

#1 *New York Times* Bestseller



Three Cups of Tea




One Man's Mission to Promote Peace . . .
One School at a Time



GREG MORTENSON AND DAVID OLIVER RELIN



"Thrilling . . . proof that one ordinary person, with the right combination of character and determination, really can change the world."
—TOM BROKAW



CHAPTER I
Failure



Greg Mortenson was lost.

He didn't know it yet.

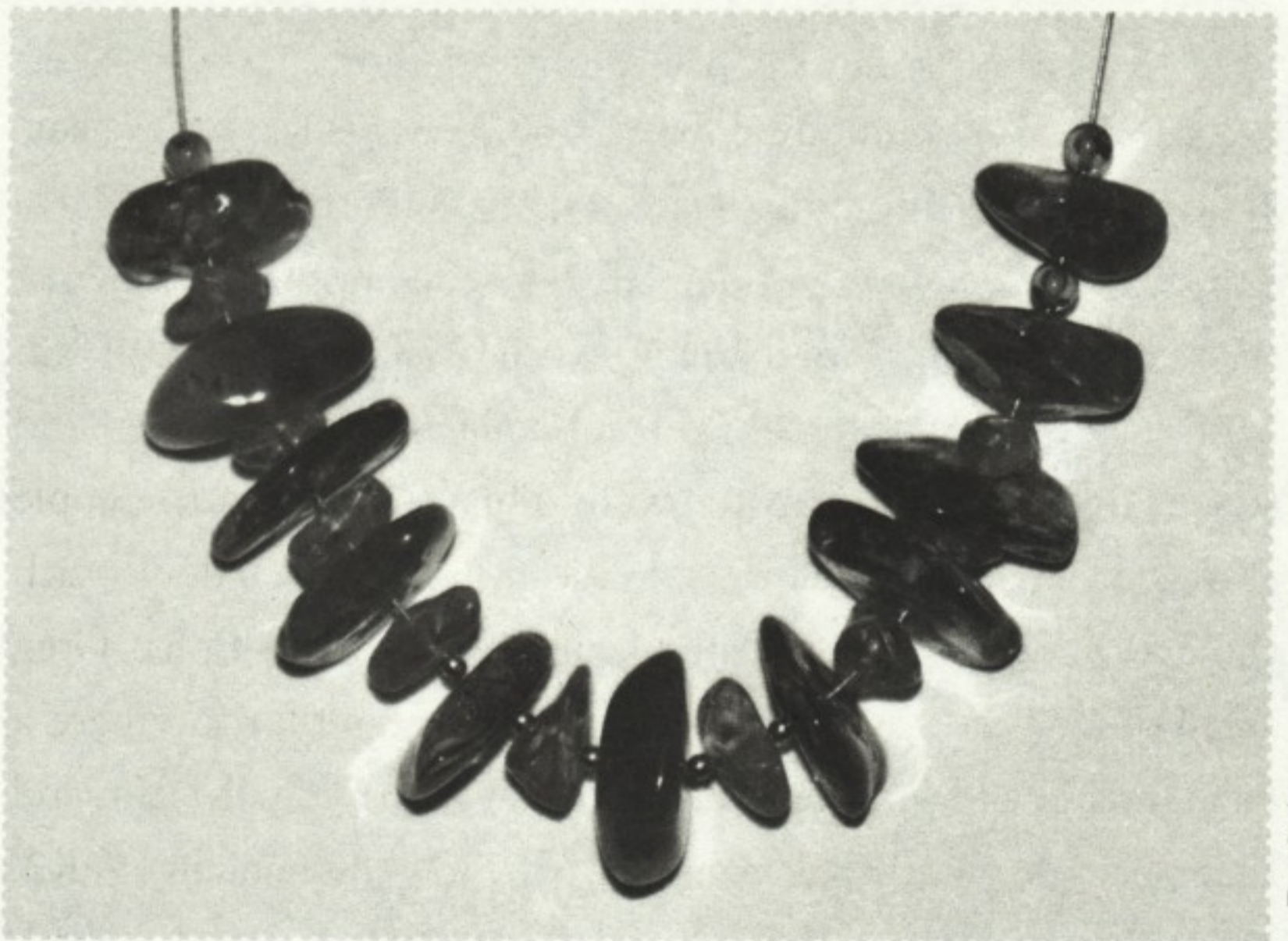
He was hiking down the Baltoro **Glacier**, a frozen river that flows along a mountain slope at a rate of four inches a day. His heavy black boots didn't seem to be moving any faster than the ice beneath them. At any moment, he thought, he'd look up and see Scott Darsney, a fellow mountain climber, sitting on a rock, waiting and laughing at him for being so slow. But he didn't realize that he had taken a wrong turn. He should have been walking west, toward a village where he hoped to hire a jeep driver to take him out of the mountains. In reality, he was now headed south, into a landscape that was a maze of shattered chunks of ice.

Greg and Darsney were part of an **expedition** that had set out three months before to reach the **summit** of a mountain called K2, part of the **Karakoram** Range in Pakistan. K2 is the

Three Cups of Tea

second-highest mountain on Earth; only Mount Everest reaches farther into the clouds. Most mountain climbers consider it to be the toughest peak in the world. Its slopes are so steep that snow can't cling to them. But Greg Mortenson knew what he was doing. He'd reached the summit of Mount **Kilimanjaro** by the age of eleven. He'd learned to climb in Yosemite National Park. He'd made it up mountains in the **Himalayas** before. He had no doubt that he'd reach the top of K2 with the **amber necklace** he carried in his pocket.

It had belonged to his sister, Christa, who'd died on her twenty-third birthday, in July 1992. Greg planned to leave the necklace on K2 in Christa's honor. And he'd come close—within six hundred feet of the summit. But now he was headed



Christa's amber neckace,

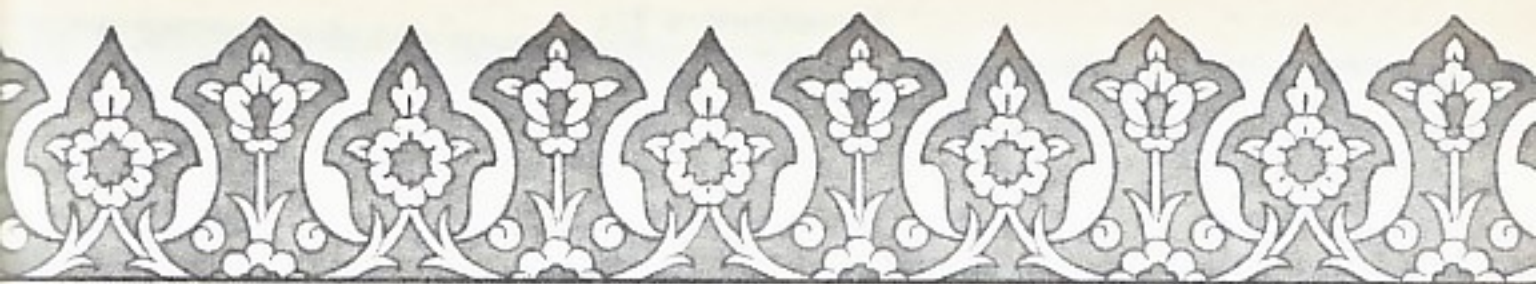


Scott Darsney

Greg Mortenson (third from right in cap) with Scott Darsney (far right) before taking on K2

back down the mountain, Christa's necklace still in his pocket. Failure—not something he was used to—was on his mind.

Greg and Darsney had helped to rescue another member of their team, Etienne Fine. When Fine neared the summit of K2, he'd gotten extremely sick as fluid collected in his lungs, and tissues in his brain began to swell. This can happen to people at altitudes above what their bodies are used to. Along with the expedition's leaders, Dan Mazur and Jonathan Pratt, Greg and Darsney had carried Fine down the mountain to where a helicopter could land and take him to a hospital. Mazur and Pratt had returned and managed to reach the summit of K2, but Greg and Darsney, already exhausted from a stressful climb



CHAPTER 1

FAILURE

When it is dark enough, you can see the stars.

—Persian proverb

IN PAKISTAN'S KARAKORAM, bristling across an area barely one hundred miles wide, more than sixty of the world's tallest mountains lord their severe alpine beauty over a witnessless high-altitude wilderness. Other than snow leopard and ibex, so few living creatures have passed through this barren icescape that the presence of the world's second-highest mountain, K2, was little more than a rumor to the outside world until the turn of the twentieth century.

Flowing down from K2 toward the populated upper reaches of the Indus Valley, between the four fluted granite spires of the Gasherbrums and the lethal-looking daggers of the Great Trango Towers, the sixty-two-kilometer-long Baltoro Glacier barely disturbs this still cathedral of rock and ice. And even the motion of this frozen river, which drifts at a rate of four inches a day, is almost undetectable.

On the afternoon of September 2, 1993, Greg Mortenson felt as if he were scarcely traveling any faster. Dressed in a much-patched set of mud-colored *shalwar kamiz*, like his Pakistani porters, he had the sensation that his heavy black leather mountaineering boots were independently steering him down the Baltoro at their own glacial speed, through an armada of icebergs arrayed like the sails of a thousand ice-bound ships.

At any moment, Mortenson expected to find Scott Darsney, a fellow member of his expedition, with whom he was hiking back toward civilization, sitting on a boulder, teasing him for walking so slowly. But the upper Baltoro is more maze than trail. Mortenson hadn't yet realized that he was lost and alone. He'd strayed from the main body

of the glacier to a side spur that led not westward, toward Askole, the village fifty miles farther on, where he hoped to find a jeep driver willing to transport him out of these mountains, but south, into an impenetrable maze of shattered icefall, and beyond that, the high-altitude killing zone where Pakistani and Indian soldiers lobbed artillery shells at one another through the thin air.

Ordinarily Mortenson would have paid more attention. He would have focused on life-and-death information like the fact that Mouzafer, the porter who had appeared like a blessing and volunteered to haul his heavy bag of climbing gear, was also carrying his tent and nearly all of his food and kept him in sight. And he would have paid more mind to the overawing physicality of his surroundings.

In 1909, the duke of Abruzzi, one of the greatest climbers of his day, and perhaps his era's most discerning connoisseur of precipitous landscapes, led an Italian expedition up the Baltoro for an unsuccessful attempt at K2. He was stunned by the stark beauty of the encircling peaks. "Nothing could compare to this in terms of alpine beauty," he recorded in his journal. "It was a world of glaciers and crags, an incredible view which could satisfy an artist just as well as a mountaineer."

But as the sun sank behind the great granite serrations of Muztagh Tower to the west, and shadows raked up the valley's eastern walls, toward the bladed monoliths of Gasherbrum, Mortenson hardly noticed. He was looking inward that afternoon, stunned and absorbed by something unfamiliar in his life to that point—failure.

Reaching into the pocket of his *shalwar*, he fingered the necklace of amber beads that his little sister Christa had often worn. As a three-year-old in Tanzania, where Mortenson's Minnesota-born parents had been Lutheran missionaries and teachers, Christa had contracted acute meningitis and never fully recovered. Greg, twelve years her senior, had appointed himself her protector. Though Christa struggled to perform simple tasks—putting on her clothes each morning took upward of an hour—and suffered severe epileptic seizures, Greg pressured his mother, Jerene, to allow her some measure of independence. He helped Christa find work at manual labor, taught her the routes of the Twin Cities' public buses, so she could move about freely, and, to their mother's mortification, discussed the particulars of birth control when he learned she was dating.

Each year, whether he was serving as a U.S. Army medic and platoon leader in Germany, working on a nursing degree in South Dakota, studying the neurophysiology of epilepsy at graduate school in Indiana in hopes of discovering a cure for Christa, or living a climbing bum's life out of his car in Berkeley, California, Mortenson insisted that his little sister visit him for a month. Together, they sought out the spectacles that brought Christa so much pleasure. They took in the Indy 500, the Kentucky Derby, road-tripped down to Disneyland, and he guided her through the architecture of his personal cathedral at that time, the storied granite walls of Yosemite.

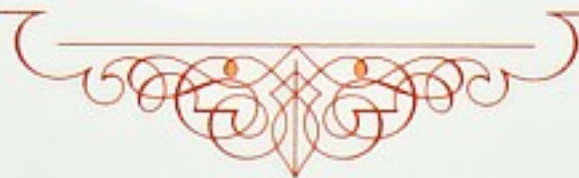
For her twenty-third birthday, Christa and their mother planned to make a pilgrimage from Minnesota to the cornfield in Deyersville, Iowa, where the movie that Christa was drawn to watch again and again, *Field of Dreams*, had been filmed. But on her birthday, in the small hours before they were to set out, Christa died of a massive seizure.

After Christa's death, Mortenson retrieved the necklace from among his sister's few things. It still smelled of a campfire they had made during her last visit to stay with him in California. He brought it to Pakistan with him, bound in a Tibetan prayer flag, along with a plan to honor the memory of his little sister. Mortenson was a climber and he had decided on the most meaningful tribute he had within him. He would scale K2, the summit most climbers consider the toughest to reach on Earth, and leave Christa's necklace there at 28,267 feet.

He had been raised in a family that had relished difficult tasks, like building a school and a hospital in Tanzania, on the slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro. But despite the smooth surfaces of his parents' unquestioned faith, Mortenson hadn't yet made up his mind about the nature of divinity. He would leave an offering to whatever deity inhabited the upper atmosphere.

Three months earlier, Mortenson had positively skipped up this glacier in a pair of Teva sandals with no socks, his ninety-pound pack beside the point of the adventure that beckoned him up the Baltoro. He had set off on the seventy-mile trek from Askole with a team of ten English, Irish, French, and American mountaineers, part of a poorly financed but pathologically bold attempt to climb the world's *second-highest peak*.

Compared to Everest, a thousand miles southeast along the spine of



“Here (in Pakistan and Afghanistan), we drink three cups of tea to do business; the first you are a stranger, the second you become a friend, and the third, you join our family, and for our family we are prepared to do anything—even die.”

—Haji Ali, Korphe Village Chief, Karakoram Mountains, Pakistan

**The astonishing, uplifting story of a real-life
Indiana Jones and his remarkable humanitarian
campaign in the Taliban's backyard**

In 1993 a mountaineer named Greg Mortenson drifted into an impoverished Pakistan village in the Karakoram mountains after a failed attempt to climb K2. Moved by the inhabitants' kindness, he promised to return and build a school. *Three Cups of Tea* is the story of that promise and its extraordinary outcome. Over the next decade Mortenson built not just one but fifty-five schools—especially for girls—in the forbidding terrain that gave birth to the Taliban. His story is at once a riveting adventure and a testament to the power of the humanitarian spirit.

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