MIXED EMOTIONS

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Mountaineering Writings of

GREG CHILD

THE MOUNTAINEERS

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To Salley Oberlin

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There is no excellent beauty that hath not some strangeness in the proportion.

—Francis Bacon (1561–1626)

FOREWORD

"SERIOUS CLIMBING," Greg Child has observed, "treads a thin line between recklessness and calculate
risk, the path marked only by intuition, a capricious and often flawed instinct." But Child's ow
instinct in such matters appears to be anything but flawed; how else to explain the fact that this wr
compact Australian is still in the company of the living?

Face to face, Child comes across as humble, thoughtful, quick to tell a joke on himself. There
nothing in his unassuming bearing to suggest that you are in the presence of an exceedingly bold ar
accomplished climber. To immerse oneself in the pages of this book, though, is to gain a quick ar
sometimes disturbing appreciation of the seriousness of Child's deeds in high places—the razor-th
margin for error, the unrelenting intensity, the scarcely imaginable physical and mental demands.

Among the premier climbers of the late twentieth century, Child stands out for his unwillingness
specialize, for his refusal to limit his activities to any single facet of the vertical oeuvre. Child
virtuosity encompasses the full mountaineering spectrum—from short, tendon-ripping "sport climb
in the modern idiom to ten-day A5 horror shows on the massive stone flanks of El Capitan to the mo
elusive summits of the high Himalaya. How many other alpinists can say they've been to the summ
of K2 and red-pointed 5.13 routes at Arapiles and Smith Rock?

To climb brilliantly on ice, on rock, and at altitude is rare enough. But Child is a writer to boot—
damn good writer, as it happens, the real deal, the author of pieces esteemed as classics in the genre.
number of these classics—including "Lost in America," "On Broad Peak," and "Coast to Coast on th
Granite Slasher" (which, astonishingly, was the first piece Child ever wrote for publication)—will b
found between the covers of this collection.

"Never trust the written word," Child writes in the first line of Granite Slasher. "At best it's
second-rate account of reality. How can you duplicate the enormity of a personal moment? How ca
you truthfully record the feelings or events when the intricacies of each second of thought would f
the circuits of a computer?" How, indeed? I am at a loss to explain it, but Child has done nothing le
in these pages, his opening disclaimer notwithstanding. This volume holds tragedy and great dram
troubling insights, gallows humor, flashes of beauty so intoxicating they take one's breath awa
Mixed Emotions is an unforgettable book. Read it and marvel.

Jon Krakauer
Seattle, 1993

PREFACE

I'VE NEVER BEEN CERTAIN whether I'm a climber who writes or a writer who climbs. Torn betwee both, I have probably wasted a good deal of time writing when I could have been climbing, climbing when I should have been writing. Still, I can't complain. Climbing has been good to m giving me passion and purpose for more than twenty years, and giving me the raw material and th courage to write.

This collection of stories covers a lot of ground, from first ascents on the rock faces of El Capita to summits of Himalayan massifs such as Gasherbrum IV, Trango Tower and K2, to treks in remot Nepal, to profiles of climbers I admire. For the most part, the setting for these tales is that strang world of high altitude. Some of these stories have appeared in magazines such as *Climbing, Rock Ice, Outside, Backpacker, Summit, Mountain* in Great Britain, and *Rock* in Australia. Others hav incubated in my journals before finding their place here.

I must admit, I've often felt mixed emotions about the life of climbing. Perhaps that's because s many friends have died in the mountains. Even so, throughout the last thirteen years and doze expeditions, my wife, Salley Oberlin, has encouraged my climbing and my writing and has share many climbing days with me. I thank her for letting me be what I am.

To most people, pursuing difficult and abstract goals like climbing mountains, and risking life an limb while doing it, is insanity, at best eccentricity. I tend to agree, in part, with that line of thinking will say, though, that the climbing experiences I've endured have made me feel my life acutely. Th challenge of trying to capture those strange, quintessential moments when climbs were overwhelmin me physically and emotionally was what prompted me to write in the first place. I don't pretend fathom the reasons people climb, but by recounting the events, feelings and landscapes in whic climbers immerse themselves we might find some clue to it all.

Greg Child
Seattle, 1993

EPIC!

TRANSLATED FROM THE LINGUA FRANCA of climbing to layperson's lingo, an epic is a bad day at the office on a cosmic scale. Many types of climbing experience qualify as epic: grand adventures, mind-bendingly terrifying ordeals, flirtations with disaster, character-building experiences. An uncomfortable bivouac on a ledge or getting benighted on a climb can qualify as epics too. So might a thorough soaking in a storm, or a long, tiring climb with hunger and thirst nibbling at your guts. Epics are a good reason to quit climbing, an awful time, and a heap of fun all rolled into one. Epics define us as climbers. Sometimes they destroy us. A climber having a proclivity for epics is termed an epic-monger. Such as myself, I suppose.

"Taking the Plunge," written in 1993, is an unreliable memoir about growing up in Australia, being bitten by a deadly snake and taking a hundred-foot nosedive onto the ground from a rock climb. "The Law of High Places," also written in 1993, examines the phenomenon of fear and the role it played in my more eventful climbs. On a more serious note is "The Obscure Object of Desire," which was written after a shivering bivouac near the summit of a 26,000-foot mountain called Gasherbrum IV. It appeared in 1986 in *Climbing* and the *American Alpine Journal*.

"On Broad Peak" describes another type of epic—a tragedy. Until 1983 I didn't know much about storytelling, but then a trip to the Karakoram to a mountain called Broad Peak came along. The climb—a tragic and harrowing experience during which I lost a friend, and upon which I still often reflect, ten years later—was an important point in my life. The experience troubled me deeply, yet the world of high mountains exhilarated me too. I had feelings to purge and a need to examine myself. I picked up a pen and paper the day I returned home and quickly wrote the tale. "On Broad Peak" appeared in *Mountain* and in *Climbing*. It was the genesis of my book *Thin Air*, which was first published in 1988.

TAKING THE PLUNGE

By all accounts, I had strange hobbies as a youth in Australia. Rock climbing was just one of ther Herpetology—the study and collection of reptiles—was another.

I began collecting snakes and lizards at age twelve. At first, my parents viewed my pastime wi circumspection, believing that snakes are poisonous, shifty and slimy. Said Dad in a stentorian voic "If-you-think-you're-bringing-snakes-into-this-house-you've-got-another-think-coming, Sonny Jim So I weaned my folks into it, first with a brace of lizards that I kept in cages in the yard of our Sydne home. These were harmless enough, my father consented. Perhaps even cute, my mother agreed. B my fascination with snakes, which eventually filled the cages, exceeded boyish fun. "You hav dangerous tastes," Dad said of it.

He didn't see the beauty in the rhythmic movement of a snake, the way curve followed curve in wave of muscle and glossy scales. He had never paused to watch the dignity of a snake as it hunted, i tongue flicking to detect the body heat of its prey, and then, when the snake's eyes had zeroed in c the kill, springing to bite and paralyze the meal. Snakes embodied professionalism, I thought. The were dedicated killing machines that existed only to hunt. When they missed a strike, the expressionless faces gave no hint of embarrassment, unlike the cries of derision heaped upon boys c the school green when the catch of a football was fumbled.

I didn't fathom Dad's interests, either. These consisted of killing fish with hook and line, tinkerin with greasy car engines and constructing free-flying model planes from balsa wood and tissue pape When pressed to accompany Dad to gatherings of his model-making cronies, I watched grown me joyously launch little motorized gliders to the heavens, as if they were giving birds freedom. The sighed as one whenever a plane fell Icarus-like and smashed into splinters. I enjoyed watching the disasters.

Despite all this, by the end of that first summer of roaming the bush with a gunny sack, my repti menagerie swelled to such bountiful proportions that I had put Dad to work building spacious cag for their imprisonment and for housing the mice and frogs I bred to feed my snakes. Mum sometim accompanied me on forays into the bush and even captured some sluggish specimens herself. If whined enough, Dad allowed the nonvenomous among my pets to be brought into the house in winte At such times, fat foot-long skinks and a long python basked in front of an electric-coil heater like o cats, displacing our actual and mystified felines. Neighbors called us the Addams Family.

I was attracted to this pastime not only out of a fascination for reptiles, but for the attendant scen of tough, schoolboy bushmen who at pre-adolescent ages thought nothing of hitchhiking a hundre miles from home to camp in a pup tent and then roam cross-country by map and compass to captu deadly snakes. They handled snakes confidently and spoke in cavalier tones about famed snake men old who'd checked out of life after a deadly bite. In my first year of high school I earned a plac among this cult of lads who assembled at lunch hour in a corner of the school quadrangle, swappin specimens and snake lore, and I rampaged with them through the bush on weekends in th pseudoscientific pursuit of the cold-blooded.

We could identify a hundred species at a glance. We traded in a currency of scaly beasts. On th high end, a lace monitor, which is a sharp-clawed, tree-climbing lizard, could be traded for a pair c green tree snakes; pythons of any kind were the blue-chip stock of choice; whip snakes, marsh snake geckoes and skinks were small change.

My father’s ban on snakes in my collection gradually relaxed to a moratorium on the dangerous poisonous, which he forbade me to touch. Yet other boys had snakes that could kill lurking in the aquariums. Why couldn’t I? I resented the ban. It was a rein on my freedom that I felt as keenly as teenager commanded to have the car home by a certain hour.

Cunning and disinformation circumvented Dad’s ban. I created fictitious names for deadly snak and passed them off as harmless. The brown snake, which when aggravated bends its neck into an and strikes like a coiled spring to pump a deadly toxin into the victim, and which when young zebra-striped, I renamed the coastal banded snake. No such snake existed. I once found Dad staring my coastal banded, which lay sunning itself in an aquarium. Dad was thumbing through a handbook Australian reptiles, searching for a listing for the snake. “This book isn’t much good,” he said. “You snake isn’t in here at all.” I diverted his attention to other matters, as expeditiously as possible.

At our all-boys school, our bazaar of reptile trading prospered. We who dealt in reptiles wer revered by some lads, but we revolted others. One day, a lad produced a small, harmless snake fro his pencil case in a math class. Holding it up by the tail, he offered to swap the snake for a gecko— nocturnal lizard capable of walking across ceilings—that I had in a pillowcase in my briefcase. As w exchanged reptiles, the boy seated behind us became agitated. His phobia of snakes got the better him. He took his steel-edged ruler, screamed and then broadswo rded the snake into two equal length The blow sent the half with the head toward the blackboard, where our teacher was scribbling a equation. Turning to address the commotion that now consumed the class, the teacher met a twitchin half-snake that collided with his chest and bit into his tie as a parting gesture. For this, we suffere long detentions.

Harvesting the venom from snakes entertained us too. This was achieved by tightly covering a j with the plastic wrap from our school lunches, then holding the snake’s head in the manner we learned from a book by a famous old snake man named Eric Worral and forcing the snake to sink i fangs into the plastic. Venom would then dribble into the jar.

A communal jar we kept in a locker contained a cocktail of poisons from several species. Th venom was a barely visible film, but, I’m certain, would have killed anyone who consumed it. W poked at the venom with our pencils. Making contact with it gave me a rush of excitement. One la conducted an experiment to test the efficiency of the poison. He swabbed a microscopic pearl of th stuff onto a beetle. The insect shriveled instantly, as if electrocuted. It was some stuff, this potion. W fantasized about using it to silence a troublesome dog that chased us when we rode our bikes school, and of spiking the teapot in the math teacher’s dayroom.

One day a gangling youth named Stephen Lee was etching a tattoo on his arm with a pen and th point of a borrowed drafting compass. Unbeknown to Lee, the compass had been dipped into th venom jar. By the time he was warned it was too late. We watched while a change of color surge through his arm as the venom entered his body by subcutaneous pathways. “Oh, shit,” he said befo losing consciousness.

Our jar was confiscated and tossed into the school incinerator. Stephen spent two days in th hospital. He was probably the only person ever to survive the poisons of twelve different snakes in single dose.

But the boy I admired most in that first year of high school was a veteran truant named Bru King. He was a masterful shoplifter, had an enviable collection of knives and daggers mounted on h wall and owned the largest collection of things deadly I’d ever seen.

In his yard one day, with a lad named Peter Rumford, we were inspecting one of Bruce specimens, a three-foot-long tiger snake. Only one Australian snake is deadlier than a tiger snake, an that is the taipan. A good bite from either can kill an adult in minutes, even seconds. Serur

laboratories measure venom potency in terms of the number of lab rats a given dose of venom wi
wipe out. The number of rats a tiger snake can kill is on the order of tens of thousands.

Bruce seized the snake's tail and lifted it out of the aquarium. The snake flattened its head like cobra, puffed up its throat with air and snorted through its nostrils. Bruce let its head rest on th ground. It squirmed to try to grip the grass with its ventral scales, the scales that propel snak forward. Using a forked stick specially carved for the job—we called it a jigger—Bruce pinned i head to the ground.

"Pick it up," he told me.

"You do it."

He looked me in the eyes. The glance spoke challenge. He had a sort of snake-eyed charm himsel If I didn't grab the snake, Bruce would label me a wimp. So, I placed thumb and finger behind its hea at the place where its ears would be, if snakes had ears. I gripped, but an instant before I tightened m squeeze, Bruce inadvertently relaxed the pressure on the jigger. The snake squirmed free. Its hea turned. It bit my index finger.

Shock coursed through me. The moment stretched, long and lingering, and I still remember it. stood up, with the snake fastened to my finger, watching it chew and pump venom. Then I flicked off. It hurtled the length of the yard, like a piece of rope. Bruce tracked it down in an instant an reincarcerated it as his pet cockatoo screeched madly at the sight of the snake.

I thrust my finger into my mouth and began sucking, to reverse the entry of venom. I sucked, the spat, but panic dried my mouth. Bruce pulled a lace from his shoe and wrapped it above my elbow as tourniquet. He produced a razor blade, held my finger, slashed an X into it and then pushed my fing back into my mouth.

"Suck!" he ordered.

Dizziness and nausea, headache and fatigue overwhelmed me. I vomited a dark, foul-tastin blood-speckled bile. But ten minutes later I was still alive, though retching like a commode-huggin drunk. Bruce, whose judgments on these matters I held as gospel, assessed the situation: "If you're n dead yet, you're gonna live." I had, in fact, been lucky: one fang had deflected off the fingernail.

"Think I should go to the hospital?"

"I wouldn't, but maybe you should."

Rumford looked on, horrified. I'd forgotten he was there until he whined, "Man, is your dad gonn shit about this!"

The notion induced another wave of puking. My arm throbbed. The artery in the pit of my elbo turned blue. I felt as if I'd contracted all the flu viruses at once. Yet the thought of my father's wrat its potential enhanced by this being Saturday, his special beer-drinking day at the local fishermen club, filled me with greater fear.

Confessing to snakebite would cause my mother to panic. Dad would be enraged that I'd broke his law of never handling a deadly snake. He'd say I-told-you-so, cuff me about the ears and never l me forget what a klutz I'd been. I would be grounded for weeks. The local newspaper would get ho of the story, as it had the tales of other snakebitten friends. My name would be mud. Moreover, th knowledge that Bruce would tough it out solo rather than hole up in a hospital and let condescendin nurses pump syringes full of antivenin into his rump, made me veto the hospital. Embarrassment w worse than death. At thirteen, I understood the former and knew nothing of the latter.

Rumford was agog at my intention to self-cure. He hedged about, nervous, certain that the tw maniacs with him were implicating him as some kind of criminal accessory to manslaughter.

"Don't be crazy! Go to the hospital! Who knows what will happen?"

“Shut up!” ordered Bruce. “He’s riding his bike home. You follow us. And don’t say anything t his old man, understand?”

I mounted my bike and pedaled, zigzagging across the road in a sleepy stupor. A few blocks fror where we began I blacked out and crashed.

When I came to moments later, my companions’ faces hovered over me, as did a new face. It wa the local Greek greengrocer, who’d seen me collapse while driving by.

“What drugs you been-a-take, boy?” he demanded.

I shook my head and vomited. The greengrocer loaded me into his car. Catholic medallior dangled from the rear-view mirror. As we sped off I saw Bruce and Rumford walking in the directic of my house, wheeling my bike between them.

When we arrived at home, Mum stood in the front yard watering our lawn, a miniature Gobi Dese that never produced a green thing in all the years I lived there. As I got out of the grocer’s car, vomited. Mum stared.

“What is wrong with you?” she exclaimed.

Fear of parents brought on an access to composure. I thought of excuses. Should I say I’d bee drinking? I’d come home experimentally stonkered on a few nips of whiskey once before; Dad ha patted me on the back and told me I’d get used to drinking as I got older, but that he’d belt me if I d it again. Still, a belting was nothing compared to the panic the truth would create, and anyway, booz was a poison my father comprehended and condoned.

Instead, I said, “It must have been that cheese and gherkin sandwich you made me for lunc Mum.”

“What?”

She visualized the sandwich, mentally checking each item she’d placed on it—cheese was fin butter and bread were fresh, gherkins weren’t off. The look on her face told me she knew I was lying scooted past her, fetched a bucket to retch into and hunkered down in my room in soothing darknes behind a closed door.

Just when I was thinking how proud Bruce would be when he learned I had bluffed my folk Rumford and Bruce arrived. Their voices shouted to cancel each other out.

“I’ve gotta tell you, Missus Child, he got bit by a snake,” blurted Rumford.

“Oh, God! What kind of snake?”

“Harmless snake, no big deal. He’ll be okay,” interjected Bruce, lying loyally.

“It was a tiger snake!” exclaimed Rumford, foiling the charade.

Mum shrieked. There was a stampede of footsteps and a growling sound as my father w informed. A second later Dad appeared in my room. The veins in his forehead bulged with ange First, by dabbling with a deadly snake I had disobeyed him. Second, I had got bitten, verifying h worst fears. For these infractions I was in deep shit.

The world swayed before my eyes. I performed my twentieth technicolor yawn into the bucket. knew I’d weather this situation, but it would be ugly in the way only a kid can know. I managed to ta my way out of going to the hospital, but I never touched a deadly snake again.

Something, though, had to fill the excitement gap that snake-catching had occupied. It was a boo that did the job.

I encountered it a year later, in the local library, while waiting for the bus home from school. Th lads I loitered with made the normal beeline for the sports section, where they plucked from th shelves pictorial books on football, cricket, horse racing and cars. Such subjects, at age thirteen, we the locus of a Sydney boy’s daydreams, though for me the maneuvers, jargon and heroes of th

sporting life were anathema. Somehow I had missed the vital lesson that taught the mantra by whic
~~sports could be understood. I found football rules as incomprehensible as algebra. The sports stars w~~
worshipped were large, violent and beer-swilling men. Whenever I was coerced into playing cricket,
drifted into the outfield, to a vanishing point where no boy could possibly smash the ball and I cou
be forgotten. The lads called this position "right left out." From there I observed the nonevent
cricket until I could sneak away.

The book in question stood in a row of mountaineering volumes. It wasn't a best-seller, it wasn
even great literature. Unless you're a climber, you're unlikely to have heard of it. It was called *K*
The Savage Mountain. I borrowed it.

It told the story of a handful of Americans traveling through Pakistan in 1953 to attempt a the
unclimbed, 28,250-foot mountain called K2. The only place higher was Everest, a place where the a
was so thin that people carried oxygen bottles and masks for breathing. In Australia the highest poi
was a hill just over 7000 feet; in Sydney, I lived at sea level.

Photographs of climbers poised on vertiginous slopes and tongue-tying, multisyllabic names
Karakoram peaks mesmerized me. The mountain was a jagged black tooth. A cloud streamed from i
summit, propelled by a hurricane wind. The image tattooed itself on my mind. I had, once befor
climbed on a short sandstone outcrop with my Boy Scout troop. I enjoyed the feeling of moving up t
rock face, but I had not reckoned, until absorbing this book, that such small steps were the buildi
blocks of the ascent of great mountains.

I read on. The climbers became trapped in their tents at 25,000 feet during a week-long blizzar
They weakened. One of them—Art Gilkey—became immobilized by a blood clot in his leg. Son
kind of infernal short circuit of his body chemistry due to altitude had caused it, and he was dyin
Turning back, they fought their way through deep snow, lowering Gilkey in a makeshift stretcher. Th
dream of becoming the first to stand atop K2 turned into a nightmare. A diagram showed the seve
climbers descending K2. Dotted lines and arrows marked paths down which five of the climbers fe
Another arrow showed where one man, Pete Schoening, had wrapped his rope around the shaft of h
ice axe, saving his falling companions. Gilkey, though, had disappeared.

They must be supermen, I thought. Instead, they were Americans. To an Aussie schoolboy bac
then, anything was possible by Americans: American astronauts had walked on the moon; Americ
had the atomic bomb, the fastest cars, the biggest planes, the best TV shows, the most exciting wars.

Images from the book filled my thoughts. While I defrosted the refrigerator I simulated the chi
of ice axe and crampon into K2's frozen hide by jabbing the wall of the freezer with a fork until
bent. I held my hand against a pile of Dad's frozen mullet until my flesh turned white and lifeles
This sort of cold, I imagined, must have nagged the K2 climbers every day on the mountain. Cold,
that point in my life, was something I hadn't experienced. Heat is the climatic norm in Australia.

I showed my father the book. He dismissed mountaineers as reckless and ridiculous. I announc
my intention to become a climber. "If you think you're gonna climb cliffs or mountains, think agai
sport."

He swayed on his feet as he barked his decree, drunk again. The gulf between us grew wider.
could only watch, in those years, as he sank into a pit of sourness over how to support a family and h
ailing mother with a business embezzled dry by a crooked employee.

He handed back the book. Minutes later he was asleep in front of the television. I returned m
attention to K2. Climbing symbolized escape—an option unavailable to Dad—in which mort
troubles fell behind like discarded ballast. Climb high enough, I thought, and those troubles droppe
so far below they were scarcely visible.

At school there existed no clique of climbers as there did with snake-catchers. The only oth

climber was an ex-snake man a year my senior—I was now fourteen—named Chris Peisker. He wa pallid and skinny and had had a kidney removed not long before I met him. At the beach he told gir the crescent-shaped scar on his side was from a shark attack.

Together, we attended monthly meetings of the Sydney Rockclimbers Club. Its elders looke disturbed that such inept-looking children were taking to the rocks. On the home front I disguised m climbing trips as camping jaunts, slowly easing my parents into the knowledge that I was a climbe My father judged that if my track record with snakes was an example, then only doom could resu from my climbing, and he further divined there could be no living made from it. He would prove clo to correct on both counts.

Peisker and I accumulated gear and made our own. In metalwork class we drilled holes in bits hexagonal aluminum and threaded them with rope, to fashion homemade nuts for jamming in cracks. With our pocket money we bought pitons and carabiners and odd imported gadgets with name such as Clogs, Pecks and Moacs. We had fragile hemp ropes until I liberated Dad's salt-encruste nylon cord from his boat. Later, my first girlfriend won my heart by buying me a real kernmant climbing rope, imported from Switzerland. Armed with this hardware, we were ordered by the polic to come down from ascents of telephone poles and the concrete cracks of nearby Cook's River Bridg

But it was amidst the urban wilderness of the Blue Mountains, a tableland of sun-colore sandstone cliffs eighty miles west of Sydney, that roped climbing began and nearly ended for me. those days, every Friday after school, I'd slip the knot from my school tie, toss it on top of abandoned pile of homework, grab my rucksack and, with Peisker or some other schoolboy-climb compañero, escape Sydney—the Big Smoke, we called it—on a clattering train called the Fish.

The aqua haze that hangs in the valleys and gives the Blue Mountains their name is said to com from the leaves of the gum tree, which on warm days emit a vapor of eucalyptus oil that refracts blu when sunlight penetrates the air. These same leaves, when tinder dry, feed the bush fires that swee the mountains every decade or two. The cliffs that border the towns of Katoomba, Blackheath ar Mount Victoria are where Australian rock climbing began, back in the 1930s. At that same time, the provided work projects for depression-ridden Australia, when, for a while, the valleys echoed to pic axe and blasting powder as coal mines and tourist trails were etched into the cliff faces. The remnan of that era are overgrown trails and Inca-like steps winding down cliffsides and waterfalls. Beyon these byways, in deep canyons of rainforest, you can still get lost for a long, long time in a timeles green world.

My first climb was up the first tower of the Three Sisters, a baroque-looking, triple-summite formation at Katoomba. Adjacent to a busy tourist lookout, it is also the most watched climb in th Southern Hemisphere. I was thirteen in 1970 when I sweated up that easy scramble. Sitting on th summit of the First Sister, gazing over the cliffs and forests of the Megalong Valley, I had a tee revelation: I would drop out of school, leave home and become a climbing bum the moment I turne sixteen, which in Australia is the legal age at which children are granted enough responsibility wreck their lives.

By age sixteen I'd made the first moves toward independence. I'd quit school and saved $200 fro a summer job, more or less left home (except for when the weather was bad or I needed a decent mea and was inhabiting a cave above a Blue Mountains cliff that I shared on and off with other teena climbers.

Three years of weekend cragging had taught us enough to be dangerous. One summer day Peisker and I strolled beneath the cliffs of Mount Piddington to try a climb, we saw nothing portento in the fact that this route was named Last Act.

I set off up the cliff and after a hundred feet reached a four-inch-wide ledge that provided me wi

a stance to edge my toes onto, and a small tree sprouting out of a crack, which I tied off with a sli
and ~~clipped myself to, with the rope. This was the belay anchor. It was shoddy and weak,~~ bare
enough to hold my weight, but I knew no better.

I began pulling in the rope as Peisker climbed to join me. When he reached me he stood with to poised on little flakes and legs stemmed across the corner, an arm's reach below me. Carefully, h passed me the gear I had placed in the cracks and that he had retrieved. He suggested that I lead agai something about the climb was psyching him out, he explained. Taking everything except one sma nut—an aluminum wedge threaded with a loop of cord, for plugging into cracks—I mounted the tr to which I was secured to let Chris clip into the anchor.

Then something went wrong. The rush of air across my cheek told me I was falling, but, since was the belayer, this was theoretically impossible. The sensation was of lightness, of weightlessne rather than acceleration. But when I cartwheeled over and saw Peisker clinging to the rock above m and receding into the distance fast, and saw a branch from the belay tree clipped to my waist harnes flapping angrily like a failed parachute, I took this as proof of falling. "This could be it," I though screamed, crashed into the limb of a tree, hit the ground 100 feet below and bounced down a stee hillside.

The rope was 150 feet long. Every bounce brought me closer to the point at which it would com against Peisker's waist and pull him off. I was hurtling headfirst through dirt and brush, thinking thi when my helmeted head rammed into something and I blacked out.

As I slowly regained consciousness from a deep quiet, I heard a cow mooing in the distance. Th cow's call grew louder, closer; the stupid beast must have wandered up from the farm below an gotten lost beneath the cliffs, I thought. I decided to move, lest it trample me. I raised my head an lifted my knees to stand. My foot slumped at a crazy angle, like a dead fish. I looked around. Bloo was everywhere. It was either mine or Peisker's. The cow started to cry pathetically, like a huma Then I realized there was no cow, that it was me wheezing through broken ribs at the pain of broke ankle, shoulder, nose, and concussion. I slumped back in resignation.

Then something moved beside me. I turned my head. A yard-long black snake was wedging itse between twigs, shedding its skin. While it worked it kept its pupil-less eyes on me since, half in an half out of its skin, it was vulnerable. We stared eye to eye. Only the dry crackle of its old ski interrupted the sound of wind rustling eucalyptus leaves. It slithered onto the tree limb I'd broug down, jammed itself between the sharp, fresh splinters and slipped opportunistically out of its last fo of old scales. The snake emerged glossy and renewed. Watching it had a calming, opiate effect on m The snake seemed oblivious to my presence now, as if I were invisible, like a ghost. And then wondered: am I dead? No, I decided, I hurt too much.

I began to piece together the shocking puzzle of what had happened to us, and the possib consequences. No one had seen the accident; no one knew where we were. Peisker was probably lyi somewhere nearby, as mangled as me, or worse. I watched an ant crawl onto my wrist. Yes, we'd b ant food by the time we were missed.

I'd stopped bouncing at 140 feet. Above, Peisker shook with fear. Between his legs the rope traile down to a groaning dead weight on the ground. Above lay 100 feet of steep rock. The rope was clippe to nothing between him and me and oblivion. He had no way to climb up or down from his airy stanc His fingers were slowly peeling from the holds he held. He could conceive of only one thing to ea the horror he found himself in: jump.

Then he remembered the nut clipped with a carabiner to his harness—the only gear I hadn't take from him. He wedged it into a pocket in the crack, tied the rope off and rappelled down the rop Peisker looked at me lying there, like a blood-soaked rag, and ran to raise a rescue.

I spent the rest of the year in and out of the hospital. Dad was not impressed by the bills. Fi ~~operations installed two steel plates and thirteen screws in my ankle, most of which were~~ lat removed and became conversation pieces when I dropped back in to high school. And I read a lot climbing books. Even if I had to limp there, I decided, I’d see those distant mountains. I’d taken th plunge into the climbing life, and there was no turning back.

ON BROAD PEAK

We were stepping over yak dung in the streets of Askole that summer of 1983, trying to act a inconspicuously as a pair of Westerners can in this village of mud-walled houses and warrens th treads a line someplace between now and the Stone Age. Neither Pete Thexton nor I were having muc success in photographing the brightly dressed, goiter-ridden local ladies. Like startled cattle, the would run from us down alleyways or giggle and chatter behind shuttered windows. The few we d aim our lenses at screeched and threw themselves down in the grey dust, covering themselves wi their many layers of ragged dress.

An open window invited us to peer into someone's home. Through the dust motes that eternal rise from these earthen floors we could see the straw bedding and blackened pots around a black fireplace. A goatskin sack hung on the wall, as did a few pictures. One was a charcoal drawing of helicopter, that mysterious beast that sometimes hovers up the valley of the Braldu. The second was poster of Bhutto, the ex-president of Pakistan, ousted and eventually executed by General Zia. In th corner of Bhutto's portrait a candle, freshly extinguished, symbolically wafted its last puff of smok Above both of these presided a photograph of the Ayatollah Khomeini, his cheerless countenanc seeming to stare through the dim, dusty light and directly into our eyes.

In this almost lawless frontier of Pakistan it is odd to see a portrait of a past leader, but n surprising to see the face of Islamic fundamentalism. While politics means little to the Balti, Islam everything. Tied to the land as they are in this desolate place, perhaps a notion of God is all that the have. Of Bhutto, our liaison officer says evil genius. Of Khomeini, evil idiot.

We turned to the street again and soon confronted another cluster of women, threshing a heap c grain with green branches. Poised for purdah, they seemed ready to bolt, but Pete had another strateg He emptied a bottle of bright red multivitamins onto the palm of his outstretched hand. The wome inched closer and with doe-eyed temerity submitted to our cameras, gently taking the magic medicin from Pete's hand as if they were diamonds.

As doctor of the expedition, Pete's was the face that all the villagers knew. At each village alon the approach he would no sooner arrive than the sick and ailing would mill around him, as if a identikit picture had preceded him. To these people medicine was more magic than anything else, ar Pete was held in particular reverence. Each night he would spend a couple of hours doing what h could, even making house calls when asked. To us, nothing could have seemed more unlikely tha hiking a long day in hundred-degree heat and finishing the day's consultations with a candle-l gynecological examination of a Balti woman in her dusty home, with children, chickens and husbar gathered around. But to Pete it was just another curious experience for a doctor in the Third World.

"If there is such a thing as reincarnation," I remarked, "and your past deeds are accountable, ar you were to find yourself reborn into a place like this, then you could say with a fair degree certainty that you had previously blown it."

"One could do worse," Pete replied.

I found it hard to imagine a station in life much more difficult than this, save for such hells warfare or prison, which man contrives for his own kind for the sole purpose of misery. Pressed, Pe elaborated.

"Well, you could come back as an Askole chicken, for instance," and he pointed to a brood bedraggled and scrawny birds rooting about in the grey muck of a culvert.

That fate, we agreed, must be reserved for the really bad eggs of society.

A month later, after our twelve-member expedition had marched to the end of a buckling swell o ice called the Baltoro Glacier, we divided into smaller teams and set off to climb the west face o Broad Peak, a 26,400-foot mountain with a summit that rose 10,000 feet above our base camp. Ju outside base camp, as we walked toward Broad Peak, Pete and I came to a zone of crevasses covere by a thin layer of snow. I poked my ice axe into a suspect snowpatch to test its strength. The ver moment I assured Pete it was safe to cross it, the surface gave way and I dropped into a crevasse. I fe the foolish surprise one would feel standing on a glass-topped table that had suddenly shattered. Mo surprising was that the crevasse had a false floor and I had stopped just a few feet down.

"Crevasse," I stated in the quiet that follows smashed mirrors and glassware.

"Thought I'd lost you already," Pete said as I extricated myself. Then he added, "You'll be please to know you've got an audience." Some trekkers on this well-traveled tract of wilderness had seen th whole display from their camp a few hundred feet away.

"Don't worry," he said with a grin, "no one from our camp saw it."

The sun was setting on one of those rare Karakoram days when there is not a breath of wind fro glacier to summit, nor any cloud or snow plume streaming from the giants. The rock on nearby K took on an orange glow.

By the time we were in the first couloirs of Broad Peak it was night. The snow was firm underfoo and shortly the full moon rounded the south flank and doused the west face with bright light. W reached 19,000 feet, rested a while and then carried on in the moonlight.

Step after step, breath after breath, every hour the atmosphere became just a little thinner. Behin us the first hint of dawn was turning the horizon every shade of blue imaginable, while the moon s great and white, refusing to evaporate. All the mountains glowed, every minute changing color lik chameleons.

Daylight revealed relics of other expeditions: shredded tents, bits of fixed rope, an old oxyge cylinder. The path was already pitted with the tracks of four members of our group above. I brief pretended to myself that I was following the tracks of Hermann Buhl back in 1957, the year of his fir ascent of this, the twelfth-highest mountain on earth. Fifty-seven was also the year of my birth, an the year Buhl died while climbing on Chogolisa, a snowy pyramid that lay to my right.

At about 20,500 feet we met Alan Rouse, Andy Parkin, Roger Baxter-Jones and the Frenchma Jean Affanassieff, the four members of our expedition who'd set off up Broad Peak a day before Pe and I. Returning from their ascent of the previous day, they looked tired. Alan told of the damnab long ridge at the end of the climb and of the windless hour they'd sat on the summit.

We reached 21,000 feet an hour after passing our four friends and fell into a deep sleep inside th tiny tent we pitched on a small clearing in the snow. Doug Scott and Steve Sustad—two others of ou group—caught up to us in the early afternoon and shared the same camp. Our tired minds were aliv with fantastic dreams, and as we four set off together the next morning we compared the places the dreams had taken us.

At 22,800 feet we rested again. After rehydrating ourselves with cups of tea brewed over a sma gas stove, we set out just as Don Whillans and the Pakistani climber Gohar Shar—the final membe of our expedition—arrived. Those two bivied here while we climbed higher, gaining height for th next day's summit push.

Pete and I pitched a tent beneath a small ice cliff at about 24,500 feet, and Doug and Steve bivi 400 feet above it. It was late into the night before we finished melting snow to drink, and even then w felt we could have drunk a gallon more.

During the night the altitude crept into our heads and by morning it was bashing away from th inside. ~~We'd chosen a very high spot to bivy—the highest I'd ever climbed. Waking was a long~~ an difficult process. While brewing tea I heard Pete mumbling in his sleep.

"What about this rope then?" he asked.

"Rope? Our rope is in the pack," I answered.

"Noooo, not that rope," he chided.

"Then what rope?"

"This rope we are tied to."

"We're not tied in, Pete. We're in the tent, on Broad Peak."

"Noooo, you don't understand," he said, and I began to feel like a thick-headed schoolboy givi all the wrong answers. I plied him for more clues to his sleepy riddle and got this:

"It's the rope that all of us are tied to."

"Fixed rope?"

"Noooo," he whined.

"Umbilical cord?" Any wild guess now.

"Noooo!"

"Then you must be speaking of a metaphysical rope, eh, one that everyone is tied to but no one tied to?"

But before I got an answer to this, the smell of sweet tea had woken him and we were trying force breakfast down our throats. A few aspirin later and we were moving.

A short step of vertical ice to round a serac got our blood flowing. Doug and Steve were alread close to the snowy notch that divided the rocky cappings of the central summit and main summit Broad Peak when I caught sight of them. By the time we surmounted the steepish final chimney to th col, at just under 8000 meters, a strong wind was blowing. Suddenly we could see into China, whe the wind was coming from. Rust-colored peaks and valleys contrasted sharply with the blinding whi of the Godwin-Austen Glacier.

On the final ridge to the summit—a rise of 400 feet but a length of a quarter-mile—lay the harde climbing yet: endless short steps of steep snow interspersed with rock. At perhaps 1:00 or 2:00 P. Doug and Steve passed us on their return from the summit. "It's even windier and colder up ther youth," Doug said, "and the top is two hours away at the rate you're moving."

Moving at this altitude was like wading through treacle. I became aware of a peculiar sense disassociation with myself in which I felt as if part of me was external to my body and looking on. felt this most acutely when setting up belays or making a difficult move; it felt like having someo peering over my shoulder keeping an eye on me, or as if I had a second, invisible head on m shoulders.

We went on for another hour to a dome of snow and cornices, where we rested. The sense disassociation had begun to be punctuated by feelings of total absence, momentary blackouts, whe neither I nor the guy over my shoulder seemed to be around. I would wake from these blackouts a fe paces beyond where they had struck me, which led to a concern about stepping off the narrow ridg "Like a dream," I murmured to Pete, but the wind snatched my words before he heard them.

Ahead, the ridge dipped down and curved left in a long, even slope to the summit, perhaps a hal hour trudge away, yet just twenty vertical feet higher. But here my fears about what was happening me doubled. A vicious headache gripped me and a tingling in my arms grew so intense that my finge curled tightly into a fist, making it hard to hold on to my ice axe. To articulate this to Pete wa difficult, as speech and thought seemed to have no link in my mind; in short, I didn't know what w

going on.

Exhaustion I can accept, and given that alone I might have crawled to the summit; but somethi alien was going on within me, and I wasn't prepared to push my luck with it. I got it out that I want down. Pete knelt beside me, tried to talk me into going on, and his ever-present determination near got me going. There is a state of mind that sometimes infests climbers in which a particular go achieves a significance beyond anything that the future may hold. For a few minutes or hours o casts aside all that has previously been held as worth living for, and one's focus falls on one risk move or stretch of ground, which becomes the only thing that matters. This state of mind is what both fantastic and reckless about the game. Since everything is at stake in these moments, one h better be sure to recognize them and have no illusions about what lies on the other side of luck. Th was one of those times. I had to weigh what was important and what was most important.

"It'd be nice to reach the top, you and I," Pete said. And so it would have, to stand up there wi this man who had become such a strong friend in such a short time.

"Didn't you once say that summits are important?" Those were my words he was throwing back me, shouting above the wind and his own breathlessness. Something I'd said a few weeks before on granite spire called Lobsang Spire. I'd said it to encourage us when the rock turned blank and it look like drilling bolts into the cliff—a tiresome process—was necessary to get up. I struggled to compo an intelligible sentence.

"Only important when you're in control. . . . Lost control. . . . Too high, too fast."

Pete nodded. I could see that he was feeling the strain too. We just got up and began the long pa down. When I looked toward those red hills in China, I saw they were now covered in cotton wo clouds that lapped at Broad Peak's east face. We were so far above them. In two and a half days w had gone from 16,100 feet to 26,250 feet. It was the limit of what our bodies could do.

Three hundred feet below our high point I blacked out for twenty minutes. I woke momentari during this period, trying to force myself awake, and recall seeing Pete next to me, observing my stat as a good doctor should. When I regained control of myself, Pete put a brew of grape drink into m hands. I drank it down, then promptly threw it up.

"See. . . . Told you I was . . . sick." The purple stain I had made in the snow formed intrica arabesque designs that grew onto the snow crystals glinting in the afternoon light. Hallucinations.

Once we were moving I began to improve, when suddenly something else happened. Pete appear over a crest, lagging on the end of the rope. He took short steps and looked stressed. Speaking in slow whisper, he told me he suddenly couldn't breathe, as if his diaphragm had collapsed. His li were blue, a sign of oxygen starvation. We had to get down, and fast, but a snail's pace was the best h could manage in this thin soup of air.

At perhaps seven in the evening we reached the col and rappelled sixty feet to the start of the sno Wind had covered any sign of our tracks. Dragging the rope behind me, I began plunge-stepping dow making tracks for Pete. After 400 feet I turned and saw that he had barely moved. By the time crawled back up to him through the soft snow, it was dark. He had his headlamp on, shining out in the windy night. When I turned to the glacier I could see a light shining back from base camp. It w Pete's girlfriend, Beth, giving the 8:00 P.M. signal, and Pete was returning it.

Conversation was superfluous. We knew that we were going to be on the go all night, very hig and the wind was rising. I tied the rope around Pete and began roping him down, length after lengt till his strength began to ebb; then I began to talk him down, ordering and cajoling every step out him. At about 10:00 P.M. he slumped in the snow and whispered that he could no longer see. So guided him by direction, telling him to traverse forty-five degrees right, or straight down. With tracks it was all instinct anyway, and the bastard moon shone everywhere but on the upper slopes

Broad Peak. And all the time, wind and spindrift blew.

~~Somewhere near was the band of sixty-foot ice cliffs we'd surmounted that morning.~~ We had t find the low spot in them, but where that was was anybody's guess. Pete had gotten too weak to wal so I was dragging and carrying him and both packs. The sensation of being outside myself was mo prevalent than ever, my watcher checking every ice axe belay and every decision. He must have lent hand in carrying Pete too.

At some point in this nightmare, I recalled reading about the first ascent of Broad Peak's centr summit, made by a Polish team who were caught in a storm on the descent. The account, recorded in climbing magazine, described what ensued as a "struggle for survival." Accompanying this story wa a photo of Broad Peak, littered with crosses where four men had perished from falls and from th biting blizzard winds. Those crosses were now underfoot. I felt as if the ghosts of history watched the shadows.

Around the lip of the seracs the angle steepened. Pete and I linked arms and shuffled along in th dark to what I hoped was the low spot. The wind howled. It became too steep to blunder about as w were, so I began making twenty-foot leads, shoving my axe into the soft snow and pulling Pete in me. At the last belay he let go of everything and swung down to the lip of the serac. The shaft of m axe dropped alarmingly. I lost my cool and yelled a mouthful of curses at him as I hauled him bac up.

"Sorry," he whispered calmly. Throughout this ordeal he had stayed composed, seeming reserving his energy for matters of survival, rather than letting fear or emotion take hold. I clippe him to his axe and wrapped his arms around it.

"Just don't lose it now, brother. Please."

The wind seemed to attack with unprecedented malice, burning our faces with thick clouds spindrift. Somewhere nearby in the black at the bottom of this serac was a tent, and if things had gon as planned, Don and Gohar were in it. I called till my throat was raw and shoved my axe into the sno as deep as it would go to lower Pete.

So much was confusion in the minute it took to lower him. Pete was so disoriented that he couldn tell where he was, I was blinded by spindrift and the axe was again shifting and coming out of th snow. I wrapped the rope around my arm to distribute some of the weight while pushing the axe with my knee. There was no way of telling if Pete was down, but he came to a stop anyway. I rappell off my second, shorter tool, moving quickly before it slid out. Pete could barely move. We aga linked arms to negotiate some broken ground and then reverted to piggybacking, when a lig suddenly appeared.

"We've got a sick man here, Don," I called to the bobbing light. Pete crawled a few feet along crest and then stopped totally. Gohar arrived, himself groggy, awakened from a deep sleep. While I s Pete on my shoulders and slid us down the last fifty feet to the tent, Gohar belayed us with a rope. A the bottom, Don helped drag Pete into the tent, where we began warming and rehydrating him. It w 2:00 A.M. We'd been moving for twenty-two hours.

All of us lay crammed in together in the quiet of the tent. It took a long time for feeling to return my hands and feet, and Pete's were ice cold, but remarkably not frostbitten. Warm liquid seemed t perk him up.

"How are you, Gregor?" he asked, his voice regaining its familiar, impish tone.

"Done in. Rest a couple hours till dawn; then we'll head on down." My eyelids closed under th weight of exhaustion and I dreamt of grassy places.

Those were the last words that we spoke together. At dawn Pete awoke to ask Gohar for water. A few minutes later Gohar pressed a cup of warm liquid to his lips, but Pete would not drink it. Don an

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