving slowly when she started out on summit day, and Fischer worried that if Pittman failed to reach the summit, he would be denied a marketing bonanza. But two other clients on Fischer's team speculate that Lopsang was short-roping her because she'd promised him a hefty cash bonus if she reached the top. Pittman has denied this and insists that she was hauled up against her wishes. Which begs a

question: Why didn't she unfasten the tether, which would have required nothing more than reaching up and unclipping a single karabiner?

"I have no idea why Lopsang was short-roping Sandy," confesses Beidleman. "He lost sight of what he was supposed to be doing up there, what the priorities were." It didn't seem like a particularly serious mistake at the time. A little thing. But it was one of many little things-accruing slowly, compounding imperceptibly, building steadily toward critical mass.

A human plucked from sea level and dropped on the summit of Everest would lose consciousness within minutes and quickly die. A well-acclimatized climber can function at that altitude with supplemental oxygen—but not well, and not for long. The body becomes far more vulnerable to pulmonary and cerebral oedema, hypothermia, frostbite. Each member of our team was carrying two orange, seven-pound oxygen bottles. A third bottle would be waiting for each of us at the South Summit on our descent, stashed there by Sherpas. At a conservative flow rate of two litres per minute, each bottle would last between five and six hours. By 4 or 5 P.M., about 18 hours after starting to climb, everyone's gas would be gone.

Hall understood this well. The fact that nobody had summited this season prior to our attempt concerned him, because it meant that no fixed ropes had been installed on the upper Southeast Ridge, the most exposed part of the climb. To solve this problem, Hall and Fischer had agreed before leaving Base Camp that on summit day the two sirdars—Ang Dorje from Hall's team and Lopsang from Fischer's—would leave Camp Four 90 minutes ahead of everybody else and put in the fixed lines before any clients reached the upper mountain. "Rob made it very clear how important it was to do this," recalls Beidleman. "He wanted to avoid a bottleneck at all costs."

For some reason, however, the Sherpas hadn't set out ahead of us on the night of May 9. When Ang Dorje and I reached the Balcony, we were an hour in front of the rest of the group, and we could have easily moved on and installed the ropes. But Hall had explicitly forbidden me to go ahead, and Lopsang was still far below, short-roping Pittman. There was nobody to accompany Ang Dorje.

A quiet, moody young man who regarded Lopsang as a showboat and a goldbrick, Ang Dorje had been working extremely hard, well beyond the call of duty, for six long weeks. Now he was tired of doing more than his share. If Lopsang wasn't going to fix ropes, neither was he. Looking sullen, Ang Dorje sat down with me to wait.

Sure enough, not long after everybody caught up with us and we continued climbing up, a bottleneck occurred when our group encountered a series of giant rock steps at 28,000 feet. Clients huddled at the base of this obstacle for nearly an hour while Beidleman, standing in for the absent Lopsang, laboriously ran the rope out.

Here, the impatience and technical inexperience of Namba nearly caused a disaster. A businesswoman who liked to joke that her husband did all the cooking and cleaning, Namba had become famous back in Japan for her Seven Summits globe-trotting, and her quest for Everest had turned into a minor cause célèbre. She was usually a slow, tentative climber, but today, with the summit squarely in her sights, she seemed energized as never before. She'd been pushing hard all morning, jostling her way toward the front of the line. Now, as Beidleman clung precariously to the rock 100 feet above, the overeager Namba clamped her ascender onto the dangling rope before the guide had anchored his end of it. Just as she was about to put her full body weight on the rope—which would have pulled Beidleman off—guide

Mike Groom intervened and gently scolded her.

***The line continued to grow longer, and so did the delay. By 11:30 A.M., three of Hall's clients—Hutchison, Taske, and Kasischke—had become worried about the lagging pace. Stuck behind the sluggish Taiwanese team, Hutchison now says, "It seemed increasingly unlikely that we would have any chance of summiting before the 1 P.M. turn-around time dictated by Rob."***

***After a brief discussion, they turned their back on the summit and headed down with Kami and Lhakpa Chhiri. Earlier, Fischbeck, one of Hall's strongest clients, had also turned around. The decision must have been supremely difficult for at least some of these men, especially Fischbeck, for whom this was a fourth attempt on Everest. They'd each spent as much as \$70,000 to be up here and had endured weeks of misery. All were driven, unaccustomed to losing and even less to quitting. And yet, faced with a tough decision, they were among the few who made the right one that day.***

There was a second, even worse, bottleneck at the South Summit, which I reached at about 11 A.M. The Hillary Step was just a stone's throw away, and slightly beyond that was the summit itself. Rendered dumb with awe and exhaustion, I took some photos and sat down with Harris, Beidleman, and Boukreev to wait for the Sherpas to fix ropes along the spectacularly corniced summit ridge.

A stiff breeze raked the ridge crest, blowing a plume of spindrift into Tibet, but overhead the sky was an achingly brilliant blue. Lounging in the sun at 28,700 feet inside my thick down suit, gazing across the Himalayas in a hypoxic stupor, I completely lost track of time. Nobody paid much attention to the fact that Ang Dorje and Nawang Norbu were sharing a thermos of tea beside us and seemed to be in no hurry to go higher. Around noon, Beidleman finally asked, "Hey, Ang Dorje, are you going to fix the ropes, or what?"

Ang Dorje's reply was a quick, unequivocal "No"—perhaps because neither Lopsang nor any of Fischer's other Sherpas was there to share the work. Shocked into doing the job ourselves, Beidleman, Boukreev, Harris, and I collected all the remaining rope, and Beidleman and Boukreev started stringing it along the most dangerous sections of the summit ridge. But by then more than an hour had trickled away.

Bottled oxygen does not make the top of Everest feel like sea level. Ascending above the South Summit with my regulator delivering two litres of oxygen per minute, I had to stop and draw three or four heaving lung-fulls of air after each ponderous step. The systems we were using delivered a lean mix of compressed oxygen and ambient air that made 29,000 feet feel like 26,000 feet. But they did confer other benefits that weren't so easily quantified, not the least of which was keeping hypothermia and frostbite at bay.

Climbing along the blade of the summit ridge, sucking gas into my ragged lungs, I enjoyed a strange, unwarranted sense of calm. The world beyond the rubber mask was stupendously vivid but seemed not quite real, as if a movie were being projected in slow motion across the front of my goggles. I felt drugged, disengaged, thoroughly insulated from external stimuli. I had to remind myself over and over that there was 7,000 feet of sky on either side, that everything was at stake here; that I would pay for a single bungled step with my life.

Plodding slowly up the last few steps to the summit, I had the sensation of being underwater, of moving at quarter-speed. And then I found myself atop a slender

wedge of ice adorned with a discarded oxygen cylinder and a battered aluminium survey pole, with nowhere higher to climb. A string of Buddhist prayer flags snapped furiously in the wind. To the north, down a side of the mountain I had never seen, the desiccated Tibetan plateau stretched to the horizon.

Reaching the top of Everest is supposed to trigger a surge of intense elation; against long odds, after all, I had just attained a goal I'd coveted since childhood. But the summit was really only the halfway point. Any impulse I might have felt toward self-congratulation was immediately extinguished by apprehension about the long, dangerous descent that lay ahead. As I turned to go down, I experienced a moment of alarm when a glance at my regulator showed that my oxygen was almost gone. I started down the ridge as fast as I could move but soon hit the traffic jam at the Hillary Step, which was when my gas ran out. When Hall came by, I masked my rising panic and thanked him for getting me to the top of Everest. "Yeah, it's turned out to be a pretty good expedition," he replied. "I only wish we could have gotten more clients to the top." Hall was clearly disappointed that five of his eight clients had turned back earlier in the day, while all six of Fischer's clients were still plugging toward the summit.

Soon after Hall passed, the Hillary Step finally cleared. Dizzy, fearing that I would black out, I made my way tenuously down the fixed lines. Then, 50 feet above the South Summit, the rope ended, and I balked at going farther without gas.

Over at the South Summit I could see Harris sorting through a pile of oxygen bottles. "Yo, Andy!" I yelled. "Could you bring me a fresh bottle?"

"There's no oxygen here!" the guide shouted back. "These bottles are all empty!" I nearly lost it. I had no idea what to do. Just then, Groom came past on his way down from the summit. He had climbed Everest in 1993 without supplemental oxygen and wasn't overly concerned about going without. He gave me his bottle, and we quickly scrambled over to the South Summit.

When we got there, an examination of the oxygen cache revealed right away that there were six full bottles. Harris, however, refused to believe it. He kept insisting that they were all empty, and nothing Groom or I said could convince him otherwise. Right then it should have been obvious that Harris was acting irrationally and had slipped well beyond routine hypoxia, but I was so impeded myself that it simply didn't register. Harris was the invincible guide, there to look after me and the other clients; the thought never entered my own crippled mind that he might in fact be in dire straits—that a guide might urgently need help from me.

As Harris continued to assert that there were no full bottles, Groom looked at me quizzically. I looked back and shrugged. Turning to Harris, I said, "No big deal, Andy. Much ado about nothing." Then I grabbed a new oxygen canister, screwed it onto my regulator, and headed down the mountain. Given what unfolded over the next three hours, my failure to see that Harris was in serious trouble was a lapse that's likely to haunt me for the rest of my life.

At 3 P.M., within minutes of leaving the South Summit, I descended into clouds ahead of the others. Snow started to fall. In the flat, diminishing light, it became hard to tell where the mountain ended and where the sky began. It would have been very easy to blunder off the edge of the ridge and never be heard from again. The lower I went, the worse the weather became.

When I reached the Balcony again, about 4 P.M., I encountered Beck Weathers

standing alone, shivering violently. Years earlier, Weathers had undergone radial keratotomy to correct his vision. A side effect, which he discovered on Everest and consequently hid from Hall, was that in the low barometric pressure at high altitude, his eyesight failed. Nearly blind when he'd left Camp Four in the middle of the night but hopeful that his vision would improve at daybreak, he stuck close to the person in front of him and kept climbing.

Upon reaching the Southeast Ridge shortly after sunrise, Weathers had confessed to Hall that he was having trouble seeing, at which point Hall declared, "Sorry, pal, you're going down. I'll send one of the Sherpas with you." Weathers countered that his vision was likely to improve as soon as the sun crept higher in the sky; Hall said he'd give Weathers 30 minutes to find out—after that, he'd have to wait there at 27,500 feet for Hall and the rest of the group to come back down. Hall didn't want Weathers descending alone. "I'm dead serious about this," Hall admonished his client. "Promise me that you'll sit right here until I return."

"I crossed my heart and hoped to die," Weathers recalls now, "and promised I wouldn't go anywhere." Shortly after noon, Hutchison, Taske, and Kasischke passed by with their Sherpa escorts, but Weathers elected not to accompany them. "The weather was still good," he explains, "and I saw no reason to break my promise to Rob."

By the time I encountered Weathers, however, conditions were turning ugly. "Come down with me," I implored. "I'll get you down, no problem." He was nearly convinced, until I made the mistake of mentioning that Groom was on his way down, too. In a day of many mistakes, this would turn out to be a crucial one. "Thanks anyway," Weathers said. "I'll just wait for Mike. He's got a rope; he'll be able to short-rope me." Secretly relieved, I hurried toward the South Col, 1,500 feet below.

These lower slopes proved to be the most difficult part of the descent. Six inches of powder snow blanketed outcroppings of loose shale. Climbing down them demanded unceasing concentration, an all but impossible feat in my current state. By 5:30, however, I was finally within 200 vertical feet of Camp Four, and only one obstacle stood between me and safety: a steep bulge of rock-hard ice that I'd have to descend without a rope. But the weather had deteriorated into a full-scale blizzard. Snow pellets born on 70-mph winds stung my face; any exposed skin was instantly frozen. The tents, no more than 200 horizontal yards away, were only intermittently visible through the whiteout. There was zero margin for error. Worried about making a critical blunder, I sat down to marshal my energy.

Suddenly, Harris appeared out of the gloom and sat beside me. At this point there was no mistaking that he was in appalling shape. His cheeks were coated with an armour of frost, one eye was frozen shut, and his speech was slurred. He was frantic to reach the tents. After briefly discussing the best way to negotiate the ice, Harris started scooting down on his butt, facing forward. "Andy," I yelled after him, "it's crazy to try it like that!" He yelled something back, but the words were carried off by the screaming wind. A second later he lost his purchase and was rocketing down on his back.

Two hundred feet below, I could make out Harris's motionless form. I was sure he'd broken at least a leg, maybe his neck. But then he stood up, waved that he was OK, and started stumbling toward camp, which was for the moment in plain sight, 150 yards beyond.

I could see three or four people shining lights outside the tents. I watched Harris walk



across the flats to the edge of camp, a distance he covered in less than ten minutes. When the clouds closed in a moment later, cutting off my view, he was within 30 yards of the tents. I didn't see him again after that, but I was certain that he'd reached the security of camp, where Sherpas would be waiting with hot tea. Sitting out in the storm, with the ice bulge still standing between me and the tents, I felt a pang of envy. I was angry that my guide hadn't waited for me.

Twenty minutes later I was in camp. I fell into my tent with my crampons still on, zipped the door tight, and sprawled across the frost-covered floor. I was drained, more exhausted than I'd ever been in my life. But I was safe. Andy was safe. The others would be coming into camp soon. We'd done it. We'd climbed Mount Everest.

It would be many hours before I learned that everyone had in fact not made it back to camp—that one team-mate was already dead and that 23 other men and women were caught in a desperate struggle for their lives.

Neal Beidleman waited on the summit from 1:25 until 3:10 as Fischer's clients appeared over the last rise, one by one. The lateness of the hour worried him. After Gammelgaard, the last of them, arrived with Lopsang, "I decided it was time to get the hell out of there," Beidleman says, "even though Scott hadn't shown yet." Twenty minutes down the ridge, Beidleman-with Gammelgaard, Pittman, Madsen, and Fox in tow-passed Fischer, still on his way up. "I didn't really say anything to him," Beidleman recalls. "He just sort of raised his hand. He looked like he was having a hard time, but he was Scott, so I wasn't particularly worried. I figured he'd tag the summit and catch up to us pretty quick to help bring the clients down. But he never showed up."

When Beidleman's group got down to the South Summit, Pittman collapsed. Fox, the most experienced client on the peak, gave her an injection of a powerful steroid, dexamethasone, which temporarily negates the symptoms of altitude sickness. Beidleman grabbed Pittman by her harness and started dragging her down behind him.

"Once I got her sliding," he explains, "I'd let go and glissade down in front of her. Every 50 meters I'd stop, wrap my hands around the fixed rope, and brace myself to arrest her slide with a body block. The first time Sandy came barreling into me, the points of her crampons sliced into my down suit. Feathers went flying everywhere." Fortunately, after about 20 minutes the injection revived Pittman, and she was able to resume the descent under her own power.

As darkness fell and the storm intensified, Beidleman and five of Fischer's clients overtook Groom, who was bringing down Weathers, on a short rope, and Namba. "Beck was so hopelessly blind," Groom reports, "that every ten metres he'd take a step into thin air and I'd have to catch him with the rope. It was bloody nerve-racking."

Five hundred feet above the South Col, where the steep shale gave way to a gentler slope of snow, Namba's oxygen ran out and the diminutive Japanese woman sat down, refusing to move. "When I tried to take her oxygen mask off so she could breathe more easily," says Groom, "she'd insist on putting it right back on. No amount of persuasion could convince her that she was out of oxygen, that the mask was actually suffocating her."

Beidleman, realizing that Groom had his hands full with Weathers, started dragging Namba down toward Camp Four. They reached the broad, rolling expanse of the

South Col around 8 P.M., but by then it was pitch black, and the storm had grown into a hurricane. The windchill was in excess of 70 below. Only three or four headlamps were working, and everyone's oxygen was long gone. Visibility was down to a few meters. No one had a clue how to find the tents. Two Sherpas materialized out of the darkness, but they were lost as well.

For the next two hours, Beidleman, Groom, the two Sherpas, and seven clients staggered blindly around in the storm, growing ever more exhausted and hypothermic, hoping to blunder across the camp. "It was total chaos," says Beidleman. "People are wandering all over the place; I'm yelling at everyone, trying to get them to follow a single leader. Finally, probably around ten o'clock, I walked over this little rise, and it felt like I was standing on the edge of the earth. I could sense a huge void just beyond."

The group had unwittingly strayed to the easternmost edge of the Col, the opposite side from Camp Four, right at the lip of the 7,000-foot Kangshung Face. "I knew that if we kept wandering in the storm, pretty soon we were going to lose somebody," says Beidleman. "I was exhausted from dragging Yasuko. Charlotte and Sandy were barely able to stand. So I screamed at everyone to huddle up right there and wait for a break in the storm."

The climbers hunkered in a pathetic cluster on a windswept patch of ice. "By then the cold had about finished me off," says Fox. "My eyes were frozen. The cold was so painful, I just curled up in a ball and hoped death would come quickly."

Three hundred and fifty yards to the west, while this was going on, I was shivering uncontrollably in my tent, even though I was zipped into my sleeping bag and wearing my down suit and every other stitch of clothing I had. The gale was threatening to blow the tent apart. Oblivious to the tragedy unfolding outside and completely out of bottled oxygen, I drifted in and out of fitful sleep, delirious from exhaustion, dehydration, and the cumulative effects of oxygen depletion.

At some point, Hutchison shook me and asked if I would go outside with him to bang on pots and shine lights, in the hope of guiding any lost climbers in, but I was too weak and incoherent to respond. Hutchison, who had got back to camp at 2 P.M. and was less debilitated than those of us who'd gone to the summit, then tried to rouse clients and Sherpas in the other tents. Everybody was too cold, too exhausted. So Hutchison went out into the storm alone.

He left six times that night to look for the missing climbers, but the blizzard was so fierce that he never dared to venture more than a few yards from the tents. "The winds were ballistically strong," says Hutchison. "The blowing spindrift felt like a sandblaster or something."

Just before midnight, out among the climbers hunkered on the Col, Beidleman noticed a few stars overhead. The wind was still whipping up a furious ground blizzard, but far above, the sky began to clear, revealing the hulking silhouettes of Everest and Lhotse. From these reference points, Klev Schoening, a client of Fischer's, thought he'd figured out where the group was in relation to the tents. After a shouting match with Beidleman, Schoening convinced the guide that he knew the way.

Beidleman tried to coax everyone to their feet and get them moving in the direction indicated by Schoening, but Fox, Namba, Pittman, and Weathers were too feeble to walk. So Beidleman assembled those who were ambulatory, and together with

Groom they stumbled off into the storm to get help, leaving behind the four incapacitated clients and Tim Madsen. Madsen, unwilling to abandon Fox, his girlfriend, volunteered to look after everybody until a rescue party arrived.

The tents lay about 350 yards to the west. When Beidleman, Groom, and the clients got there, they were met by Boukreev. Beidleman told the Russian where to find the five clients who'd been left out in the elements, and then all four climbers collapsed in their tents.

Boukreev had returned to Camp Four at 4:30 P.M., before the brunt of the storm, having rushed down from the summit without waiting for clients—extremely questionable behaviour for a guide. A number of Everest veterans have speculated that if Boukreev had been present to help Beidleman and Groom bring their clients down, the group might not have got lost on the Col in the first place. One of the clients from that group has nothing but contempt for Boukreev, insisting that when it mattered most, the guide "cut and ran."

Boukreev argues that he hurried down ahead of everybody else because "it is much better for me to be at South Col, ready to carry up oxygen if clients run out." This is a difficult rationale to understand. In fact, Boukreev's impatience on the descent more plausibly resulted from the fact that he wasn't using bottled oxygen and was relatively lightly dressed and therefore had to get down quickly: Without gas, he was much more susceptible to the dreadful cold. If this was indeed the case, Fischer was as much to blame as Boukreev, because he gave the Russian permission to climb without gas in the first place.

Whatever Boukreev's culpability, however, he redeemed himself that night after Beidleman staggered in. Plunging repeatedly into the maw of the hurricane, he single-handedly brought back Fox, Pittman, and Madsen. But Namba and Weathers, he reported, were dead. When Beidleman was informed that Namba hadn't made it, he broke down in his tent and wept for 45 minutes.

Stuart Hutchison shook me awake at 6:00 A.M. on May 11. "Andy's not in his tent," he told me somberly, "and he doesn't seem to be in any of the other tents, either. I don't think he ever made it in."

"Andy's missing?" I asked. "No way. I saw him walk to the edge of camp with my own eyes." Shocked, horrified, I pulled on my boots and rushed out to look for Harris. The wind was still fierce, knocking me down several times, but it was a bright, clear dawn, and visibility was perfect. I searched the entire western half of the Col for more than an hour, peering behind boulders and poking under shredded, long-abandoned tents, but found no trace of Harris. A surge of adrenaline seared my brain. Tears welled in my eyes, instantly freezing my eyelids shut. How could Andy be gone? It couldn't be so.

I went to the place where Harris had slid down the ice bulge and methodically retraced the route he'd taken toward camp, which followed a broad, almost flat ice gully. At the point where I last saw him when the clouds came down, a sharp left turn would have taken Harris 40 or 50 feet up a rocky rise to the tents.

I saw, however, that if he hadn't turned left but instead had continued straight down the gully—which would have been easy to do in a whiteout, even if one wasn't exhausted and stupid with altitude sickness—he would have quickly come to the westernmost edge of the Col and a 4,000-foot drop to the floor of the Western Cwm. Standing there, afraid to move any closer to the edge, I noticed a single set of faint

crampon tracks leading past me toward the abyss. Those tracks, I feared, were Harris's.

After getting into camp the previous evening, I'd told Hutchison that I'd seen Harris arrive safely in camp. Hutchison had radioed this news to Base Camp, and from there it was passed along via satellite phone to the woman with whom Harris shared his life in New Zealand, Fiona McPherson. Now Hall's wife back in New Zealand, Jan Arnold, had to do the unthinkable: call McPherson back to inform her that there had been a horrible mistake, that Andy was in fact missing and presumed dead. Imagining this conversation and my role in the events leading up to it, I fell to my knees with dry heaves, retching as the icy wind blasted my back.

I returned to my tent just in time to overhear a radio call between Base Camp and Hall—who, I learned to my horror, was up on the summit ridge and calling for help. Beidleman then told me that Weathers and Namba were dead and that Fischer was missing somewhere on the peak above. An aura of unreality had descended over the mountain, casting the morning in a nightmarish hue.

Then our radio batteries died, cutting us off from the rest of the mountain. Alarmed that they had lost contact with us, climbers at Camp Two called the South African team, which had arrived on the South Col the previous day. When Ian Woodall was asked if he would loan his radio to us, he refused.

After reaching the summit around 3:30 P.M. on May 10, Scott Fischer had headed down with Lopsang, who had waited for Fischer on the summit while Beidleman and their clients descended. They got no farther than the South Summit before Fischer began to have difficulty standing and showed symptoms of severe hypothermia and cerebral oedema. According to Lopsang, Fischer began "acting like crazy man. Scott is saying to me, 'I want to jump down to Camp Two.' He is saying many times." Pleading with him not to jump, Lopsang started short-roping Fischer, who outweighed him by some 70 pounds, down the Southeast Ridge. A few hours after dark, they got into some difficult mixed terrain 1,200 feet above the South Col, and Lopsang was unable to drag Fischer any farther.

Lopsang anchored Fischer to a snow-covered ledge and was preparing to leave him there when three tired Sherpas showed up. They were struggling to bring down Makalu Gau, who was as debilitated as Fischer. The Sherpas sat the Taiwanese leader beside the American leader, tied the two semiconscious men together, and around 10 P.M. descended into the night to get help.

***Meanwhile, Hall and Hansen were still on the frightfully exposed summit ridge, engaged in a grim struggle of their own. The 46-year-old Hansen, whom Hall had turned back just below this spot exactly a year ago, had been determined to bag the summit this time around. "I want to get this thing done and out of my life," he'd told me a couple of days earlier. "I don't want to have to come back here."***

***Indeed, Hansen had reached the top this time, though not until after 3 P.M., well after Hall's pre-determined turn-around time. Given Hall's conservative, systematic nature, many people wonder why he didn't turn Hansen around when it became obvious that he was running late. It's not far-fetched to speculate that because Hall had talked Hansen into coming back to Everest this year, it would have been especially hard for him to deny Hansen the summit a second time—especially when all of Fischer's clients were still marching blithely toward the top.***

***"It's very difficult to turn someone around high on the mountain," cautions Guy Cotter, a New Zealand guide who summited Everest with Hall in 1992 and was guiding the peak for him in 1995 when Hansen made his first attempt. "If a client sees that the summit is close and they're dead-set on getting there, they're going to laugh in your face and keep going up."***

***In any case, for whatever reason, Hall did not turn Hansen around. Instead, after reaching the summit at 2:10 P.M., Hall waited for more than an hour for Hansen to arrive and then headed down with him. Soon after they began their descent, just below the top, Hansen apparently ran out of oxygen and collapsed. "Pretty much the same thing happened to Doug in '95," says Ed Viesturs, an American who guided the peak for Hall that year. "He was fine during the ascent, but as soon as he started down he lost it mentally and physically. He turned into a real zombie, like he'd used everything up."***

At 4:31 P.M., Hall radioed Base Camp to say that he and Hansen were above the Hillary Step and urgently needed oxygen. Two full bottles were waiting for them at the South Summit; if Hall had known this he could have retrieved the gas fairly quickly and then climbed back up to give Hansen a fresh tank. But Harris, in the throes of his oxygen-starved dementia, overheard the 4:31 radio call while descending the Southeast Ridge and broke in to tell Hall—incorrectly, just as he'd told Groom and me—that all the bottles at the South Summit were empty. So Hall stayed with Hansen and tried to bring the helpless client down without oxygen, but could get him no farther than the top of the Hillary Step.

Cotter, a very close friend of both Hall and Harris, happened to be a few miles from Everest Base Camp at the time, guiding an expedition on Pumori. Overhearing the radio conversations between Hall and Base Camp, he called Hall at 5:36 and again at 5:57, urging his mate to leave Hansen and come down alone. "I know I sound like the bastard for telling Rob to abandon his client," confesses Cotter, "but by then it was obvious that leaving Doug was his only choice." Hall, however, wouldn't consider going down without Hansen.

There was no further word from Hall until the middle of the night. At 2:46 A.M. on May 11, Cotter woke up to hear a long, broken transmission, probably unintended: Hall was wearing a remote microphone clipped to the shoulder strap of his backpack, which was occasionally keyed on by mistake. In this instance, says Cotter, "I suspect Rob didn't even know he was transmitting. I could hear someone yelling—it might have been Rob, but I couldn't be sure because the wind was so loud in the background. He was saying something like 'Keep moving! Keep going!' presumably to Doug, urging him on."

If that was indeed the case, it meant that in the wee hours of the morning Hall and Hansen were still struggling from the Hillary Step toward the South Summit, taking more than 12 hours to traverse a stretch of ridge typically covered by descending climbers in half an hour.

Hall's next call to Base Camp was at 4:43 A.M. He'd finally reached the South Summit but was unable to descend farther, and in a series of transmissions over the next two hours he sounded confused and irrational. "Harold was with me last night," Hall insisted, when in fact Harris had reached the South Col at sunset. "But he doesn't seem to be with me now. He was very weak."

Mackenzie asked him how Hansen was doing. "Doug," Hall replied, "is gone." That

was all he said, and it was the last mention he ever made of Hansen.

On May 23, when Breashears and Viesturs, of the IMAX team, reached the summit, they found no sign of Hansen's body but they did find an ice axe planted about 50 feet below the Hillary Step, along a highly exposed section of ridge where the fixed ropes came to an end. It is quite possible that Hall managed to get Hansen down the ropes to this point, only to have him lose his footing and fall 7,000 feet down the sheer Southwest Face, leaving his ice axe jammed into the ridge crest where he slipped.

During the radio calls to Base Camp early on May 11, Hall revealed that something was wrong with his legs, that he was no longer able to walk and was shaking uncontrollably. This was very disturbing news to the people down below, but it was amazing that Hall was even alive after spending a night without shelter or oxygen at 28,700 feet in hurricane-force wind and minus-100-degree windchill.

At 5 A.M., Base Camp patched through a call on the satellite telephone to Jan Arnold, Hall's wife, seven months pregnant with their first child in Christchurch, New Zealand. Arnold, a respected physician, had summited Everest with Hall in 1993 and entertained no illusions about the gravity of her husband's predicament. "My heart really sank when I heard his voice," she recalls. "He was slurring his words markedly. He sounded like Major Tom or something, like he was just floating away. I'd been up there; I knew what it could be like in bad weather. Rob and I had talked about the impossibility of being rescued from the summit ridge. As he himself had put it, 'You might as well be on the moon.'"

By that time, Hall had located two full oxygen bottles, and after struggling for four hours trying to deice his mask, around 8:30 A.M. he finally started breathing the life-sustaining gas. Several times he announced that he was preparing to descend, only to change his mind and remain at the South Summit. The day had started out sunny and clear, but the wind remained fierce, and by late morning the upper mountain was wrapped with thick clouds. Climbers at Camp Two reported that the wind over the summit sounded like a squadron of 747s, even from 8,000 feet below.

About 9:30 A.M., Ang Dorje and Lhakpa Chhiri ascended from Camp Four in a brave attempt to bring Hall down. At the same time, four other Sherpas went to rescue Fischer and Gau. When they reached Fischer, the Sherpas tried to give him oxygen and hot tea, but he was unresponsive. Though he was breathing—barely—his eyes were fixed and his teeth were clenched. Believing he was as good as dead, they left him tied to the ledge and started descending with Gau, who after receiving tea and oxygen, and with considerable assistance, was able to move to the South Col.

Higher on the peak, Ang Dorje and Lhakpa Chhiri climbed to 28,000 feet, but the murderous wind forced them to turn around there, still 700 feet below Hall.

Throughout that day, Hall's friends begged him to make an effort to descend from the South Summit under his own power. At 3:20 P.M., after one such transmission from Cotter, Hall began to sound annoyed. "Look," he said, "if I thought I could manage the knots on the fixed ropes with me frostbitten hands, I would have gone down six hours ago, pal. Just send a couple of the boys up with a big thermos of something hot—then I'll be fine."

At 6:20 P.M., Hall was patched through a second time to Arnold in Christchurch. "Hi, my sweetheart," he said in a slow, painfully distorted voice. "I hope you're tucked up in a nice warm bed. How are you doing?"

"I can't tell you how much I'm thinking about you!" Arnold replied. "You sound so much better than I expected.... Are you warm, my darling?"

"In the context of the altitude, the setting, I'm reasonably comfortable," Hall answered, doing his best not to alarm her.

"How are your feet?"

"I haven't taken me boots off to check, but I think I may have a bit of frostbite."

"I'm looking forward to making you completely better when you come home," said Arnold. "I just know you're going to be rescued. Don't feel that you're alone. I'm sending all my positive energy your way!" Before signing off, Hall told his wife, "I love you. Sleep well, my sweetheart. Please don't worry too much."

These would be the last words anyone would hear him utter. Attempts to make radio contact with Hall later that night and the next day went unanswered. Twelve days later, when Breashears and Viesturs climbed over the South Summit on their way to the top, they found Hall lying on his right side in a shallow ice-hollow, his upper body buried beneath a drift of snow.

Early on the morning of May 11, when I returned to Camp Four after searching in vain for Harris, Hutchison, standing in for Groom, who was unconscious in his tent, organized a team of four Sherpas to locate the bodies of our teammates Weathers and Namba. The Sherpa search party, headed by Lhakpa Chhiri, departed ahead of Hutchison, who was so exhausted and befuddled that he forgot to put his boots on and left camp in his light, smooth-soled liners. Only when Lhakpa Chhiri pointed out the blunder did Hutchison return for his boots. Following Boukreev's directions, the Sherpas had no trouble locating the two bodies at the edge of the Kangshung Face.

The first body turned out to be Namba, but Hutchison couldn't tell who it was until he knelt in the howling wind and chipped a three-inch-thick carapace of ice from her face. To his shock, he discovered that she was still breathing. Both her gloves were gone, and her bare hands appeared to be frozen solid. Her eyes were dilated. The skin on her face was the colour of porcelain. "It was terrible," Hutchison recalls. "I was overwhelmed. She was very near death. I didn't know what to do."

He turned his attention to Weathers, who lay 20 feet away. His face was also caked with a thick armour of frost. Balls of ice the size of grapes were matted to his hair and eyelids. After clearing the frozen detritus from his face, Hutchison discovered that he, too, was still alive: "Beck was mumbling something, I think, but I couldn't tell what he was trying to say. His right glove was missing and he had terrible frostbite. He was as close to death as a person can be and still be breathing."

Badly shaken, Hutchison went over to the Sherpas and asked Lhakpa Chhiri's advice. Lhakpa Chhiri, an Everest veteran respected by Sherpas and sahibs alike for his mountain savvy, urged Hutchison to leave Weathers and Namba where they lay. Even if they survived long enough to be dragged back to Camp Four, they would certainly die before they could be carried down to Base Camp, and attempting a rescue would needlessly jeopardize the lives of the other climbers on the Col, most of whom were going to have enough trouble getting themselves down safely.

Hutchison decided that Chhiri was right. There was only one choice, however difficult: Let nature take its inevitable course with Weathers and Namba, and save the

group's resources for those who could actually be helped. It was a classic act of triage. When Hutchison returned to camp at 8:30 A.M. and told the rest of us of his decision, nobody doubted that it was the correct thing to do.

Later that day a rescue team headed by two of Everest's most experienced guides, Pete Athans and Todd Burleson, who were on the mountain with their own clients, arrived at Camp Four. Burleson was standing outside the tents about 4:30 P.M. when he noticed someone lurching slowly toward camp. The person's bare right hand, naked to the wind and horribly frostbitten, was outstretched in a weird, frozen salute. Whoever it was reminded Athans of a mummy in a low-budget horror film. The mummy turned out to be none other than Beck Weathers, somehow risen from the dead.

A couple of hours earlier, a light must have gone on in the reptilian core of Weathers's comatose brain, and he regained consciousness. "Initially I thought I was in a dream," he recalls. "Then I saw how badly frozen my right hand was, and that helped bring me around to reality. Finally I woke up enough to recognize that I was in deep shit and the cavalry wasn't coming so I better do something about it myself."

Although Weathers was blind in his right eye and able to focus his left eye within a radius of only three or four feet, he started walking into the teeth of the wind, deducing correctly that camp lay in that direction. If he'd been wrong he would have stumbled immediately down the Kangshung Face, the edge of which was a few yards in the opposite direction. Ninety minutes later he encountered "some unnaturally smooth, bluish-looking rocks," which turned out to be the tents of Camp Four.

The next morning, May 12, Athans, Burleson, and climbers from the IMAX team short-roped Weathers down to Camp Two. On the morning of May 13, in a hazardous helicopter rescue, Weathers and Gau were evacuated from the top of the icefall by Lieutenant Colonel Madan Khatri Chhetri of the Nepalese army. A month later, a team of Dallas surgeons would amputate Weathers's dead right hand just below the wrist and use skin grafts to reconstruct his left hand.

After helping to load Weathers and Gau into the rescue chopper, I sat in the snow for a long while, staring at my boots, trying to get some grip, however tenuous, on what had happened over the preceding 72 hours. Then, nervous as a cat, I headed down into the Icefall for one last trip through the maze of decaying seracs.

I'd always known, in the abstract, that climbing mountains was a dangerous pursuit. But until I climbed in the Himalayas this spring, I'd never actually seen death at close range. And there was so much of it: Including three members of an Indo-Tibetan team who died on the north side just below the summit in the same May 10 storm and an Austrian killed some days later, 11 men and women lost their lives on Everest in May 1996, a tie with 1982 for the worst single-season death toll in the peak's history.

Of the six people on my team who reached the summit, four are now dead—people with whom I'd laughed and vomited and held long, intimate conversations. My actions—or failure to act—played a direct role in the death of Andy Harris. And while Yasuko Namba lay dying on the South Col, I was a mere 350 yards away, lying inside a tent, doing absolutely nothing. The stain this has left on my psyche is not the sort of thing that washes off after a month or two of grief and guilt-ridden self-reproach.

Five days after Namba died, three Japanese men approached me in the village of



Syangboche and introduced themselves. One was an interpreter, the other was Namba's husband, the third was her brother. They had many questions, few of which I could answer adequately. I flew back to the States with Doug Hansen's belongings and was met at the Seattle airport by his two children, Angie and Jaime. I felt stupid and utterly impotent when confronted by their tears.

Stewing over my culpability, I put off calling Andy Harris's partner, Fiona McPherson, and Rob Hall's wife, Jan Arnold, so long that they finally phoned me from New Zealand. When Fiona called, I was able to say nothing to diminish her anger or bewilderment. During my conversation with Jan, she spent more time comforting me than vice versa.

With so many marginally qualified climbers flocking to Everest these days, a lot of people believe that a tragedy of this magnitude was overdue. But nobody imagined that an expedition led by Hall would be at the centre of it. Hall ran the tightest, safest operation on the mountain, bar none. So what happened? How can it be explained, not only to the loved ones left behind, but to a censorious public?

Hubris surely had something to do with it. Hall had become so adept at running climbers of varying abilities up and down Everest that he may have become a little cocky. He'd bragged on more than one occasion that he could get almost any reasonably fit person to the summit, and his record seemed to support this. He'd also demonstrated a remarkable ability to manage adversity.

In 1995, for instance, Hall and his guides not only had to cope with Hansen's problems high on the peak, but they also had to deal with the complete collapse of another client, the celebrated French alpinist Chantal Mauduit, who was making her seventh stab at Everest without oxygen. Mauduit passed out stone cold at 28,700 feet and had to be dragged and carried all the way from the South Summit to the South Col "like a sack of spuds," as Guy Cotter put it. After everybody came out of that summit attempt alive, Hall may well have thought there was little he couldn't handle.

***Before this year, however, Hall had had uncommonly good luck with the weather, and one wonders whether it might have skewed his judgment. "Season after season," says David Breashears, who has climbed Everest three times, "Rob had brilliant weather on summit day. He'd never been caught by a storm high on the mountain." In fact, the gale of May 10, though violent, was nothing extraordinary; it was a fairly typical Everest squall. If it had hit two hours later, it's likely that nobody would have died. Conversely, if it had arrived even one hour earlier, the storm could easily have killed 18 or 20 climbers—me among them.***

***Indeed, the clock had as much to do with the tragedy as the weather, and ignoring the clock can't be passed off as an act of God. Delays at the fixed lines could easily have been avoided. Predetermined turn-around times were egregiously and wilfully ignored. The latter may have been influenced to some degree by the rivalry between Fischer and Hall. Fischer had a charismatic personality, and that charisma had been brilliantly marketed. Fischer was trying very hard to eat Hall's lunch, and Hall knew it. In a certain sense, they may have been playing chicken up there, each guide ploughing ahead with one eye on the clock, waiting to see who was going to blink first and turn around.***

Shocked by the death toll, people have been quick to suggest policies and procedures intended to ensure that the catastrophes of this season won't be

repeated. But guiding Everest is a very loosely regulated business, administered by a byzantine Third World bureaucracy that is spectacularly ill-equipped to assess qualifications of guides or clients, in a nation that has a vested interest in issuing as many climbing permits as the market will support.

Truth be told, a little education is probably the most that can be hoped for. Everest would without question be safer if prospective clients truly understood the gravity of the risks they face—the thinness of the margin by which human life is sustained above 25,000 feet. Walter Mittys with Everest dreams need to keep in mind that when things go wrong up in the Death Zone—and sooner or later they always do—the strongest guides in the world may be powerless to save their clients' lives. Indeed, as the events of 1996 demonstrated, the strongest guides in the world are sometimes powerless to save even their own lives.

Climbing mountains will never be a safe, predictable, rule-bound enterprise. It is an activity that idealizes risk-taking; its most celebrated figures have always been those who stuck their necks out the farthest and managed to get away with it. Climbers, as a species, are simply not distinguished by an excess of common sense. And that holds especially true for Everest climbers: When presented with a chance to reach the planet's highest summit, people are surprisingly quick to abandon prudence altogether. "Eventually," warns Tom Hornbein, 33 years after his ascent of the West Ridge, "what happened on Everest this season is certain to happen again."

***For evidence that few lessons were learned from the mistakes of May 10, one need look no farther than what happened on Everest two weeks later. On the night of May 24, by which date every other expedition had left Base Camp or was on its way down the mountain, the South Africans finally launched their summit bid. At 9:30 the following morning, Ian Woodall radioed that he was on the summit, that teammate Cathy O'Dowd would be on top in 15 minutes, and that his close friend Bruce Herrod was some unknown distance below. Herrod, whom I'd met several times on the mountain, was an amiable 37-year-old with little climbing experience. A freelance photographer, he hoped that making the summit of Everest would give his career a badly needed boost.***

***As it turned out, Herrod was more than seven hours behind the others and didn't reach the summit until 5 P.M., by which time the upper mountain had clouded over. It had taken him 21 hours to climb from the South Col to the top. With darkness fast approaching, he was out of oxygen, physically drained, and completely alone on the roof of the world. "That he was up there that late, with nobody else around, was crazy," says his former teammate, Andy de Klerk "It's absolutely boggling."***

Herrod had been on the South Col from the evening of May 10 through May 12. He'd felt the ferocity of that storm, heard the desperate radio calls for help, seen Beck Weathers crippled with horrible frostbite. Early on his ascent of May 24-25, Herrod had climbed right past the frozen body of Scott Fischer. Yet none of that apparently made much of an impression on him. There was another radio transmission from Herrod at 7 P.M., but nothing was heard from him after that, and he never appeared at Camp Four. He is presumed to be dead—the 11th casualty of the season.

As I write this, 54 days have passed since I stood on top of Everest, and there hasn't been more than an hour or two on any given day in which the loss of my companions hasn't monopolized my thoughts. Not even in sleep is there respite: Imagery from the climb and its sad aftermath permeates my dreams.

There is some comfort, I suppose, in knowing that I'm not the only survivor of Everest to be so affected. A teammate of mine from Hall's expedition tells me that since he returned, his marriage has gone bad, he can't concentrate at work, his life has been in turmoil. In another case, Neal Beidleman helped save the lives of five clients by guiding them down the mountain, yet he is haunted by a death he was unable to prevent, of a client who wasn't on his team and thus wasn't really his responsibility.

When I spoke to Beidleman recently, he recalled what it felt like to be out on the South Col, huddling with his group in the awful wind, trying desperately to keep everyone alive. He'd told and retold the story a hundred times, but it was still as vivid as the initial telling. "As soon as the sky cleared enough to give us an idea of where camp was," he recounted, "I remember shouting, 'Hey, this break in the storm may not last long, so let's go!' I was screaming at everyone to get moving, but it became clear that some of them didn't have enough strength to walk or even stand.

"People were crying. I heard someone yell, 'Don't let me die here!' It was obvious that it was now or never. I tried to get Yasuko on her feet. She grabbed my arm, but she was too weak to get up past her knees. I started walking and dragged her for a step or two. Then her grip loosened and she fell away. I had to keep going. Somebody had to make it to the tents and get help, or everybody was going to die."

Beidleman paused. "But I can't help thinking about Yasuko," he said when he resumed, his voice hushed. "She was so little. I can still feel her fingers sliding across my biceps and then letting go. I never even turned to look back."

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## **Everest Revelation: A Clarification**

By Jon Krakauer

In my article "Into Thin Air" I speculated that Andy Harris, a guide on Rob Hall's expedition, walked off the edge of the South Col and fell to his death after becoming disoriented in the rogue storm of May 10. Only minutes before Harris disappeared, I'd encountered him in the blizzard. I spoke with him briefly and then watched him walk to within 30 yards of camp, where he became enveloped in clouds.

Two weeks after the magazine went to press, I discovered compelling evidence that Harris did not walk off the Col to his death and that the person I had met in the storm just above Camp Four was in fact not Harris. In a telephone conversation, Martin Adams, a client on Scott Fischer's expedition, revealed that he, too, had encountered a climber sitting just above the South Col at about the same time I had encountered Harris. In the stormy darkness, Adams couldn't tell who the other climber was, but their conversation, he says, was very similar to the conversation I reported having with Harris. Both Adams and I are now certain that, in my own hypoxic condition, I confused him with Harris.

On July 25, in a four-hour, face-to-face discussion, Lopsang Jangbu, Fischer's head sherpa revealed something that hadn't come up in previous discussions: that he had spoken with Harris on the South Summit at 5:30 p.m. on May 10 approximately the same time I thought I saw Harris near the South Col. By this late hour Rob Hall had been repeatedly calling for help on the radio, saying that Doug Hansen had collapsed on the Hillary Step and that both Hall and Hansen desperately needed oxygen. As Lopsang began descending from the South Summit, he saw Harris, who was himself ailing, plodding slowly up the summit ridge to assist Hall and Hansen. It was an extremely heroic act for which Harris deserves to be remembered.

As I reported, when radio contact between Hall and Base Camp was re-established the next morning, a distraught, severely debilitated Hall said that Harris "was with me last night. But he doesn't seem to be with me now. He was very weak." From this snippet, which I originally interpreted as being the incoherent babble of a severely hypoxic man, it is impossible to say exactly what became of Harris. But the awful truth that he is gone remains.

For two months after returning from Everest, I was haunted by the fact that Harris, who'd become a close friend during the expedition, appeared to have been so near the safety of Camp Four and yet never made it. Unable to let the matter rest, I obsessively mulled the circumstances of his death even after my article went to press which is how I made the belated discovery of my error.

That I confused Harris for Adams is perhaps not surprising, given the poor visibility, my profound exhaustion, and the confused, oxygen-starved state I was in. But my mistake greatly compounded the pain of Andy Harris's partner, Fiona McPherson; his parents, Ron and Mary Harris; and his many friends. For that I am inexpressibly sorry.

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### **Everest Revelation: A Clarification (Cont.)**

*Response from Anatoli Boukreev, July 31, 1996*

Dear Mr. Bryant

I am writing you because I think Jon Krakauer's "Into Thin Air," which appeared in your September, 1996 issue, was unjustly critical of my decisions and actions on Mount Everest on May 10, 1996. While I have respect for Mr. Krakauer, share some of his opinions about high altitude guiding, and believe he did everything within his power to assist fellow climbers on that tragic day on Everest, I believe his lack of proximity to certain events and his limited experience at high altitude may have gotten in the way of his ability to objectively evaluate the events of summit day.

My decisions and actions were based upon more than twenty years of high altitude climbing experience. In my career I have summited Mount Everest three times. I have twelve times summited mountains of over 8,000 metres. I have summited seven of the world's fourteen mountains over 8,000 metres in elevation, all of those without the use of supplementary oxygen. This experience, I can appreciate, is not response enough to the questions raised by Mr. Krakauer, so I offer the following details.

After fixing the ropes and breaking the trail to the summit, I stayed at the top of Everest from 1:07 p.m. until approximately 2:30 p.m., waiting for other climbers to summit. During that time only two client climbers made the top. They were Klev Schoening, seen in the summit photograph (pages 46-47) taken by me, and Martin Adams, both of them from Scott Fischer's expedition. Concerned that others were not coming onto the summit and because I had no radio link to those below me, I began to wonder if there were difficulties down the mountain. I made the decision to descend.

Just below the summit I encountered Rob Hall, the expedition leader from New Zealand, who appeared to be in good shape. Then I passed four of Scott Fischer's client climbers and four of his expedition's Sherpas, all of whom were still ascending. They all appeared to be all right. Then, just above the Hillary Step I saw and talked with Scott Fischer. He was tired and labouring, but said he was just a little slow. There was no apparent sign of difficulty, although now I have begun to suspect that his oxygen supply was, then, already depleted. I said to Scott that the ascent seemed to be going slowly and that I was concerned descending climbers could possibly run out of oxygen before their return to Camp IV. I explained I wanted to descend as quickly as possible to Camp IV in order to warm myself and gather a supply of hot drink and oxygen in the event I might need to go back up the mountain to assist descending climbers. Scott, as had Rob Hall immediately before him, said "OK" to this plan.

I felt comfortable with the decision, knowing that four Sherpas, Neal Beidleman, (like me, a guide), Rob Hall, and Scott Fischer would be bringing up the rear to sweep the clients to Camp IV. Understand, at this time there were no clear indications that the weather was going to change and deteriorate as rapidly as it did.

Given my decisions: (1) I was able to return to Camp IV by shortly after 5:00 p.m. (slowed by the advancing storm), gather supplies and oxygen and, by 6:00 p.m. begin my solo effort in the onset of a blizzard to locate straggling climbers; and (2) I was able, finally, to locate lost and huddled climbers, resupply them with oxygen, offer them warming tea, and provide them the physical support and strength necessary to get them to the safety of Camp IV.

Also, Mr. Krakauer raised a question about my climbing without oxygen and suggested that perhaps my effectiveness was compromised by that decision. In the history of my career, as I have detailed it above, it has been my practice to climb

without supplementary oxygen. In my experience it is safer for me, once acclimatized, to climb without oxygen in order to avoid the sudden loss of acclimatization that occurs when supplementary oxygen supplies are depleted.

My particular physiology, my years of high altitude climbing, my discipline, the commitment I make to proper acclimatization and the knowledge I have of my own capacities have always made me comfortable with this choice. And, Scott Fischer was comfortable with that choice as well. He authorized me to climb without supplementary oxygen.

To this I would add: As a precautionary measure, in the event that some extraordinary demand was placed upon me on summit day, I was carrying one (1) bottle of supplementary oxygen, a mask, and a reductor. As I was ascending, I was for a while climbing with Neal Beidleman. At 8,500 meters, after monitoring my condition and feeling that it was good, I elected to give my bottle oxygen to Neal, about whose personal supply I was concerned. Given the power that Neal was able to sustain in his later efforts to bring clients down the mountain, I feel it was the right decision to have made.

Lastly, Mr. Krakauer raises a question about how I was dressed on summit day, suggesting I was not adequately protected from the elements. A review of summit day photographs will show that I was clothed in the latest, highest quality, high altitude gear, comparable, if not better, than that worn by the other members of our expedition.

In closing, I would like to say that since May 10, 1996, Mr. Krakauer and I have had many opportunities to reflect upon our respective experiences and memories. I have considered what might have happened had I not made a rapid descent. My opinion: Given the weather conditions and the lack of visibility that developed, I think it likely I would have died with the client climbers that in the early hours of May 11, I was able to find and bring to Camp IV, or I would have had to have left them on the mountain to go for help in Camp IV where, as was in the reality of events that unfolded, there was nobody able or willing to conduct rescue efforts.

I know Mr. Krakauer, like me, grieves and feels profoundly the loss of our fellow climbers. We both wish that events had unfolded in a very different way. What we can do now is contribute to a clearer understanding of what happened that day on Everest in the hope that the lessons to be learned will reduce the risk for others who, like us, take on the challenge of the mountains. I extend my hand to him and encourage that effort.

My personal regards,

Anatoli Nikoliavich Boukreev  
Almaty, Kazakhstan

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### **Everest Revelation: A Clarification (Cont.)**

*Reply from Jon Krakauer, August 24, 1996*

Anatoli Boukreev's letter to the editor of *Outside*, dated July 31, 1996, demands a response. Anatoli performed heroically in the pre-dawn hours of May 11, and helped save the lives of Sandy Pittman and Charlotte Fox; I admire him immensely for going out alone in the storm, when the rest of us were lying helpless in our tents, and bringing in the lost climbers. But his behaviour as a guide earlier in the day is

troubling, and I continue to feel quite strongly that it needed to be addressed in print.

After speaking with Anatoli at length and on several occasions, the crucial facts remain indisputable: Anatoli elected not to use supplemental oxygen on summit day, May 10, and after tagging the summit he went down alone ahead of his clients, defying the conventions of responsible guiding. Why would a guide do this? Anatoli's explanation—"I wanted to descend as quickly as possible to Camp IV in order to warm myself and gather a supply of hot drink and oxygen in the event I might need to go back up the mountain to assist descending climbers"—betrays, at best, an alarming lack of judgment.

If Anatoli was concerned that his clients might run out of oxygen, why didn't he carry extra oxygen for them on the way up, instead of carrying nothing at all, not even a pack? He jettisoned his pack early on the climb, around 6:30 a.m., just above the 27,800-foot "Balcony." All the other guides on the mountain wore packs, in which they carried such items as rope, first aid supplies, extra crampons and clothing—the things experienced guides typically carry to assist clients in the event of an emergency. Of the 30-some climbers attempting the summit on May 10, Anatoli was the only person up there without a pack.

If Anatoli was worried about dwindling oxygen supplies, why didn't he suggest to Fischer or Lopsang Jangbu Sherpa (when Anatoli met them on the summit ridge as Anatoli was descending) that they radio Camp IV and request that Pemba Sherpa (who was waiting on the South Col in support for just such an eventuality) start heading up with extra oxygen? It is extremely difficult for me to accept that the most sensible course of action was for Anatoli to rush down alone ahead of the clients, then attempt to come all the way back up with a load of extra oxygen. Climbing to the summit ridge of Everest twice in a single day—without relying on gas, in a raging blizzard—has never been done in the history of mountaineering, and is probably beyond the abilities of any climber, even one as accomplished as Anatoli. I believe—and some of his clients concur—that the clients would have been better served if Anatoli had stayed and assisted them down the mountain. Anatoli did not have a radio (neither he nor Neal Beidleman were given radios; only Fischer and Lopsang carried radios among Fischer's team). Once he abandoned his crew, it was thus impossible for him to even know what kind of trouble the clients might be in, or know where on that huge expanse of mountain they might actually be.

In fact, at 6 p.m. on May 10, when Anatoli "gathered supplies and oxygen," as he describes it, and began his "solo effort in the onset of a blizzard to locate straggling climbers," he was able to climb no more than 600 feet above Camp IV before becoming disoriented in the storm and being forced to descend back to the tents around 8 p.m. without locating anybody. This was a brave and noble effort on Anatoli's part, and is to be commended, but it was completely ineffective, and demonstrates rather dramatically what was wrong with his decision to descend ahead of his clients.

And even though Scott Fischer gave him permission to do so, does Anatoli really think that it was in his clients' best interest for him to climb without using supplemental oxygen? Anatoli is a remarkably strong climber at altitude, but he was paid \$25,000 to perform as a guide, and oxygen would have certainly allowed him to think more clearly and assist clients much more readily. Or does Anatoli somehow believe that he is stronger without oxygen than with it?

Anatoli states, "In my experience it is safer for me, once acclimatized, to climb without oxygen in order to avoid the sudden loss of acclimatization that occurs when

supplementary oxygen supplies are depleted." In truth, once acclimatized, any climber—including Anatoli—would be better off using bottled oxygen on a summit attempt and having it run out late in the day than not using it in the first place. The harmful effects of hypoxia are cumulative; the longer you go without oxygen, the more deleterious the outcome. If Anatoli doubts this, I suggest that he consult any reputable expert in high-altitude physiology, or compare notes with such accomplished Himalayan climbers as Alex Lowe and Ed Viesturs—who have demonstrated that they are at least as strong as Anatoli above 8,000 meters—and wouldn't think of guiding without using gas.

Anatoli also states, "As a precautionary measure, in the event that some extraordinary demand was placed on me on summit day, I was carrying one (1) bottle of supplementary oxygen, a mask, and a reductor.... At 8,500 meters [approximately 27,800 feet], after monitoring my condition and feeling it was good, I elected to give my bottle oxygen to Neal [Beidleman], about whose personal supply I was concerned." This implies that Anatoli was doing Beidleman a favour by giving him this bottle. In truth, Beidleman—who had a full bottle of oxygen at the time, and was already using his own perfectly functioning mask and regulator—neither needed nor wanted Anatoli's bottle, mask, and regulator, which added approximately 10 pounds to the large load Beidleman was already carrying (by that point Beidleman was also carrying two coils of rope he'd taken from the ailing Lopsang, who, like Anatoli, was not using gas). In effect, Anatoli said to Beidleman, "Now that I know I'm not going to need this oxygen, you carry it for me, because somebody else may need it later." Anatoli was simply trying to strip his load down to the bare minimum, because he was climbing without gas and wanted every possible advantage in the horribly thin air above 27,000 feet.

In Anatoli's letter to the editor, he included his climbing résumé. It is a very impressive tally of ascents, but there is a world of difference between being a brilliant climber and an able guide. Throughout Anatoli's defence of his actions he has implied that Scott Fischer fully approved of his guiding style. In fact, Fischer had repeatedly reprimanded Anatoli throughout the expedition for not sticking closer to his clients. On May 7, during Fischer's last satellite phone conversation with his business partner in Seattle, Karen Dickinson, he told her that he was furious with Anatoli for not fulfilling his responsibilities as a guide. The day before, on May 6, in the middle of the Khumbu Icefall, Fischer severely castigated Anatoli in front of one of their clients for being AWOL during a potentially life-threatening situation.

Many of us who were on Everest last May made mistakes. As I indicated in my article, my own actions may have contributed to the deaths of two of my teammates. Anatoli is an extraordinary Himalayan climber, and I don't doubt that his intentions were good on summit day. What troubles me, though, is Anatoli's utter refusal to acknowledge the possibility that he made even a single poor decision. Not once has he ever indicated to me that maybe, just maybe, it wasn't the smartest choice to climb without gas or go down ahead of his clients. Anatoli doggedly insists that he would make the same decisions all over again—in his opinion, he was the only person on the mountain who did everything right. The rest of us fucked up big-time, but not Anatoli.

Such arrogance, I believe, is dangerous for any climber, but it is especially dangerous for one who purports to be a Himalayan guide.

Jon Krakauer  
Seattle

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## **Everest Revelation: A Clarification (Cont.)**

*Response from Lopsang Jangbu Sherpa, August 11, 1996*

I am writing to you in response to the "Into Thin Air" piece written by Jon Krakauer, published in your September, 1996, issue.

I came to Seattle to attend Scott Fischer's memorial service and stayed there throughout the summer. Jon didn't interview me until after he had already written and submitted his "Thin Air" piece. As a result many false and negative allegations were made against my group, led by Scott Fischer concerning the disaster that occurred on Everest on May 10, 1996. In particular, I was singled out as contributing to these tragic events. Krakauer's reputation as an outstanding writer makes his slanderous view of my character and work habits very damaging. Because your readers have been misinformed, I would like to clear up these errors.

My choice to summit Everest without oxygen was questioned by him. I have summited Everest three times without oxygen before this year's expedition, (not two as mentioned), and will continue to do so on future expeditions. Krakauer neglected to mention that on summit day of Rob Hall's 1995 Everest expedition, I broke trail through deep snow and then fixed ropes from the south summit to the top. There I waited for one hour for other team members, who unlike myself, were using oxygen. No one else came.

Scott Fischer did not order me, nor did Sandy Pittman offer a "hefty" cash bonus to short-rope her to make it to the top. On ten other expeditions, I have short-ropped any team member who has trouble. This year it was Sandy. I wanted to ensure that all group members had a good chance of making the summit. This was my goal, our team's goal. I worked very hard on this expedition and all members of my group would agree. I do not understand how Krakauer, involved in a different expedition, could write statements that judge my work habits or intentions.

In regard to the "Goldbrick" comment, you may wish to know that I netted \$2,000 for this expedition, not to mention that fact that to save Sandy Pittman, I gave her my personal oxygen bottle on the way up, at 8,820 meters. I also carried an 80-pound load from Camp III to Camp IV the day prior to the summit bid, which included 30 pounds of other member's personal gear. There was no personal financial incentive for this. Money is not important for me. I always give my best, I am my father's only child and I have many uncles and family. We help each other and live very well in Kathmandu. To be described as a "Goldbrick" is completely false.

I was also referred to as a "showboat" to which I have this reply. Just below the summit of Everest, I anchored my ice axe and fixed a 15-meter rope at a dangerous spot so that all remaining team members could get down safely. I then waited for Scott to arrive. He finally arrived very late and we started down. Just as we reached my ice axe, Rob Hall and Doug Hansen were coming up my rope. After they passed, I sent Scott down and waited next to my ice axe in wind and extreme cold for them to summit and return so that they could get safely down. Once they were off my rope, I left and quickly caught Scott. From the South Summit I physically dragged him down through the storm until he could go no further. There I waited with Scott, determined to save him or die. Finally, he threatened me to save myself, saying he would jump off if I did not go down. I was, in fact, the last person to leave Scott Fischer and Makalu Gau that night. (Jon incorrectly states that three Sherpas were the last.)

In reference to the complaint about the fixing of the lines, let it be understood that on

all expeditions, whoever goes first from Camp IV is supposed to fix ropes. Rob Hall's group left 45 minutes ahead of us. In my group there were two guides who were paid considerably more money than me—Anatoli (Boukreev) and Neal (Beidleman). That these strong professional guides sat on the South Summit waiting for "sherpas" or me to come up and fix lines for them seems ridiculous.

Krakauer makes references to my vomiting, implying that I was weak and unable to do my job; that it affected my performance. This too was wrong. I have been over 8,000 meters many times, and each time I vomit. It is just something that happens to me and has nothing to do with altitude sickness. I have done it on all expeditions. It just happens. I did it at Camp I, II, etc. On the way to the summit, Neal Beidleman saw me vomit and also misunderstood this. He took the load of ropes out of my pack and took off in the lead with Anatoli. I assumed they would fix lines for the group. My job then became that of seeing to the rest of the team, making sure they got to the summit. I in no way "lost sight of what I was supposed to be doing up there..." It would have been very bad for all three guides to go ahead and summit without the others. Again, I was doing my job. I thought that Neal and Anatoli were doing theirs. Also, if I was sick and weak, then why would I wait so long on the summit for Scott, Rob Hall and Doug Hansen? If I was sick and weak, how could I spend seven hours dragging Scott back down from the South Summit?

My name is misspelled and my age misrepresented. So you know, my name is Lopsang Jangbu Sherpa and I am 23 years old.

Finally, I express my profound condolences to the family and friends of the victims.

Respectfully,  
Lopsang Jangbu Sherpa  
Kathmandu, Nepal

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### **Everest Revelation: A Clarification (Cont.)**

*Reply from Jon Krakauer, August 24, 1996*

I regret if Lopsang Jangbu Sherpa feels that he was "singled out as contributing to [the] tragic events" described in my Everest article. He was certainly no more culpable than any of us who were on the mountain last May; indeed, it should be remembered that Lopsang was paid only about \$2,000 for his services, while most of the western guides received between \$10,000 and \$15,000, and guide Anatoli Boukreev received \$25,000. I apologize if my article somehow implies that Lopsang was more to blame than anybody else.

Lopsang has another legitimate beef with me as well: Although I did question him on at least three occasions before writing my article (on May 12 at the Yellow Band above Camp III, on May 14 after the memorial service at Base Camp, and on June 8 at a memorial service for Scott Fischer in Seattle), none of these interviews were very fruitful. On May 12, for example, when I met an exhausted, emotionally devastated Lopsang descending the fixed ropes between Camp IV and Camp III, to all my questions Lopsang simply replied, near tears, "I am very bad luck, very bad luck. Scott is dead; it is my fault. I am very bad luck. It is my fault. I am very bad luck." It wasn't until July 25, when I had the opportunity to speak with Lopsang face to face for four hours in Seattle, that I heard his version of the tragedy in detail. And by that time my article had already gone to press.

During the long interview in Seattle, Lopsang insisted that Scott did not in fact order

him to short-rope Sandy Pittman on May 10, nor was he offered money by Pittman as an incentive for assisting her to the summit (Lopsang did express mild surprise, however, that he received "no money, no thank you, nothing" from Pittman after the expedition for the help he provided her). Lopsang explained that he made the decision to short-rope Pittman entirely on his own, "because Scott wants all members to go to summit, and I am thinking Sandy will be weakest member, I am thinking she will be slow, so I will take her first." The prospect of receiving money from Pittman, he assured me, in no way entered into his decision. I thus stand corrected regarding Lopsang's motivation for short-roping Pittman. But the Seattle interview shed no new light on why he was helping Pittman in the early hours of May 10 instead of moving to the front of the pack to fix ropes according to the predetermined plan. Lopsang acknowledged that he left Camp IV at the front of Fischer's group, carrying two coils of rope to be fixed, but claimed that there was no plan in effect for him or any other Sherpas to fix ropes ahead of the clients.

I feel obliged to point out that one important assertion made by Lopsang in his Letter to the Editor is directly contradicted by statements he made to me, recorded on audio tape, during our long conversation on July 25: In his letter Lopsang denied that he was "sick and weak" on summit day. Yet during our Seattle interview Lopsang told me, "Every mountain I climb, I go first, I fix line. In '95 on Everest with Rob Hall I go first from base camp to summit, I fix all ropes. But this year on summit day I am tired and sick because [the day before] I am carrying 80 pounds, maybe 75 pounds, from Camp III to Camp IV, I am carrying Sandy's telephone. I am also very tired because [on summit day] I take up Sandy together on rope above Camp IV. I am too tired, I vomit, so I tell to Ang Dorje [Hall's sirdar], you fix line. He says OK. I tell to Neal [Beidleman], you take ropes from me."

Another complaint Lopsang made in his letter also requires clarification. He wrote, "Krakauer neglected to mention that on summit day of Rob Hall's 1995 Everest expedition, I broke trail through deep snow and then fixed ropes from the south summit to the top. There I waited for one hour for other team members, who unlike myself, were using oxygen. No one else came." This is certainly true. But Lopsang failed to explain why no one else came: Due to the lateness of the hour, Hall had turned everyone around just above the South Summit. Lopsang, at the head of the line, ignored the turn-around signal and went on to the summit alone, infuriating the usually imperturbable Hall. As Lopsang was sitting on the summit, Hall, guides Ed Viesturs and Guy Cotter, and the other Sherpas were desperately struggling to bring two severely ailing clients (one of whom, Chantal Mauduit, was stone-cold unconscious) down from the South Summit, and would have benefited greatly from Lopsang's assistance. Hall admonished Lopsang sharply for going to the summit alone, and subsequently decided not to offer Lopsang employment in 1996.

Lopsang is an extraordinarily gifted climber, with the potential to be one of the world's foremost high-altitude mountaineers. I respect and admire him tremendously for staying with the dying Fischer as long as he did, at considerable risk to his own life. Lopsang would be an asset to any expedition; I would climb with him anywhere. But at the age of 23, with only four years as a climbing Sherpa under his belt, he still has something to learn about judgment.

Jon Krakauer  
Seattle

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