

"A love story, a tale of adventure, and a study in obsession all at once,  
*Above All Things* is simply breathtaking." JOSEPH BOYDEN

Tanis Rideout

ABOVE  
ALL  
THINGS

A NOVEL



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McClelland & Stewart

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*For Simon,*

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*who knows there will always be mountains.*

# Contents

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*Cover*

*Title Page*

*Copyright*

*Dedication*

*Epigraph*

1920

The Voyage Out: Sea Level: 1924

Dawn: 5 O'clock

Base Camp: 17,000 Feet

Breakfast: 7 O'clock

Icefall: 19,325 Feet

Magdalene: 11 O'clock

Advanced Base Camp: 21,200 Feet

Will: 1 O'clock

The North Col: 23,200 Feet

Market: 2 O'clock

Rongbuk Monastery: 16,340 Feet

Tea: 4 O'clock

The Assault: 27,000 Feet

Dinner: 7 O'clock

Camp VI: 26,900 Feet

Port and Whisky: 10 O'clock

The Final Push

Visitations

*Author's Note*

*Acknowledgements*

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There have been joys too great to be described in words, and there have been griefs upon which I have not dared to dwell; and with these in mind I say: Climb if you will, but remember that courage and strength are not without prudence, and that a momentary negligence may destroy the happiness of a lifetime. Do nothing in haste; look well with each step; and from the beginning think what may be the end.

— EDWARD WHYMPER

Upward I looked, and beheld its shoulders,  
Vested already with that planet's rays  
Which leadeth others right by every road.  
Then was my fear a little quieted.

— *THE INFERNO – canto 1*

“Tell me the story of Everest,” she said, a fervent smile sweeping across her face, creasing the corners of her eyes. “Tell me about this mountain that’s stealing you away from me.”

George and Ruth sat on the drawing room floor, laughing and tipsy, dinner growing cold at the table in the next room. Ruth was cross-legged opposite him, her grey skirt pulled tight across her knees. She picked up the single sheet of thick, ivory paper from her lap and reread the invitation from the newly formed Everest Committee again. “My husband, the world famous explorer.” Ruth held up her glass of wine and he reached out with his own, the crystal ringing in the lamplit room. She was fairly bursting with happiness.

“I like the sound of that,” George said and let himself imagine what it would be like to have people thinking about him, talking about him. The opportunities that success on Everest would bring. “I might be able to leave teaching, maybe even write full time. We could travel,” he said. “Have our own adventures.”

Handing him the invitation, Ruth rose unsteadily to her feet and gulped at her wine. He scanned the words again – *hope that you’ll join the Everest reconnaissance, pursuit of the final Pole, for the honour of King and Country* – as she crossed the room to the bookcase. Stretching up on her bare feet, she reached for the atlas on the top shelf before turning to pad back to him. “Show me,” she said, sitting back down beside him. Her hair had come loose from where it had been pinned up and haloed her in the dim light. She pushed it off her brow with the back of her hand.

He laid out the *Times Atlas of the World* on the floor, on the blue Turkish rug with its wove colours of water and sky, ice and snow. When he found the proper map, George took Ruth’s hand and with her finger drew a line around Europe, the path of a ship past France, around capes and narrow islands and the ruins of the Greeks. Through the canal that split the desert in two and past the land of Lawrence’s Arabs. Their hands described reckless adventures sailing over longitudes and latitudes, past *here there be monsters* and the arched backs of serpents painted on the blue of the Indian Ocean, and into the port of Bombay. George drew lines across the plains of India, around bazaars and villages, landscapes of tea and Hindu cows, into the curved spine of the Himalaya with its foothills and plateaus.

“It’s blank,” Ruth exclaimed when their hands reached the spot where Everest should be. There was only a series of names – no relief, no lines of ridges or elevations. Just words floating in an empty space, waiting to be claimed by him.

“No one has mapped her yet. That’s what we’re going to do, Ruth – reconnoitre her, bring back the shape of her.” He stroked his fingers across the map, as if he could explore the ranges through the pages, feeling for the relief of peaks. “These are the highest mountains on Earth. There was an awe in his voice that he wanted her to share. He recited names and caressed the page, before moving from the map to navigate her skin beneath the folds of her skirt. “West to east – imagine them. Cho Uyo, Gyanchungkang, Everest, Makalu, Kangchenjunga.” They were like spices on his tongue, on hers, tingling.

In a cloud of lavender soap and cloves for the toothache she had complained of earlier

Ruth pressed against him, promised curries for dinner. "You'll have to write me about everything. Every detail so it will be almost like I am with you." There was a thread unravelling at her collar, marking a line on her pale throat.

"You will be with me," he said. "Every step of the way."

"Everest," she said, "sounds like a foreigner."

He took her hands again and traced the lines of her palms, like horizons. "She was named for George Everest. He was the surveyor general of India, but he died before he ever saw her. From malaria, after blindness, paralysis, and wild bouts of insanity. He was a bulldog, apparently, drove his men mad. He set out to force some order on the world with his maps. He started at the bottom and swept his survey up the whole arc of India."

He whispered words like *trigonometrical* and *triangulation* against her throat, at the pulse below her ear. With the back of his fingers he skimmed the long declension of her throat, traced the line of her collarbone where it slipped beneath her blouse.

"Everest was measured from a horizon away." He traced the curvature of the Earth along the concave of her stomach. Pushed her back onto the blue carpet, unearthed her.

"They crept from hill to hill, building towers and measuring the angle of peaks on the horizon. A fraction of a degree could make all the difference." He pressed on top of her, tilted her hips, and pulled her to him.

The atlas ripped under her, the paper stuck to her wet skin.

After a few minutes, Ruth rolled on to her side, curved her body around his, and tucked her head under his chin. She could smell herself on him.

"There were three problems with the measurements. Corrections to be made, all based on mathematics. The curvature of the Earth, the refraction of the light through the thinner air and colder temperatures. And the weight of the mountain."

The air was cooling now on her naked skin. After a moment, Ruth began to shiver despite still being slick with sweat. She pulled herself up, sat facing him, hugged her knees to her chest. She couldn't believe how happy she felt, proud, that George had been chosen. The scent of him rose off her skin. "The weight of the mountain?" she asked.

The light was thinning in the room, etching the two of them in dusk-blue lines. George stood, strode to the window, and gazed out towards the towers of Charterhouse while Ruth shrugged into the jacket he had thrown aside. He shut the window tight and came back, knelt in front of her. He tugged at the lapels of his jacket, drawing it tight around his shoulders.

"It's so massive it affects the gravity around it. They used theodolites to survey her, but the pull of the mountain threw the measurements off. Can you imagine anything so powerful, Ruth? This mountain has a presence. Everest knew it when he planned to measure her – and he didn't even go near her, never even saw her." Closing her eyes, Ruth leaned against his shoulder and pictured the jagged skyline of the mountain.

"Twenty-nine thousand feet." A whispered invocation. A prayer.

She imagined his letters arriving from the Himalaya, herself curled up by the fire to read them. She thought about his returning home to her, victorious. Her face split into another smile, her cheeks aching from it. She couldn't help it. The happiness she felt for him sweated through her. She tried not to think that being apart only seemed romantic when you were together.



“How do they know?” she asked. “How do they know how tall it is, if no one’s been there?”

He reached out again and Ruth stretched out her hand to meet his. She would take his hand, pull him to his feet, lead him up the stairs to their bedroom. But he brushed past her and touched the waiting emptiness of the map.

*A little while longer then*, she thought. She would wait while he planned for and dreamed about the mountain, the future. “How do they know?” she asked again. “Maybe it isn’t even the tallest.”

“It has to be,” he said, his fingers lingering on the map. “It has to be.”

He still remembered the first time he saw her. He felt the pull of her, even then. In 1921 the members of the expedition had planned the sighting, knew roughly where they would get their first glimpse of her. But when the group arrived at the predetermined Himalayan pass, they saw nothing but banks of clouds, pierced by the nearer ridges. Still they set up camp and over the course of the afternoon and evening Everest had slowly unveiled herself. They watched her, stripping away clouds and light.

“There!” someone had called out when the summit finally appeared – a great fang thrust into the expanse of sky. She towered head and shoulders over all the other peaks nearby.

They camped at the apex of the pass overnight and watched her reappear in the morning, noting the play of light and weather on her. The way the clouds rushed up to veil her again in the afternoon. They had already come closer than anyone else had ever been.

The first time, George thought, he’d been successful before he even left.

By the time he returned to England from the second Everest expedition a year later, success was impossible to claim. The *Times* was already blaming him for the disaster that had put an abrupt end to the 1922 attempt. It wasn’t fair, but for good or ill it was his name that had become synonymous with Everest.

When he met Ruth in Paris on his return, he was certain he was done with the mountain. In the hotel room, he’d sworn to her he would never go back: “I promise I’m done with it. I don’t need it. I need to be with you.” He had believed it at the time. Continued to believe the next year, even after Arthur Hinks, the chairman of the Everest Committee, asked him to consider returning a third time, in 1924, even as other names were put forward and a team began to form without him.

He had tried to push Everest out of his mind, but it remained – his first thought on waking his last at night. She was there as he read the newspaper articles about who from the previous expedition was returning for the new attempt: *Colonel Edward (Teddy) Norton, Dr. Howard Somervell*. As he imagined that they might summit his mountain.

Then one day Ruth had said, “You’re thinking of going back.” It wasn’t a question. She looked past him to the rain-pocked window. He could hear the spatter of water against the glass, the gush in the downspouts. He should have denied it; he shouldn’t have said anything, but it was too late for that.

“Perhaps we should at least think about it. They need my experience. No one has been on Everest more often than I have. If they succeed this time and I’m not with them ... Do you remember everything we dreamed about when they first asked me?”

“Teddy’s been to the mountain,” Ruth countered. “And Dr. Somervell, too. You only have one more season than them, George. They’re not your responsibility. You have responsibilities here. There’s your new teaching position at Cambridge. And I don’t think the children could bear for you to go away again.”

He tried not to remember how John had shied away from him when he came home in ’22

But John had been only a baby then. Now he'd had time with his father, knew him. This time would be different.

"You said you were done with it. You promised." Her voice sounded tight. She breathed deeply. "I know you, George. What you want is for me to give you leave to go."

"No," he started to protest, but she was right. They both knew it.

Eventually, Ruth had agreed they should think about it, and he promised they'd make the decision together. But when Hinks's final invitation came, George had accepted without discussing it with her. He couldn't help himself. For days after, he'd waited for the right moment to tell her what he'd done.

He'd returned from a meeting at the college determined to tell her. She was in the dining room – a perfect silhouette in the evening gloom, her features outlined by the dusk glow of the window behind her. Stepping into the room, he wanted to kiss her, to scoop her up, but something about how still she was, the sad line of her mouth, stopped him.

"I knew you'd never let anyone else climb it," she said, not even looking at him. Her backlit profile was a cameo he wanted to carry with him. "As soon as the Committee decided they were going back, I knew you'd be going, despite all the protestations, all the promises. You should have just told me."

She was right. He hadn't meant her to find out this way. The telegram on the table in front of her was luminescent on the dark wood. He knew what it must say – *Glad to have you aboard again*. Damn Hinks.

"I'm sorry, Ruth," he said. "But I have to do this. I have to. It's my mountain. You have to understand." She shook her head as if to say she didn't, she wouldn't. "This will be the last time. It has to be."

"You've said that before, George. And I believed you. I'm not sure I can this time."

"Ruth –"

"Don't." She stood and the movement sent the telegram wafting to the floor. When he looked up from where it had landed she was staring at him, her eyes shrouded by the dim light. Her hands fluttered near her mouth, her throat. "You'll have to find a way to tell the children. Clare will be so disappointed," she said as she stepped around him, moving toward the door. *Disappointed*. The word stung. He knew that's what she felt more than anything. Disappointed, betrayed. He winced, tried to banish the word from his mind.

"When do you leave?" She stood in the doorway, her back to him.

"Ruth, you'll see. It will all be all right. I'll do it this time and then I'll never have to leave again."

"When do you leave?" she asked again.

The months that followed had been difficult. Ruth had been quiet, withdrawn, her words always politely supportive. He found himself missing her before he'd even left.

The night before his departure, they had made love in the unfamiliar hotel room and she had clung to him, desperately, like the wind on the mountain, bucking against him until he was gasping, drained. They were both different when he was leaving; the imminent separation changed them, made them bolder.

The next morning, on board the *RMS California*, she'd kissed him goodbye, nodded emphatically, and then turned to walk down the gangplank, her hips switching under her long skirt. God. How could she not believe him when he said she was beautiful? She'd shake her

head and cover her mouth with her hands – even more beautiful for her denial. There was the hot prick of tears in his eyes, a dull ache in his throat. He swallowed and watched her go. He counted in his head. It would be six months, maybe more, before he saw her again.

That was weeks ago. Now, standing on the deck of the *California*, George cast his gaze back across the Indian Ocean to where he imagined the horizon must be, where it had disappeared when the sun set an hour ago. There was no way to make things right between them except to do what he'd been promising Ruth for years: succeed and put Everest behind him once and for all. He had tried to explain again in the letter he'd started earlier, just why he had to go, how it had nothing to do with his love for her, but the right words never ended up on the page. *My Dearest Ruth, I know this has been hard for you, but you must know how very much you mean to me, how much knowing you are waiting for my success and return drives me forward. That every day farther away is also a day closer to my returning to you again.*

The ship rolled slightly under him, raising a chorus of metallic clangs and creaks from nearby lifeboats and chains. Ignoring the clamour, he pulled out his diary from the pocket of his dinner jacket. The bold dates at the top of the pages were barely visible in the gathering darkness. He leaned farther over the railing to catch some of the light reflecting off the water. He counted down the days. Two more nights. Then the Indian subcontinent, the baked heat of it, the blaze of exotic chaos before they disappeared off the map. He wanted it to burn the salt, the smell of fish and algae from his nostrils. The ocean air was too thick and heavy. It clung to him, clogged up his lungs.

“Am I interrupting?”

George glanced up. “Not at all,” he said, as Sandy Irvine stepped to the railing beside him. George closed up his diary, trying to remember what he had written about Sandy in his letter to Ruth. Probably some remark about the boy's bulk, the sheer size of him. *Our attempt at superman*, he remembered. He slipped the diary back into his pocket, removed his cigarette and offered one to Sandy, who shook his head and leaned forward against the rail. Behind them, the dining room was ablaze with light as waiters cleared tables and joked with one another, louder than when there were diners present.

“Missed you at the shuffleboard contest this afternoon,” Sandy said.

“Not really my game.”

“I won.”

Of course you did, George thought as Sandy described the closeness of the match. He suspected physical challenges came easily to the boy. Sandy was the largest member of the entire team – not the tallest, but he seemed stronger than any of the other climbers.

“Sandy's the Committee's attempt to inject some young blood into the expedition,” Teddy Norton, the expedition leader, had explained months ago when George questioned the boy's inclusion. “To balance out our, shall we say, *experience*.” Teddy had raised an eyebrow as he said the word.

“They think brute strength is the way to go, then?” George had responded. “You and I both know it takes more than muscle to get to the summit. And he doesn't look like much of a climber. He's too big. With too much weight to carry up an incline.”

“You imagined someone more like you, I suspect,” Teddy had teased.

But the best climbers *were* built like him. And Teddy, George thought. Long and thin, with a good reach.

Now, next to Sandy on the deck, George pulled himself up to his full height and ran a hand through his hair, stretched out the muscles in his back. Still, if the boy could continue to sharpen his skills, he might be of some use higher up on the mountain.

“Have you been practising the knots I showed you?” he asked now.

“I know those knots already.”

“You’ll want to practise, believe me. When your fingers are frozen and your brain is fizzing away and suffocating, you’ll pray your body remembers what it needs to do all on its own. Practise.”

“I have climbed before. In Spitsbergen with Odell. I wasn’t bad at it. Quite good, even.”

Of course he was. “Sandy, this won’t be like anything you’ve ever done before. God, we could all die a dozen times before we even get to the mountain – malaria, wild animals, a fall down a cliff face. And then there’s the mountain itself.” He sounded as if he was back in front of the classroom at Charterhouse, the bored faces of his students glaring up at him.

He inhaled and tried again. “There’s just no way to know how you’ll respond. Not at those altitudes. Twenty-nine thousand feet. That’s much higher than even the Camels fly. And those pilots, they’d pass out without their oxygen masks. My brother, Trafford, was a pilot. He loved flying. But he told me he thought he was going to die the first few times he went up. From the vertigo and nausea. That’s what it’s like on Everest all the time. Like the most terrible influenza you’ve ever had. Like something horrible is sitting on your chest, ripping at it. Everything just hurts. Your joints, your bones, your skin even. And the only way to end it is to climb the bloody mountain.”

“So.” Sandy turned to stare at him dead in the eye. His were striking, a flat blue colour. Almost too pale, like light reflecting off stagnant water. “Tell me again why we’re going?” He reached over and punched George lightly in the shoulder, more a push than a punch. Then he smiled and his face opened with it and his eyes weren’t flat anymore; they deepened, the colour shifting. “Just joking,” he said. “I wouldn’t be anywhere else.” He turned back to the expanse of water before them.

Behind them, through the open window of the captain’s salon, George could hear the clink of glasses, the laughter and chatter of their other teammates – the expedition leader, Edward “Teddy” Norton, along with the team doctor, Howard Somervell, and the naturalist Noel Odell. The three of them, along with George and Sandy, would make up the climbing team. There were two more men awaiting them in Bombay – Shebbeare and Hazard – soldiers attached to the local Gurkha regiments who knew the Tibetan languages and customs (more so even than Teddy) and would serve as their translators and guides.

Every so often, the pop and flash of John Noel’s camera strobed across the deck, punctuating the distant murmur of conversation. George couldn’t make out any of the words, but he could imagine easily enough what was being said. He was already tired of the same old conversations – provisions, oxygen, strategy. And Teddy’s waffling. Somervell’s condescension. Odell’s insistence that he knew what was best.

“Look at that,” Sandy said, pointing to the black water roiling in the wake. A green phosphorescence bloomed just beneath the surface of the water where the *California* had passed.

“It’s algae,” George said, watching the glowing trail stretch out behind the ship.

“Incredible.” Sandy’s voice, hushed now, slipped in with the murmur of the engines deep

inside the ship. “Odell told me about this green glow once, on the way to Spitsbergen. We went out on deck every night, but I never saw anything. So strange. Reminds me of the Northern Lights we saw once we arrived in Greenland.”

“Mmmm.” George leaned over the railing to get a closer look. Cool air rose up from the ocean eighty feet below. He’d never seen the Northern Lights, but this colour was too heavy, too viscous to be thought of as light. It reminded him of the seeping gases in the trenches, the shell-holes of no-man’s-land. It moved the same way, wet and congealing as it rolled and gathered in pockets, thicker, heavier than the medium it travelled in. He remembered how the gas crept towards you, like it knew where you were. Stalked you. His throat tightened; he could smell the rubber of the gas masks. George straightened up and inhaled deeply into his lungs: salt, oil, the tobacco burning in his hand.

He shook his head free of the memory and took another drag from his cigarette. Sandy would be too young to remember much of the war. “How old did you say you were, Sandy?”

Sandy bristled next to him. “Twenty-one. I know what you’re thinking, but I’m ready for this. Maybe, as you’ve said, Everest is different, but Spitsbergen wasn’t easy. God, the cold there. The snow would melt inside our boots, down our collars, so it was impossible to stay dry. It was the hardest thing I’ve ever done. But it was incredible – to feel like what I was doing mattered, that people were counting on it. Like this does. Don’t you feel that too? We have to succeed. We have to. Everyone’s counting on us.”

There was a sharp laugh from down the deck. A woman, her laugh too forced. Clearly her companion wasn’t the least bit funny, though she wanted him to think he was. George flicked his cigarette out to sea.

“That’s what my mum thinks too,” Sandy went on. “That I’m too young. She’s worried I’m going to get myself killed. ‘Haven’t enough boys already died?’ she said. I told her I’d be fine. But she stopped speaking to me before I left. She hugged me goodbye, but wouldn’t say anything to me.” Sandy grasped at the railing, then shoved himself away, as if willing the ship to hurry up. As if he could will the outcome of the expedition from here. “But when we succeed,” Sandy continued, “when we climb Everest, then she’ll understand why it had to be done.”

George glanced over at Sandy. The boy really believed they couldn’t fail.

“They grow out of it,” George said. “Mothers.” He stuffed his hands in his pockets. “Mum doesn’t worry much anymore. ‘But I do wonder about you,’ she says, and I like the idea of her wondering.” His father, though. He would have preferred Sandy’s mother’s silence to his own father’s over-loud opinions.

The two men grew quiet as a couple passed by them, leaning close together, voices low and intimate. Sandy watched after them and didn’t speak again until the sound of their footsteps had faded. “I suppose one gets used to it eventually. Being so far away?”

How to answer that? Clearly Sandy was looking for some kind of reassurance, but George wasn’t sure he could give it. “No, you don’t,” he said finally. “Or at least I never have.” Even now he felt torn. Part of him hated being separated from Ruth and the children. And another part hated himself for being so damn sentimental. It was weak. Still, there was the luxury of freedom this far from home. He felt different away from Ruth, away from everyday life, and he was never quite sure which person he was, which he wanted to be.

Somewhere down the deck a door opened and closed, releasing strains of music. Beside

him, Sandy picked up the tune, humming a moment before trailing off, as if he hadn't noticed he was doing it.

Ruth did that, hummed fragments of songs or tunes she made up without realizing. She laughed when he pointed it out to her. "I wasn't humming," she'd tease. "You're hearing things." Dear God, but he missed her.

"Still, I'm glad to be here." Sandy seemed to rush his words, as if his concern over his family might have been misunderstood. "I mean, I'm glad you picked me for the expedition.

"It wasn't really my decision," he said and felt Sandy retreat somewhat beside him. He hadn't meant it like that. "Odell's a good man. Proved himself before on big mountains and he's a first-rate naturalist too. He's brought home at least a dozen new species of plants. The time it seems he's hoping for fossils. His recommendation would have been taken very seriously. Obviously it was." He went on. "Odell wants to prove that Everest was once at the bottom of the ocean. Imagine that." George stared out over the rolling water moving away and away. Tried to imagine the depth of it. As deep as Everest was high. "Ridiculous, really.

"What does it matter?"

"Exactly."

"All that matters is that it's there."

He looked sidelong at Sandy, who smiled, teasing him with his own flippant quotation. "I haven't heard that one before," George said.

"Couldn't resist." Sandy stared up at the night sky, the shapes of foreign constellations. The damp air settled on him, and the faintest dusting of salt water coated his lapels. Backlit by the night sky, Sandy made a handsome shadow. A fresh burst of talk came from behind them followed by staccato laughter. It sounded like Somervell. Sandy turned towards the source now. "Shall we rejoin them?"

"You go ahead. I have some letters I'd like to get written. Besides, it'll just be the same old conversations."

"If you're sure." Before he moved away, Sandy peered over the railing again. "It's gone." There was disappointment in his voice.

For a moment, George wasn't sure what Sandy meant, then he noticed a fresh darkness over the water, deeper than it had been a few minutes ago. The algae had disappeared, the green behind them had faded away; all that was left was the black boil of the ocean.

"I'll let you know what you missed." Sandy paused a moment, as if expecting something before walking towards the salon.

George knew that Sandy had been watching him, measuring him. What did he see? An old man? Thirty-seven wasn't so old. He was strong, in good shape. *A perfect specimen for the expedition*, his medical report had read. Sure the others were fit. They had to be. None of them were slouches. Though Odell was much too weedy. There wasn't much there for the mountain to rip off him. But Sandy. Sandy looked stronger than any of them.

George turned back to face the ocean and watched the waves, peak after peak, as far as he could see.



THE PORT AT BOMBAY was overwhelming. George had tried to describe the chaos of it to him, but still it was more than Sandy could have expected.

It didn't help that he'd slept only fitfully as they waited for landfall. Between his nerves and the wash of sounds that came from the city, he'd woken up again and again. *It's almost like Christmas morning*, he'd written to Marjory in the middle of the night, using his torch until Odell in the bunk below had thudded on the underside of Sandy's bed and muttered him to go the hell to sleep.

When dawn finally arrived, it was a relief. Now Sandy stood on the deck, stunned in silence by the port. After the long days at sea, even the air was different, no longer scoured clean by ocean winds. Here the air was thick in his nose and lungs. He could taste it – diesel and something frying, rotten fish and the stinking detritus of the harbour. From high above he watched the scurry and swirl of men in white suits and *kurtas*, their heads covered in reddish turbans or tan pith helmets. Scattered among them were women in jewel-coloured saris – greens and pinks no Englishwoman would wear. A sea of people all blurred by the heat.

A thump on his back pulled him back from his thoughts. "You should probably be about something," George said as he strode down the gangplank into the commotion below. He was right, but Sandy couldn't tear himself away. Even if he returned to Bombay over and over the way George had, he knew he would never see it like this first time ever again. Ahead of him was the great Gateway, and behind that the Taj Mahal Hotel with its minarets and turrets. That's where they were staying. Just for the one night. One last glimpse of luxury Odell had said, before they pushed out across the countryside and through the province sleeping in train cars and tents.

As Sandy made his way down into the crowd, he spotted Odell bent over a large crate wiping at the sweat on his brow and swatting away a skinny child who had approached him with hands out. He couldn't bring himself to ask Odell for an assignment. True, he wouldn't be here without Odell's recommendation, but he didn't want to always be associated with the naturalist. And he didn't need taking care of. If he stood a chance at the summit, it would be with Odell. George would never pair them together – they were the wrong combination of strength and experience. Or lack thereof.

Colonel Norton was coming down the gangway with the purser. *I like Norton*, Sandy had written to Marjory the previous night. *Teddy, as the others call him. He's the expedition leader. He's been in the military all his life – spent more time abroad than in England. Apparently he hosts a mean pig-sticking competition out here in the colonies. Though he seems too civilized – too neat for something that barbaric. Norton seems calm in a way that George (who's the climbing leader) doesn't. George is always moving, fidgeting, even when he's just sitting at his desk. He's forever picking things up, putting them down. Norton, though, moves more slowly, talks more slowly. He says something once and he says it right.*

Sandy made to intercept Norton, dodging around a group of small Indian men, but he was stopped by a petite figure stepping in front of him. "You're best to keep an eye on anyone getting too close," Norton had warned before they disembarked. "Especially the children. They'll beg with one hand and slip the other into your pocket." Sandy stuffed his own hands into his pockets and stepped aside, shaking his head, trying to remember the Hindi word for no. But the figure continued to block him, and when he looked down he was surprised to find instead of a child a young woman. She was tiny, strangely so, as if cast in miniature, and dressed in white, her head draped with cloth. He wondered if she was a distraction,



someone else might try to pick his pocket now, but she appeared to be alone. She smelled sweet – not of perfume, but of some scent he didn't recognize. She waved him down and he bent towards her, inhaling her, deeply. She reached up and touched the spot between her eyebrows but didn't meet his eye. Instead she looked at his lips, the angle of bone below her ear. She pressed yellowed palms together and bowed to him.

He bowed back, still towering over her. She held out her hands. He dug in his pockets not for coins, but all he had was English money. He pressed a shilling into her hand and the yellow came off on his fingers, like pollen. She smiled up at him and bowed again, before she moved off to stop another disembarking passenger, who waved her away.

Sandy's fingers found the spot where she had touched him. Amazing. It was all amazing. "Sandy?" Odell was waving to him from where he struggled with a few of the larger crates. Beside him were Shebbeare and Hazard, neat in their tropical khakis. The last two members of the expedition had met the *California* when she docked and come on board armed with customs documents and contracts, details of what train they were to board and when. "Give us a hand?"

Sandy leaned over the crate and with a grunt he and Hazard hoisted it onto the truck. "We'll take care of this," Sandy told Odell, as he and Shebbeare bent for the next one.

"Just think," Shebbeare smiled, "not long now and we'll be carrying these up a mountain."

Sandy was breathing hard and sweating as he turned the corner to sprint the last quarter mile to the hotel. Each step jolted his knees, his shins. It wasn't a long run, but he did try to go a little out, even against the stitch in his side, the shortness of breath. "Push yourself like you're rowing your last eight," Somervell had told him. "Come back good and spent."

Even with the stiffness in his legs, he felt strong as he ran through the lobby and towards the lush courtyard where Somervell was waiting for him. And it did feel good to exert himself, to feel his body respond. The four weeks spent on the ship, even using the gymnasium and running the decks, had left him sluggish. That melted away now as his muscles burned back to life.

He pulled up as he reached Somervell, who put down his pipe and newspaper and picked up his stethoscope. Sandy bent at the waist – his lungs heaved and sweat dripped from his forehead onto the marble floor. The air was filled with the scent of the woman who had blessed him earlier, but now the smell was coming from him. He licked at the salt on his lips.

"You really didn't need to overdo it." Somervell checked his watch as he pressed the stethoscope against Sandy's chest.

"You said. Run. Like it was. My last. Eight."

"All right, well, stand up straight. Breathe normally. I need a base reading. Sea level. Low stress."

Pressing against the stitch under his ribs, Sandy stood upright and tried to steady his breath, his pulse. Somervell listened and measured. Most of the tables in the courtyard were empty, except for a few men who sat drinking from highball glasses, ice cubes tinkling. Bright flowers overflowed from pots on the walls, releasing their evening perfume into the air. He had never stayed in any place this luxurious, even with Marjory, who liked to splash out and meet him in fancy hotels in London.

"Enjoy it now," George had told him when they'd registered. "It's all downhill from here."

"Isn't it uphill?" he responded, and smiled at his own joke. George had just nodded.

His pulse was dropping quickly. That was good. He'd known these tests were coming. "Want to see what happens to the body at altitude," Somervell had explained one afternoon on board the *California*. "We'll test all the way there, all the way back, track the changes. Physical, mental, emotional. All of us."

"Looks good," Somervell said now as he pulled the stethoscope away from his ears and jotted something in a notebook. "Good resting rate, good under duress. Mind you, I'd be surprised to see anything different. Keep it up. But now to the real stuff – mental acuity." Somervell pulled a sheet of paper from a leather portfolio on the table and handed it to him. "You've got three minutes." Somervell hit his stopwatch, sat down, and picked up his newspaper and drink again.

The problems weren't difficult. Sandy finished them easily, even with the distracting sound of ice clinking in Somervell's glass and a bird flitting about somewhere, unseen, in the courtyard. "You'll have to make them tougher, Some," he joked, handing the sheet back to Somervell.

"You say that now." Somervell didn't look at the answers, but set the sheet aside. "Are you now? The Bible passage I asked you to learn?"

Sandy recited the passage without fumbling once.

"Right. Thank you, Mr. Irvine." Some nodded formally. "That concludes our first round of testing. Congratulations."

"And? How did I do?"

"It looks like you did just fine. Of course, I'll have a better idea when I collate all of the data, but you've nothing to worry about. As a doctor, I'd say you're fit for service."

"Well, not to be too boastful, but I did just come off a good rowing season. And Spitsbergen was a good test."

"I've no doubt it was. You're a solid specimen."

"But how'd I do compared to, say, George?"

"Ah. Sorry, Sandy. Doctor-patient confidentiality. Besides, even we old men are in pretty good shape here. But ..."

"Yes?"

"Well, your working pulse rate is the lowest. That's a good sign, I think. Still, it's damn near impossible to tell how any individual will respond at altitude. Fitness doesn't seem to have much to do with success up there." Somervell handed him another sheet of paper and another Bible passage. "Learn this one. I'll test you again when we get to Darjeeling."

Later, in his room, damp from the cool bath, the humid air, Sandy sat at the desk and took a break from his letter to Marjory to gaze out over the city. The air was heady with the heavy smell of the city, spiced with strange foods and night-blooming flowers. There was music coming from somewhere down on the docks, a clanging riot that he couldn't find the rhythm in. For a moment he imagined Marjory had come with him, pictured her naked on the linen bed cover, her eyes closed so her other senses could take over. He almost wished she could have come, just to see her lying there, her skin freckled from the sun, the coverlet damp with her sweat.

She'd joined him on the ship to Spitsbergen, paid her own fare, had her own cabin that he could sneak into at night. "I want to see you off," she'd said when he was packing for Spitsbergen. "Properly." She was so happy and proud of him. "You're not like my husband at all," she

said, lying on top of him, her small breasts solid against him. “He never tries anything. You you’ll try anything.” And she gave him that look she had, the small twist of her mouth, the raising of her left eyebrow just a fraction. On anyone else it would look vulgar, or worse, ridiculous, but it suited her. *She* was the one who would try anything.

*It’s nice to have a familiar face in Odell. His role on this expedition is different than when I went with him to Spitsbergen. There, he seemed to have more input on leadership. But here, it’s George and Norton I need to impress. As the climbing and expedition leaders, they’ll decide who gets to take a shot at the prize, who gets left behind. I’m not their first choice, that much is certain, but I do want a shot. I know I could do it. I just need a chance to show them.*

*All in all, things seem more ambitious too. Spitsbergen was surveying – this is a different end altogether. Conquering. Norton talks constantly about plans, about schedules. George writes things down. I wonder if he writes about me. But my tests are good, Somervell says. And I’m ready. You wouldn’t believe this city. Someday we’ll come here. You and me. I’ll show you this place.*

Did he mean that? He wasn’t sure. But the words were already written and there was no way to cross them out unless he started again, and he just wanted to be done with the letter and lie in the dark listening to the city. Already the sounds had shifted – the whine of motorcars had tapered off somewhat and the music of insects and nightbirds had added a chorus to it. He scanned the words again and stared back out the open window. What could hurt? She would feel loved and that was important.

The whole thing with Marjory had started out as a lark, but recently she had begun to talk about the future – while he hadn’t thought of much beyond her bed. He’d leave it for now and sort it out when he got home. When he got home everything would be different.

*Tomorrow we head out for Darjeeling, on the other side of the country, almost a week from here by train. It feels like this is where it all begins. I’ve been on ships before. But now there is all of India to cross. I hope I’ll do you proud.*

He didn’t sign it with *love*, just his name. He turned off the desk lamp, and then the room was blacker than the world outside. He watched the small skiffs flicker in the harbour and then lay on his bed, drifting to the distant music that echoed across the water.



IT HAD BEEN ten days since they made landfall at Bombay and now, on the day they were to leave Darjeeling, heading northwards through the Mahabharat Range and into Tibet, George woke with a hangover. Hoping to burn off the worst of the headache, he forced himself out into the misty morning to run along the Teesta – the slow wide river that edged the hamlet and its terraced tea plantations.

His head throbbed with each step, and he gritted his teeth against it. This was how it would feel to work at altitude – this painful and foggy. The muddy riverbank sucked at his feet, and his legs burned as he dragged them free. His body was loose and lazy, but eventually he found his stride, gulping at the clean, wet air. Musty and rich.

The journey here had been a slow drift through the seasons – he could barely remember the damp, February weight of Cambridge, of London. Then they had slipped past the coast of France and into the humid spring of the Mediterranean. Now they were leaving the dry summer blaze of India and would soon enter the high Himalayan winter. There everything

would be grey and white, the colour stripped from the landscape, tinted only by the rising and setting sun. For the moment, he basked in the lush green of the tea plantations. He would miss the first burst of spring green back home. It would be late summer before he returned.

Feeling the familiar twinge in his ankle, George lengthened his stride. His mouth was dry and pasty. If he'd been at home in Cambridge, there would have been a cool glass of water waiting for him when he finished his run. Ruth would leave it at the top of the stoop and it always seemed freshly run, droplets clinging to the inside of the glass. What was Ruth doing right now? He tried to calculate the time difference. She'd likely just be turning in, climbing alone into their bed.

*Don't think it cruel, darling, he'd written her before dinner the previous night, but I think you most as I climb into bed. I am so used to your presence beside me, that its absence is a palpable discomfort that makes sleep feel as far away as you are.*

He needed to finish the letter so he could get it in the post before they left Darjeeling. The letters he'd send from this point on – from remote settlements such as Kyishong or Khamlung Dzong, even Everest itself – would take much longer to reach home. *From here our letters will travel more slowly. But they are coming, I promise. Watch for them.* He still wanted to describe for Ruth the tiny toy train they had taken from Rangtong – *like something we'd see at the Brighton Pier* – and the endless bickering with Teddy about plans and oxygen. It was almost impossible to remember every thought and sight he wanted to share. He had written his way to the Himalayan foothills – first across the ocean, then the Indian subcontinent, its cities opening out into yellow plains, turning first to forest, then to lush jungles, and finally the dark heavy green of these foothills.

On their arrival in Darjeeling, they'd been welcomed by Richards, the local consul, who had insisted, as the last bastion of the Empire before the great wilds, on sending them off in style. "I don't get much cause for hosting the Empire's celebrities," Richards said. "Not over here. I need to splash out where I can. The locals expect it. They want to be awed by English pomp." And so each time they passed through Darjeeling, either on the way to or from Everest, Richards threw a dinner party in his perfectly manicured English gardens. They always ate and drank to excess. Last night had been no exception.

His legs were warming up now, and the sweat was beginning to spring up along his hairline, down his spine. He could smell the alcohol evaporating off his body. He shouldn't have drunk so much last night. Though he wasn't the only one. They'd all gone a little overboard.

As the meal started, Richards had turned to Teddy, the great length of him stretched out in his chair, and gestured in George's direction. "George Mallory! I can't believe you convinced him to come back, Teddy. I thought I'd seen the last of him."

Teddy laughed. "Did you? Really? I knew George would never let anyone else climb here. He thinks it's his mountain. I always knew he wouldn't abandon us."

George panted into his second mile. The rest of the evening hadn't been so good-natured. As the dinner had ground on and the drinks became stronger, the expedition members had grown louder, more aggressive – the weeks of close contact on the ship and on the trail had edged their conversation.

"Sandy," Somervell had smirked at one point "You won't believe it, but last time, do you remember, Teddy? Last time, George put the film in his camera wrong. What was it, George

A week's worth of shooting that we lost? Poor Noel. I thought he might murder you."

"It wasn't a week. It was one roll of film." Everyone else laughed. The gin had slipped into his brain and fizzled there. He tried to laugh with them, but couldn't. "Besides, Noel took enough photos for all of us," George said, glancing over to where the photographer sat with his camera on the table in front of him.

Somervell ignored him and turned to Sandy, Hazard, and Shebbeare – the three novices. "That's why you always have to follow up on George. He's forever losing things, forgetting them. His mind gets ahead of him. He's always a little farther up the mountain than the rest of us."

As usual Teddy, calm as new snow, had interjected, smoothing things over before George even had a chance to respond. "But the man can climb."

Today they would leave their dinner jackets behind, shedding them along with all the other niceties of civilized society, for the three-week trek to Everest Base Camp. Their dinner jackets would be cleaned and pressed, waiting for their return. With luck, they'd need them for celebratory dinners on the way home. By then the suits would hang loose on their thinned frames. But for now they all appeared healthy, ambitious, strong.

As George rounded a long bend in the river, he slowed, and the churning froth of water spread out in front of him, a dream-scape in the weak, wavering light. Above the surface mist and smoke clung to the current, dragged along as the river coursed south. His pulse pounded at his temples, heat radiated from his face, but at least his hangover was finally easing away. To hell with Somervell, he thought, as he looked across the river and let the air slip out of his lungs.

On the far bank, pale flames flickered through the mist on built-up platforms, the flames stretching out in either direction to where the river bent away in the haze. Some of the platforms burned brightly, others were only smouldering ashes that scattered in the breeze. White shapes hovered above a few of the flames. Spirits, it seemed. No. Men. Stained white with the ash. They fanned the fires that were still burning or swept dying embers into the rivers. A keening, ceremonial chanting filled the air.

They were burning bodies.

Bile rose at the back of his throat. He bent and vomited the small contents of his stomach, then spat, and watched the smoke rising, the sputter of flames. Flesh burning, incense, the acrid smell of it thick in his nostrils. It was repulsive, savage. But the ritual was consolidating somehow, too. A release – of the body, the spirit – into the river, the air.

After his brother, Trafford, had been shot down during the war, their father had performed the funeral rites at their church at Mobberley. His father, the reverend at the altar, surrounded by the caskets of the three fallen soldiers and airmen. All of them empty. George knew what happened to bodies in the war, had seen the bloody pulp of them outside the trenches, the white gleam of skulls and bones in the moonlight when they were ploughed back up, over and over again, by shelling and rain. Rarely were bodies ever sent home. But the families wanted – needed – something to mourn over. The coffins wouldn't be buried. They'd be used again and again, standing in for the bodies of other dead men.

His father had insisted on eulogizing all of the fallen together.

*Fallen.* Even the word glossed over the bloodiness and the unfairness of it.

"Trafford deserves his own service," George protested. "It's not right. And not fair to Mum

She deserves to mourn her son properly.”

“And the others don’t?” his father had shot back.

“That’s not what I mean. Of course that’s not what I mean. But Trafford –”

“He died the same way those other boys did. For his country. Do you think our loss is any greater than anyone else’s?”

“No. It’s just –”

His father cut him off. “Don’t you see what it means to the Barkers? The Clarkes? To know we share their grief? We’re all in this together and this is our sacrifice to make. Mine, your mother’s, your sister’s, yours.” His father sat down, opened his Bible in front of him. “Your brother would have understood that.”

“My brother? You won’t even say his name. You can’t. As long as it’s not Trafford, as long as he’s unnamed, you can bury him like everyone else. Say it.” His father wouldn’t look up at him. “Say his name. Please.”

“They all died bravely.”

“You don’t know that. You have no idea what it’s like over there. In those trenches, those skies. Your God isn’t there.”

“Stop it,” his father said, “you sound like a whinging child.”

“None of them died bravely. Not if bravery means not screaming, or crying, or pissing themselves.” Even as he said it he tried not to think of how painful Trafford’s death must have been. Tried not to think of him screaming, crying. Tried not to think of the rest of his friends, his students, still in France. Still cold and wet and frightened, waiting for gas attacks and for the whistle of shells, the snipe of bullets. He couldn’t think of them while he was home in a warm bed with Ruth, waking up to his baby girl. Safe. Invalided out because of an old climbing injury.

He’d wanted to go back. Had to. He would have settled for Le Havre if he couldn’t go all the way back to Armentières. But his blasted ankle was too much trouble, the doctors said. You can help in other ways, they told him. So he’d written pamphlets on how to conserve food, fuel, and electricity, instruction manuals for children on how they could help defeat the Hun. While Jack Sanders, Gilbert Bell, and Rupert Brooke had been killed.

His brother’s name was on his lips. In time to the keening, George chanted his brother’s name.

His father had never cried for Trafford. He never cried for any of the men he buried, just sat in his rectory and praised God, and quietly went on doing His bidding. George hated his father for that, for his calm faith that the war was right and just.

Did his father think Everest was worth dying for? Did he even? Already it had cost them so much. Eleven dead so far. Seven in the avalanche. Others to frostbite and malaria, mountain sickness. Maybe there wasn’t any way to measure the value of a life. But wasn’t it important to risk something if you believed in the end goal?

The fires burned lower, bluer, devouring the heavy insides, the bones.

This was all there was. Maybe nothing was worth dying for. It was all foolishness, vain quests, and ambitions of glory – for themselves, for King and Country. But if there was nothing worth dying for, neither could there be anything worth living for.

He recited their names. All of his loved ones. He could go on with the losses.

Except for this, his mind was empty. For once there was no thought of success or failure.

Or endings.

He watched until the last fire smouldered out.

He recited Everest.



HIS PONY WAS a ruddy terror, liable to take off without warning and stop just the same. Sandy kept the reins tight now as he navigated a narrow switchback leading up to the next pass. When the animal veered close to the edge, he squeezed his legs tight against the pony's round stomach. It skittered forward a few steps, jolting him, before Sandy leaned back hard on the reins again, bringing the pony to a stop. He'd been riding the animal for almost three weeks but every time the pony stumbled, his bones shuddered.

Already they had come so far. They had crossed rivers by fords or narrow rope bridges made from twisted vines and branches. Moved up and up onto the windswept Tibetan plateau, past settlements sculpted out of rock faces and the terraced balconies of impenetrable fortresses reaching up, their back walls buried deep within the granite of the mountains. Tomorrow they'd cover the last leg, journeying down through the valley, past Rongbuk Monastery – the last human outpost – and then onto the flanks of Everest herself.

Only a week ago, he'd seen her for the first time. He'd known the sighting would be coming soon; they'd talked about it the evening before at Shekar Dzong, where they'd hired their team of high-altitude porters. But he hadn't known what to expect when George had challenged him to race up one of the passes.

"I'll even give you a head start," George had said as they climbed off their mounts. "I'll turn the ponies over to Virgil and then catch you up."

It had taken almost everything Sandy had to beat George, but he'd managed it, reaching the pass in the lead, his lungs aching. If he was this out of breath now, Sandy thought, how would he be once he got on the mountain? Some was right, the altitude was punishing. But his legs felt strong, fresh. That at least was something.

Still, he didn't let himself rest. Climbing would only become more difficult the higher they went on Everest. Sandy gave himself a test, like Somervell would; if he could carry the largest stone he could lift to the cairn at the apex of the pass without putting it down, then surely he'd do well on the mountain. The cairn was only twenty feet away. Not far. But in a boat race, twenty feet could mean a vast lead. Here it could mean the difference between the summit or not.

He bent down and heaved a stone to his chest. It was heavier than he expected. He stepped towards the cairn. George would be able to do this. Norton too. And they were practically Olympic men. The rock was what, two stone? Stones suddenly made sense to him. The whole world should be measured in stones. At sea level, he would have found the task effortless, but up here, it had taken him almost five minutes to move the bloody thing. Still, he'd done it. Gasping, he slumped to the base of the cairn and tried to even out his breath.

"Feeling all right?" George was coming up the pass, breathing easily. "George is good at altitude," Some had told him during the last round of tests. "He's part mountain goat. You have to work hard to beat his numbers."

"Yes. Fine." His voice wavered more than Sandy would have liked. He cleared his throat. "Fine," he said again, louder.

“Did you see her?”

“What?”

“Come here.” George led him to the far edge of the pass, where the trail sloped back down the other side. “There,” he said, with a kind of ownership in his voice. “Just to the left. The highest one. That’s it. That’s where we’re going.”

The peak towered over its nearest neighbours. Sandy smiled, his lips cracking where the skin was dry from the wind and sun. He didn’t care. Why should he? He was going to the highest place on Earth. “It looks like a brute, even from here,” he said.

“It is.”

“We’ll make it up there. This time. Don’t you think?”

He expected George to agree, but instead after a slight pause he said, “My friend Geoffrey taught me to climb, a long time ago.” George laughed slightly, incredulous, as though he was counting the years. “He liked to take me out the day before a climb to study the route. He said it helped to see a mountain from a distance; then you might know where you were if something went wrong, if you got stuck.”

“Sounds like good advice.”

“He’s a smart man, Geoffrey. Almost like a father to me.” A pause. “Though he’d hate to hear me say that. It would make him feel old.”

“He’s a good climber then?”

“He was. Probably the best of his generation. If Geoffrey had been able to come to Everest in ’22, it would have been climbed already. We wouldn’t even be standing here.”

“Why didn’t he?”

“He can’t climb anymore. He lost his leg in the war, has a wooden one now. Gets about with a cane.”

“I’m sorry.”

George was silent a moment, gazing out towards Everest. “He still comes with me to Wales, and we go out the day before a climb and spot the route together. It’s a good practice.”

“So, which way do we go then?” Sandy asked, his eyes searching the flanks of the mountain, trying to choose a path.

George reached out to trace a route in the air. “We’ll follow that valley to Base Camp – sits in a shallow bay, surrounded by mountains. From there it’s the longest single stretch. Fourteen miles up shattered slate, crumpled rocks, easy to break an ankle, a limb. And then on to the glacier, the Icefall. We’ll make an interim camp somewhere there – just a depot, an emergency stop-off with a bed, a cookstove, not much. We’ll try not to stay there. The Advanced Base Camp, more home than Base Camp will be. That’s where we’ll live. Then up and down, up and down to establish the other camps, six in all.”

George stepped behind him, pointing over Sandy’s shoulder so he could follow his finger. “Camp Six, if we could see it, would be just behind that peak there. Just on the lee of the ridge. Almost a day to the summit and back from there. The others will be spread out below. We won’t see them until we get there. Without them in place, we don’t stand a chance.”

“It looks a clear run along the ridge,” George continued. “That’s the way we’ll likely go.”

Sandy hoped he was part of the *we* George was talking about. “Six camps. Three above the Col, three below?”



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