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A Personal Account of the Mt. Everest Disaster

INTO THIN AIR

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NEW AFTERWORD BY THE AUTHOR

Jon Krakauer

AUTHOR OF INTO THE WILD AND EIGER DREAMS

It would seem almost as though there were a cordon drawn round the upper part of these great peaks beyond which no man may go. The truth of course lies in the fact that, at altitudes of 25,000 feet and beyond, the effects of low atmospheric pressure upon the human body are so severe that really difficult mountaineering is impossible and the consequences even of a mild storm may be deadly, that nothing but the most perfect conditions of weather and snow offers the slightest chance of success, and that on the last lap of the climb no party is in a position to choose its day. . . .

No, it is not remarkable that Everest did not yield to the first few attempts; indeed, it would have been very surprising and not a little sad if it had, for that is not the way of great mountains. Perhaps we had become a little arrogant with our fine new technique of ice-claw and rubber slipper, our age of easy mechanical conquest. We had forgotten that the mountain still holds the master card, that it will grant success only in its own good time. Why else does mountaineering retain its deep fascination?

Eric Shipton, in 1938

Upon That Mountain

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

It was early in the afternoon of May 10, 1996. I hadn't slept in fifty-seven hours. The only food I'd been able to force down

over the preceding three days was a bowl of ramen soup and a handful of peanut M&Ms. Weeks of violent coughing had left me with two separated ribs that made ordinary breathing an excruciating trial. At 29,028 feet up in the troposphere, so little oxygen was reaching my brain that my mental capacity was that of a slow child. Under the circumstances, I was incapable of feeling much of anything except cold and tired.

I'd arrived on the summit a few minutes after Anatoli Boukreev, a Russian climbing guide working for an American commercial expedition, and just ahead of Andy Harris, a guide on the New Zealand-based team to which I belonged. Although I was only slightly acquainted with Boukreev, I'd come to know and like Harris well during the preceding six weeks. I snapped four quick photos of Harris and Boukreev striking summit poses, then turned and headed down. My watch read 1:17 P.M. All told, I'd spent less than five minutes on the roof of the world.

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

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

Nobody can speak for the leaders of the two guided groups involved, because both men are dead. But I can attest that nothing I saw early on the afternoon of May 10 suggested that a murderous storm was bearing down. To my oxygen-depleted mind, the clouds drifting up the grand valley of ice known as the

Western Cwm* looked innocuous, wispy, insubstantial. Gleaming in the brilliant midday sun, they appeared no different from the harmless puffs of convection condensation that rose from the valley almost every afternoon.

As I began my descent I was extremely anxious, but my concern had little to do with the weather: a check of the gauge on my oxygen tank had revealed that it was almost empty. I needed to get down, fast.

The uppermost shank of Everest's Southeast Ridge is a slender, heavily corniced fin of rock and wind-scoured snow that snakes for a quarter mile between the summit and a subordinate pinnacle known as the South Summit. Negotiating the serrated ridge presents no great technical hurdles, but the route is dreadfully exposed. After leaving the summit, fifteen minutes of cautious shuffling over a 7,000-foot abyss brought me to the notorious Hillary Step, a pronounced notch in the ridge that demands some technical maneuvering. As I clipped into a fixed rope and prepared to rappel over the lip, I was greeted with an alarming sight.

Thirty feet below, more than a dozen people were queued up at the base of the Step. Three climbers were already in the process of hauling themselves up the rope that I was preparing to descend. Exercising my only option, I unclipped from the communal safety line and stepped aside.

The traffic jam was comprised of climbers from three expeditions: the team I belonged to, a group of paying clients under the leadership of the celebrated New Zealand guide Rob Hall; another guided party headed by the American Scott Fischer; and a noncommercial Taiwanese team. Moving at the snail's pace that is the norm above 26,000 feet, the throng labored up the Hillary Step one by one, while I nervously bided my time.

Harris, who'd left the summit shortly after I did, soon pulled up behind me. Wanting to conserve whatever oxygen remained in

*The Western Cwm, pronounced *koom*, was named by George Leigh Mallory, who first saw it during the initial Everest expedition of 1921 from the Lho La, a high pass on the border between Nepal and Tibet. *Cwm* is a Welsh term for valley or cirque.

"A harrowing tale of the perils of high-altitude climbing, a story of bad luck and worse judgment and of heartbreaking heroism." —PEOPLE

Reeling from the brain-altering effects of oxygen depletion, Jon Krakauer reached the summit of Mt. Everest in the early afternoon of May 10, 1996. He hadn't slept in fifty-seven hours. As he turned to begin the perilous descent from 29,028 feet (roughly the cruising altitude of an Airbus jetliner), twenty other climbers were still pushing doggedly to the top, unaware that the sky had begun to roil with clouds. . .

This is the terrifying story of what really happened that fateful day at the top of the world, during what would be the deadliest season in the history of Everest. In this harrowing yet breathtaking narrative, Krakauer takes the reader along with his ill-fated expedition, step by precarious step, from Kathmandu to the mountain's pinnacle where, plagued by a combination of hubris, greed, poor judgment, and plain bad luck, they would fall prey to the mountain's unpredictable fury.

With more than three million copies in print in all editions, this sensational book virtually defines excellence in the genre of narrative nonfiction. Brilliantly written and supported by unimpeachable reporting, *Into Thin Air* will by turns thrill and terrify.

"*Into Thin Air* is a raw, vivid book, written in anguish and reported within an inch of its life." —THE WASHINGTON POST

"In this movingly written book, Krakauer describes an experience of such bone-chilling horror as to persuade even the most fanatical alpinists to seek sanctuary at sea level." —SPORTS ILLUSTRATED

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