

SNOW

IN THE



KINGDOM



ED WEBSTER

MY STORM YEARS ON EVEREST



Front Cover: Ed Webster leading the Jaws of Doom crevasse at 23,000 feet during the first ascent of the Neverest Buttress. Mount Everest, Tibet, 1988

Photograph: © Robert Anderson

Frontispiece: Chomolungma, Goddess Mother of the World © Carol Fraser

Title Page: Ang Zangbu Sherpa at 22,000 feet on Everest's West Ridge Direct

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SNOW IN THE KINGDOM, My Storm Years on Everest

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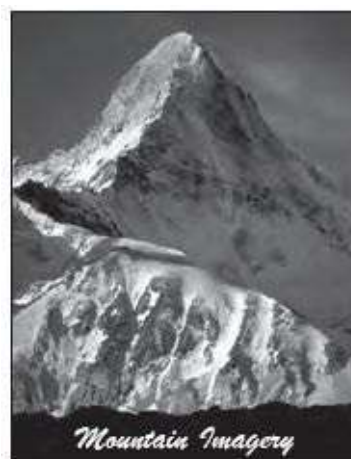


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About the Author

ED WEBSTER, born March 21, 1956 in Boston, Massachusetts, is a well known American climber, author, photographer, and lecturer. After graduating from Colorado College in 1978 with a B.A. in Anthropology, he was a contributing editor of *Climbing Magazine* from 1984 to 1994. He has authored two popular guidebooks, which include three editions of *Rock Climbs in the White Mountains of New Hampshire*, and *Climbing In The Magic Islands*, about the Lofoten Islands in Arctic Norway. His articles and photographs have appeared in such diverse publications as *The New York Times Sunday Magazine*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Popular Mechanics*, *Rock and Ice Magazine*, *Rolling Stone*, and *Climbing Magazine*; and in the books *50 Classic Climbs of North America*, *Ascent*, *Heroic Climbs of the Himalaya Alpine-Style*, *Everest, the Best Writing and Pictures*, and *World Mountaineering*. In addition to the three Everest expeditions described in this book, Ed is a veteran of five other Himalayan expeditions—to Bhutan, Nepal, and Pakistan. In 1992, he was the first American mountaineer to climb in Mongolia, where he made the first ascents of several unclimbed peaks.

Ed was awarded the 1988 Seventh Grade Award for “Outstanding Achievements in Mountaineering” from the American Mountain Foundation; the 1990 Literary Award, for excellence in mountaineering writing, from the American Alpine Club; and the 1994 David A. Sowles Award, for saving the life of a fellow climber, also from the American Alpine Club. He lives with his wife and daughter in Maine.

Ed Webster also lectures frequently on his Mt. Everest experiences as an inspirational speaker to clubs, schools, universities, and at corporate events. Please email info@mtnimagery.com to make a lecture inquiry, or for additional information. Thank you.



Above: Ed Webster in 1988 atop the Pang La pass in Tibet, heading toward the Kangshung Face of Mount Everest. Photograph by Joe Blackburn.

Below: 2013 portrait (25 years later) taken in Italy. Photograph by Jochen Hemmleb.



Quotes

We had already. . . taken time to observe the great Eastern face of Mount Everest, and more particularly the lower edge of the hanging glacier; it required but little further gazing to be convinced—to know that almost everywhere the rocks below must be exposed to ice falling from this glacier; that if, elsewhere, it might be possible to climb up, the performance would be too arduous, would take too much time and would lead to no convenient platform; that, in short, other men, less wise, would attempt this way if they would, but, emphatically, it was not for us.

—**George Mallory, *Mount Everest, The Reconnaissance, 1921***

The passions of the long trail bring out the best in men and the worst, and all in scarlet; and which the law of compensation, which keeps life livable, provides that in the after-memories which form existence, only what is pleasant survives, I hold that it is unfair to nature and the blessed weakness which make us human to divert by one hair's breadth in any record of the trail from facts as you saw them, emotions as you felt them at the time. To distort or hide, in deference to any custom, or so-called sense of pride or honor, simply is to lie. The tragic moments in the heat of the trail's struggle *the event as it affected you as you then were*—to note that with all the passions or heroism, the beastliness or triumph, of the moment—must not such a record in the end turn out fair? And true . . . can be?

—**Robert Dunn, *The Shameless Diary of an Explorer***

A mountaineer may be satisfied to nurse his athletic infancy upon home rocks, and he may be happy to pass the later years of his experience among the more elusive impressions and more subtle romance of our old and quiet hills. But in the storm years of his strength he should test his power, learn his craft and earn his triumphs in conflict with the abrupt youth and warlike habit of great glacial ranges.

—**Geoffrey Winthrop Young, *Mountain Craft***

Foreword

Lord Hunt of Llanfairwaterdine

For a mountaineer whose active life is long since over, one of my delights is to be kept in touch with the aspirations and achievements of younger generations of climbers who continue to reach for the limits of skill and daring on mountains. For myself, I have long discovered, as I hope they will, that there is a great deal more to be enjoyed in the mountain environment than climbing them by the hard ways.

Of the many expeditions whose members have paid me the compliment of making me their Patron the 1988 International Everest Expedition is one of the most remarkable. As was the case with the Matterhorn in 1865, the sensation created by the first ascent of Mount Everest in 1953 has been followed by numerous climbs on that mountain which have not been deemed worthy of a mention by the news media. But there have been a few exceptions; one of these was the epic achievement in 1985 on Everest's East (or Kangshung) Face by Ed Webster with his three companions. They attempted a route of unknown difficulty, which they had viewed in a photograph taken from some distance. They were a team of four men with no reserves; they used no oxygen; they did not have the support of Sherpas; they employed a bare minimum of technical equipment; they were exposed to the dangers of bad weather and variable snow conditions. This band of heroes went to the very limits of human endeavour.

The question remains: was it worthwhile? Only they themselves can answer this at the personal level. More generally, I believe that it was. I am full of admiration for the outstanding achievement of their team in pushing through a new route of exceptional difficulty on this much-climbed mountain. In the future, Everest may become as commonplace a climb as the ascent of the Matterhorn by its Hörnli Ridge. But these men have shown the world the high value of courage, determination and comradeship in adversity—of challenging the near-impossible. The world stands in need of such examples.

I am honoured to have known them.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John Hunt', is centered on the page. The signature is written in a cursive style and is flanked by two horizontal lines that extend outwards from the ends of the signature.

Aston, Henley-On-Thames

England April 2, 1998



John Hunt

Leader, 1953 British Mount Everest Expedition
Patron, 1988 International Everest Expedition

Introduction

*Great things are done when men and mountains meet.
This is not done by jostling in the street.*

—William Blake

Thomas F. Hornbein

As this 20th century closes, more than a thousand pairs of feet will have trod upon Earth's highest point. Although for each of the many who now aspire to summit Everest, the effort is a serious and challenging undertaking, in the overall history of man's courtship with this mountain only a handful of moments of special creativity—those meetings when “great things are done”—shine forth as precious gems in the total matrix of human striving at the top of our planet. The tale told here by Bill Webster about what he, Robert Anderson, Paul Teare and Stephen Venables accomplished on the Kangshung (East) Face in 1988 describes an endeavor that is among those special moments on my personal list of landmark Everest events.

Among these events are Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay's first ascent on May 29, 1953. Yet summiting is not an essential criterion. I would cite, for example, Edward F. Norton's remarkable climb above twenty-eight thousand feet without the use of supplemental bottled oxygen in 1924, an altitude not to be exceeded for nearly three decades. And from that same expedition we are left with the mystery of whether George Mallory and Andrew Irvine might have actually reached the summit before they disappeared.

For those at the cutting edge of mountaineering or indeed any act of creativity, uncertainty regarding outcome is an essential ingredient to the undertaking. Thus once Everest was climbed, the next stage in the game was the search for new, more challenging ways to its summit. Among subsequent climbs that raised the bar were those of the Southwest Face by Doug Scott and Doug Haston in 1975, the Kangshung Face by a large American team in 1983, and the tenacious efforts to find a way through the forbidding gauntlet of obstacles on the Northeast Ridge.

And then, in 1980, Reinhold Messner's solo ascent over four days from the base of the North Col without supplemental oxygen augured a revolutionary change in style for climbing Everest. Now there was an alternative to the ponderous siege tactics that characterized earlier efforts. In 1986 Erhard Loretan and Jean Troillet in a forty-five hour round-trip journey up the *Super Couloir* on the North Face, further exploited that capacity for skilled, acclimatized mountaineers to move quickly over difficult terrain in the rarefied atmosphere at the top of the world.

In 1963 Willi Unsoeld and I made the first ascent of Everest's West Ridge and the first traverse of a major Himalayan peak. I would like to believe that our adventure helped set the stage for the climb which is the culmination of this book. Though our effort perhaps anticipated what was to come mainly in the small size of our team and the extent of commitment on our summit push, there are important differences. We West Ridgers were part of a classical expedition, each successive camp being placed and stocked with the help of Sherpas. And we used supplemental oxygen; the first ascent without bottled oxygen would come fifteen years later, by Messner and Peter Habeler.

Each of these climbs is a piece of the creative history that underpins why I look upon what Bill Webster and his companions accomplished on this new route on Everest's Kangshung Face as a beautiful example of what David Brower, marveling at the magic of the human soul, described as “the

inclination to inquire, this drive to go higher than need be, this innate ability to carry it off, the radiance in the heart when it happens....” It’s not just the boldness of a new route, one where the mountains of difficulty and danger would give pause to most of the world’s best climbers. But along with that boldness (some would say foolhardiness, and not without justification) was style: four savvy mountaineers, no Sherpas, no radios, no supplemental oxygen. Then, after days of punishing effort getting to the South Col, the final determined push for the summit stretched the metaphorical cord connecting Webster, Venables and Anderson to the world below—almost to the breaking point.

Getting up, remarkable though it was, seems but preamble to the ultimate challenge: getting down. Here, exhausted bodies and poorly functioning brains summoned that inner will to survive, combined with it an inexplicable luck (“Luck is what you make it,” a Nepali told me in 1963). In a small way, this final, climactic struggle of these three (compelled predominantly by Ed) brings back memories of Shackleton’s incredible Antarctic epic in 1914 -15. All these elements combine to give us one of the more precious moments in our history with Mount Everest, transforming Ed Webster’s account into a story that elicits admiration and adds meaning to our lives.

Yet Ed’s story is more than Everest. Although we share common roots (and routes) on crags above Boulder, Colorado, and on the granite verticality of Longs Peak’s East Face, Ed is someone I have come to know other than by reputation only in the last decade. This book is primarily about his captivation with Everest, covering three separate attempts upon its summit, but it evolved from the death in his arms of the young woman he loved, Lauren Husted, following a fall in the Black Canyon of the Gunnison. His memorial to her, perhaps in part an almost suicidal search for his own salvation from grief, was to climb alone a new route up the Diamond, the vertical upper wall on the East Face of Longs Peak. This climb, *Bright Star*, was both Ed’s tribute to Lauren and the beginning of a search for salvation as his dreams carried him on to Everest.

One more comment would I make before you embark upon Ed’s journey. This book is about one man’s venture through a phase of life that is intense in its searching outward for something lurking inside. Ed Webster is a consummate photographer; in a certain sense he also writes pictures, seeing both vast panoramas but also their tiny, lovely parts: the flowers, the smells, the people. His perspective complements Stephen Venables’ fine chronicle of their Everest ascent, *Everest Kangshung Face*, and we experience the same events through another set of eyes and emotions. For me the journey with Ed has been more than climbing yet another mountain. I have been privileged to journey with one who sees the world in ways different from my own, a person who takes me to places and in spaces I would otherwise not have known.



Seattle, Washington
July 1, 1998



Tom Hornbein on Zumme's Thumb, Longs Peak, Colorado. Jim Detterline

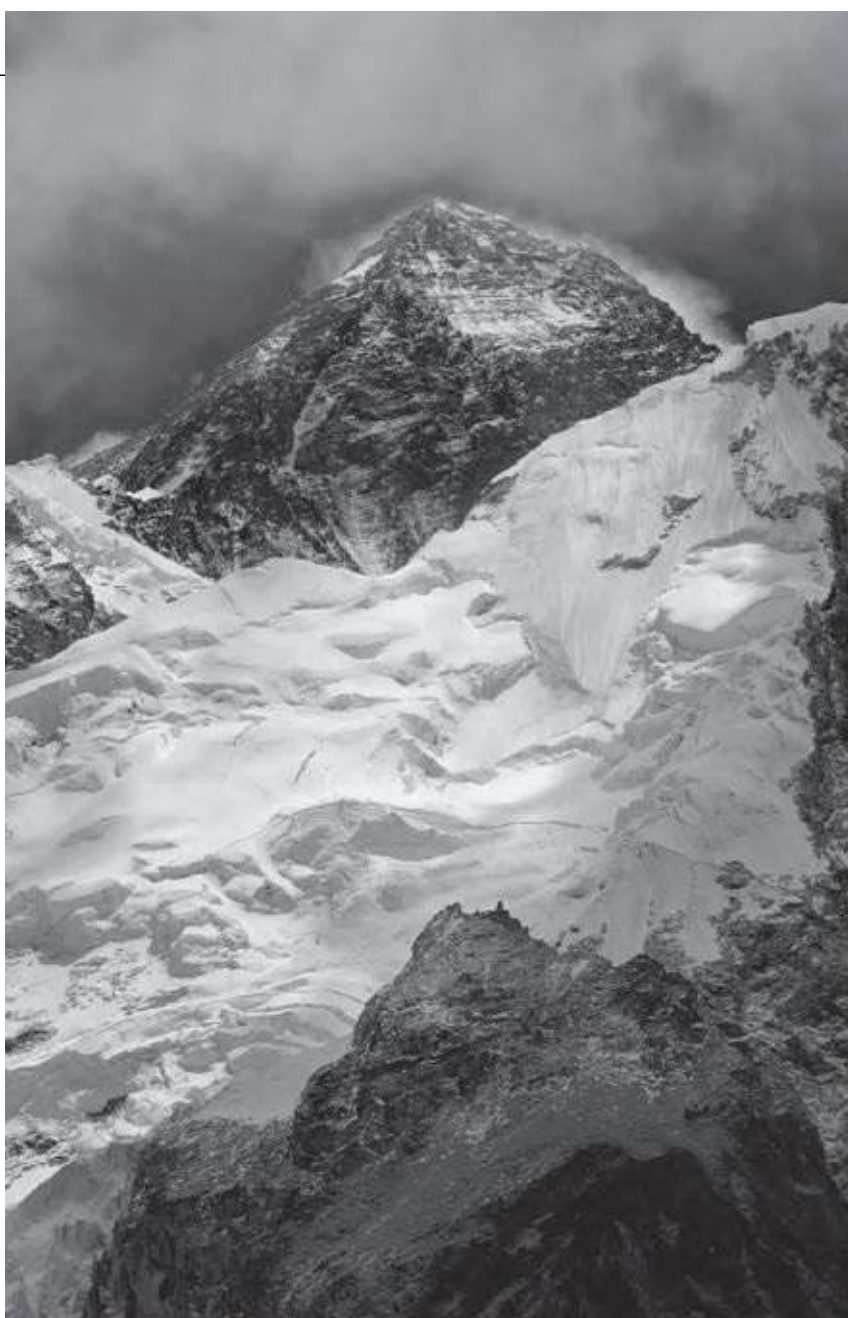
Prologue - An End and a Beginning



*Security is mostly a superstition . It does not exist in nature,
nor do the children of men as a whole experience it .
Avoiding danger is no safer in the long run than outright exposure.
Life is either a daring adventure, or nothing.*

—Helen Keller

Twelve years ago, I determinedly began to write this book, typing out the words in agonizing taps with my black, mummified, frostbitten fingertips—and with thankfulness and disbelief that I'd survived my ordeal on Mount Everest's Kangshung Face. I was still alive. And although some of my life ambitions had been realized, many others were now destroyed.



The summit of Mount Everest from Kala Pattar, Nepal.

Several years earlier, I was convinced that I might never have the chance to climb in the Himalayas, let alone on Everest, the mountain of my dreams. Even though I'd rock climbed avidly since age eleven and by my mid-twenties had accomplished many of my youthful goals—like scaling Captain's three-thousand-foot granite walls in Yosemite Valley—my greatest desire, to join a Himalayan expedition, lay unfulfilled. After graduating from Colorado College in 1978, I spent several happy wandering years rock climbing in many parts of America, Great Britain, and France. My life's inspiration was my climbing, but earning a living as a climber was virtually impossible. My fledgling career as an adventure journalist earned only rejection slips. Then, in 1983, at age twenty-eight, I landed a job running a climbing school back in Colorado.

Overjoyed to return to the West from the deep woods of Maine where I had been living, I reveled once again under the sunny skies of the Rocky Mountains with their panoramic vistas. Below the Flatirons, in the university town of Boulder, I also met a beautiful young woman. Lauren Husted and I dated that summer, hiking and rock climbing locally before Lauren returned to college in Vermont. By June the next spring, Lauren had graduated, and we were living together in Boulder. My life was changing. Slowly, inexorably, even somewhat painfully, I could feel myself drifting farther away from

full-time climbing.

I had to grow up sometime, didn't I? True, I had never achieved my dream of climbing in the Himalaya—and maybe now that Lauren and I were involved in a serious relationship I never would. How much longer could I delay life's expected rites of passage: getting married, settling down, working a nine-to-five job, maybe even having children? When would I come to my senses?

At twenty-two, Lauren was energetic and talented, brown-haired and blue-eyed. Born and raised in Boulder, she lived for the unbridled joy of being outdoors. But Lauren was no cardboard cutout. Bright and articulate—she'd graduated with honors—literature and writing were her motivating passions. Her career, too, was well begun; she'd just landed a job as a paid intern for *Denver Magazine*. Yet Lauren was also often uncomfortable in social settings, intensely jealous of her privacy, and she frequently needed time to be alone.

As our relationship blossomed and we overcame our inevitable ups and downs, Lauren could still surprise me, as she did one evening when I told her of the recent exploits of a climbing partner of mine. Bryan Becker and I had climbed together for years, and just two years earlier we'd successfully climbed the five-thousand-foot North Face of Mount Robson, an avalanche-raked precipice on British Columbia's highest peak. Now Bryan had taken this high-stakes alpine game a notch higher, forging a grueling new route, the *Denali Diamond*, up Mount McKinley in Alaska. I felt jealous of Bryan's pioneering climb, and my thoughts had become increasingly preoccupied with dreams of challenging a big mountain—a peak exceeding twenty thousand feet in elevation. Although the rigors and risks of climbing at high altitude felt daunting, going on a long expedition, hopefully overseas, and testing myself at altitude was the one type of mountaineering I hadn't experienced.

But one evening as we sat in our living room and I confided to Lauren that I'd give anything to go on a Himalayan expedition, her response couldn't have been more the reverse of what I'd expected. Instead of showing her usual vigorous enthusiasm for the outdoors, she suddenly and inexplicably broke down and began to sob as if seized by an unseen force. "No!" she burst out, startling me, her voice anguished and vehement, her fists clenched.

"No—I don't want you to go!" Then her body started to tremble.

"I'll die before you go to the Himalaya!" she exclaimed.

Of course I did not take her words literally—yet what she had said shocked me. Why had she spoken these disturbing words, and what did she mean by them? I hadn't meant to upset her, but I do feel strongly that one day I wanted to go on a Himalayan mountaineering expedition. As a climber herself, Lauren was well aware of the beauty and the danger of climbing, but a high-altitude ascent, we both knew, represented a greatly elevated level of seriousness above mere weekend rock climbing. However, although I'd lost several close friends in climbing accidents, my own twenty-year climbing record was injury free.

I was utterly stunned at the depth of Lauren's anguish and emotion. After immediately reassuring her that I'd be careful if I did go on an expedition, I hugged her as she wiped the tears from her eyes. I didn't know what more I could say to calm her fears. I only knew that testing myself on a big expedition and at high altitude were important goals to me. I hoped Lauren would eventually understand my need to fulfill these dreams, and as we hugged, I tried to put aside her initially adamantly negative reaction to what I'd said.

* * * * *

A week later, Lauren and I spent Saturday and Sunday rock climbing in the Black Canyon of the

Gunnison River, a twenty-five-hundred-foot chasm carved into the bedrock of Colorado's Western Slope. On Sunday, the sun was merciless. It was stiflingly hot, and we hadn't carried enough water. Dehydrated and worn out after ten rope lengths of climbing, we sat resting on a narrow ledge two hundred feet below the juniper-forested canyon rim—and safety.

"Next time we go away, let's try to relax a bit more," Lauren said. "Maybe we shouldn't do so much climbing."

"Maybe we shouldn't climb at all," I replied, somewhat out of character. "We'll have plenty of time to hike up in the mountains this summer."

Lauren nodded in quick approval; she loved the Rockies' wealth of alpine flowers. After sharing some final sips of water from our water bottle, we caught our breath for several minutes, then slapped my hands on my knees.

"Shall we?" I asked, rising.

"Let's go," Lauren replied.



The Black Canyon of the Gunnison River, Colorado.

Twenty minutes earlier, we'd decided to untie from our climbing rope in order to finish our ascent more quickly. The terrain had become easy—just scrambling along twenty-foot-wide ledges—and to stop and belay and safe-guard each other with the rope, while obviously safer than climbing unroped, was also considerably more complicated and time consuming. To complete the climb, we now decided to traverse right across a narrower horizontal ledge system into a rocky, bush-filled gully that led to the canyon rim. The traverse was about three hundred feet long. And while the ledges looked relatively straightforward, in places they narrowed to only a foot or two wide, there was some loose rock, too—and below loomed a two-hundred-foot drop.

For the past month, Lauren had been leading her own rock climbs, going first on the rope and scouting out the route. Like a bird preparing to fly from the nest, she obviously enjoyed testing her strength and stamina, and increasingly she wanted to make her own decisions when we climbed together.

Yesterday, we'd done another route in the Black Canyon. Just below the top, Lauren had insisted that we climb solo—without the security of the climbing rope—up an eighty-foot-high crack. “No,” I spoke firmly to her: “It’s harder than it looks.” When she refused my advice, I insisted we roped together and take the time to belay each other safely up the crack. And when she declined to tie into our climbing rope a second time, I took one end of it and, somewhat angrily, tied it into her harness. At the top, Lauren laughed. She was glad we’d roped up.

Today the situation was similar. Although the difficulty of the climbing was considerably easier, it was not without danger. The traverse ledges appeared to provide a natural and obvious line of escape. Once more Lauren assured me that she’d be okay climbing without the rope. And letting down my guard for the first time since we’d begun climbing together, I didn’t question or analyze her judgment. We were both tired. I didn’t want to argue. If she doesn’t want to use the rope, fine, I thought. She seemed completely self-confident.

I went first; Lauren followed just behind me. She wore the coiled rope tied around her back; I carried the rest of our equipment. I threw most of the loose rock off, cleaning the handholds as I went. Ahead, I could see that the difficulties appeared to be ending. The climb would be over in a minute or two. A wide and spacious ledge was twenty-five feet away from me, but below our feet, the cliff still dropped precipitously for about one hundred feet. The potential for disaster never registered in my thoughts.

“Almost there!” I yelled, and then, as I turned around to watch her progress, I asked, “Are you okay?” Lauren stood twenty feet to my left.

“I’m coming!” she replied.

Then I witnessed the unthinkable. I saw her right hand reach for the next handhold. But she did not test it with a gentle tap to see if it was reliable. Instead, she pulled on the rock a little too hard—and it broke. Then I thought I saw her right foot slip, and Lauren lost her balance. She inhaled a breath of surprise. The look on her face was startled, but unafraid . . . then she cried out, helplessly—and fell, disappearing from view.

Horrified, I screamed her name repeatedly, but I heard only silence. Trembling with shock and disbelief, I ran over to the main gully, then angled back down it a short ways until I found Lauren lying on her side near the trail, bloodied and broken limbed, alive, yes, but breathing with great difficulty. It was the most horrible moment. Gently, ever so gently, careful of her head and neck, I rolled her over so she lay on her back. I cradled her head in my lap, trying to ease her pain and to stop the bleeding, but Lauren was very badly injured. Fortunately, some nearby hikers answered my shout for help, then they ran to call for a rescue.

Twenty minutes later several people arrived, including Chester Dreiman, my best friend and frequent climbing partner. Luckily, Chester had failed on his climb and was in the campground when the call came; he was also a skilled emergency medical technician. A woman hiker who was a registered nurse also rushed to the scene. They tended to Lauren’s injuries for several minutes, then the nurse looked up. Staring directly at me, she spoke with a shocking calm.

“You know, she might not make it. Maybe you’d better prepare yourself.”

Might not make it? Until that moment, I had never considered the possibility that Lauren could die. Now, on hearing the nurse’s words, I contemplated anew the severity of Lauren’s wounds. Yet as I lovingly cradled her head in my lap, I simply could not accept the possibility that Lauren would die. Was God so uncaring as to let such a young and vibrant woman die?

Could fate be this unspeakably cruel? Lauren could not die.

But as the sun sank toward the canyon's western rim, Lauren did die. Her head rested upon my lap. In the passing of those eternally long and yet forever lost seconds, Lauren's face became serene and peaceful as her struggle for life ended. Her blue eyes, gazing upward, were both tranquil and open. Gradually her gentle breathing slowed, became imperceptible, and her heart quieted. Then Lauren became perfectly still. With tear-filled eyes and trembling limbs I held her close, and tried to understand why, why she had died.

My grief over her death and my sense of guilt for letting her die in a rock climbing accident—on so preventable in hindsight—were overwhelming. Lauren died in my arms that afternoon on the day of our one-year anniversary. She also died, much more tragically, on Father's Day. The date was June 17, 1984. That evening, as I struggled to control my shock and grief, a police officer drove me to a pay phone where I called her beloved father to tell him that his eldest daughter had died. Several days later, I joined her family and friends at an outdoor memorial service in the mountains above Boulder and Lauren Ann Husted was buried in her hometown, within sight of the Flatirons and the snow-capped Rocky Mountains she had loved.

* * * * *

I lived alone that summer in the basement apartment Lauren and I had shared on Pine Street in Boulder. A month after her death, while visiting friends in Aspen, I forced myself to go rock climbing again. I sobbed uncontrollably. Climbing had always been so life affirming, my greatest source of joy and self-expression, and a constant stabilizing force for me. In my pursuit of climbing, I had seen incredible natural beauty and made many lasting friends—but how could I have let Lauren die? Why hadn't I foreseen the danger and insisted that we remain roped together for safety? Could I continue to climb? I wondered—and doubted—that climbing would ever give me the same joy that it once had.

Wanting to know Lauren better, I read several short stories that she had written, her recent diaries, and two of her college textbooks about the English poet John Keats. I knew she'd experienced a profound—and at the time, an inexplicable—kinship with Keats, who also died young, at the age of twenty-six. Lauren was twenty-two when she died. She had greatly enjoyed reading Keats's poetry aloud. Her favorite was the sonnet "Bright Star":

*Bright star, would I were steadfast as thou art—
Not in lone splendour hung aloft the night
And watching, with eternal lids apart
Like nature's patient, sleepless Eremite,
The moving waters at their priest like task
Of pure ablution round earth's human shores,
Or gazing on the new soft fallen mask
Of snow upon the mountains and the moors—
No—yet still steadfast, still unchangeable,
Pillow'd upon my fair love's ripening breast,
To feel for ever its soft fall and swell,
Awake for ever in a sweet unrest,
Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath,
And so live ever—or else swoon to death.*

In retrospect, I believe Lauren left me her writing and Keats's poetry to guide me through my

anguish. The months following her death brought about a difficult and yet deeply spiritual awakening in me. As I read her diaries, I also learned Lauren had experienced premonitions of her own death, although she never mentioned them to me. I sensed Lauren's spirit had returned home to Boulder, and I often palpably felt her soft gaze consoling me over one shoulder.

Lauren and I were climbers because of our mutual delight in living life to its absolute fullest. She had filled her all-too-short number of years with such vitality that I decided I had to do something to equal her passion for living. The young woman who had bicycled alone through Scotland, biked down the California and Oregon coast, sailed along the Turkish coastline, hiked Colorado's high country, and climbed so elegantly, deserved a fitting memorial.

* * * * *



*The East Face of Longs Peak in Rocky Mountain National Park, Colorado.
The Diamond is the vertical granite precipice beneath the summit.*

The preceding spring, Lauren and I had discussed hiking up Longs Peak, which at 14,256 feet is the tallest mountain in northern Colorado. Longs was my favorite local summit; I'd already hiked and climbed it a half dozen times. Longs also boasts Colorado's most difficult alpine rock wall, the thousand-foot vertical granite face called the Diamond.

I first climbed the Diamond at age twenty-one in 1977, completing a four-day rope-solo ascent of the *D1 Route*. Getting caught in a violent hailstorm just below the peak's weather-blasted summit, I had been forced to make an emergency bivouac. Would I be able to find my way down the next morning? I had no map, and just a rough idea of where the descent route was located. Snow fell thick around me that night, and tossing and turning through the long dark hours, wet, shivering, and cold, I began to wonder if I'd survive.

Then, not knowing if I was awake or asleep, I floated upwards. Separating from my physical body,

rose into a warm and comforting sky. From this vantage point, I looked down at my suffering, body clinging to life amongst the iron-cold boulders and swirling snowflakes. A moment later, a female figure hovered beside me. We drifted together; I knew her identity immediately. She was my mother, Irene, who had died from a heart attack brought on by diabetes when I was a baby. The sensation of being surrounded by her caring love intensified. Irene was watching out for me, as she always had. She would protect me. I would survive the storm, and she was my guardian. Without a single word being spoken, I knew that this tenderness was real, yet as soon as I tried to consciously prolong my vision of my mother, instantly I was thrown back into my physical body and shivering once again with hypothermia amongst the rocks. But now none of my suffering mattered. I knew I would be safe. When the morning dawned, the storm clouds lifted, and I descended safely.

As the years passed, I felt lucky to have had my out-of-body experience. It was such a personal and profound revelation that I told very few people of it. I felt singled out, charmed, protected. And bolstered by this unwarranted self-confidence, *I began to believe that I could survive virtually any climb I attempted*. Each climb I tried was harder, riskier, and more life-threatening than the last. When my mother died, I was so young—two and a half years old—that I have never had any mental recollection of her. So, logically, and I think understandably, I began to wonder whether, if I pushed myself to my utmost on other climbs as I had on the Diamond, I might see Irene again. In fact, and during my twenties, I found it impossible to suppress this wish “to visit” with her.

In the August following Lauren’s death, I remembered having seen a thin crack slicing straight up the center of the Diamond when I’d soloed the face seven years earlier. I knew that this crack was unclimbed. It was a potential new route. Impulsively, I decided to attempt to climb it alone, to push myself to that next edge of possibility. A new route up the Diamond would be my tribute to Lauren, and I knew immediately what I would name it: *Bright Star*.

Death could be a serene conclusion to life—but death could also be hated, cold, ugly, and unfathomable. Death was human, yet very inhuman. For weeks and months after Lauren died, I still could not accept its irrevocable finality. I had watched and sensed Lauren’s soul leave her body, and that vision lingered painfully on in every cell of memory in my brain. Why had life been torn from my grasp? I had found no answer to this question. I only knew that to sustain Lauren’s memory, and to find a way to continue with my own life, I had to try to solo a new route up the Diamond. And what if I injured myself or died? Grief had pushed me beyond the brink of caring.

* * * * *

In the first week of September, 1984, three friends helped me shoulder one hundred pounds of equipment and food up the Longs Peak Trail to the Chasm View overlook, a spectacular rocky notch at 13,500 feet in elevation. Bidding good-bye to Larry, Denny, and Jan, I carefully rappelled down the five-hundred-foot cliff to the foot of the Diamond. After slowly working my way to my left across the ledge system known as Broadway, transporting my loads in stages, I set up my bivouac in a small sheltered cave beneath the towering wall.

Settling down for the night on the rock-strewn ledge at the base of the Diamond, I watched the pinks and blues of evening rise like vapors from Colorado’s eastern plains, tinting the brush-stroke clouds upon the horizon. Lights from small ranches appeared in the dark valley below, while the evening stars came out alone, and first to grace the night—sparkled directly overhead. Only two and a half months had passed since Lauren’s death, but already my final conversation with her felt a lifetime away. Alone on my ledge, I hugged my sleeping bag for warmth, and relished the timelessness of my solitary view.

Strong forces were at work for the next three days while I lived on the Diamond’s vertiginous

precipice. Providentially, the weather was clear and crisp, with no afternoon thunderstorms—and the vertical cracks beckoned skyward, piercing the heart of the gold-plated granite wall. After two rope lengths of strenuous aid climbing, where I supported my weight by hanging from marginally placed pitons (knife-like blades of chrome-moly steel hammered into cracks), and tiny wedge-shaped wire nuts (slotted into the cracks), I arranged a hanging bivouac three hundred feet up the wall. Sitting comfortably on my portaledge (a suspended platform akin to a collapsible Army cot), I admired the evening quiet, sipped my tea, and contemplated nature's great symphony.



The author during his solo first ascent of Bright Star (V 5.9, A3) on Longs Peak.

On Day three, five rope lengths of climbing—hand and fist jamming up awkward cracks, more tricky artificial climbing, and the back-breaking manual labor of hauling my equipment—saw n

arrive exhausted on the Yellow Wall bivouac ledge, a slender shelf four hundred feet below the Diamond's summit. The temperature plummeted that night as I searched the sky for the storm that knew would probably soon threaten me. The weather had been too good for too long. I tried to direct my thoughts to Lauren; I was doing this climb for her, infusing the ageless stone with her spirit. My life had been forever altered by her death; I was no longer the person I had once been.

My brain agonized the next morning when I realized that I was irrevocably committed to finishing the climb. Retreat was now only a last-ditch option. In photographs, I recalled seeing an elegant crack splitting the gold headwall above the cliff's final overhangs; reaching this crack became my goal. Numbed with cold, I hammered pitons and wedged wired nuts into devious cracks in the stone, placing one anchor for each new body length of height. One hundred feet higher, I arranged a belay anchor below a six-foot horizontal ceiling that jutted out spectacularly over my head. Below, over fifteen hundred feet of empty, cold air separated me from the rippling waters of Chasm Lake.

Swinging spider-like past the edge of the top overhang, I looked up expectantly. I could do it! The lovely climbable crack led directly to the top—but I had to hurry. A storm had arrived, and it would soon break. Ominous gray clouds raced demonically over the jagged rocky summit, now a stone's throw above me. With adrenaline-fed urgency, I climbed rapidly toward the top.

Then, at the end of the difficulties, two college climbing friends of mine, Peter Gallagher and Russ Johnson, appeared like apparitions. Having just completed another route on the Diamond, Peter and Russ helped me haul up my equipment to the finish. Unfortunately, the threatening storm cut short our impromptu celebration. We hurried past the scene of my earlier out-of-body experience near the summit of Longs, and raced down the North Face descent. Safely back at the Chasm View overlook where I'd begun my vertical journey three days prior, my friends wished me luck and headed down a different way.

Alone once again, I stumbled downhill to the normal hiking trail at the Boulderfield. Incredulous at my luck that the weather had remained fair as long as it did, and that the route had been feasible, I could hardly believe I'd succeeded on *Bright Star*. Hoisting my gargantuan pack filled with gear and ropes onto my shoulders, grimacing and smiling simultaneously, I hobbled awkwardly down the uneven rocky trail in an endless series of knee-pounding sprints.



Longs Peak welcoming the storm, seen from the Boulderfield. The Diamond's upper half is visible.

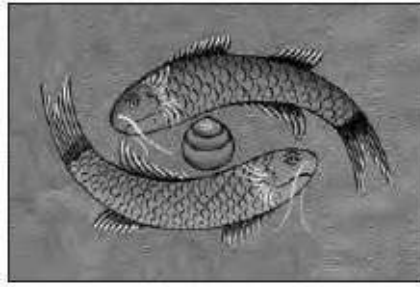
Out of breath, I stopped to rest for the fiftieth—or the one hundredth—time. Glancing back up the mountain, I watched in awe as a black blanket of angry clouds steamrolled up the back side of Longs and engulfed the Diamond's stark precipice in wrathful fury. I could no longer recognize the golden vertical wall that I'd spent the past three days climbing, but now it no longer mattered. I was safe, I was on the trail, and my adventure was over. Minutes later, storm clouds dropped earthward, cloaking Longs Peak and pouring pounding waves of hail from the darkened sky. Soaked to the skin in seconds, I began to shiver violently.

I could have cared less.

Propping my eighty-pound haulbag against a convenient granite boulder, I sat down and laughed and cried. Only this time, my tears flowed not from sadness, but from strength. Unseen hands—God's, Lauren's, or both—had just safeguarded me through one of the most positive experiences of my life.

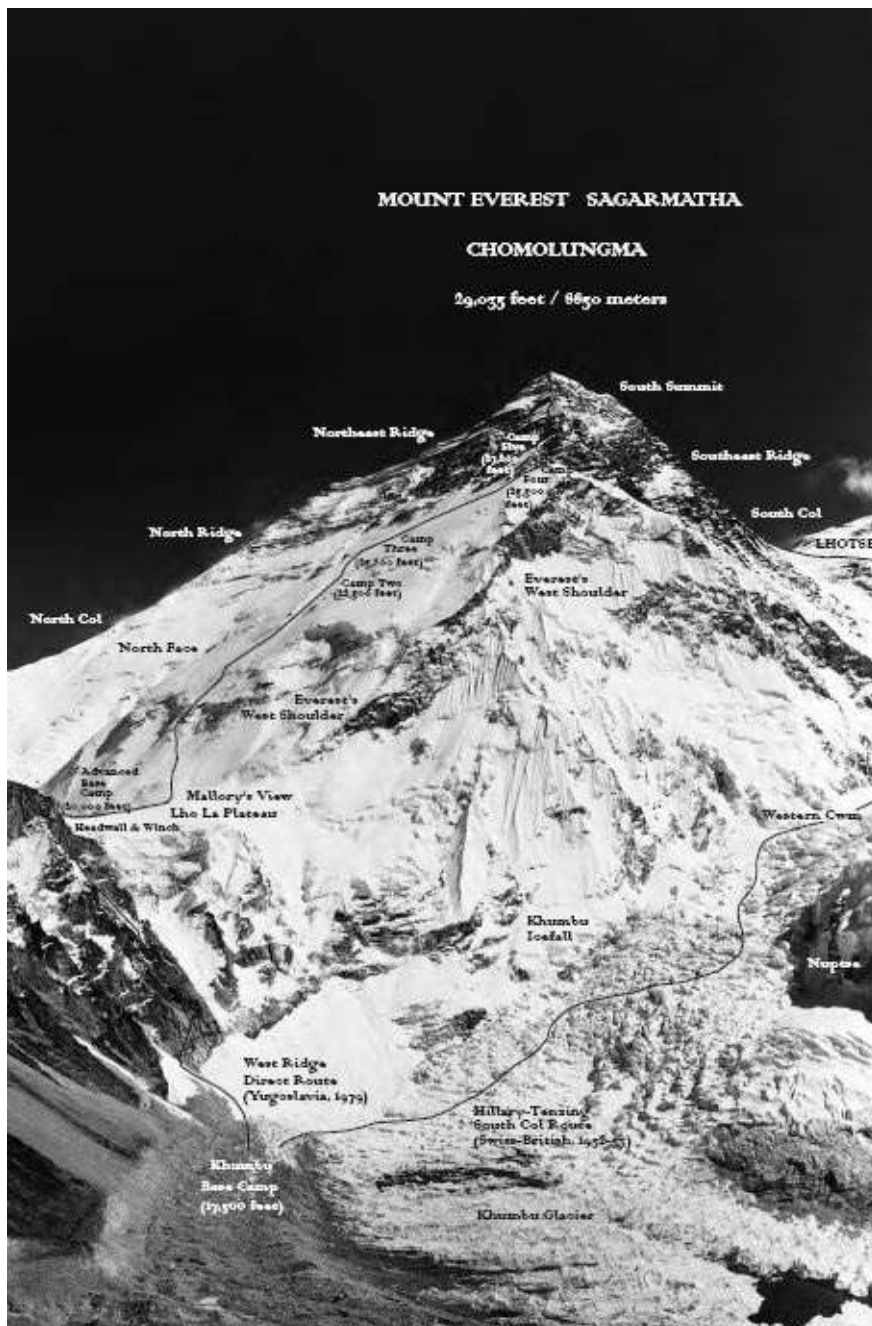
Lauren had known the answer all along, that the only way to live life was as intensely and completely as possible, choosing energy over despair. I knew that I would follow her example and live my life to the fullest, but on that stormy September day on Longs Peak, I could never have fathomed where that challenging path would soon take me: to the Himalaya, to Nepal, Tibet, and China. Three times within the next four years, I would attempt to climb Mount Everest, and in 1988 I would almost lose my life climbing a new route up Everest's most perilous side, the Kangshung Face. The next few years would truly be the storm years of my strength, and of my youth—the days when I would be tested as never before.

Chapter 1 - Beginners on Everest



*If we are facing in the right direction,
all we have to do is keep on walking.*

—Buddhist expression



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