

HIGH EXPOSURE

*An Enduring Passion for Everest
and Unforgiving Places*

DAVID BREASHEARS



CANONGATE

Edinburgh • London • New York • Melbourne

For my mother

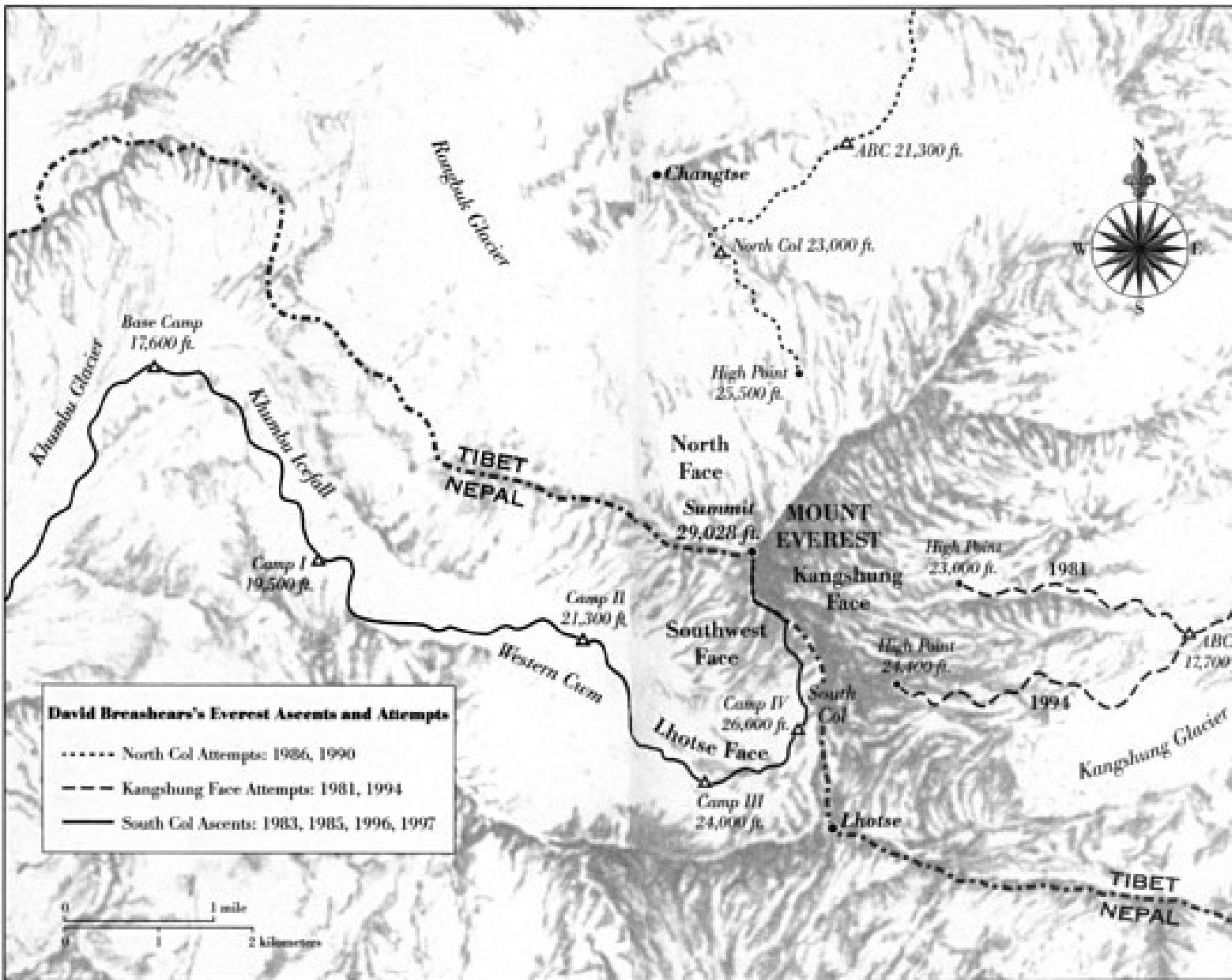
and

*my peerless and indomitable companions on
Mount Everest in 1996*

*Robert, Ed, Araceli, Jamling, Sumiyo, Wongchu, Jangbu,
Paula, Liz, Audrey, and Brad*

*A little learning is a dangerous thing;
Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring:
There shallow draughts intoxicate the brain,
And drinking largely sobers us again.*

–Alexander Pope



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FOREWORD

Most of the world knows David Breashears as an uncommonly intrepid filmmaker: the guy who brought back spectacular IMAX footage from the top of Mount Everest. Others associate his name primarily with *Red Flag Over Tibet*, the disquieting, Emmy Award-winning documentary about the Chinese occupation of the Buddhist homeland, which he made for the PBS series *Frontline*. Among a handful of Hollywood insiders he is celebrated, as well, for being the guerrilla cinematographer who smuggled a 35mm Arriflex into Tibet and surreptitiously filmed scenes that lent crucial authenticity to the big-budget epic *Seven Years in Tibet*.

The renown that Breashears has earned for his work in film is certainly deserved. But to a small, immoderately idealistic community of rock climbers who lived in Colorado in the 1970s (the community of which he and I were part), his most remarkable feat has nothing to do with making movies. Some of us believed—and still believe—that Breashears's defining moment was his authorship of a little-known climbing route, name of Perilous Journey, which rises in the foothills outside Boulder, Colorado. The large-format film, *Everest*, the Emmy Award, his four expeditions to the 29,028-foot summit of Everest—they all pale in comparison with his first ascent of this obscure rock climb, which measures scarcely 100 feet from bottom to top. If you want to understand David Breashears—if you hope to comprehend what really makes him tick—you need to know a little about Perilous Journey.

The forested hills south and west of Boulder bristle with precipitous crags that have long attracted climbers from around the globe. In July 1975, Breashears—then a climbing-obsessed nineteen-year-old—casting about for a suitable challenge—latched on to the idea of pioneering a new route on one of these crags, an out-of-the-way cliff called the Mickey Mouse Wall. The route he envisioned scribed a line up a swath of untrammelled sandstone that, to the casual observer, appears much too steep and smooth to climb. But after careful study of the cliff's geologic idiosyncrasies, Breashears became convinced that the rock had a sufficient number of surface blemishes—feldspar crystals, dime-sized divots, and tiny pebbles of conglomerate protruding from the vertical plane—to allow upward progress, at least in theory.

It was obvious that if the route could be climbed at all, it was going to be exceedingly difficult—right at the limit of what was physically possible at the time. It was also obvious that the absence of deep natural fissures would preclude the placement of aluminum nuts to safeguard his passage over the route's most severe section. If he lost his purchase on any of the minuscule finger- and toehold holds, he would plummet into the jagged boulders that line the base of the cliff.

As it happens, the broad ledge that marks the summit of Perilous Journey can be reached via a routine scramble up a broken section of cliff nearby. Before attempting the route, it would have been a simple matter for Breashears to rappel down the cliff from the top, rehearse all the moves with a safety rope from above, and drill a series of expansion bolts that would erase all the danger from his ascent. But according to the climbing subculture's unwritten ethical codex, the practice of pre-drilling bolts on rappel and unlocking a climb's secrets with a top rope constituted a despicable sort of

cheating. The whole point of doing a route like Perilous Journey was to test one's mettle—challenge not only one's physical skills, but take measure of one's judgment and nerve as well. The nonexistent margin for error was soberly acknowledged, but it was celebrated rather than lamented. Our youthful, self-absorbed zeal, we liked to imagine that the gravely serious stakes set climbing apart from lesser pursuits (such as mainstream sports, or working for a living). No climber in Boulder believed more passionately in the unforgiving tribal ethos than Breashears.

On the chosen day (as he recounts later in this book), he bushwhacked up to the bottom of the Mickey Mouse Wall at dawn, accompanied by his friend Steve Mammen, who'd agreed to belay him. The morning smelled of pine and juniper. Nobody else was around. Breashears laced up his painfully tight climbing shoes, tied a rope to his waist harness, and dipped his fingers into a pouch of gymnast chalk. Then he stepped up to the cliff and laid his hands on the brick-red sandstone. The climbing became diabolically difficult almost immediately. Crimping lentil-size pebbles with his fingertips, Breashears muscled and balanced his way slowly upward, shifting his weight from hold to minuscule hold with meticulous care, unraveling the route's defenses inch by vertical inch. Although the physical strain on his digits and forearms was nearly overwhelming, he maintained his poise and Zen-like focus, betraying none of the tremendous effort required simply to grip the rock, to say nothing of making upward progress.

Twenty feet above the talus, in the middle of an overhanging bulge, Breashears arrived at the route's first substantial hold: a shallow, angled slot wide enough to grip with both hands. This hold also presented him with his first opportunity to place protective hardware: He managed to wedge a nut into the slot, albeit not very securely, clipped a carabiner to it, then ran his rope through the carabiner. In the event that he fell, the dubious nut would almost certainly be plucked from the rock like a berry from a vine, but, Breashears recalls, "It was oddly comforting to see the rope running through this solitary, useless piece of protection."

The difficulties resumed immediately past the slot, and continued with scant respite for another twenty feet. Then, unexpectedly, he encountered a square-cut shelf about as thick as the spine of a hastily written book. When he pulled himself up to its relative security, he had reason to believe that the climb's major trials were over. The shelf stuck out from the wall no more than an inch and a half, but above it the cliff leaned back at an angle slightly less than vertical. By standing on the shelf and pressing his chest tightly against the rock, he could actually drop both hands to his sides and give his arms a desperately needed rest after twenty minutes of intense, nonstop effort. Better yet, the sandstone above his head was pocked with a series of Swiss cheese-like holes that looked big enough to accept his fingers to a depth of half an inch or more. Perilous Journey seemed to be a fait accompli.

When Breashears reached up and felt the lowest of the pockmarks, however, he was alarmed to discover that it was much smoother and shallower than it had appeared from below. He reached higher, and then higher still, but none of the holes provided the kind of handhold he was willing to trust his life to. He was four stories off the ground. A slip from this point would send him hurtling into the boulders below.

The gravity of his circumstances inspired him to redouble his concentration. A more thorough examination of the wall overhead turned up a rounded, jelly bean-size blister that he could wrap two fingertips around. Awkwardly reaching across his body until his right hand was above his left shoulder, he clenched the jelly bean, levered his body upward, and stretched as far to the left as he could. He smeared the soles of his boots onto a nearly featureless patch of sandstone, shifted his weight onto his left foot, and thereby managed to touch a small scoop that was slightly deeper than the other pockmarks were, and had a tiny ridge across its lower lip on which he could hook the calloused pad of a fingertip. Twenty inches above this pathetic hold was a substantial ledge. Committing his life to the tips of two fingers on his left hand, he cranked for all he was worth, snaked his right hand up

the ledge, and wrapped his paws securely around its reassuring contours. A glance overhead revealed that the rest of the route was covered with large, in-cut holds. Within minutes he stood triumphant atop Perilous Journey.

It was a visionary ascent, one of the boldest achievements in the annals of North American mountaineering, done in impeccable style. A handful of other climbs of comparable difficulty existed but seldom, if ever, had such extreme difficulties been undertaken in circumstances where the climb was unlikely to survive a fall. Yet, to nobody's surprise, Breashears wasn't hounded by journalists for interviews. No mention of Perilous Journey appeared in any newspaper, local or otherwise. He received no remuneration or formal recognition of any kind. Word of the climb, however, filtered gradually through the mountaineering grapevine. His ascent was reenacted in pantomime, move by move, in climbers' camps from Yosemite to the Tetons to the Shawangunks of New York. He had achieved something he valued much more than wealth or fame: the respect and admiration of his peers.

In writing this foreword, my intent is not to nominate Breashears for sainthood. I have spent enough time in his proximity to know that he is impatient, driven, incredibly tightly wound. I have witnessed his explosive temper; indeed I have felt the sting of it firsthand. But he possesses, in abundance, a quality perhaps best described as "character." And I admire this trait even more than I admire what he has achieved in the arenas of film and mountaineering. Although I have disagreed with him both publicly and privately, I have always been impressed with his willingness to act on his convictions—even when his ire has been directed at me.

Two decades after I first met David Breashears on a crag above Boulder, chance brought us together again on the slopes of Everest during what turned out to be a very bad season. When disaster struck, he placed the most important film project of his career in jeopardy, without hesitation, in order to provide assistance to those of us who were in trouble. That the creator of Perilous Journey emerged as one of the heroes of the 1996 Everest calamity came as no surprise to me.

Jon Krakauer
Boulder, Colorado
February 1999

PROLOGUE

EVEREST 1996



High winds scour the Southwest Ridge of Mount Everest.

As a mountain climber, I've always felt more drawn to the top than driven from the bottom. I was twelve years old when I came upon the famous picture of Tenzing Norgay standing atop Mount Everest. From that moment on, I equated climbing Everest with man's capacity for hope. Indeed, there's nothing so exhilarating, so purifying, as standing on its summit more than 29,000 feet above the sea, surveying the planet below. Before May 1996, I had climbed Everest twice, and each time had experienced the singular sense of rebirth that the mountain has to offer.

But Everest also offers the finality of death. On the morning of May 10 my *Everest* IMAX Filming Expedition resolved to go up the mountain and help bring down survivors of an icy calamity that had left eight people dead. Over the next several days our expedition climbed up Everest struggling with bitter cold and bitter truths and a deeply felt grief for our friends who would lie frozen in death forever. There's no place to bury the dead on an ice-bound mountaintop.

In the week following Everest's crudest disaster, other expeditions broke their siege and went home. Why did we stay on and ascend the mountain once more? On reflection, I think it was because I felt a strong kinship not only with the dead but with the mountain itself. I hated seeing it stand in disarray, under scrutiny from the world's media; I wanted redemption from the tragedy. I couldn't accept leaving, not after all my years on the mountain, not with reasonable weather and our enormous stock of equipment and human skill, not without trying one more time. Call it a specialist's pride: I felt it was up to us to finish—safely—this unholy episode. I wanted to prove that Everest was—in its grandeur—an affirmation of life, not a sentence of death.

So, with the aid of a London-based weather service, we watched and waited for a break in the weather at the top. The jet stream, which sweeps across Everest in the spring, was howling around the summit, and no man-made instrument can accurately forecast when it will blow off the mountaintop and move north over the Tibetan plateau. For days, there was little change. I was dismayed but not astonished; I've seen the jet stream pound Everest for fifty uninterrupted days. Still, I searched reports for the tiniest shard of hope, anything to signal a positive turn. Nothing.

Eventually we decided it was time to move out from our Base Camp at 17,600 feet: better to face the mountain in our boots than sit around in our tents brooding about it. On the slopes, we'd see for ourselves what the mountain held for us, and we'd let the mountain tell us when to climb—or not to climb. So we struggled into our gear and headed up—the entire IMAX filming team—camp by camp.

We climbed back to the upper camps with the threat of the wind roaring ominously above at eighty to ninety miles per hour. In mountain climbing, it's not the wind around you that frightens you, but the wind that awaits you. Much of our trepidation was, to be sure, psychological. After all, skilled Everest veterans had died up there just weeks before.

At dusk on May 22, the day we reoccupied the high camp, Camp IV at 26,000 feet on the South Col, the winds died out. It was a rare and welcome moment as we pitched our tents; we could actually stand upright, and we could continue that night toward the summit minus a goodly portion of our fear.

The sun descended and the tent walls darkened. Though we were utterly exhausted, none of us could rest. Throughout the evening we readied our climbing gear and the film equipment and melted ice to drink. There's no malingering at the South Col camp. It's too high, too barren, and the air is too thin. There's no earthly reason to be there except to gain Everest's summit. We'd spent two years preparing for this summit attempt, training our bodies and minds, making checklists, customizing and winterizing and lightening the massive IMAX camera and everything else within our grasp.

Now the weather had given us the break we needed.

At 10:35 P.M. I unzipped my tent.

No matter how many times I've made this journey, it always begins in the same way. It's pitch-

dark outside as I unzip the door. What little heat has pooled inside spills out into the frigid night and the sense of safety and security I feel in the tent vanishes with the warmth. On my hands and knees I crawl into one of the world's most hostile environments, into my ultimate arena—the last 3,000 vertical feet to the summit of Everest.

The stars were out that night but there was no moon. It was dark and cold, minus 30 degrees; the night was still. Looking above, I could barely see the outline of Everest, a dark, lopsided pyramid cut out from the stars.

I sat on a small rock to put on my crampons (sharp metal spikes attached to my boots), which dug into the snow and ice. Bare-handed, I checked and rechecked to make sure the heel and toe clips were biting through the thin neoprene of my overboots, an extra layer of insulation over my climbing boots. I hadn't planned on using overboots up there. But after the catastrophe I felt inordinately vulnerable, not just to the cold, but to my own mortality. I've always relied on strength of mind to drive my body, and the body has always been good with plenty of horsepower. But the deaths in that disastrous climb reminded me that I was forty years old now. I had borrowed the overboots from a friend, Joe Krakauer, who had survived the May 10 storm.

I walked among the nylon domes of the heavy-weather tents, hoarsely shouting that it was time to go. The tents were already alive, sides huffing out with the movements inside, zippers scraping in the silent night. Sherpas and team members gathered their gear, and I mentally ran through my own checklist one more time: two full bottles of oxygen, spare mittens, ice axe, and, most important, my compass fixed with a heading so that even in a storm I could find my way home. There was no idle chatter in the air, only tension and focus on the mission.

The South Col is a broad expanse of rocks, a hard, flat, forbidding surface. I knew that this featureless terrain had been a deadly problem for the descending climbers on the night of May 11 because, without a compass to guide them, there were no directional clues in the blizzard's whiteout. Lost and desperately searching for high camp, eleven climbers had collapsed at the edge of the 8,000-foot precipice of Everest's Kangshung Face overlooking Tibet. There, a few hundred yards from safety, one woman, Yasuko Namba, had frozen to death, and a Texan named Beck Weathers had suffered mutilating frostbite.

I crossed the South Col to the first icy incline, awkwardly duck-walking on crampons scraping against fist-sized rocks and bulletproof ice. Like my team, I knew I was hypoxic (starved for oxygen), severely sleep-deprived, dehydrated, and malnourished. Yet here I was, commanding my body to work as hard as it had ever worked. That makes for tough going. But after an hour of robotically placing one foot in front of the other, I finally found my rhythm. All I could hear was the raspy sound of my labored breathing as I inhaled and exhaled through my oxygen mask, my breaths keeping pace with each step.

Yet this time there was no matching sense of purpose and exhilaration, only the grim knowledge of the littered battlefield we would find as we climbed higher. I'd been involved in body recoveries on Everest before, but there had been nothing in my training to prepare me to pass through the open graveyard waiting above: This time the graveyard held friends.

There are other bodies-bodies of people I'd never met-scattered from Advance Base Camp to points near the summit. Several hundred yards below Advance Base Camp, at 21,100 feet, a climber lay near the route, wrapped in a blue tarp. And for years, before the wind finally blew her remains over the Kangshung Face, every Everest expedition climbing on this route had passed Hannelore Schmatz, a skeletal landmark just above the South Col with her brown hair streaming in the wind.

Also near the South Col camp lay a Czech and, higher up, a Bulgarian. Years earlier, on the glacier below, I'd gathered the frozen bodies of two Nepalese climbers.

The North Col route, on the Tibetan side, was similarly strewn with climbers who had never com-

down. In 1986 I'd helped carry a Sherpa friend buried by an avalanche to Rongbuk monastery for cremation. And one of my documentaries followed the search for the most celebrated of the dead British legend George Mallory, who vanished near the summit in 1924. Wherever they lie, the dead mutely testify to the sinister ease with which a day on Everest can come undone.

Despite the snow and ice, Everest is as dry as a desert; the sun and wind quickly mummify human remains. They come to resemble nothing so much as that ancient iceman discovered years ago in an Italian mountain pass. I've dealt with them before, and hardened myself to the harsh knowledge that the line between life and death is mercilessly thin in the frigid and rarefied air of this unforgiving place.

But this night was different; those waiting ahead were people I had known and respected. We knew exactly where one of the best-known Everest guides, Rob Hall, had died, due to his final radio transmissions. From other reports we had a good idea where Scott Fischer lay. Doug Hansen died near Rob and we thought we'd find him, too. But Andy Harris was still missing. Our team had had nearly two weeks since the tragedy to face our fears and sorrows and anger. Still, it's one thing to deal with your demons at the foot of the mountain, quite another to see comrades lying dead in the snow.

Hours passed as I resolutely climbed higher and higher, with little sense of gaining height because of the darkness beyond the circle of light from my headlamp. I felt alone and detached, in a trance-like state, as I always have on these summit slopes. But when I looked back I could see the shafts of light from my companions' headlamps, and it was comforting to know that they were there, making the solitary journeys with me.

Sporadic gusts of wind swirled loose powder snow and I would pause with my head bowed east away from the icy spray. Prior to dawn, at 27,100 feet, below the gully that leads to the Southeast Ridge, I was startled by a blue object off to my right. I was hypoxic and briefly confused. From Anatoli Boukreev's report I'd known that Scott Fischer would be near this spot. But the intense effort of the night had smothered that thought. And now my dulled brain struggled to make sense of it: How could someone as strong and resourceful as Scott end up here? It seemed dreamlike; it couldn't be real.

I didn't go near him. On this day I needed to conserve myself, and distance was a defense. By the light of my headlamp I could see that he was lying on his back across a narrow snow-covered terrace, one leg outstretched, one bent, and his arm tightly clenched across his chest. His body position was awkward, slightly contorted. I could readily imagine Scott resisting to the end, his strength and will alive slipping away, until finally he lay back and death stole over him. Anatoli, who tried to save Scott on May 11, had lashed a backpack over his friend's head. I was grateful for that. I didn't want to see the ruin of Scott's handsome, friendly face.

I turned, climbing onto the Southeast Ridge at 27,600 feet. It's a vivid sight, peering over a knife-edged crest down two vertical miles of the Kangshung Face into Tibet. It seemed as though I could see halfway across the continent from this vantage point. Sun rays lit the tallest summits of the Himalayas first, one at a time, like candles glowing above ink-dark valleys. To the east, the world's third highest peak, Kanchenjunga, stood rimmed in crimson. And much closer, Makalu, the fifth highest, shimmered orange and pink.

Three hard hours later we reached the South Summit and the traverse to the Hillary Step, a forty-foot cliff at 28,700 feet. The route here is wild and exposed, along a narrow corniced ridge, the last barrier to the summit. I had planned to film this dramatic traverse as a centerpiece for our film. At its start, between a wind-blown cornice and a rock wall, lay a red-clad figure. He was lying on his side, buried from the shoulders up in drifted snow. His left arm rested on his hip and his hand was bare.

It was Rob Hall; no mistaking him, even from a distance. He was wearing a red Wilderneck Experience jacket like one I'd owned. His red Patagonia bib overalls bore a distinctive checkerboard

pattern in the weave which I had noticed two weeks earlier when I descended past him and his party clients. He was facing east with his back to the wind.

My first thought was that—typical of Rob—the site seemed well ordered. It was clear that he had made a determined attempt to survive. He'd removed his crampons to prevent them from conducting cold through his boots. His oxygen bottles were arranged carefully around him. Two ice axes were thrust vertically into the snow. One I knew belonged to Rob, the other—we later learned—to his assistant guide, Andy Harris.

The last thing you want to do in a storm is lay down your ice axe. Snow will cover it, or it will slide away, or you'll simply forget where you put it. Upright and at hand like this, the axes showed that Rob and Andy—or at least one of them—had been thinking clearly in the early hours of their desperate bivouac.

I knelt in the snow next to Rob. I couldn't see his face and so felt a little distant from him. Then I looked at his bare hand, still undamaged by the elements. What was a seasoned mountaineer like Rob doing without a glove? A glove is a climber's armor. How had Rob's vanished?

I looked down at my own heavily mittened hands and pondered sadly. So much of Rob's life had mirrored my own. We were roughly the same age, with a similar level of experience, ability, ambition, and confidence. Both of us were driven to make a life in the mountains, a life on Everest. But now Rob lay dead.

Studying his bare hand, I suddenly understood the dread Rob must have faced, the terrible knowledge that he was so cold and weak that he'd lost control of his own life. He'd been alive and uninjured, but the wind and cold of that awful night left him hypoxic, hypothermic, and frostbitten, and so he'd lain trapped in this remote outpost, utterly unable to save himself. I couldn't imagine a worse nightmare.

Mingled with my sorrow, I must confess, were feelings of anger toward Rob which I had carried with me all the way from Base Camp. I knew in my bones that the mistakes of May 10 could have been avoided, that hubris had likely doomed Rob and his party. Of all the guides, Rob had been the most outspoken about his prowess, and the most proprietary about the mountain. He had sometimes acted as if he were a part-owner of Everest, an attitude I found disturbing. Everest is many things to many people, but owned is not one of them.

His clients had come for a climb, not to take serious risks. Rob's expertise was supposed to be the warranty against danger and Rob had let them down. There was an ugly premonition of disaster. We'd watched fifty-five people swarm the fixed ropes to Camp III before their summit push. That was the day I'd decided to take our expedition back down the mountain and wait for the weather—and the crowds—to clear before attempting the summit ourselves. So I was angry at the sorrow and chaos caused by these tragic deaths. That's not how things are supposed to work for clients paying to climb this great mountain.

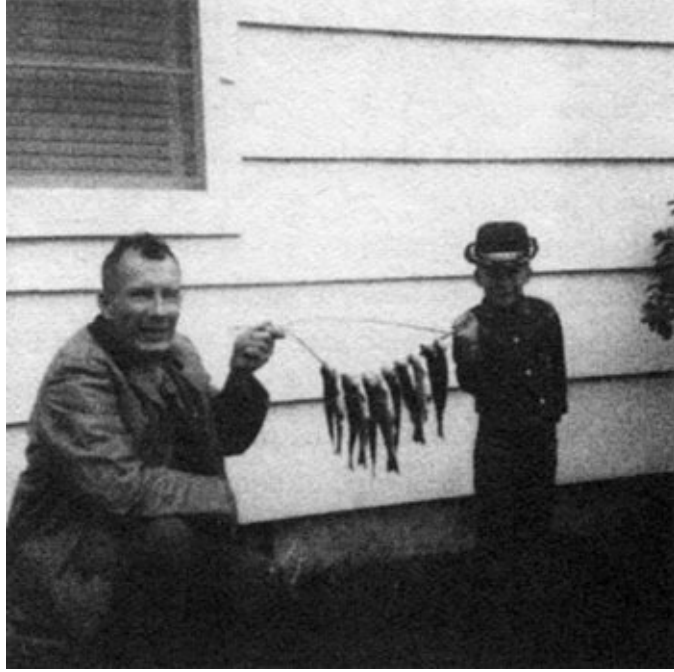
I looked at Rob, and at the bare, open hand that would never draw on another mitten or hold an ice axe again. I held up a handful of snow and let it blow away like ashes. As I sat with Rob and thought about his valiant attempt to save a client and the questions that needed answering, I saw myself lying there: Would I have done the same?

Suddenly the Sherpas appeared, coming up the ridge carrying my camera equipment. *Time to move on*, I silently announced to Rob. I couldn't film this spot. His death had made it hallowed ground for me; this was one piece of Everest he could, at last, call his own.

I stood and put on my pack. Then we began to climb the final sweep of the mountain.

THE KID

CHAPTER ONE



Dad and me, just after fishing, cheyenne, wyoming, 1961.

From the moment I first saw the picture of Tenzing Norgay, I've felt the tug of Everest. We were living in Greece at the time, when my family was still a family; and it was both the best and worst time of my life. It takes a twelve-year-old's wide-ranging imagination to see his destiny in a picture of a mountain and a stranger atop it, but that is exactly what I envisioned that morning.

Greece was just my latest home. My father was a military officer, a major in the United States Army. That made me a military brat from day one; by the time I had graduated from high school, I had lived in towns from Georgia to Greece to Colorado. I have a dim early memory of an afternoon in Fort Benning, Georgia, with tiny white clouds of parachutes emerging from the rear of a shiny twin-tail troop transport, and my mother and I trying to guess which parachute carried my father. I loved my mother. She was Scottish and English, proud, resilient, and strong-willed. Back then, though, it was my father who was my hero. He jumped out of airplanes. He wore a uniform and carried lethal weapons. He trained men to fight and prepared them for battle. Beyond that, he was an old-fashioned outdoorsman who hunted, fished, and by God drove a pickup truck. In short, he was the perfect uniformed, spit-polished role model—until the time came when I had to look behind the olive drab and the major's gold insignia.

In my family I was the third son and two years older than my sister. What mattered to my father was that I was the runt of the litter, Major Breashears's scrawny little kid, the comic-book ninety-eight-pound weakling right out of the Charles Atlas ads. I lacked the athlete's grace; in playground games, when they chose sides, I was always the last one picked. I made my mark in school by being clever and, later on, even a little feisty. But the truth is that until I reached seventeen, there was scarcely a muscle on my body.

My father believed, literally, in the philosophy of swimming or sinking. When I was five and we were living in Cheyenne, Wyoming, I was too small to touch the bottom of the pool at the Francis Warren Air Force Base. So one day Dad simply threw me out into the pool and ordered me to swim back. I kept sputtering and thrashing toward the side where he stood—and he kept bending down and throwing me back out. Finally, after choking down a few mouthfuls of chlorinated water, I decided to flail over to the pool's opposite side and cling to the gutter.

"David!" he roared. "David! Swim over here right now."

But I hung on for dear life. It was one of the first times—but definitely not the last—that I didn't want to go near him.

So I was a shy little kid when I started elementary school in Cheyenne. It took me a long time to get my footing in school. Among other things, I simply didn't like being indoors. No, the glorious moments of my boyhood came outdoors, when we went camping near Jackson Hole, farther north in Wyoming. The first great mountain I ever saw was the Grand Teton, standing against the Wyoming skyline. I was astonished at how high and jagged the peak was. It looked like some impregnable castle—and yet a ranger told us that climbers had cracked its riddle and were scaling the mountain that very moment with pitons and ropes. I remember squinting into the sun over the mountain to try to spot these marvelous creatures but of course I couldn't see anyone. All I could do was marvel at what an amazing thing that was to do: climb a mountain.

Otherwise my brothers and I fished and played in the lakes and streams around Jackson Hole. That should have been fun, but my father usually wasn't interested in fun, only whether something was done right. That's the military mind at work—the least foul-up can cost lives in the platoon. If one of us didn't cast a line properly or committed some other minor infraction, he'd treat it as if we had violated an order and punish us, using a belt on my brothers and a thunderous scolding or rolled-up newspaper for me. I remember thinking that my sister and I were his favorites because he spared us that pigskin belt.

When I was ten, my dad was transferred to Greece, where he worked with the Joint U.S. Military

Advisory Group. This was in 1966, when the Cold War had boiled over into Vietnam, and Greece itself was caught up in political turmoil. But for us the craggy country was a great adventure and was a time of discovery and unbounded energy. My friends and I were allowed to camp out alone, explore ancient ruins or climb around bombed-out World War II German fortifications. Across the bay from our apartment rose snow-clad Mount Olympus, and I remember longing to climb it and search for traces of mythic gods and ancient warriors.

Soon after we arrived in Greece, the military staged a coup, the one made famous in the Costas Gavras film *Z*. There were tanks in the streets and soldiers with machine guns. The aircraft carrier *USS America* of the Sixth Fleet sailed into the harbor at Thessaloniki to protect American citizens and evacuate them if necessary. It was the biggest ship in the harbor. They docked the admiral's launch where my friend Van van Way and I spent weekends fishing off the pier. We soon talked the sailor into giving us a tour of the carrier and a ride in the admiral's launch. I was a major's son.

This was when I first began leaving our apartment alone. We lived in the densely populated, hillside area of Thessaloniki, an old city of winding, cobblestoned streets, narrow alleys, and little gates. It was a man-made maze, the ideal training ground for a boy to find new routes—and then find his way home. Each time I ventured out I went farther and farther afield, training myself to always memorize the way back to the apartment, to never overlook a landmark. It was all the more challenging because I didn't speak Greek and few of the locals spoke English. I'd see a ruin on a far-off hill and try to find my way to it, always mindful that a safe trip home depended solely on my memory. I didn't know it at the time, but this marked the beginning of my mountain training.

Meanwhile, I was still getting lessons in the bare-knuckled ways of my father. One Saturday he made slingshots for Van and me out of wood and bicycle inner tubes.

"Whatever you do with these, David," he warned, "don't break any glass." He knew what tempted young boys.

I was attending a private American school at the time, Pinewood, and each day our bus climbed a steep, winding road to the school's secluded location in the forest. Van and I immediately jumped on the city bus and rode up into the hills near our school and hiked to an abandoned house concealed in the forest. We tried to shoot out the windows in the building with the slingshots, but the rubber bands were too stiff to draw, so we decided to knock out all the windows by the more direct method of hurling rocks.

We were so engrossed in our assault that we didn't notice a thickly built Greek man approaching us. Suddenly he appeared at our side, grabbed us by the ears in an iron grip, and hauled us off into the forest. Van started bawling and pleading as four other men gathered with our captor in a circle around us. I just wanted Van to stop; showing fear wasn't going to get us anywhere. It seemed the louder he wailed, the madder they got.

They talked over our heads in Greek, deciding what to do, and then dragged us down to our school and had the gatekeeper there telephone our parents. I was terrified, not of the Greeks any longer, but of my father. I feared I'd just earned my first whipping with the pigskin belt.

Van's father picked us up at the school gate. Back home I sat in my father's study explaining everything to him in a quavering voice. He sat silently until I was finished. Then he stood up, leaned his hands on the desk, his face close to mine, and said, "David, I want you to take me up there and show me that man."

My father was trained in hand-to-hand combat, and he was said to have carried that training in his bars now and again. He'd been knocked unconscious once in a barroom brawl in Germany, but more often than not it was he who came out on top. He had a reputation for being a very tough and determined man.

We drove back up into the hills. The Greek who'd caught us smashing windows walked out of the

woods to meet us; he was the owner of the abandoned house. It was clear that he was thinking the American was going to teach his son a lesson. When he got out of his truck, my father turned to me and calmly said, "Wait here." The two of them walked off into the forest. A short time later, my father returned alone.

I quickly got the picture: No Greek was going to push Major Breashears's kid around. This wasn't a matter of paternal protective-ness but of primitive pride, and it frightened me.

My father's harshness escalated. Returning from a day trip to assess Greek defenses near the Bulgarian border he tried to run over a dog that chased our truck through a village. It was a bizarre scene, my father and I in his truck, swerving back and forth, a battle between my dad and a dog. I was mortified when he circled back to try again. As I look back on it, for me it marked the beginning of the end of our family life.

The violence in him boiled over one night when we heard him and my mother arguing furiously in the kitchen. Soon my mother was screaming for help. My brothers charged down the hall with baseball bats to attempt her rescue, but my father just flung my brothers back down the hall. Finally one of our neighbors summoned the local police. Dad threw them out, too.

At that point I made the ostrich's decision: I simply refused to acknowledge what was happening because to acknowledge it was to admit that my world was falling apart. But I also know that I made a more profound decision, deep down inside: Don't become what you behold.

My father's erratic, abusive behavior continued for several days and nights and at one point things became quite dangerous; my eldest brother found my father's handgun and was ready to defend our family. Blessedly it all ended one evening, without violence, when my father sat us all down on the living room sofa. Pointing at my mother, who sat in an armchair next to us, he said evenly, "I don't care what you say, Ruth. Our children are going to decide whether I go or stay."

I couldn't speak. I wanted desperately for him to leave, but how do you order your own father out of the house? My brothers sat in silence while I sobbed; my sister got up and sat on my mother's lap. My father just stood there, watching us, awaiting our response. Finally he stormed out the front door slamming it behind him. None of us moved; we sat still, staring at the closed door. An enormous sense of relief coursed through me and I stopped crying. Would he simply disappear? I wondered. Could it really be this easy?

Moments later the door was flung open and there he stood, angry and terrible. "Wait a minute!" he shouted. "This is my house. I don't have to leave my own house!"

The scene fades to black after that, like the ending of a sad movie. I don't remember what we did, I don't remember what my father did. I simply blanked it all out. I know that he continued to share our house for some weeks.

Through the years, my father's shadow hung over me like a malediction and became a source of deep and abiding fear. Grim memories would periodically surface. I used to have profound and disturbing dreams in which I was groping my way out of that dreadful darkness toward some sliver of light glowing in the distance.

To this day, my brothers and sister and mother and I have never spoken of the chaos he wrought in our lives. I only know that, before my eyes, the hero of my young life had transformed, full-blown and bellowing, into a monster. That was the end of our family's life as I had known it.

It was during this bleak time that I discovered the book *Mountains* and the photo of the Sherpa Tenzing Norgay atop Mount Everest. I was transfixed. Tenzing's pose on that barren slope of rock and snow—the highest point on the face of the earth—bespoke honor and hope and transcendence. It imparted directly to me a promise that up there, on that forbidding mountain, lay a path of clean and simple nobility.

I clung to that sturdy image. I'd open the book and there was my security, my sanctuary. No matter

how difficult my family life was, Everest somehow offered hope. I was enthralled by accounts earlier attempts on the mountain from the Tibet and Nepal sides. I memorized details of the first successful ascent in 1953. Other boys imagined they were Namath or Seaver; I dreamed I was Norgay.

It wasn't long before my mother packed us children into our Pon-tiac Bonneville and drove off. We slept in the car that night—it was safer there—then soon boarded a plane for the United States. My father flew to Arkansas where his mother lived, thinking we were headed there. But my mother rerouted us to Canada, where we found haven with friends from Greece who lived in the beautiful farm country along the banks of the St. Clair River.

My mother was worn out and traumatized and needed to rest. After two months by the river she felt stronger, and we returned to the familiar landscape of Cheyenne. Old friends from our previous stay there, Colonel Roy Wasson and his wife, Liz, opened their home to us and for several months we lived out of suitcases in their basement while my mother looked for a job.

Money was our biggest problem. My father had kept all of our furniture, all of our possessions including my *Mountains* book. He never sent one check for alimony and only a few for child support. Moreover, because he'd been sent overseas as a military adviser, he couldn't be served with legal papers. The dismal truth is, we rarely heard a word from him. It seemed that by stepping out the door of our apartment in Greece, we had ceased to exist for him.

My mother soon found a job. Though she hadn't worked for some time, she had the necessary skills: She could type ninety-five words per minute. Within two months she had passed the civil service exam and landed a good post with the secretary of state at the state capitol. Slowly, we began to reconstruct a normal life.

That meant another new school for me. I quickly became reacquainted with my grade-school friend Danny Oaks, also the son of divorced parents and a blessedly kindred spirit. Every man remembers his first woman, of course; but even further back than that, he remembers his first real boyhood pal, and the adventures they shared. Danny and I glued model airplanes together, worked on go-carts, hunted for gophers with pellet guns. But what we really liked to do was build bombs.

We had Danny's basement for a laboratory and, since firecrackers were practically free in Wyoming, a ready supply of gunpowder. We started with small stuff, for example launching plastic ships loaded with cherry bombs out on Sloan's Lake. Then we graduated to more serious business. In those days you could order underwater fuses from the back pages of comic books, giving us the capacity to make two-by-five-inch pipe bombs. After unloading countless strings of firecracker packing in the powder and slowly screwing on the ends—we knew to soap the threads to reduce friction—we had the bombs ready for transport to our detonation area.

My mother had rented a house across from the rodeo grounds which annually hosted Frontier Day, a regional rodeo dubbed "The Daddy of 'Em All." We cut a hole in the fence, and down where the broncos and Brahman bulls tested their riders during the summer months, Danny and I tested our carefully assembled creations. After burying the bombs in the dirt, we'd run fifty feet of wire to a nine-volt battery to trigger the explosions. We were careful—even scientific—about it and never sought to destroy property—just to create gigantic craters out of the soft, loamy earth.

The rodeo grounds proved useful for one other passion of mine: winter survival and camping. As Arctic fronts buried the arena in snow, I would tunnel deep into tall drifts and practice hollowing out a snow cave until my icy jeans were as hard and stiff as armor.

Every fall as I awaited the fierce wind and the biting cold of the Wyoming winter, I read stories of the great mountain men and trappers of the American West. They were often misfits, isolated by choice and supremely self-sufficient. They had a keen sense of weather and of danger—and how to avoid problems with both. They weren't thrill-seekers. They didn't plunge over waterfalls. They didn't ride the rapids in a crude log canoe unless they had to. The idea was to stay alive.

I'd joined Danny's Boy Scout troop, mainly for the chance to explore the wilderness and climb rocks. I really couldn't get enough of it. Even when there were no troop outings, Danny and I would badger his mother into driving us twenty-five miles out to Vedauwoo in the Medicine Bow National Forest, where we'd spend whole weekends scouting the woods and mountains. Deer were plentiful and so were the predators. Danny and I spent one very long night trading off as sentries after a mountain lion loped past our pup tent.

At an age when we most needed guidance, each of us had to find his own way through the wilderness. From the distance of time I can see now how the camping trips and even the bonfire experiments were ways to invent our own reality as we engaged in the kind of adventures we imagined we might have enjoyed with our fathers.

I managed to get my hands on a coil of old hemp rope for climbing. Neither of us knew a damn thing about mountain climbing, of course; all we had to guide us were pictures in library books. On Sunday, I opened the Cheyenne newspaper to a photo of a man rappelling over a cliff in that classic alpine style called *dulfersitz*, with the rope run between his legs and looped across his shoulder. We immediately applied ourselves to replicating the procedure on the rocky pinnacles scattered around Vedauwoo—and came home with nasty rope burns on our necks and hands for our troubles. Although we could mimic the pictures, we didn't know how to wrap the rope securely around our bodies or—frankly, on that matter—the first thing about safety precautions. It's lucky my mountain career didn't end in Vedauwoo that day.

Descending was one thing, getting up another. Danny was more interested in fly fishing and duck hunting than climbing, so my first real ascent was done alone, unroped. I left Danny in camp and started up a 150-foot spire of randomly stacked granite blocks. The climbing was more like scrambling but a slip would end fatally. Twenty-five feet from the top, the rock reared up nearly vertical and I suddenly found my next handholds hanging out of reach. I tiptoed onto a half-dollar-sized ledge, leaning against the wall of the cliff. I reached high—and stopped. I saw that once my toe left that hold I risked being unable to climb back down. Even then, I understood that retracing a risky route could be perilous if not impossible.

I weighed the risks against the gain and made my choice. As I had done in the Greek mazes, I carefully memorized the way back—and stepped up. The moment my toe left that rock I experienced a tingling surge of feelings: the flush of fear, the intoxication of the unknown, and, above all, the exhilarating pleasure of self-discovery.

From the top I waved down to Danny as if I were Tenzing poised on the summit of Everest. It was the first time in my life I remember doing something that I thought was extraordinary.

Near the end of junior high school I persuaded my mom to let me go to the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) in Lander, Wyoming. The course was too expensive for us, so I wrote to the legendary founder, Paul Petzoldt, who granted me a partial scholarship. My mom put me on a bus in Cheyenne with my brand-new Kelty frame pack from the L.L. Bean catalogue. I was feeling self-assured when I stepped off the bus in Lander, proud of my climbing experience and my new pack. But I was a little scared, too; I had no way of knowing how I'd measure up.

NOLS was a remarkable experience. Traversing the Wind River Mountains we learned how to use a backpack, how to cook, how to build a fire in the rain, how to use a compass and read a topographic map. It was my first experience with a real ice axe, and I learned how to climb snow and how to self-arrest, a vital technique for stopping yourself when sliding down a snowy slope. And I finally learned how to rappel properly and spare myself the rope burns.

We grew more fit by the day as we traversed the steep mountain trails. At one point a course-mate injured his ankle and had to be evacuated. I was deemed too small to help carry his stretcher out over the high passes. That hurt. But near the end of the six-week course I was chosen to lead our patrol

With no instructors to guide us, and no food except some flour and whatever fish we could catch, our team had to chart a twenty-mile route to the trail head. We made it.

I hated to leave—especially, I think, because my family in the interim had moved again, this time to Denver. Once again, I found myself a stranger in a new school. Still, my mom's new job in advertising sales steered me into the mountains. It seemed that an acquaintance in her new office, Ward Woolman, was an amateur climber. When my mom told him about my interest, he invited me to join his friends to climb on a small cliff near Golden. It was a cold, blustery day and the air was rich with the smell of hops from the Coors brewery. I was wearing wool knickers and old-style Austrian climbing boots called *Kron-hoffers*; I must have looked like an alpine waif with a rope. But I didn't want to impress these adults so that maybe they'd take me along again. We spent the day climbing with ropes on short, steep routes, and, for the first time, I realized that I could do some things that grown men couldn't—and that I earned respect because of it. I started training in earnest.

Every day after school, while other kids went to football practice or swam laps, I went buildering. Derived from the term bouldering, which is the art of climbing short, extremely difficult routes unroped on relatively low rocks or boulders, buildering was the urban climber's training. The brick walls of our three-story apartment building provided practice routes. The masons had placed the bricks haphazardly, creating hundreds of quarter-inch holds. I climbed on them daily, building finger strength, discipline, and precision in my footwork. When I mastered the brick wall, I searched Denver for other challenges, discovering training grounds hidden in plain sight beside city sidewalks. My favorite spots were the natural stone walls of the Observatory near Denver's Botanical Garden. Natural undulations and fis-sures in the large sandstone blocks and the curve of the thirty-foot-high walls made it like climbing a real cliff.

Meanwhile, I attended Thomas Jefferson High School, a radical departure from my school in Wyoming. Everything was bigger, louder, faster. I was so used to being the outsider I didn't even bother trying to fit in. I was physically and psychologically unsuited for team sports; I couldn't possibly answer to a coach—or any sort of male authority figure, for that matter. I answered only to myself and sometimes to my mom. If I wanted As in class, I got them; but I felt no need to excel on anyone else's terms.

It was a jangled time, the age of The Who, Led Zeppelin, and Deep Purple. Pink Floyd was huge at high school; we were all explorers on the Dark Side of the Moon. There was marijuana for some, LSD for others. The drugs were turning harder and meaner all the time, and I avoided them.

Besides, I was otherwise hooked. I spent my spare time boulder-ing, buildering, and reading about climbing, figuring out what I'd need in order to test my skills on a real mountain. I'd replaced my virtually useless hemp rope with Gold Line, 150 feet of stiff twisted nylon, which purportedly stretched to absorb the force of a climber's fall. I'd also bought a few carabiners—metal snap links for attaching the rope to anchors in the rock—and several pitons—alloy spikes placed in the rock as anchors to stop a fall. Then I studied the guidebook to select a route that seemed about the right degree of difficulty for my first real climb.

A friend, Hank Barbier, and I got a ride from his mother to the Dome, a granite outcrop near the mouth of Boulder Canyon. Our target was a climb called the Bulge, rated a solid 5.7 on a scale that went up to 5.11. The guidebook assured us it was easy except for a protruding bulge near the middle of the first rope-length. But as we crossed the river on a length of irrigation pipe, the 200-foot-high hummock of rock rising before us looked anything but easy. I'd thought my training in belaying and rappelling at NOLS would be sufficient to tackle the Bulge, yet as I watched the climbers on a different route using pitons, I understood that our shiny new gear revealed how little we knew. I realized that my brand-new Gold Line might not be my safety line at all, but only a sort of useless decoration for whomever was leading.

Both of us wanted to take the sharp (lead) end of the rope—but we were each afraid. Leading your first climb is a moment of high anxiety. Finally we agreed I should take the first lead.

Wind whistled down the canyon as we set off. Back then climbing harnesses were still a luxury like specialized rock shoes; thus the rope was tied around my waist with a bowline knot, and my feet were encased in my 1950s-era *Kronhoffers*. Bravely imitating pictures of seasoned belayers, my friend paid out hanks of rope while I scrambled up a low-angle crack.

Soon I reached the dreaded Bulge. Mercifully a piton had been hammered into a crack and led me there. I used one of my carabiners to clip the rope in, then delicately climbed and traversed eight feet higher until I was awkwardly bent over the Bulge, stuck, unable to go up, and unable to see my feet. I clung there for several forlorn minutes with a sharp wind buffeting me about, searching the rock for clues to the puzzle, fully aware of my precarious position, but unwilling to retreat.

Suddenly I was airborne. The piton held, but Hank had fed out too much rope and I plummeted a good twenty-five feet, smacking into the steep slab below. Without a harness to spread the shock, the rope around my waist dug in and nearly cracked my lower ribs. So I hung there, too embarrassed to feel any pain and unable to breathe, until Hank finally lowered me to the ground. He was badly shaken; it's often worse to watch a fall than to take one. He asked if we should quit and go home. I wanted to but said no. I knew I had to go back up or risk losing my nerve. I'm sure it wasn't pretty, but I managed to get over the Bulge on the second try, climber's passion intact.

I started scuffling around the cliff formations near Boulder and met David Waggoner, the only other boy at my high school who climbed. Like Danny Oaks, David was being raised by a single mother. We were in the same class and shared the same birthday. When I became old enough to drive, I'd borrow my mother's car and tell her that David and I were going over to the Observatory to practice climbing for a few hours. Then I'd disconnect the odometer and we'd race forty miles northwest to Boulder.

While our classmates went to football games and homecoming dances or took advanced placement courses for college credit, David and I gained experience on increasingly difficult climbs high above Boulder or in Eldorado Springs Canyon. We were consumed with our training, with learning the craft and technology of safe ascent, and with reading about the legendary climbers. It wasn't the usual high school fare but I thought that our adventures, esoteric as they were, called for more character and control than it took to knock helmets on a football field. Some of the most profound satisfactions of life come at those moments when your destiny—your immediate destiny—hinges strictly on your craft and abilities. After all, our mistakes carried serious consequences.

Occasionally we encountered veteran rock climbers who owned more reliable Kernmantle ropes, racks of modern equipment, and had authored first ascents of routes we could only dream about. At the base of Cob Rock one day, we caught our first glimpse of a pioneering climber named Pat Ameringer. We got to meet a few legends, too: the most prominent was a math professor named John Gill who applied gymnastic training to rock climbing. I'd read about him. He was more than six feet tall, could do one-finger pull-ups, and had fashioned dozens of the most difficult short climbs in the U.S. while soloing, unroped, during family vacations. I was struck by his modesty and his discipline; many of his climbs have never been recorded or repeated.

Another serious influence on my developing style came via the Chouinard climbing equipment catalogue of 1972, a slender publication with a Chinese landscape painting on the cover. Its author, the revered rock and ice climber Yvon Chouinard, called for "clean" climbing, proposing that climbers disavow pitons and bolts that scarred or otherwise altered rock. Instead, he advocated the use of metal nuts of various shapes and sizes which slotted into cracks without damage to the rock and could be recovered by the second climber on a rope. He reminded readers of the edict of John Muir, the late nineteenth-century poet-environmentalist: "Leave no mark except your shadow."

This ethic of purism and self-control made a profound impact on the climbing community—and on

me as well. It was one more life lesson I was gaining in the mountains that another teenaged boy might learn from his father. This made my climbing bittersweet: I was learning to enjoy and respect the outdoors but without my father to bear witness.

My most memorable climb back then was a multipitch route in Eldorado Springs Canyon christened the Great Zot. It was pure adventure, a youthful foray into the unknown. Neither David nor I had ever attempted such a long route or stood on top of the sandstone prow called TI, short for Tower One, at its finish. The climbing was more time-consuming and more devious than we had the experience to plan for. It was pitch dark by the time David joined me on the summit 600 feet above the river, and we had no lights or any clear idea of how to get down. It never occurred to us to call for help; that's the last thing any climber wants to do. There was no one to hear us anyway. And so we started down what we hoped was the descent gully, rappelling over short drops, tiptoeing blindly along a scant ledge, clinging to small trees and shrubs, guided mainly by gravity and touch. Suddenly a magnificent harvest moon rose up from the plains, lighting our way as if it were high noon. What a gorgeous sight, looking back up at the summit aglow in the light of that moon. I felt a deep sense of accomplishment as we crossed the footbridge to the dirt road and descended through the vast, empty canyon.

Two years passed. I paid the barest lip service to school. I got average grades. I didn't go to the senior prom. I didn't even bother to have my picture taken for the yearbook. Climbing was all-consuming. It wasn't a lifestyle for me, it was a way of life—reality etched in a craggy vertical landscape, exotic and mysterious. Up there, you needed special skills to survive. Climbing had its own language and a literature all its own and rules which led to reward or punishment. Climbing held the consequences of one's own actions—something I'd never seen my father face.

I was a climber and a climbing aficionado. After school I'd take the bus to the Denver Public Library, dig out books about mountaineering and read them during class, on the bus, and before falling asleep at night. An obscure book entitled *The White Spider* by Heinrich Harrer was one of my favorites. It recounted one of the most daring climbs ever made, the first ascent in 1938 of the treacherous, ice-plastered North Face of the Eiger. Another significant influence was Hermann Buhl's *Nanga Parbat Pilgrimage: The Lonely Challenge*. Buhl, an Austrian, was one of the great Himalayan climbers, celebrated for soloing the final slopes on the first ascent of Nanga Parbat (26,660 feet). Reinhold Messner's *The Seventh Grade* was a particular inspiration. Published in the 1970s, Messner's book caught my attention for its stress on moving from one level of ability to the next—from mastery of rock to mastery of ice, from short climbs to big ones. Further, he was uncompromising about the benefits of physical training, something most American climbers were just beginning to take seriously. He also verged on being branded a lunatic because of his astonishing ability and bold solo climbs but he was never reckless. He was the first man to solo Mount Everest and to climb it without supplemental oxygen.

I became a student of Everest, absorbing everything possible about the earliest attempts on the summit and on through the saga of the big siege-style expeditions of the 1970s. Tom Hornbein's *The West Ridge*, filled with dazzling photographs and evocative prose about the first ascent of Everest's West Ridge in 1963, is a masterpiece. And, again, that picture of Tenzing Norgay continued to stir my blood. If anything, I was more impressed than ever by Tenzing and Hillary's climb.

Books about climbing led to books about explorers and discovery. Everest was called the Third Pole, so I scrutinized man's struggles at the other two poles. Looking back, I can see I'd embarked on a search for a moral code. I was intensely curious about the way people behaved in extreme situations and what constituted right and wrong in the wilderness where the laws of civilization no longer existed. I wanted to know how others had responded to the stress and chaos of an adventure gone wrong.

I was riveted by Captain Scott's account of his ill-fated journey to the South Pole in 1911 and 1912. Scott's British expedition hoped to beat Norwegian Roald Amundsen's team to the South Pole and claim for Britain a glorious first. In the end, however, after months on foot in subzero temperatures, they reached the Pole thirty-five days after Amundsen's party had planted the Norwegian flag. They all died on the return journey, three of them within eleven miles of their nearest supply depot. Scott kept writing till the very last and his diary spoke to me as if it were the voice of a ghost. I was deeply touched by the self-sacrifice of the frostbitten man Captain Oates, who knew he was a burden to the team. "I am just going outside and may be some time," he said to his comrades. Then he walked out onto the ice.

Despite Scott's legend, I admired even more another explorer, Ernest Shackleton. It was Shackleton who returned home from an Antarctic epic with every one of his men alive. In South Island describes how their ship was crushed in the pack ice, and how he managed to lead his crew to safety on Elephant Island, then set off in a small open boat across the world's worst seas for a journey of 8000 miles. Three months later he returned to Elephant Island to retrieve his men, as he had promised he would.

I rounded out my reading with books about Rudolf Nureyev. I was thoroughly impressed by his grace, sense of craft, and dazzling skill. I was already beginning to look on climbing not just as a sport, but as a form of expression. The quality of the ascent was becoming as important to me as the ascent itself. When you first begin climbing, it's natural to sweat and lunge and slap your way to the top. But young as I was, I was no longer a novice. I wanted to make my climbing an expression of competence and grace.

Lunging for holds was especially unappealing to me. In climbing vernacular, a lunge is a dynamic move, or dyno. Some made dynos a specialty, suddenly exploding upward to slap for a hold. I'd rarely seen it done gracefully. To me it was a desperate act, lacking purpose and control, ill-suited for the routes I aspired to climb. It also seemed a little flamboyant. I was much too shy then to pass judgment out loud on anyone else's methods, but for myself and my technique I practiced static moves carefully reaching to the next hold in a controlled manner, over and over and over again. I was rewarded much sooner than I expected.

Late in the spring of 1974, David and I drove up to Eldorado Springs Canyon. Graduation day was drawing near for our class. Some kids were going on to college, others were lining up jobs, some were even getting married. Vietnam was over, so the draft was no longer a concern. In my case, the future was a blank slate.

Hiking along the trail that snakes beneath the overhangs of Redgarden Wall, David and I stopped to watch a pair of climbers attempting to free climb an old aid route called Kloberdan. During the 1950s and 1960s many of the steepest, most difficult climbs had been accomplished with aid, i.e., by driving pitons into cracks in the rock and attaching nylon stirrups, a short rope ladder, to stand in. By the 1970s the trend was to free climb those classic routes by climbing without aid, using only your hands and feet on the rock. The rope was not to be used for any assistance, only to catch a fall. Kloberdan was one such challenge.

The crux, the most difficult section on the climb, was an overhanging ten-foot roof which had repulsed numerous free-climbing attempts. Naturally, then, it was the challenge of choice that season. One man, Steve Wunsch, had managed to finish it after several days of effort, with a series of swinging dynamic moves. No one, including Wunsch, could duplicate his performance.

On this particular afternoon, an extraordinary climber and track athlete named Roger Briggs was dangling forty feet above the trail, having his go at Kloberdan. Roger and his brother Bill were among the elite climbers of Colorado in those days, and they walked that walk around Eldorado Springs.

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