

ROYA
PUBLICATION
No. 58



THE STANDING MAN

C H E W Z

A ROYA PUBLICATION

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Chew Z

Printed in the Reach

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THE WEIGHT IN GRAMS

Aberdeen, three weeks before flying.



Above the South Col everything is weight. She had already cut the handle off her toothbrush and left the second glove liner, and she had made those calculations in grams for four months and made them ruthlessly. The photograph went back in the album, because a photograph is a picture of a living boy and there is no living boy up there. The letter she burned in the sink. The rabbit she held the longest, and put back in the box, and the box back in the loft. What went in the chest pocket of the down suit was his door key from the flat in Fort William, which she had never returned to the landlord, because to return a key is to make a statement about the future.

WEIGHED

<i>photograph, in the silver frame</i>	212 g	OUT
<i>photograph, out of the frame</i>	4 g	OUT
<i>the letter, written in the eighth month</i>	6 g	BURNED
<i>the blue rabbit, 1997, one ear</i>	61 g	OUT
<i>door key, Fort William. Yale, brass, worn silver at the shoulder</i>	4 g	CARRIED

SYNOPSIS

Above eight thousand metres the dead are not brought down. They are left where they stop, and the living learn to navigate by them.

Ruth Aldiss is fifty-eight years old, twenty-nine years in payroll for the City of Aberdeen, and constitutionally unable to let a discrepancy lie. Four years ago her son sat down on a shelf of rock at eight thousand six hundred metres and did not get up. He is still there, upright, facing downhill, and every climber on the route uses him as a waypoint.

She has trained for four years in a stairwell. She is not going up there to bring him home; she knows she can't, and she has done the arithmetic more carefully than anyone alive.

What she has not calculated is what the mountain will refuse her.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

When I began reading about high-altitude physiology I was looking for a mechanism, and what I found was an accountant.

Above eight thousand metres the body performs a series of decisions that no conscious mind would authorise. It stops repairing wounds, because repair is expensive and the brain is not. It disassembles the muscle of the legs — the very thing carrying it upward — in order to keep the lights on for another hour. It stops writing memory. And at a certain point, in a great many documented cases, it produces a companion: a patient presence walking just behind and to the left, kind about the pace, entirely convincing, entirely absent. Shackleton had one. Smythe offered his a piece of mint cake at eight thousand three hundred metres and was surprised when it declined.

What interested me was not the strangeness of this but its bookkeeping. Everything above that altitude is a ledger. The oxygen is calculated to the litre. Whether a stranger lives is a matter of arithmetic performed in the head of an exhausted person who will not remember doing it. And grief, I came to think, must be on that ledger too — because grief is not a mood, it is a process, a continuous rendering of somebody who is not in the room, and it costs. Which raises a question I could not put down: what happens to a woman who carries an unbearable thing to an altitude at which she can no longer afford to carry it?

I do not believe extreme experience heals anything. That is the promise the mountain makes on the posters and it is a lie, and it is a lie that people die of. But I do believe the body is the last honest witness we have. It will tell you what you actually are while your mind is still drafting the version for other people. Ruth Aldiss goes eight and a half kilometres up into the sky in order to be told something, and she is told, and the answer is delivered not in words but in the flat refusal of her own trained legs to sit still.

I owe a debt here to Vonnegut, who understood that the only way to

write about the worst thing is to keep the sentences plain and let the reader do the falling.

The rest is the arithmetic. I have tried not to soften it.

Chew Z

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I. THE WEIGHT IN GRAMS

ONE. THE ROUTE DESCRIPTION

The email came on a Tuesday in February and it was cheerful.

That was the thing about it. It had an exclamation mark in the second line and a photograph of six people in matching jackets at the bottom, and it addressed her as *Ruth* on first acquaintance, and it thanked her for her interest, and it was signed by someone called Ollie who had put a small green leaf beside his name asking her to consider the environment before printing this message.

She printed it.

She printed it in the copy room on the second floor of the council offices on Broad Street at twenty past four in the afternoon, standing over the machine while it warmed up, in a cardigan, holding a mug of tea gone cold at half past two, and a woman from Housing came in and said something about the weather and Ruth said something back and neither of them afterwards could have told you what.

Ruth Aldiss had been in payroll for the City of Aberdeen for twenty-nine years. Her working life had been the reconciliation of one column against another column. There is a particular kind of person who does that for three decades without going mad, and the particular kind of person is not stupid and not unimaginative but is constitutionally unable to let a discrepancy lie. If the two columns disagree by eleven pence, you do not adjust the eleven pence. You find the eleven pence.

The document she had printed ran to four pages. Most of it was logistics — deposits, insurance requirements, a kit list that included, without irony, *lip balm (high factor)*. The part she had printed it for was on page three, under the heading **Summit Day: what to expect**, and it said this:

You will leave Camp IV between 10 p.m. and midnight. Expect 5-6 hours to the Balcony (8,400m) in darkness — this is the

hardest psychological section of the climb. From the Balcony the ridge steepens. Around 40 minutes above the Balcony you will pass the rock band. The traverse begins twenty minutes past the standing man. Your Sherpa will indicate.

She read it eleven times in the copy room.

Your Sherpa will indicate.

She had spent four years in a condition she did not have a word for. It was not sorrow. Sorrow has a shape, sorrow eventually consents to be a shape, and this had never consented to anything. It was closer to a low continuous administrative noise, like a building's ventilation, which you stop hearing and which is nevertheless the reason you cannot sleep. It had a temperature. It was the same on Christmas Day as on a Wednesday.

And underneath it, holding it up, keeping the whole apparatus off the floor, was something with a very clear shape indeed, and the shape had four names.

Løvgren. Hale. Bardsley. Whitcombe.

A Dane, an Australian and two Englishmen, who on the twenty-second of May at around eleven in the morning had walked past her son at 8,600 metres and gone on up, and had come down past him again four hours later, and had gone home, and had given interviews. She had transcribed all four interviews by hand. Not typed — by hand, in a ruled A4 notebook, because writing something out by hand is slower and she had wanted the slowness. She could recite passages of them. She had read them aloud to nobody, at two in the morning, in a kitchen with the light on, more times than she could put a number to, and she was a woman who could put a number to most things.

They had said he was still moving when they passed him.

They had said he was determined to continue.

That was the phrase. *Determined to continue*. It had been in two of the four interviews in almost exactly those words, which had struck her early on as suspicious and later on as merely what happens when four frightened men agree on a story in a tent, and she had built four years on it: that her son had blown his turnaround time, that he had wanted the top more than he had wanted the rest of his life, that he had been twenty-six and stupid and had killed himself with ambition, and that four men had watched him do it and had chosen the summit.

She hated them with something that had become almost domestic. It got up with her. It rode the bus.

She did not know then — and would not know for another fourteen months, on a folding chair in a mess tent at 5,364 metres, from a photograph on a stranger's telephone — that every single part of that was wrong.

At home that evening she folded the four pages once, along their length, and put them in the drawer of the hall table with the death certificate and the notebook and the loss adjuster's letter, and she stood in her hallway with her coat still on.

Then she went into the kitchen, took down the biscuit tin where she kept nothing, counted what was in it, and worked out, in her head, standing up, in about forty seconds, what she would have to sell.

TWO. TWO THOUSAND HOURS

There is a stairwell at the back of the building on Broad Street that goes up eight floors and is used by nobody, because there are two lifts and people are sensible.

Ruth climbed it at half past six in the morning and again at six in the evening, carrying a rucksack she had loaded with bags of builder's sand from B&Q. She started at eleven kilos in the March and finished at twenty-four kilos in the following February. Eight floors is thirteen point six metres. She did it in sets. In the first month she managed four sets and had to sit down on the landing afterward with her head between her knees, and a cleaner called Agnieszka found her there and was kind about it, and Ruth said it was a fitness thing, and Agnieszka said good for you, and that was the closest anybody in the building came for three years to knowing.

By the end she was doing eighty-one sets. Eleven hundred metres of vertical gain, twice a day, in a stairwell that smelled of floor polish, in the dark of a Scottish winter morning, at fifty-six, fifty-seven, fifty-eight years old.

You do not do that because you are grieving. Grieving people cannot get out of bed; that is the whole of their literature. You do

that because you have a task, and Ruth had understood something about herself very early, in the first fortnight, sitting in a plastic chair in a library with her coat on: that she could not survive an emotion but she could survive a project. Give her two columns and she would reconcile them. Give her a mountain with a number on it and she would find the number.

The weekends were the Cairngorms. She did not learn to climb, because there was nothing on the route that required climbing; she learned to *plod*, which is the actual skill, and which nobody romanticises. Braeriach in December in the dark. Ben Macdui with the wind coming across the plateau at fifty knots and the hood cinched down to a letterbox. She fell twice and did not tell anyone and drove home with a wrist she could not turn.

In the second year she went to Leeds.

There is a facility there with a hypoxic chamber, used mostly by professional cyclists and by expedition teams with sponsors, and she paid for eleven residential blocks out of the last of the insurance. A young man in a fleece called Rob put her at a simulated 6,500 metres and then, over eighteen months, walked her up. He made her sleep in it. He made her do arithmetic in it, which she was better at than he expected and which unnerved him slightly. He made her change an oxygen cylinder wearing three-layer gloves, at a simulated eight thousand metres, over and over, forty times, sixty times, until she could do it without looking, until her hands did it while her mind was somewhere else entirely.

"You're not really here for this bit, are you," Rob said once, watching her.

"I'm here for all of it."

"No — I mean you're not *present*. Most people are gripping. You've gone somewhere."

"Is that a problem?"

"It's what you want," he said. "It's just unusual to see someone get there on purpose."

She had spent, by her own reckoning — and her reckoning was good — two thousand and forty hours. Danny's death-in-service payment had come to a little under seventy thousand pounds, and she had spent sixty-one thousand of it on a stairwell she used for free, a chamber in Leeds, a permit, an agency, four sets of boots, and a down suit made in Chamonix that fitted a fifty-eight-year-old woman badly across the shoulders and had to be altered.

The other nine thousand she did not spend. She left it where it was, in an account, and she thought about it sometimes with a kind of embarrassment, because she knew precisely why she had left it, and the reason was that nine thousand pounds is roughly what a funeral costs when there is nobody left to organise it and it has to be done by a solicitor.

The last thing she did, three weeks before flying, was the scales.

She put the kitchen scales on the counter and weighed the things she had thought about carrying up there for four years.

The photograph in the silver frame: 212 grams. Absurd. Out.

The photograph out of the frame: 4 grams. She stood holding it for a while and then put it back in the album, because a photograph is a picture of a living boy and there is no living boy up there and to carry one is to argue with the mountain about a matter of fact.

The letter she had written to him in the eighth month and never destroyed: 6 grams. She read it again for the first time in three years and found it embarrassing and a little dishonest, and burned it in the sink.

The blue rabbit from the loft, from 1997, missing an ear: 61 grams. She held that one the longest. Then she put it in the box and the box back in the loft and pulled the hatch closed, and stood on the landing on the stepladder for a while with her hand flat against the hatch.

What went in the chest pocket of the down suit was his door key from the flat in Fort William. Yale, brass, worn silver at the shoulder. Four grams.

She had never returned it to the landlord, because to return a key is to make a statement about the future.

THREE. THE OFFICE ON TRIDEVI MARG

Kathmandu in April smells of diesel and marigolds and wet dust, and the noise of it comes up at you from below like heat off a road.

The agency had an office on the second floor of a building off Tridevi Marg, above a shop selling counterfeit jackets, and the stairs had a red carpet worn through to the weave in the centre of each tread. On the wall of the office were forty or fifty framed photographs of clients on summits holding flags, and a laminated price list, and a calendar from a Nepali bank two years out of date.

Ollie of the small green leaf turned out to be twenty-nine and from Bristol and genuinely nice, which she had not been prepared for. He shook her hand with both of his. He had an accent that went up at the end of sentences.

“So you’ll be our oldest this season,” he said, delighted, as though awarding her something.

“Yes.”

“And your VO2 numbers are honestly ridiculous. Rob sent them over. Sorry — is that a weird thing to say?”

“No.”

He went through it item by item. The permit: eleven thousand US dollars, paid to the Ministry, non-refundable, non-transferable. The liaison officer. The icefall doctors’ fee. Bottled oxygen at a per-cylinder rate with a schedule of how many she was likely to need. Helicopter evacuation insurance, which was mandatory, and which required a policy number she had brought with her on a printed sheet.

“And repatriation,” he said, moving down the list without pausing, because it was the fourteenth time that week he had said it. “That’s the other one that’s mandatory. Covers the return of remains from Base Camp. It won’t cover anything above Camp Two, but nobody’s does, so.”

"No," Ruth said. "Nobody's does."

Ollie looked up.

It was the first moment in the whole transaction where the room changed temperature, and it lasted about a second and a half, and then he looked back down at his sheet and said something about the deposit schedule.

There was one more thing.

"I want Phurba Dorje," she said.

Ollie's pen stopped. "Right. Okay. Can I ask —"

"He was sirdar on the 2019 expedition."

"I know which one he was sirdar on."

"Then you know why."

Ollie put the pen down and for a moment he was not a nice young man from Bristol in a room full of flags; he was a person who had worked six seasons on the world's highest rubbish dump and had learned things.

"Mrs Aldiss," he said. "I want to be straight with you. If you're coming out here to have a conversation with somebody, we can arrange the conversation and it doesn't cost eleven thousand dollars and you don't have to walk to five and a half thousand metres to have it. And if you're coming out here to make a point to him on a mountain, I'm not going to sell you that. I'd rather lose the booking."

"I'm not going to make a point to him."

"Then what am I selling you?"

She thought about it. She thought about it long enough that he shifted in his chair.

"A guide," she said. "The best one you have. Who has been to that specific place on that specific mountain and knows exactly where it is."

Ollie picked the pen back up.

"He'll have to agree," he said. "I'm not putting his name on it until he's agreed."

"Ask him tonight."

"He'll want to know who you are."

"Tell him."

He asked that night. Dorje agreed within the hour. Ollie told her the next morning at breakfast in a way that suggested he had expected a much longer negotiation and had spent the night composing arguments he never got to use, and Ruth said thank you and ate her eggs, and did not ask what she should have asked, which was why a man would say yes that fast.

FOUR. THE TRAFFIC OF THE LIVING

You do not fly to a mountain. You fly to Lukla, which is an aircraft carrier glued to a hillside, and then you walk for eight days, and the walking is the point, because the body only agrees to altitude in instalments.

Ruth walked it well and quietly. Namche, Tengboche, Dingboche, Lobuche. Rhododendron then juniper then nothing. Yaks with their bells and their sideways patience. Suspension bridges hung with prayer flags gone to lint. Every morning colder, every night longer, the air behaving less and less like a substance and more like a rumour of one.

What she had not been told about, and what she thought afterward should have been in the brochure in bold, was the traffic coming down.

The season empties itself in a stream. You climb up past people who are finished. They come down burnt black across the cheekbones, twelve kilos lighter, with the particular gait of a person whose knees have been asked a great deal, and they are either radiant or they are hollow and there is nothing in between. The radiant ones want to tell you. The hollow ones look through you, and they look through you in a specific way — not rudely, but as though you are further away than you are — and Ruth

understood by the fifth day that she was reading a two-way traffic report on a road she was going to drive.

On the seventh day, above Lobuche, walking on moraine beside the glacier where the ice is grey and full of rubble and does not look like ice at all, she and Dorje talked properly for the first time.

He had been unfailingly correct with her for eight days and had told her nothing. He had adjusted her pack straps on the second morning without being asked and had put her on a slower pace than she wanted and had refused, twice, to let her carry more.

"You want to ask me about the twenty-second of May," he said. Not a question.

"Not particularly."

"Everybody wants to ask."

"I've read four accounts of the twenty-second of May," Ruth said. "I've read them until they've stopped meaning anything, which happens to words. I know what time you left the Col. I know the weather, I know the wind speed at the Balcony at six a.m., I know which of them was on two litres and which was on three. I know more about that morning than any of the people who were on it, because they only had it once and I've had it about nine thousand times."

Dorje walked for a while.

"That is a great deal of information," he said, "about a day."

"Yes."

"And has it told you anything?"

"No."

"No," he agreed.

The glacier ticked and knocked beside them. It does that. It is moving, slowly, and it complains.

"I want to say one thing," Dorje said, "and then I will not say it again, and you may decide what to do with it. I am not sorry."

Ruth stopped walking.

"I am sorry that he died," he said. "That is a different sentence and it is a smaller one and I will say it as often as you like. But you have come six thousand miles and I think you have come to hear a man be sorry, and if that is what you have paid for then you have been badly sold, because I have thought about the twenty-second of May every week for four years and I would do the same thing again on any morning you care to name. I want you to have that at Lobuche, at four thousand nine hundred metres, where you can still turn around, and not at eight thousand where it will cost you something."

She was aware of her own breathing. She was aware of the cold coming up off the ice.

"That's a rehearsed speech," she said.

"Yes."

"How long have you had it?"

"Four years," said Dorje.

They walked on. And Ruth, who had come to the mountain with a hatred so well-organised that it had a filing system, discovered that she was not angry, and turned that over for the next two hours, and could not make it come out the way it was supposed to.

FIVE. INTAKE

Base Camp is not a camp. It is a small ugly town of four hundred people laid out on moving ice at 5,364 metres, with generators and a bakery tent and a laminated rota for the shower, and above it the Icefall going up like a bad idea.

The doctor's tent was blue and had a folding table and a proper examination couch, which had been carried up by a man, and Marit Sandvik had been running it for five seasons.

She was forty-three, Norwegian, with the manner of somebody who had done emergency medicine in a city and had come to the mountain for the quiet and had discovered the mountain was not quiet. She had an accent that flattened the ends of words. She wore a fleece with a coffee stain she had clearly stopped seeing.

"Sit. Finger." She clipped the pulse oximeter on. "Talk to me about anything for one minute, so you forget you are being measured."

"About what?"

"Anything. The walk in."

Ruth talked about the yaks. Marit watched the numbers and wrote.

"Eighty-six per cent at rest, day two at altitude. That is very good. Resting rate fifty-eight. That is annoyingly good." She unclipped it. "Weight."

"Sixty-one kilos."

"Weigh, don't tell me."

Sixty-one point four. Marit wrote it down and then wrote something else, longer, and Ruth watched the pen and could not read it upside down.

"Chest." The stethoscope was cold even through the fleece. "Breathe. Again. Again. Good. You have no crackles, which at your age and this altitude I take as an insult." She sat back. "Now. Fifty-eight. Which is not old. But it is old for the season, and I have five seasons of these conversations, so I will do it quickly. Why?"

"My son died on this mountain in 2019."

"I know. It is in your file. Everybody in this tent has read your file and everybody has decided to be delicate about it and I am not going to be, because delicacy kills people up there. So." She turned in her chair to face Ruth properly. "You want to bring him down."

"No."

"No," Marit repeated, and looked at her.

"He's at eight thousand six hundred metres. Nobody has ever brought anybody down from eight thousand six hundred metres. Two men died trying to move a body from eight thousand three hundred in 1996 and the body is still there. I know the literature. I'm not confused."

"Good. Then a memorial? People do this. There is a place at Thukla, above the village, with the stones —"

"I've seen it."

"You walked past it."

"I walked past it," Ruth agreed.

Marit tapped the pen twice on the desk.

"Here is my difficulty," she said. "In five seasons I have examined perhaps four hundred clients. They come in and they cannot stop talking about the summit. They tell me the date they hope to be on it. They tell me about the flag. Some of them have the photograph already, in their head, and they describe it to me — the flag, the sky, the wife. It is boring and it is human and I have heard it four hundred times."

"And?"

"And you have not said the word once. Not on the trek, not in this tent, not on your medical questionnaire where there is a box for *objective* and you have written *8,600m*." She let that sit. "You have trained like a professional. Better than most professionals. Your numbers are the best I have seen in a woman of your age and probably in the top decile of this entire camp. And you have organised all of it around a point on the mountain that is two hundred and fifty metres below the top and you have never once mentioned the top."

Ruth said nothing.

"Do you intend to summit?"

"If the weather allows and Dorje thinks it's sensible."

"That is not an answer. That is a form of words."

"It's the answer I have."

Marit looked at her for a long moment. Then she picked up the pen and wrote for perhaps fifteen seconds, and it was the longest note she had written that day.

Aldiss, R. F/58. Sats 86 @ 5364, HR 58, chest clear. Fitness exceptional, out of category. No stated summit intention. Objective given as 8,600m only. No talk of return. Query goal.

Recommend: watch.

She did not act on it, then or later, and that was not negligence exactly. It was that the diagnosis interested her more than the woman, and by the time those two things separated in her mind it was the eleventh of May and Ruth Aldiss was at Camp Two.

SIX. THE NINE PHOTOGRAPHS

There are nine.

She could have told you the number in her sleep, and the sources, and the dates, and which of them had been taken on a telephone and which on a proper camera by somebody with the presence of mind at 8,600 metres to think about framing.

Four of them were on a Reddit thread. Two were on a Czech expedition blog with a comment section she had learned not to read. One was in a Norwegian newspaper article about the ethics of the corpse-strewn route, illustrating a paragraph that did not mention him. One was in a French climbing magazine, printed small. And one — the ninth, the best, the one — was on the personal blog of a woman from Colorado who had summited in 2021 and had written eleven hundred words about her experience and had included it without caption, halfway down, between a photograph of the Balcony and a photograph of her own boots.

In that one you can see the orientation of the shelf and the way the rock breaks behind him, and there is enough light on him to make out the rime on the shoulder, and he is not in the middle of the frame — he is at the edge of it, half out, because the woman from Colorado had been photographing the ridge.

Ruth had memorised all nine so completely that she had begun, at some point in the second year, to know things about that shelf that were not in any of them.

She knew, for instance, that the rock behind him went back about a metre and a half before it stepped up. That is not visible in any of the nine photographs. She knew that the wind on that shelf came across from the left. That is inferable from the rime, and she had inferred it, and then over time she had stopped remembering that

she had inferred it, and it had become a thing she simply knew, like the layout of her own kitchen.

This is what the mind does when you give it four years and only nine photographs. It builds the rest. It does not tell you it is building. She was aware of the mechanism in the abstract — she had read about confabulation in the same library, in the same coat — and being aware of it made not the slightest difference, which she would have said, if asked, was the single most useful thing she had learned in four years, and which she would have occasion to remember at 8,400 metres on a morning in May, sitting on a floor of dead cylinders, in the company of somebody who was not there.

On her third evening at Base Camp she took the four folded pages out of the dry bag and read the route description again by head torch.

The traverse begins twenty minutes past the standing man. Your Sherpa will indicate.

She had a thought then that she did not much like, and which she turned over anyway, because turning things over was what she was for.

The thought was: they have made him useful.

And underneath it, in the same voice, in the flat tone she used for a figure she had already checked three times:

And nobody up there is going to say his name, and I am going to say it, and that is the entire reason a fifty-eight-year-old woman from Aberdeen is lying on a glacier in Nepal — because a boy is being used as a signpost and somebody ought to go and address him personally.

She folded the pages along the same crease and put them away.

Outside, the Icefall was working in the dark, cracking and settling like a building coming to terms with its own weight, and somewhere down the moraine somebody was playing music, and eleven days later the weather would open and she would go up into it, and at no point in the whole of Part One of her life did she ever say out loud, to Ollie or to Marit or to Dorje or to a single soul in

Aberdeen, that she had bought a one-way ticket to Kathmandu and had told the woman at the desk it was because she wasn't sure yet how long she'd want to stay.

II. THE THIN

SEVEN. THE ICEFALL

They went into it at two in the morning because by nine the sun is on it, and the sun is what kills you there.

The Khumbu Icefall is six hundred metres of vertical chaos where the glacier comes over a step in the bedrock and shatters. It is not a slope. It is a collapsed cathedral the size of a small town, blocks of ice the size of terraced houses stacked at every angle, and the whole of it is in motion — a metre a day, sometimes more — which means the route through it is not a route but a temporary opinion, re-negotiated every few days by a team of men who go up before everyone else and fix ladders across the gaps and hope.

Ruth had understood the numbers. She had not understood the noise.

It talks. All night. Deep booms that arrive through the soles of your boots before they arrive at your ears, and sharp cracks like a rifle, and long grinding complaints from somewhere underneath you, and occasionally — three times that first night — a roar off in the dark that goes on for eleven or twelve seconds and then stops, and nobody on the rope says anything, and everybody keeps walking.

The ladders were the thing.

An aluminium ladder laid flat across a crevasse and lashed at both ends, sometimes two wired together end to end, sometimes three, and you cross them in crampons, which means the front points go through the rungs and you must place each foot so the points straddle a rung and take the weight, and you must not look down, except that everybody looks down, because a crevasse in a head torch is not black. It is blue. And the blue goes down further than the light does, and it was the most beautiful colour Ruth had ever seen in her life, and it was fifty metres deep.

She had rehearsed ladders. Rob had made her cross one in a warehouse in Leeds over a gymnastics mat in full boots, thirty or forty times.

The mat had not prepared her for the flex.

Halfway across the fourth one, with the ladder bouncing gently in the middle in the way that no amount of lashing prevents, Ruth Aldiss discovered that she was frightened. Not philosophically. Not in the way she had been frightened in a library four years ago. Frightened in the animal way, in the hands and the back of the throat, the whole system voting at once and voting no.

She stood still in the middle of the ladder for perhaps four seconds.

And what she felt, when it passed and she got moving and stepped off onto the ice on the far side with her heart going like a bird in a box, was something she had not felt in four years and did not immediately recognise.

She was interested.

That was all. The fear had been perfectly ordinary — the same fear as a wobbling stepladder, only louder — and it had come and gone, and it had crowded out, for four entire seconds, the low continuous administrative noise that had been running behind everything since a Tuesday in May.

Four seconds of silence in there. She had not known that was available at any price.

She thought about that for the rest of the Icefall, and about what it implied concerning people who climb, and about the fact that Danny had come home from the North Sea every fortnight for six years and gone straight to the hills. She had thought it was a hobby. It had not been a hobby. It had been a man buying four seconds at a time, and she had never once asked him what was making the noise.

Behind her, Dorje said, "Ladders again on the way down. Worse in the afternoon."

"I'm all right."

"I know," he said. "You did not stop for long."

EIGHT. THE DISASSEMBLY

The rotations are the actual work, and nobody photographs those either.

You go up to Camp One and sleep badly and come down. You go up to Camp Two and stay three nights and come down. You go up to Camp Three on the Lhotse Face and touch it and turn around, because sleeping there is a fight the body loses slowly. Up, down, up, down, for five weeks, so that the blood learns to make more of itself. It is the least romantic process imaginable. It is essentially a course of medical treatment administered by a landscape.

Camp Two sits at 6,400 metres in the Western Cwm, a valley of ice walled by three of the largest faces on earth, which acts on a clear day as an oven. The temperature in a tent there at noon can reach forty degrees, and by nine at night it is minus twenty, and there is no shade anywhere in it, and the light comes at you twice — once from the sky and once off the floor.

This is where the body starts eating itself. Ruth kept a record.

Day 1 Camp II — appetite gone entirely. Ate half a packet of oatcakes over eleven hours. No hunger, no nausea. Simply an absence of the idea of food.

Day 2 — the cough. Everyone has it. Comes from below the sternum, dry, clears nothing, does not stop. Woke twice with it. The Australian two tents down has cracked a rib coughing. Apparently common.

Day 3 — taste gone. Tinned peaches taste of cold. Tea tastes of the cup.

Day 6 (2nd rotation) — the cut on my knuckle from the ladder on the 1st has not changed in nine days. Not infected. Simply not closing. The body has stopped funding non-essential repair.

Day 8 — measured thigh. Down 3cm since Kathmandu.

She wrote that last one and looked at it for a while.

Above about six thousand metres the body cannot take in enough oxygen to metabolise fat efficiently, so having burned what little is accessible it turns, with a kind of clerical indifference, to protein —

and the largest reserve of protein in a human being is the muscle of the legs. The organism disassembles its own means of locomotion in order to keep its brain lit. It is the worst possible decision from an engineering standpoint, and it is the decision made by every mammal that has ever been asked.

Ruth ran her hand down the front of her thigh in the dark of the tent and felt the architecture standing out where four months ago there had been a smooth line, and she was not distressed.

She wrote, underneath the measurement, in the same neat payroll hand:

Being reduced to the essential parts. This seems correct.

And then, three lines lower, in a different and much less careful hand, at some point in the night when the cough had woken her for the third time and she was too tired to be careful:

Danny did this five times. Nobody wrote it down. Nobody ever asked him what it was like. He came home and had his tea.

NINE. WHAT WILL YOU DO IN SEPTEMBER

Marit weighed her on the fourteenth day.

"Fifty-four point one."

"That's seven kilos."

"That is seven kilos in fourteen days, and it is too fast, and I am putting you on a feeding schedule that you will hate." She wrote. "Saturation?"

"Eighty-eight this morning at rest."

"That is good. That is annoyingly good again." She put the pen down. "Your body is doing something strange, Ruth, and I want to describe it to you accurately. Your acclimatisation is excellent — genuinely the best in this camp. And your wasting is severe, faster than I would tolerate in a man of thirty. Those two things do not usually travel together. Do you know what it looks like to me?"

"No."

"It looks like an organism spending everything it has on one performance, which has made no provision for afterwards."

The tent was quiet apart from the generator and, distantly, somebody's music.

"That's a metaphor," Ruth said.

"It is a physiological description. It is also a metaphor. Both can be true at once, and this is why I dislike this job." Marit took her glasses off and rubbed the bridge of her nose. "May I ask you something that is not medical?"

"You'll ask anyway."

"Yes." She put the glasses back on. "What will you do in September?"

Ruth said nothing.

"It is not a trick," said Marit. "It is the easiest question in the world. Four hundred clients. I ask them in this tent when they are tired and honest, and they all answer immediately, and they all answer badly — I will sleep for a month, I will eat a steak the size of my head, I will not look at a hill until Christmas, my wife has booked Corfu. It takes them no time at all. It is a reflex. Like a knee."

"I don't know what I'll do in September."

"No," said Marit. "That is what I am saying."

"That isn't sinister. I'm fifty-eight. Twenty-nine years in payroll and a flat with a hall table in it. September won't be very different from any other month. That's not a symptom. That's just what it's like being me."

It was a good answer. It was well constructed and evenly delivered and it contained no false statements, and Ruth was rather proud of it afterwards, and it was the only complete lie she told anybody on the mountain.

Marit looked at her for a moment too long.

Then she said, "Eat the feeding schedule," and turned to the next file, and did not add anything beneath her note from the first examination.

She would think about that particular decision, in a flat in Bergen, on and off, for the rest of her life.

TEN. ONE TOO MANY

The Lhotse Face is a wall of blue-green ice a kilometre and a half high set at fifty degrees, and you go up it on a single fixed rope with a jumar, clipping through at each anchor, in a queue.

That is the part that surprises people. It is a queue. On a good weather day there are two hundred bodies on that rope and you move at the pace of the slowest, and you stand still on a fifty-degree ice wall at seven thousand metres for eleven minutes at a time, cooling, waiting for a man forty feet above you to sort his tether out, and there is nothing to look at but the ice in front of your face, which is old and full of bubbles and the colour of a bottle.

Ruth had been counting for about an hour before she noticed that she was counting.

It is a natural thing to do on a rope. You count the people ahead of you to the next anchor, and you count the ones behind, because the ones behind determine how long you will stand at the anchor being cold. She had counted five behind her at the last anchor. She counted again at this one.

Six.

She turned her head, which cost six breaths, and looked down the line.

Five.

She looked again, carefully, all the way to where the rope went out of sight over the roll of the face. Five people, strung out at intervals, all of them working, none of them looking up.

She turned back and got on.

At the next anchor she did not count, and found that she had counted anyway, without permission, and the number was six.

Sensed presence, she thought, in the flat internal voice, the checked-it-three-times voice. Third Man factor. Parietal function under hypoxic load. One of the most consistently reported phenomena in high-altitude medicine, described in Shackleton and in Smythe and in perhaps a third of all solo polar accounts. There is a paper by Suedfeld. I have read the paper by Suedfeld. This is a well-characterised artefact of an oxygen-starved brain assembling a companion out of proprioceptive noise, and it means nothing whatsoever.

She filed it correctly. She filed it immediately and accurately and with references.

And then she stood on the fixed line at seven thousand one hundred metres at the back of a queue, breathing eighteen times a minute, and discovered that filing it correctly did not help even slightly — and that she very badly wanted to turn her head again, and that she was not going to. Because if she turned and there were five, she was a woman on a rope with five people behind her.

And if she turned and there were six.

She got on.

That night at Camp Three, wedged on a platform cut into the face with the tent floor sloping and the Cwm dropping a thousand metres from the vestibule, she lay awake and listened to her own breathing lurch and stop and lurch, and she thought: he was kind about the pace. Whoever it is. He didn't crowd me.

And then, because she was Ruth Aldiss and could not let a discrepancy lie:

He did nothing. There is no he. You are doing this to yourself — and the fact that you are doing it kindly ought to worry you a great deal more than the fact that you are doing it.

ELEVEN. WHAT A MOUNTAIN OWES

The weather closed on the eighth of May and stayed closed for nine days, and there is nothing to do at Base Camp in a weather hold but drink tea and go slowly out of your mind.

They played cards. They watched three films on a laptop with the volume up over the generator. Ruth read the same eleven pages of a paperback somebody had abandoned in the mess tent, and on the fourth evening she and Dorje ended up alone in there at about nine o'clock with the stove ticking and everybody else gone to their tents.

"May I ask you something," she said, "that you'll think is stupid."

"Yes."

"Do you love it?"

Dorje considered this long enough that she thought she had offended him.

"No," he said. "I am very good at it. My father was very good at it. It has paid for a house in Kathmandu and for my daughters' schooling, and I am respected in a way a man from my village is not usually respected, and I have stood on top of that thing seventeen times and felt nothing up there except an urgent wish to be lower down." He turned his cup on the table. "The clients love it. That is what they are buying. I am selling something I do not personally use."

"That's very bleak."

"It is Tuesday," said Dorje. "Ask me on a Friday and I will tell you it is the most beautiful place on earth, and I will also mean it. Both are true at nine in the evening."

Ruth said: "I've been trying to work out what it owes."

"Owes."

"Yes." She stopped, and started again, because it mattered to get this right. "I keep catching myself thinking the mountain has an account. Like a ledger. He paid in — he trained, he was careful, he'd been up four other times, he wasn't a fool — so there was a balance, and the balance should have covered him, and it didn't. And I want to know why the account is in error. That's the noise in my head. It has been the noise for four years. I have spent four years auditing a mountain."

"And?"

"And I know it's madness. Knowing hasn't stopped it once."

Dorje was quiet for a while.

"There is a thing the clients say at the end," he said, "on the walk out, when they are happy. They say: the mountain let us up. Or: the mountain did not want us this year. It is very hard not to say it, because that is the shape the experience has, and language will find the shape whether or not there is anything inside it." He set the cup down. "But listen. If the mountain lets you up, then the mountain also chose your son. Do you want that? You cannot have the sentence only one way round. If it is a thing that gives, then it is a thing that withholds — and then every person who has ever died up there was refused deliberately, by name."

"That is exactly what it feels like."

"I know. And it is the one thing that is certainly not true." He said it without any heat at all, which was what made it land. "It does not take, Mrs Aldiss. It stops giving. Those are not the same, and the difference is the whole of it. You want it to be cruel. I understand that. Cruelty would mean it noticed him."

She sat with that for a while.

"My mother had a book," she said eventually. "When I was small. One of those big illustrated things they did in the fifties — Persian stories, tales from the East, the sort of thing that was in every library. And there was one about a child born wrong, born with white hair, and his father was ashamed and had him carried up a mountain and left on a rock to die. And a great bird came down and took him and raised him in her nest on the summit among her own young. And years later she gave him back to his father — she gave him back — and she gave him one of her feathers, and she said: if you are ever in trouble, burn this, and I will come."

"That is a good story."

"I loved it because of the feather. Not the bird. The *feather*." She looked at him. "Because there was a mechanism. There was a thing you could do, and somebody had agreed in advance to answer, and the arrangement held. I was seven, and I understood straight away

that the whole point of it was that somebody had agreed in advance."

Dorje nodded slowly.

"Nobody has agreed in advance," he said.

"No."

"That is what everybody comes here to find out. They all think they are the first."

Later — much later, in a hospital ward in Kathmandu with two fingers gone — Ruth would take that entire conversation out and go through it line by line, the way she had once gone through four interviews in a ruled A4 notebook. And she would find, sitting in the middle of it, the sentence she had missed at the time because it had been said so gently and so much in passing that it had gone by like weather:

A man at eight thousand metres is not making a choice. He is executing a calculation his body finished before he arrived.

She had assumed, at the time, that he was talking about Danny.

TWELVE. THE CONFIGURATION

He gave it to her on the sixth day of the hold, in the afternoon, outside on the moraine with the wind coming down the valley and the prayer flags going.

"There is something you should have before we go up," Dorje said, "and I have been deciding for four years when to give it to you. I have decided it is now, because after this week it will be too late to be any use to you."

He held out his phone.

Ruth looked at the screen for a long time without taking it.

It was a photograph she had never seen. That fact alone took several seconds to process, because she had believed, in the flat literal way she believed things she had checked, that there were nine — that nine was the complete set, that she had exhausted the visual record of her son.

There were ten.

It had been taken from below and to the left, from further down the ridge, in bright flat mid-morning light. Much better light than any of the nine. And it was not a photograph of the ridge that happened to contain him at the edge of the frame. It was a photograph *of him*. Somebody had stopped at 8,600 metres and squared it up and taken it properly.

"You took this."

"Yes."

"On the twenty-second of May."

"At two minutes to eleven. From forty metres below him, before I went up and spoke to him."

She made herself look at the image and not at the fact of it.

He was in the red suit and he was on the shelf and he was upright, as he was in all of them. But the light was good and the resolution was good, and she could see the shelf itself now — the way the rock stepped back behind him about a metre and a half — *she had known that, she had known that for two years and had never been able to say how* — and she could see his harness.

And she stopped.

Ruth Aldiss had spent two thousand and forty hours learning to operate a jumar and a pair of tethers in gloves in the dark. She had done it in a stairwell and in a warehouse in Leeds and on the Cairngorms in February, until it had left her mind entirely and gone down into her hands. She could not, at that point in her life, have explained the system in words. She could only do it.

Which is why she read the photograph in under a second, before any part of her had decided to.

His jumar was not on the rope.

It was clipped off and stowed, hanging at the front left of his harness where you put it when you have finished with it. And his safety tether — the long one, the one you run when you are going

down — was clipped to the fixed line below the anchor, with the descender rigged on it.

He had turned around.

He had reached 8,600 metres on the twenty-second of May, two hundred and fifty vertical metres and perhaps two hours from the summit of the world, with the weather good and the ropes fixed and his oxygen sufficient — and he had stopped, and taken his ascender off the rope, and stowed it, and rigged himself to descend.

He was not a boy who had been determined to continue.

He was a boy who had done the arithmetic correctly and on time, better than the four men who went past him, and had made the decision every one of them failed to make, and had turned for home. And had then sat down on a shelf to rest before starting down, because he was tired.

And had not got up again.

The wind came down the valley and the flags went.

"They said he was determined to continue," Ruth said. Her own voice arrived from some distance off. "Two of them. In the interviews. Those exact words."

"I know."

"Why would they say that?"

"Because it is what they needed to have been true," said Dorje, "and because at eight thousand six hundred metres you see what you require. They were not lying. That is the part nobody can accept. Four separate men remembered a boy who was pressing on, and not one of them looked at his harness, and by the time they were in a tent on the Col agreeing with each other about it, it had become a memory. And a memory is not a photograph."

"You looked at his harness."

"I looked at his harness."

"You looked at his harness. And you took a photograph. And you kept it for four years."

Dorje did not answer that.

She was aware — dimly, from somewhere far back in the building — that she had just asked a real question and had not received a real answer, and that this was a discrepancy, and that Ruth Aldiss did not let discrepancies lie.

But the audit had stopped.

Because the hatred had four names in it, and the hatred had been the frame, and she had just been shown in good light at high resolution that her son had not been reckless and had not been vain and had not chosen a summit over her. He had chosen her. He had turned around and started for home and sat down for a minute. And the mountain had not been running any kind of ledger at all, and there had never been an eleven-pence discrepancy to find, and there never had been anything whatsoever to audit.

She stood on the moraine holding a stranger's telephone with a photograph of her son on it, and understood with total clarity and no comfort at all that she had spent four years hating four men for failing to save a boy who had already saved himself — and that it had made no difference — and that this was simply what the universe was like.

And that she was going up there anyway, on the eighteenth.

THIRTEEN. THE WINDOW

The forecast came in on the fifteenth: a four-day window opening on the twenty-first, summit winds dropping below thirty knots from the small hours of the twenty-second.

She worked the dates out on the back of the forecast printout, because she was a woman who worked dates out, and found that if the window held she would be on the ridge on the morning of the twenty-second of May.

She sat with that for a while and then put the paper away. It meant nothing. Weather is not arranged and nobody had agreed anything in advance, and the fact that she had gone looking for a meaning in it was the kind of thing she had spent four years learning not to do and had not learned.

Everything after that is a machine that starts.

Base Camp to Camp Two in a single push on the eighteenth — nine hours through the Icefall in the dark and up the Cwm in the oven, arriving stupid with heat. A day at Camp Two doing nothing. The Lhotse Face on the twentieth, six hours on the fixed rope in a queue, to Camp Three at 7,300.

That is where the oxygen goes on.

You put a mask on your face and something changes that is very difficult to describe to anyone who has not been high. The world does not become normal. It becomes *possible*. The margin comes back — an inch of it, enough to hold an opinion in. Ruth put the mask on at four in the afternoon on the twentieth of May and felt the inch arrive and thought, distinctly: this is a loan.

On the twenty-first they went to the South Col.

Seven hours: the top of the Lhotse Face, the traverse, the Yellow Band, the Geneva Spur, and then out onto the Col itself at 7,950 metres, where the tents were already up and the wind was already working at them.

And somewhere in those seven hours, without any announcement at all, the Thin arrived properly.

It is not like Camp Two, where you are simply tired. It is a change in the medium. Speech becomes expensive — a sentence of nine words costs more breath than it returns in value, so you stop making them, and then you notice you have not made one in two hours and that you do not miss it. Time develops holes. Ruth arrived at the Col with no memory whatsoever of the Geneva Spur, which is a large and distinctive feature she had crossed forty minutes earlier.

And her grief went.

That is the flat truth of it, and she recorded it flatly, in her head, because there was no oxygen for writing.

It did not lift, and it was not resolved, and nothing had been healed. It was simply no longer affordable. Grief is enormously expensive — it is a whole second process running continuously, rendering a

person who is not there — and at 7,950 metres the body performed an audit of its own and closed the account without consulting her.

She sat in the tent on the Col and went looking for it and it was not there. The facts were all present. Danny; twenty-six; the twenty-second of May; the red suit; the shelf. All correct. All weightless. Somebody else's payroll.

She had carried it for four years across every hour of every day.

She had come six thousand miles and eight vertical kilometres in order to be with it.

And the mountain had taken it off her at the door, at about half past two in the afternoon on the twenty-first of May, somewhere near the Geneva Spur, and she had not even noticed it happening.

That was the first thing the Thin withheld.

She got into the tent at half past four in the afternoon and lay down and did not sleep, and outside the light went out of the sky, and it was the twenty-first of May.

III. THE STANDING MAN

FOURTEEN. THE BALCONY

Camp IV, 7,950 metres

The wind came off the Col in slabs, not gusts — flat masses of moving air that struck the tent broadside and held it bent for eight or nine seconds before letting go. In the slack between them Ruth could hear the other tents doing the same thing, a whole village of nylon inhaling and failing to exhale, and beneath that the small industrial hiss of her regulator, and beneath that nothing at all. There was no birdsong at 7,950 metres. There were no insects. There was no rot. The South Col was a gravel yard the size of four football pitches, swept clean four hundred days a year by wind that had crossed two thousand kilometres of Tibetan plateau without touching anything soft, and the only organic material on it was what climbers had carried up and failed to carry down.

She had stopped sleeping three nights ago. Not from nerves — from chemistry. Above seven thousand metres the brainstem loses confidence in its own arithmetic. The carbon dioxide receptors that ordinarily set the pace of breathing find themselves outvoted by the oxygen receptors screaming from the other side of the chamber, and the body, unable to reconcile the two, begins to legislate by lurching: forty seconds of rapid shallow breaths, then a pause, then nothing, then nothing, then nothing, then the panic. Cheyne-Stokes respiration. Ruth had read about it in a library in Aberdeen four years ago, sitting in a plastic chair with her coat still on, and had underlined it, and had thought: *so that is what he was doing at night*. The underlining had felt like an act of intimacy at the time. She had been very stupid then, and had not known it, and she envied that woman now the way you envy the dead their ignorance.

She had lost eleven kilos since Base Camp. The body at altitude eats itself in a particular order — the fat first, briefly, and then, when it discovers there is not enough fat and never will be, it turns to muscle with a kind of administrative indifference and begins to disassemble the thighs. She had watched her own legs go. Every morning in the tent she had run her hand down her quadriceps and felt the architecture emerging, and this had not distressed her. She was being reduced to the essential parts. That seemed correct.

Dorje came in at nine with the stove and did not ask permission to light it, because there is no politeness left at that altitude, only procedure. It takes forty minutes to melt a litre of water on the Col. He melted three. She drank two of them and could not taste anything, which was also chemistry, and he watched her drink the way a man watches a fuel gauge.

"Two litres per minute from the Col to the Balcony," he said. "Then three. Do not touch the regulator yourself. If you feel you need more, you tell me, and I decide."

"And if you're wrong?"

"Then I am wrong with a whole bottle and you are wrong with an empty one." He was fitting the mask to her face, checking the exhaust valve, breaking a small crust of ice out of it with his thumbnail. He had done this ninety or a hundred times in his life. He had done it for her son. "It does not take, Ruth. It stops giving. There is a difference and the difference is everything."

He had said that at Base Camp, in the mess tent, in almost exactly those words, and he said it now in almost exactly the same order, and she noticed that and filed it and could not think, at that altitude, why a man would keep a sentence so well.

"That's a distinction for the living."

"All distinctions are." He sat back on his heels. Outside, the tent bent and held.

She said nothing for a long moment. The regulator hissed between them like a third party.

"When I was told," she said, "the first thing I asked was whether he was in pain. And the man on the telephone said no, at the end there's a euphoria, they go warm, they take their gloves off, they feel that everything has been forgiven. And I remember thinking: that's a kindness. Somebody built a kindness into it. And then about a year later I understood that it isn't a kindness, it's just hypoxia, it's just the last thing the brain does with the last of the sugar, and there's no one to thank, and I have never got over that. Not the death. The nobody to thank."

Dorje was quiet.

"You think I want it to be cruel," she said. "I want it to be *addressed*. To anyone. To me."

"Yes." He stood, bent under the nylon. "That is what everybody wants who comes here. Some of them ask for it with a flag."

And he did not say the other line, the one about cruelty requiring attention, and she understood that he was saving it, and could not think why a man would save a line.

The going out, 23:40

Getting dressed took her fifty-one minutes.

This is the part nobody photographs. The boots have frozen in the night into the shape they held when you took them off, and you must break them open with your hands, and your hands have three good minutes in them before the cold begins charging interest. Liner sock. Vapour barrier. Second sock. The double boot, then the overboot, then the crampon, and the crampon strap has to be threaded through the buckle by fingers that have stopped reporting accurately on their own position, so you do it by watching, like operating a machine at a distance. Harness over the down suit. Jumar on the front left, tether, screwgate, second tether. Mask, hose, regulator, the bottle in the pack riding the small of her back at four kilos, which at sea level is a bag of shopping and on the Col is a second spine.

She stood up and the world went white and grey and then came back, in that order, with the small internal sound of a slide changing.

Twenty-two headlamps were already moving off the Col in a broken line up the Triangular Face. From below they did not look like people. They looked like a slow fuse.

She stepped into the line and began.

Ten breaths, one step. She had built this in Aberdeen on a stairwell with a weighted pack, and on the Cairngorms in February, and on a treadmill in a hypoxic chamber in Leeds that had cost her the last

of Danny's insurance money, and none of it had prepared her, and all of it had prepared her, both being true at once. Ten breaths, one step. The breaths were not deep. There is nothing to be deep with. Each one was a shallow scoop at a bowl that had already been emptied, and the value of ten of them was to convince the body that it had been consulted.

The Face was forty-five degrees of frozen scree and old snow, and she climbed it in a tunnel two metres long — the reach of her headlamp — for four hours, and in those four hours she thought about almost nothing. This is the part of the literature that had struck her as a failure of writing when she first read it and that she now understood to be exact reportage: at altitude the mind does not become profound. It becomes *administrative*. It thinks: strap. It thinks: breathe. It thinks: the man in front has stopped, why has the man in front stopped. Grief requires oxygen. Grief is a luxury good, and she had carried it for four years at sea level, where it was affordable, and up here the customs officer had taken it off her at the border and she had let it go without a word of protest, and this was, she thought later, the first real betrayal of the climb, and it happened at about half past one in the morning, and she did not notice it happening.

At the base of the ridge, the fixed lines began. You clip past the anchor one tether at a time, and if there are ten people at the anchor you wait, and while you wait you cool, and while you cool you calculate.

The Balcony, 8,400 metres, 05:10

Dawn on the Southeast Ridge does not come up. It comes *around*. The sun cleared the Kangshung side and the shadow of the mountain threw itself west across Nepal for a hundred kilometres, a perfect black triangle laid over the world, and above the horizon there was a band the colour of a bruise where the atmosphere gave out and the actual dark of space began. She could see the curve of the earth. It was not a figure of speech.

The Balcony is a shelf of snow the size of a small garden and it is covered in dead oxygen bottles. Hundreds of them. Yellow, orange,

silver, thirty years of them, dropped where they emptied. Ruth sat on the snow with the others and Dorje changed her bottle and she looked out at the curvature of the earth from a floor of industrial litter and felt the euphoria arrive.

It came in like warmth from a doorway. That was the only way she could describe it afterward. Everything relaxed. The distances became loving. She was aware — precisely, technically aware, she had underlined this in Aberdeen — that this was cerebral hypoxia producing a sensation of significance without an object, and the awareness changed nothing whatsoever, and that was the whole horror and the whole gift of it: you can know exactly what is being done to you and it is done anyway, warmly, from inside.

And there was someone behind her on the rope.

She did not turn around. Turning around at 8,400 metres costs six breaths. She knew, in the way you know the geometry of your own house in the dark, that there was one more person on the fixed line than there had been, and that he was young, and that he was being patient with her pace, which he always had been, even at eleven, even on the Cairngorms with his boots too big. The Third Man. Shackleton had one. Smythe had one and offered it a piece of Kendal mint cake at 8,300 metres and was mildly surprised when it declined. It is among the best-documented artefacts in the whole of that literature, and it is manufactured by a parietal lobe running at sixty-two per cent saturation, and Ruth knew all of it, and she said, into her mask, where no one could hear it:

“I know. I’m going as fast as I can.”

The passing, 08:20, approximately 8,540 metres

She had already gone past three bodies that morning and had catalogued each of them without distress, which she would think about for the rest of her life.

The first was under an overhang below the Balcony, in a blue suit gone chalky with UV, one arm out from the rock as if reaching for a light switch. The second was nothing but a boot and the geometry above it. The third was face-down on the ridge itself and the route

ran within a metre of him and everyone stepped over the rope where it crossed his back, including her, and she had thought — with the flat administrative clarity of the altitude — *that is a good boot, that is a Millet, Danny had those.*

So when the fourth shape resolved out of the snow forty metres ahead, sitting upright against the rock with its legs out in front of it like a child on a beach, she read it as another one. She was already composing the catalogue entry. Sitting. Orange suit. No pack.

Then it moved its head.

The line stopped. Not for him — for the anchor above him, where three people were waiting to clip past. The stopping was coincidental. She wanted that recorded, later, in whatever court she was building in herself: *the line did not stop for him.*

He was young. Twenty-six, twenty-eight. His mask was off and hanging at his chest, and the bottle beside him had its regulator dial hard over on the empty stop, and his down suit was unzipped to the sternum and both gloves were off and lying in the snow beside his hip in a matched pair, neatly, the way you'd set them down at a table. His hands were the colour of candlewax and had swollen. Paradoxical undressing. The last thing the hypothalamus does before it goes off shift is throw open all the windows, and the dying feel a great and spreading heat, and they let the cold in to meet it, courteously, and it is not a kindness, and there is no one to thank.

He was looking at her. He was entirely awake. That was the thing nobody had prepared her for, no book, no chair in Aberdeen. She had understood that people were passed. She had not understood that they *watched you decide.*

Dorje was already down on one knee at his side. She saw him check the bottle. She saw him lift one of the bare hands and let it go and the hand stayed where he put it. She saw him look up the ridge and then down it, and she understood the look, because she had done the arithmetic herself on a stairwell in Aberdeen with a weighted pack a thousand times:

He cannot walk. Nobody at 8,540 metres can carry a man who cannot walk; it has been attempted and it has killed the carriers and it has never once succeeded. A full bottle at three litres a minute is four hours of life, and she had four hours of life on her back and no more, and to give it to him is not to save him — it is to sit with him for four hours while he dies anyway and then to die beside him, both of them, in a doorway that nobody would find until the wind cleared the shelf, and then there would be five of them on the ridge and everybody's mother would have this. There is no version of the arithmetic where the number comes out different. She checked it three times. She checked it with the part of her that had spent four years wanting to find a flaw in exactly this sum, in someone else's handwriting, at exactly this altitude, and there was no flaw, there had never been a flaw, and she felt the last load-bearing wall of the last four years take the weight and begin, quietly, to fail.

He said something. His mask was off and there was no wind in that moment, and the words came across the two metres between them very clearly, in an accent she thought was Czech, and what he said was:

"I'm all right. I'm just having a rest."

Ruth knelt down in the snow.

She did not give him oxygen. Let that be written plainly, in her handwriting, without softening: she did not give him oxygen, and she knew what she was doing, and she was not confused, and hypoxia is not a defence because she had never been more lucid in her life.

What she did was pick up his gloves. She put them on him — the right one went easily and the left she had to work over the swollen knuckles with both hands for perhaps forty seconds, breathing eighteen, nineteen, twenty times into her mask, and he watched her do it with mild interest, as though she were a stranger fixing his cuff at a wedding. Then she zipped his suit to the throat. Then she put her mittened hand flat on the top of his head, once, the way you do to a child who is about to be left somewhere, and she felt

the shape of his skull through the hood, and it was the same shape, it was the identical shape, every one of them is the identical shape.

Dorje said her name. The anchor was clear.

She stood up. She clipped her tether above the anchor and her second tether below it and unclipped the first, in the correct order, because she had trained for two thousand hours and the body does what it has been taught, and she stepped past the young man in the orange suit and went on up the ridge.

She got perhaps eighty metres.

Then it arrived — not as thought, there was no oxygen for thought, but as a physical event somewhere under the sternum, the way a wave arrives under a boat: *they were right*.

Danny's team had been right. The four of them who went past him at eleven in the morning on the twenty-second of May with their heads down, whose names she had learned and whose interviews she had transcribed by hand and read aloud in an empty kitchen at two in the morning for four years, whose faces she had taken to bed with her every night since — they had done the sum, and the sum was this sum, and they had got the same answer she had just got, and they had been *right*, and she forgave them, entirely, all four, in the space of about eleven seconds on the Southeast Ridge at 8,560 metres.

And she understood, still climbing, ten breaths and a step, ten breaths and a step, that the hatred had been the only thing standing up in her. That it had been the frame. That grief had been hanging on it the way a coat hangs on a hook, and that she had just, with her own hands, out of nothing but decency and correct procedure, taken the hook out of the wall.

The euphoria came in again from the doorway, warm, loving, addressed to no one.

Above her, forty minutes up the ridge, at the place where the route bends and everybody says *twenty minutes past the Standing Man to the traverse*, her son was waiting where he had stopped, facing downhill.

FIFTEEN. TWENTY MINUTES PAST

8,600 metres, 09:05

The phrase came down to her before he did.

Two Austrians descending from the traverse went past her at the anchor, roped and slow and entirely inside themselves, and one of them said something to the other in the flat shout you use through a mask, and she caught only the end of it — *nach dem stehenden Mann* — and then they were below her and gone, and she stood at the anchor with her jumar in her hand and understood that she had just heard her son used as a unit of distance by a man who would be home in Innsbruck by Friday.

They had all done it. She had heard it in six languages since Camp II. It was on the radio. It was in the route description that the agency emailed her in February with the cheerfulness of a company confirming a car hire: *from the Balcony, forty minutes to the rock band, then the traverse begins twenty minutes past the standing man*. She had printed that email. She had put it in a drawer in Aberdeen with the transcripts and the death certificate and the four years, and she had taken it out perhaps sixty times, and every single time she had read it she had thought: *they have made him useful*.

She had assumed she would hate them for it. That was one more thing she had been wrong about, and the wrongness arrived the way all of them arrived up here, mildly, without ceremony, as a small correction to the file. They had not made him useful. They had made him *reliable*. Four years of wind and he had not moved and he had not fallen and he was exactly where the description said he would be, and every man and woman on this ridge had at some point in the dark looked up and found him and known where they were and taken comfort from it. Her son had become the one dependable thing above eight thousand metres. There were worse jobs. She had done worse jobs.

She clipped through and went on.

The rock band

You see him from below and you think it is a climber who has stopped.

That is the whole of it. That is why the phrase exists and why nobody has ever managed to find a gentler one. He is ten metres off the fixed line on a shelf of wind-scoured rock, and he is upright — not lying, not curled, not slumped against anything. Upright. The ice has grown around his lower legs and locked them and the ice is holding him the way a stand holds a specimen, and his back is straight and his head is up, and he faces downhill, down the Southeast Ridge, down the long white throat of the mountain toward the Balcony and the Col and the icefall and Nepal and everything that is below and warm and alive, and at first light, when the headlamps are still coming up, every climber on that ridge sees a man standing quietly two hundred metres above them, watching them come.

Ruth had seen photographs. There were nine on the internet that she knew of, taken by strangers, and she had looked at all nine of them every night for four years, and she had believed — she saw this now, standing forty metres away with her chest heaving twenty times a minute — that she had used them up. That she had worn the image down to something she could stand next to.

She had not used them up. Photographs are two-dimensional and lit by somebody else. They do not have a *back*. They do not stand in a real relation to the rock behind them and to the sky above and to the woman looking at them, and it was the third dimension that did it, that came across the forty metres and went into her under the ribs: her son occupied volume. He displaced air. He was a solid object in the world, still, at this moment, on this morning, while she was also a solid object in the world, and the two of them were forty metres apart, which is a distance you can cross.

She began to cross it.

The suit had been red. On the sun side it was the colour of the inside of a shell, pink going to bone, four years of ultraviolet at an altitude where there is a third less atmosphere to filter it. On the

shadow side it was still red. It was still, exactly, the red she had watched him pack in a hallway in Aberdeen while telling him he had too many socks.

Rime ice had grown out of his windward shoulder in feathers eight or nine centimetres long, all of them pointing west into the weather, because rime grows into the wind that makes it, which is a thing she had learned in a book and never expected to verify. He had a small crest of it along the top of his hood. It made him look decorated. It made him look like something that had been given an honour.

His goggles were on and his hood was up and drawn tight and the drawcord had frozen in its toggle, and between the top of the goggles and the edge of the hood there was a band of frozen fabric perhaps three centimetres wide, and there was nothing else. There was no face.

What she had brought

She had brought one thing. Everything above the Col is weight — she had cut the handle off her toothbrush at Base Camp, she had left the second glove liner, she had made those calculations in grams for four months and had made them ruthlessly, because a woman who intends to reach 8,600 metres at fifty-eight years old does not get to be sentimental about grams. And she had thought for four years about what she would carry up here to leave with him, and had considered the photograph and the letter and the small blue rabbit that had been in a box in the loft since 1997, and she had weighed each of them, in the actual sense, on the kitchen scales, and had put them all back.

She had brought his door key.

Four grams. Yale, brass, worn silver at the shoulder. She had never given it back to the landlord in Fort William because to give it back was to make a statement about the future, and she had carried it in her pocket for four years the way other people carry a coin, and it was in the chest pocket of her down suit now, and it had been there for ten weeks.

She got the pocket open. That took a while.

She had thought she would say something. She had written things, in the way that everybody writes things — in her head at traffic lights, in the bath, at three in the morning, whole paragraphs, arguments, apologies, one furious speech about the socks — and standing in front of him at 8,600 metres, breathing twenty-two times a minute into a mask through which no human sound can travel more than a metre, she discovered that the mountain had taken those too. There was no oxygen for a sentence. A sentence is enormous. She had been given a body that could either climb or speak and she had spent every gram of it on climbing, and this was the arithmetic she had never once done, in four years, at any kitchen table.

So she did the only thing left that cost nothing.

She reached up with her mitten and tried to clear the ice from his goggles.

It did not clear. Four years of rime is not frost; it is a growth, it is welded, and a mitten on rime is a fist on a wall. She worked at it for perhaps forty seconds and achieved a smear. And then she took the mitten off.

She was aware of what she was doing. She wants that on the record too. Bare skin at 8,600 metres has between sixty and ninety seconds before the tissue begins to die, and she had trained for two thousand hours and knew the number, and she took the mitten off and worked at the ice over her son's eyes with her fingernails, with the pads of four fingers, with her thumb, for a count that she put at thirty and that Dorje put at close to two minutes, and the ice took a polish and would not take anything else.

She got the mitten back on. Two of the fingers she would lose in Kathmandu, and she would sign the consent form left-handed and feel nothing about it whatsoever.

There was no face. That was the whole of the transaction. She had crossed six thousand miles and four years and eight and a half kilometres of vertical air and had spent the last of her body on the last three centimetres, and the mountain had said: *no, not that*. Not

cruelly. It does not take. It stops giving. It had let her have the shape of his skull under her hand, forty minutes ago, on a young man from Prague who was still warm and still speaking, and it would not let her have this, and there was no one in the sky or the rock or the thinning blue above the rock to whom she could put the question of why the exchange had been arranged in that order.

The chough

There was a bird.

It came up the ridge on the morning thermal, black, and turned once above the rock band at a height she could not judge because there was nothing up here of a known size, and its wings made a sound like a page. An alpine chough. They follow the expeditions. They have been recorded above eight thousand metres, which no physiology properly explains, and they come for the litter and the crumbs and they are the only living thing at that height that is not there on purpose.

Her mother used to tell her, in the flat in Dundee, the story of the child left out on the mountain — put out on the rock to die because he had been born wrong, born white-haired, and a great bird came down and took him up to her nest on the peak and raised him among her own, and years later gave him back to his father, and gave him a feather, and said: *burn this and I will come*. Ruth had loved it because of the feather. Because there was a mechanism. Because somewhere in the world was a bird you could summon and an arrangement you could rely on and a mountain that gave children back.

The chough went east over the rock band and did not return.

What was behind her

And then she understood the last thing, and it was the only thing that morning that she was not able to file calmly.

He was still behind her.

The presence that had come onto the rope below the Balcony and climbed with her all morning at her left shoulder, patient with her

pace, the one she had spoken to at the anchor and thanked at the rock band — it had not moved. It had not gone in. It had not, at any point in the last four minutes, crossed the two metres between her and the upright thing in the bleached red suit and *become him*. It was at her shoulder. It was still waiting for her to get on.

Which meant it had never been him. Which meant it was a parietal lobe at fifty-nine percent saturation, generating company out of nothing, the way it does for everyone, the way it did for Shackleton on South Georgia and for Smythe offering mint cake to the air at 8,300 metres, an artefact, a reflex, a warmth from a doorway addressed to no one.

She had climbed all morning beside a hallucination and had let it be her son. And it had been kind to her. And there was nobody to thank.

Below her on the fixed line, somebody clipped through the anchor and looked up and got their bearings and went on, twenty minutes to the traverse.

Ruth put the key in the ice at his feet, where the ice would have it inside a week and would keep it for a very long time. Then she sat down beside him on the shelf, out of the wind, with the mountain going down and away in front of her for eight and a half kilometres, all of it bright, all of it below, and she was fifty-eight years old and had four hours of oxygen on her back, and she began, without hurry, to get her breath.

SIXTEEN. THE REFUSAL

8,600 metres, 09:20

She had expected it to be a matter of allowing.

That was the shape the thing had held in her mind for four years, on the stairwell and in the chamber in Leeds and at three in the morning in a flat in Aberdeen: that at the end of all the effort there would be a moment of setting down. That the whole enormous machinery of staying alive — which she had been operating by hand, consciously, every hour of every day since a Tuesday in May — could simply be released, the way you release a rope you have

been holding, and the thing would go, and she would be permitted to stop.

Nobody tells you that the body has its own opinion, and that it is not interested in yours, and that it does not regard the matter as settled by anything you have decided in a kitchen.

She sat in the lee of the rock with eight and a half kilometres of bright air falling away in front of her, and the first thing that happened was that the shivering started.

Not the shivering she knew. Not cold-bus-stop, not February-on-the-Cairngorms. This came up out of the trunk in long convulsive waves that lifted her off the rock and set her down again, a full-body cramp arriving every eleven or twelve seconds, and it went on, and it did not adjust, and each wave hurt in the muscle wall of her abdomen where four months of it had already been wrung out. Thermogenic shivering can raise metabolic heat production fivefold. She knew that. She had underlined it. What the underlining had failed to convey was that the process is *violent*, that the body defends its core the way a dog defends a doorway, with no dignity whatsoever and no interest at all in the household's plans.

And she thought: I will wait it out.

And the body said: no.

She would try, for years, to find language for what happened over the next fifty minutes, and would never find any better than that. It was not a change of mind. Her mind did not change. Her mind sat on the shelf beside her son with perfect composure and continued to hold the position it had held since the Tuesday in May, and it was overruled — not argued with, *overruled* — by something underneath it that had no vocabulary and enormous authority.

There was the cold, which was not the promised warmth. There was the shivering. There was the hypoxic euphoria she had been counting on since Aberdeen, which had come to her freely twice that morning, unasked, at the Balcony and on the ridge, and which now, when she was actually sitting still and required it, would not come at all. Because she was resting. Because her exertion had

dropped and her saturation had crept up two or three points and the doorway had closed, and the mountain was letting her have precisely the thing she had not come for: clarity. Cold, shivering, uncomfortable clarity, at 8,600 metres, beside a body with no face.

It does not take. It stops giving.

She understood then what Dorje had been telling her in the tent, and she understood that he had not been consoling her, and she had a fairly clear view of what a bastard he was for having phrased it so beautifully.

10:05

The regulator changed its note.

That was all. A four-kilo cylinder on her back reaching the end of its useful pressure and the flow beginning to thin, and the sound of it altering by perhaps a semitone, and it was the smallest possible event in the world, and it went into her the way a fire alarm goes into a building.

She was standing before she knew that standing had been proposed.

That is not a figure of speech and she never afterwards described it as one. Two thousand hours. A stairwell in Aberdeen with a weighted pack, three hundred and sixty ascents. The Cairngorms in the dark. The chamber in Leeds where a Yorkshireman in a fleece had put her at a simulated eight thousand metres and made her change a bottle in gloves until the changing of a bottle stopped being an act and became a reflex — *until she did not have to be present for it*. She had built that. She had built it deliberately, at considerable expense, out of the last of her son's insurance money, so that nothing at altitude would require her attention, so that all of her attention could be saved and spent here, on this shelf, on this.

She had built a machine for getting a woman to 8,600 metres and back, and she had built it very well, and it did not know what she had built it for.

Her right hand went over her shoulder to the valve. Her left came up to steady the hose. Her feet, which had been arranged for

sitting, set themselves at the correct angle to the fall line without being consulted. And she stood there in the wind beside her son with her heart going and her mind screaming at the whole apparatus to *stop*, and the apparatus did not stop, because the apparatus had never once in two thousand hours been given a reason to.

Twenty metres below, at the anchor, Dorje stood up.

He had been there the whole time. Forty-five minutes, out of the wind, hands in his armpits, saying nothing, doing nothing, not once calling up to her. She had thought it was respect. She had thought it was a man giving a mother her hour. It was neither of those things and she would not learn what it was for another eleven days.

He came up the shelf and clipped her tether to his own and turned her by the shoulders, gently, the way you turn someone in a hospital corridor, and he did not say a word about it then or ever. And Ruth Aldiss, who had come six thousand miles and four years to lie down, went down the ridge on her own two feet at a steady rate with a fresh bottle at three litres a minute, weeping into a mask where it froze immediately and blinded her, being carried away from her child by a body she had trained herself for the express purpose of arriving.

The last of it

There is a documented phenomenon called summit amnesia. Above 8,000 metres the hippocampus, which requires a great deal of oxygen to lay down memory and receives very little, largely stops writing. Climbers descend with holes in the day. They are shown photographs of themselves on the summit and do not recognise the occasion.

She kept two things from the descent to the Balcony and lost the rest.

The first was the sound of her own crampons on old blue ice, which is a squeak, an absurd small domestic squeak, like a hand on a wet window, and which she found unbearable.

The second was a thought that came to her somewhere on the ridge in the middle of the morning, complete, in her own voice, in the tone she used for the flat statement of a fact she had already checked three times:

I have just been passed.

Not by Dorje. By the mountain. She had sat down in plain view, at the side of the route, upright, exactly like the young man from Prague, and the mountain had come along the line and done the sum and looked at her and found that the arithmetic did not permit it, and had stepped past her and gone on up, and would be home by Friday.

She had wanted so badly to be addressed.

She had been. That was the answer. That had been the answer all morning and she had not been able to read it because she had been expecting a sentence, and what she had been given instead was a body that would not sit still, and a regulator changing its note, and four years of her own discipline arriving at 8,600 metres like a bailiff.

Below her the ridge dropped and the Balcony came up out of the light with its acres of dead cylinders, and behind her the standing man went on facing downhill, watching her come, the way he had watched every one of them come, for four years, dependable, and would go on watching for four hundred more.

SEVENTEEN. THE ONLY ALTERATION

She came down on him at about eleven in the morning and knew from forty metres that he was finished, because the snow had begun to collect on his shoulders and the snow does not collect on a man who is still producing heat.

He was exactly as she had left him.

That is the thing. Nothing on that ridge had touched him in two and a half hours — not the wind, which was slack that morning, not the traffic, of which there had been perhaps thirty people. His gloves were on. Both of them, the right one sitting easy and the left one worked over the swollen knuckles in a way that was slightly wrong,

slightly bunched at the wrist, because it had been fitted by a woman breathing twenty-two times a minute who could not feel her own fingers. His suit was zipped to the throat.

He had died dressed.

Ruth stopped on the rope above him. Dorje let her stop.

She understood, looking down at the young man from Prague, that she was looking at the only alteration she would ever make to that mountain. Everything else she had done up there had been undone behind her — her tracks blown out within the hour, her breath gone, the ice she had scratched at with her fingernails already reformed. She had put a glove on a dying stranger and zipped a zip. That was the whole of her work at eight and a half thousand metres. It had bought him nothing. It had not extended his life by a minute and had not made his death warmer and had not been noticed by anyone, including, in all likelihood, him.

And it would outlast her. He would sit there in his gloves for forty years.

She thought — and it arrived complete, in the flat voice, on a ridge where thinking was almost impossible:

Somebody did this for Danny.

Not that. Not the gloves. But some small useless thing, some adjustment, some hand on the top of a head. Because she had been on this mountain for six weeks now and she had seen who these people were, and it was not credible that four men and a sirdar had walked past a twenty-six-year-old boy sitting upright on a shelf and had done nothing at all with their hands. Somebody had straightened something. Somebody had spent forty seconds they did not have.

And nobody had ever mentioned it in any interview, because it was too small to be a story and because it was the kind of thing that sounds like an excuse when you say it out loud.

She clipped past. She did not look at his face, having already seen it.

EIGHTEEN. THE FLOOR

The descent is where the mountain collects.

Everybody knows the statistic and nobody behaves as though they do: the great majority of deaths on the eight-thousanders happen on the way down, on ground the climber has already crossed once that day, in daylight, with the hard part finished. The body has spent its account. The mind has stopped writing. And the thing that had been carrying you — the enormous forward pull of the objective — switches off at the top, and what is left is eleven hours of technical descent performed by an organism that no longer has a reason.

Ruth had a reason. Hers was behind her, facing downhill.

She came off the ridge onto the Balcony at half past eleven and sat in the litter of dead cylinders while Dorje changed her bottle, and she remembers none of it. She remembers nothing at all between the Balcony and a point somewhere on the Triangular Face where she fell over.

Not a slip. A fall, sideways, from standing, onto the frozen scree, and she lay there for a moment looking up at a sky that had gone the wrong colour and thought, with mild interest: I have been drunk twice in my life and this is the second one.

Dorje got her up. He got her up the way you get a wardrobe up.

They reached the South Col at three in the afternoon and the wind had come back, and they lay in the tent for four hours and did not sleep, and at seven he made her drink a litre of water she did not want, and at eight they went down again, because you do not sleep on the Col twice if you can avoid it and by then Dorje had a private opinion about her chances of standing up in the morning.

The Lhotse Face by head torch. The traverse. The Yellow Band. The queue behind eleven other people all of whom were finished.

She got to Camp Two at two in the morning on the twenty-third of May, having been on her feet for twenty-six hours out of the last twenty-eight, and inside the tent, in the light, she took her mittens off.

Two fingers on the right hand were the wrong colour. Not black — that comes later, over days, and it is worse for being so slow. They were the flat waxy grey-white of something moulded, and they were rigid to the second joint, and when she pressed one against the tent floor there was no sensation of pressing, only a report from somewhere further up the arm that pressing had occurred.

Dorje looked at them for a long time.

“Do not warm them,” he said. “Not here. If they thaw and freeze again you lose the hand. We keep them cold until Base Camp and Marit does it properly.”

“All right.”

“Ruth.” It was the first time he had used her name. “How did it happen?”

She thought about it. It required some care, because the day had holes in it.

“I took my mitten off,” she said.

“Why?”

“To clear the ice off his goggles.”

Dorje said nothing for a while. The stove hissed. Somewhere down the Cwm the glacier made a noise like a door.

“Did it clear?” he asked.

“No.”

He nodded, and put the pan on, and did not say anything else, and she lay on her side in the dark with her ruined hand held out from her body like something she had been asked to carry for somebody else, and she did not cry, and she was not sad, and there was still no grief in there anywhere, and she understood that at some point in the next few days it was going to be delivered to her all at once, at a lower altitude, with interest.

IV. NOBODY TO THANK

NINETEEN. THE DIAGNOSIS

Marit worked on the hand for ninety minutes in the blue tent and did not speak while she did it, and at the end of it she said that the index would probably be taken at the middle joint and the middle finger below it, in Kathmandu, by somebody better than her.

Then she washed her hands and sat down and said: "Now we are going to talk."

"I'm very tired."

"Yes. You will be tired for a year. Sit."

Ruth sat.

"I am going to tell you what I think," said Marit, "and I am going to be accurate rather than kind, and then you may leave and I will not raise it again. Do you agree?"

"You'll do it anyway."

"Yes."

"Then go on."

Marit took her glasses off. Without them her face was younger and much less certain.

"You did not come here to die," she said. "I want to start there, because it is what everyone in this camp will say behind your back for the next four days, and it is wrong, and it is lazy. If a person wants to die there are a hundred cheaper ways and you are a woman who costs things out. You did not come here to die."

"No."

"You came here to be *permitted*," Marit let that sit. "You could not do it on your own authority in a flat in Aberdeen, because you are not the kind of person who acts on her own authority — you are the kind of person who reconciles a column against another column and abides by the result. So you came six thousand miles and you found the largest authority on the planet and you presented yourself to it, correctly, in good faith, with everything in order. And you sat down in front of it and you waited to be told."

Ruth did not answer.

"And it did not tell you," said Marit. "It did not say yes and it did not say no. It said nothing at all, because it is a pile of rock, and your body stood up and walked you down, because that is what bodies do. And you have been furious about it for three days and you have not said a word to anybody, and you will not, because who would you say it to. That is my diagnosis. I have no treatment for it."

The generator ran. Outside somebody laughed at something.

"That's not an accusation," Ruth said eventually.

"No."

"I'd have preferred an accusation."

"I know," said Marit. "An accusation would give you something to defend. I am not offering you that either." She put her glasses back on. "Now the part that is about me. On the eighth of April I wrote a note in your file. It said *query goal*, and it said *recommend: watch*. And then I did not watch. I read you correctly in the first fifteen minutes and I found the reading interesting, and I filed it, and I went on to the next client, and I let you go up. Four hundred people through this tent and the one I understood is the one I did nothing about."

"You couldn't have stopped me."

"That is true and it is not a comfort and I did not offer it as one." Marit stood. "I am telling you because in about six weeks you are going to be at sea level with a hand missing two fingers and no project, and it is going to arrive. All of it. Four years of it, and this as well. And when it does I want there to be one person on earth who already knows, so that you do not have to begin by explaining."

She wrote something on a card and held it out.

"Bergen," she said. "I am not a psychiatrist and I will not pretend to be. I am a person who saw it and said nothing at the time. That is a small qualification. It is the one I have."

TWENTY. THE FIFTH MAN

He came to the ward on the eleventh day.

She had signed the consent form left-handed, with a nurse steadying the clipboard, and had felt nothing whatever about it, and they had taken both of them, at the joints Marit had predicted, and the hand was in a great white parcel of dressing that made it look like a prop.

Dorje sat down in the plastic chair beside the bed with his cap in his hands.

"I want to tell you about the twenty-second of May," he said.

"I've read four accounts of the twenty-second of May."

"Yes," said Dorje. "Four. That is the number I want to talk about."

Something in the room changed pressure.

"There were four clients," he said. "Løvgren. Hale. Bardsley. Whitcombe. Those are the four names in the newspapers, and in the inquiry, and in your notebook, and I know they are in your notebook because you told me you could recite them." He turned the cap over. "Nobody ever asks how many people were on that rope. They ask which climbers. A sirdar is not a climber. A sirdar is equipment. So the accounts say four, and the accounts are wrong, and they have been wrong for four years, and I have let them be wrong."

"How many were there?"

"Five," said Dorje. "And I was in front."

Ruth was very still.

"I came upon your son at a few minutes before eleven in the morning," he said. "I was fifty, sixty metres ahead of my clients, as I always am, because that is the job. He was sitting on the shelf where he is now. He was conscious. He spoke to me. He said —" Dorje stopped, and then went on, because he had clearly decided somewhere on the walk to the hospital that he was going to do all of it. "He said that he was fine and that he was going down in a minute. His mask was on. His bottle had about forty minutes in it.

His jumar was stowed and he was rigged to descend and he had done everything right and he could not stand up."

"You checked."

"I checked. I did the arithmetic that you did on the ridge on the twenty-second of May with the young man from Prague, and I got the same answer, and it took me about the same length of time, and there is no version of it where the number comes out differently. He could not walk. He could not be carried. My oxygen was accounted for to the litre. To stay was to add bodies."

"And then?"

"And then I went up," said Dorje. "And my four clients came along the rope behind me, one at a time, four or five minutes apart. And every one of them stopped, and looked at me, and I gave them the sign to keep going. They did not make that decision, Mrs Aldiss. I made it. Five times — once for myself and four times for them. They obeyed their sirdar, which is what they had paid for and what they were told to do at the briefing, and it is the correct thing to do at eight thousand six hundred metres, and it is the only reason all five of us are alive."

Ruth said, very quietly: "They've been the ones."

"Yes."

"For four years. There was a piece in the Telegraph. Hale's daughter had to change schools."

"Yes."

"And you let it."

"I let it," said Dorje.

He looked at the cap in his hands.

"I have been asked for an interview four times and I have declined four times, and each time I have told myself that it is not my place, that it is not the custom, that the families should not have a Sherpa's version to argue with. All of that is true and none of it is the reason. The reason is that if I speak, then it is a decision that a man made, and a decision is a thing a person can be blamed for.

While it is four foreigners in a fog, it is an accident." He set the cap on his knee. "I have known exactly what I was doing. I want to be clear about that. I am not a confused man."

"Why now?"

And Dorje said: "Because you have done it."

The ward was quiet. Somewhere down the corridor a trolley.

"When Ollie telephoned me in April last year and said there is a woman, and she has asked for you by name, and she is the mother — I said yes inside the hour. He thought I was being brave. I was not being brave." He looked up at her for the first time. "There is nobody at sea level who can absolve me. I have tried. My wife says it was not my fault, and she loves me, and she has never been above four thousand metres, and her forgiveness is worth nothing to me because she does not know what she is forgiving. The clients cannot do it; they were following me. A priest cannot do it. In this whole world there was one person who could stand in that air, with that arithmetic in front of her, in a body that had done the same training, and reach the same answer honestly — and that person was you, and she was in Aberdeen, and she wanted to come."

"You gave me the photograph."

"On the sixth day of the hold. Yes."

"So that I'd know he'd done everything right."

"So that you would know there was no fault in him," said Dorje. "Because if there was no fault in him, and no fault in the mountain, then the only place left for fault to be is in the men who walked past. And I wanted you standing at eight thousand six hundred metres with that fully understood, having just walked past someone yourself."

Ruth thought of the anchor. Twenty metres below the shelf. Forty-five minutes.

"You stood at that anchor," she said, "and you watched me sit down beside him. And you didn't come up."

"No."

"I could have died on that shelf."

"Yes," said Dorje. "And if I had come up and taken you off it, then whatever you said to me afterwards would have been the words of a woman who had been rescued, and I would never have known whether she meant them." He was not crying. He was, if anything, extremely calm, and that was the worst of it. "So I waited to see whether you would stand up on your own. And you did. And now you have carried it down, and it is yours, and it is real, and I have come to ask you for it."

TWENTY-ONE. SPENT

Here is what Ruth Aldiss reached for, sitting up in a hospital bed in Kathmandu with a parcel where her hand had been.

She reached for rage. It was the correct thing to feel and she knew where it was kept — the drawer had been open for four years and there had never been any difficulty finding it. A man had taken her money and her forty-five minutes on a shelf and had used her son's death as an instrument and had used her, deliberately, from the first hour, and had gambled her life on a ridge to get a cleaner result.

She reached for it and the drawer was empty.

Not empty in the way of something taken. Empty in the way of an account that has been closed and reconciled and shows a balance of nothing, because on the twenty-second of May at approximately half past eight in the morning, at eight thousand five hundred and sixty metres, walking away from a young man in an orange suit, Ruth Aldiss had forgiven the arithmetic.

Not four men. She had thought at the time that she was forgiving four men. But the thing that had come up under her sternum like a wave under a boat had not had names in it. It had been general. It had been an acquittal of the sum itself — of anybody who had ever stood in that air and done that calculation and got that answer — and it had been unconditional and involuntary and had taken about eleven seconds, and she had not been consulted, and she could not now go back and attach conditions to it.

She had spent it four hours before he asked. On nobody. On the mountain. Into the wind.

"You can't have it," she said.

Dorje's face did not change.

"I understand."

"No — listen to me, because you've been four years getting to this chair and you should at least be told the truth of it." Her voice was flat and unhurried, the voice she used for a figure she had checked three times. "It isn't that I'm keeping it from you. I would keep it from you. I'd very much like to be a woman who's keeping it from you — I'd have something then, wouldn't I. I'd have a thing I was doing." She looked at the parcel on the end of her arm. "It's that it's gone. I gave it away on the ridge before I ever knew you needed it. To no one. To the air. And you can't have it because there isn't any left, and I can't refuse you either, because you can't refuse someone a thing you haven't got."

Dorje sat for a while with his cap in his hands.

"That is worse," he said.

"Yes."

"For both of us."

"Yes," said Ruth.

He stood up. At the door he stopped, and did not turn round, and said: "I will give the interview. I have arranged it. It is on Thursday." A pause. "That is not for you. I want to be clear. You have not moved me. I decided it on the walk here, in case you said yes, and I have not changed it now that you have said no, and I think that is the only honest thing I have done in four years."

And then he was gone, and the trolley went past in the corridor, and Ruth Aldiss lay in a hospital bed eleven hundred metres above sea level in a city that smelled of diesel and marigolds, and she was fifty-eight years old, and she had lost her son and her hatred and two fingers and the whole of the project, and every single one of them was gone for good, and she was still there.

TWENTY-TWO. THE HALL TABLE

The flat was exactly as she had left it, which she had not expected and which was the first thing that got through.

Eleven weeks of dust on the hall table. A dead spider plant. Eleven items of post, all of it addressed to a woman who had made no arrangements to receive it. She had genuinely not thought about the post. She stood in her own hallway with her coat on and a bag at her feet and understood, in the way you understand a thing your body has known for some time, that she had made no arrangements about anything.

She found the return-flight receipt in her bag six days later, the one bought at a desk in Kathmandu with a bank card, on the ninth of June, at seven in the morning, by a woman with one hand who had needed a member of staff to type the numbers.

She kept putting her hand in the chest pocket of a coat that was not the down suit, for a key that was in the ice at eight thousand six hundred metres and would be there for a very long time.

The grief came in the third week, as advertised, and it was not what four years of the low administrative noise had prepared her for. It came in the Co-op. She was buying tinned peaches, because she had been able to taste nothing else at Camp Two and it had become a habit, and she got as far as the till and put the basket down on the floor and left it there and walked out and sat in the car park.

Four years. All at once. With interest.

She telephoned Bergen on a Sunday, and hung up before it connected, and telephoned again on the Wednesday and did not.

In August a letter arrived from an insurance company in Prague with a case reference and a request that she confirm certain details as a witness present at the scene, and there was a name in the second paragraph, alphabetised in a list of three, between a woman called Dvořáková and a man called Fiala.

Doležal, Jakub, 27.

She had put a glove on him and had not known his name, and now she knew his name and it was in a list, and she sat down on the stairs with the letter and stayed there until it got dark.

She went back to work on the first of September.

Nobody in the building knew where she had been. She had taken it as unpaid leave and had told the team it was a family matter, which was true, and they had all assumed a dying relative, which was close enough. Agnieszka the cleaner said something about her hand and Ruth said she'd had an accident, and Agnieszka said good God, and that was the whole of it.

The hatred did not come back. She checked for it, the way you check a tooth.

That was the strangest thing about the autumn, and it took her until November to find the shape of it: that she had been standing up for four years on a scaffold, and the scaffold had been taken down while she was abroad, and she had not fallen, and she had also not learned to stand. She simply remained upright in the middle of a room, in the same position, holding nothing.

The four folded pages were still in the drawer of the hall table. The route description, and the notebook, and the death certificate.

She did not throw any of it out. That would have been a gesture, and she had come home with a very poor opinion of gestures.

She just stopped opening the drawer.

CODA. THE FEATHER

Her mother's book had gone to a charity shop in 1994, and she had never looked for another copy, and she found in the end that she did not need one, because the story had never really been the bird.

A child born wrong and carried up a mountain and put out on a rock. A great bird who came down and took him and raised him and — this is the part — gave him back. And a feather. And an agreement: if you are ever in trouble, burn this, and I will come.

Ruth had loved it at seven for the mechanism. There was a thing you could do. Somebody had undertaken, in advance, to answer.

Nobody undertakes anything in advance. She had gone eight and a half kilometres up into the sky to establish that with certainty, and had established it, and had paid two fingers and a son's door key and four years of usable hatred for the finding, and it was not a discovery anybody wanted and she could not give it to a living soul.

She has no feather. There is nothing in the flat to burn. The nine photographs are ten now, because Dorje sent it to her in October without a message, and the tenth is the only one she looks at, and in it her son has stowed his ascender and rigged his descender and is coming home.

She is still here. That is the whole of it and there is no better way to put it.

On a Tuesday in September, at twenty past four, in a cardigan, with a mug of tea gone cold at half past two, Ruth Aldiss found that the payroll ledger for the Environmental Services directorate disagreed with the bank reconciliation by eleven pence.

She could have written it off. Everybody writes off eleven pence.

She took her glasses off and cleaned them, and put them back on, and went and found it.

It took her forty minutes. It was a transposition in a night-shift allowance, entered in April by somebody who had gone home early, and she corrected it, and the two columns agreed, and she sat back in her chair in the empty office with the strip lights humming and her ruined hand flat on the desk.

There. One thing in the world reconciled.

Outside the window it was getting dark over Broad Street, the ordinary dark of a Scottish autumn, four hundred feet above the sea.

She put her coat on and went home.

GLOSSARY

sirdar SIR-dar — Nepali, from Persian, *chief*. The head of the Sherpa staff on a Himalayan expedition — the man who runs the mountain for the agency, and who is not, as the book is careful to say, a climber.

Above eight thousand metres the dead are not brought down. They are left where they stop, and the living learn to navigate by them.

Four years ago Ruth Aldiss's son sat down on a shelf of rock at eight thousand six hundred metres and did not get up. He is still there, upright, facing downhill, and every climber on the route uses him as a waypoint. The description issued to clients reads: the traverse begins twenty minutes past the standing man.

She is fifty-eight, twenty-nine years in payroll for the City of Aberdeen, and constitutionally unable to let a discrepancy lie. She has trained four years in a stairwell, weighed everything she owns in grams, and memorised nine photographs of a body she cannot reach. She is not going up there to bring him home. She knows she can't, and she has done the arithmetic more carefully than anyone alive.

What she has not calculated is what the mountain will refuse her.

"A boy is being used as a signpost and somebody ought to go and address him personally."



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