

I doubt if anyone would claim to enjoy life at high altitudes—
enjoy, that is, in the ordinary sense of the word. There is a certain
grim satisfaction to be derived from struggling upwards, however
slowly; but the bulk of one's time is necessarily spent in the ex-
treme squalor of a high camp, when even this solace is lacking.
Smoking is impossible; eating tends to make one vomit; the neces-
sity of reducing weight to a bare minimum forbids the importation
of literature beyond that supplied by the labels on tins of food;
sardine oil, condensed milk and treacle spill themselves all over the
place; except for the briefest moments, during which one is not
usually in a mood for aesthetic enjoyment, there is nothing to look
at but the bleak confusion inside the tent and the scaly, bearded
countenance of one's companion—fortunately the noise of the
wind usually drowns out his stuffy breathing; worst of all is the
feeling of complete helplessness and inability to deal with any
emergency that might arise. I used to try to console myself with the
thought that a year ago I would have been thrilled by the very idea
of taking part in our present adventure, a prospect that had then
seemed like an impossible dream; but altitude has the same effect
on the mind as upon the body, one's intellect becomes dull and
unresponsive, and my only desire was to finish the wretched job
and to get down to a more reasonable climate.

Eric Shipston
Upon That Mountain

Chapter 8

Just before dawn on Tuesday, April 16, after resting for two
days at Base Camp, we headed up into the Icefall to begin our
second acclimatization excursion. As I nervously threaded my
way through the frozen, groaning disorder, I noticed that my
breathing wasn't quite as labored as it had been during our first

trip up the glacier; already my body was starting to adapt to the altitude. My dread of getting crushed by a falling serac, however, was at least as great as before.

I'd hoped that the giant, overhanging tower at 19,000 feet—christened the Mousetrap by some wag on Fischer's team—had toppled by now, but it was still precariously upright, leaning even farther over. Again I realigned my cardiovascular output rushing to ascend from its threatening shadow, and again dropped to my knees when I arrived on the serac's summit, gasping for air and trembling from the excess of adrenaline fizzing through my veins. Unlike our first acclimatization sally, during which we stayed at Camp One for less than an hour before returning to Base Camp, Rob intended for us to spend Tuesday and Wednesday nights at Camp One and then continue up to Camp Two for three additional nights before heading down.

At 9:00 a.m., when I reached the Camp One site, Ang Dorje,* our climbing sirdar,[†] was excavating platforms for our tents in the hard-frozen snow slope. Twenty-nine years old, he is a slender man with delicate features, a shy, moody temperament, and astounding physical strength. While waiting for my teammates to arrive, I picked up a spare shovel and started helping him dig. Within minutes I was exhausted from the effort and had to sit down to rest, prompting a belly laugh from the Sherpa. "Are you not feeling good, Jon?" he mocked. "This is only Camp One, six thousand meters. The air here is still very thick."

Ang Dorje hailed from Pangboche, an aggregation of stonewalled houses and terraced potato fields clinging to a rugged hillside at 13,000 feet. His father is a respected climbing Sherpa who taught him the basics of mountaineering at an early age so

*He should not be confused with the Sherpa on the South African team who has the same name. Ang Dorje—like Pemba, Lhakpa, Ang Tshering, Ngawang, Dawa, Nima, and Pasang—is a very common Sherpa appellation; the fact that each of these names was shared by two or more Sherpas on Everest in 1996 was a source of occasional confusion.

[†]The sirdar is the head Sherpa. Hall's team had a Base Camp sirdar, named Ang Tshering, who was in charge of all the Sherpas employed by the expedition; Ang Dorje, the climbing sirdar, answered to Ang Tshering but supervised the climbing Sherpas while they were on the mountain above Base Camp.

that the boy would have marketable skills. By the time Ang Dorje was in his teens, his father had lost most of his sight to cataracts, and Ang Dorje was pulled from school to earn money for the

family.

In 1984 he was working as a cook boy for a group of Western trekkers when he caught the attention of a Canadian couple, Marion Boyd and Graem Nelson. According to Boyd, "I was missing my kids, and as I grew to know Ang Dorje he reminded me of my eldest son. Ang Dorje was bright, interested, keen to learn, and conscientious almost to a fault. He was carrying a huge load and he had nose bleeds every day at high altitude. I was intrigued."

After seeking the approval of Ang Dorje's mother, Boyd and Nelson started supporting the young Sherpa financially so that he could return to school. "I will never forget his entry exam [to gain admission to the regional primary school in Khumjung, built by Sir Edmund Hillary]. He was very small in stature and prepubescent. We were crammed into a small room with the headmaster and four teachers. Ang Dorje stood in the middle with his knees quaking as he tried to resurrect the bit of formal learning he had for this oral exam. We all sweated blood . . . but he was accepted with the proviso that he would have to sit with the little kids in the first grades."

Ang Dorje became an able student and achieved the equivalent of an eighth-grade education before quitting to go back to work in the mountaineering and trekking industry. Boyd and Nelson, who returned to the Khumbu several times, witnessed his maturation. "With access for the first time to a good diet, he began to grow tall and strong," recalls Boyd. "He told us with great excitement when he learned to swim in a pool in Kathmandu. At age twenty-five or so he learned to ride a bicycle and took a brief fancy to the music of Madonna. We knew he was really grown up when he presented us with his first gift, a care-fully selected Tibetan carpet. He wanted to be a giver, not a taker."

As Ang Dorje's reputation for being a strong and resourceful climber spread among Western climbers, he was promoted to the role of sirdar, and in 1992 he went to work for Rob Hall on

Everest; by the launch of Hall's 1996 expedition, Ang Dorje had climbed the peak three times. With respect and obvious affection, Hall referred to him as "my main man" and mentioned several times that he considered Ang Dorje's role crucial to the success of our expedition.

The sun was bright when the last of my teammates pulled into Camp One, but by noon a scum of high cirrus had blown in from the south; by three o'clock dense clouds swirled above the glacier and snow pelted the tents with a furious clamor. It stormed through the night; in the morning when I crawled out of the shelter I shared with Doug, more than a foot of fresh snow blanketed the glacier. Dozens of avalanches tumbled down the steep walls above, but our camp was safely beyond their reach.

At first light on Thursday, April 18, by which time the sky had cleared, we gathered our belongings and embarked for Camp Two, four miles and 1,700 vertical feet above. The route took us up the gently sloping floor of the Western Cwm, the highest box canyon on earth, a horseshoe-shaped defile gouged from the heart of the Everest massif by the Khumbu Glacier. The 25,790-foot ramparts of Nuprise defined the right wall of the Cwm, Everest's massive Southwest Face formed the left wall, and the broad frozen thrust of the Lhoitse Face loomed above its head.

The temperature had been brutally cold when we set out from Camp One, turning my hands into stiff, aching claws, but as the first of the sun's rays struck the glacier, the ice-spangled walls of the Cwm collected and amplified the radiant heat like a huge solar oven. Suddenly I was sweating, and I feared the onset of another migraine-intensity headache like the one that had hampered me at Base Camp, so I stripped down to my long underwear and stuffed a fistful of snow beneath my baseball cap. For the next three hours I slogged steadily up the glacier, pausing only to drink from my water bottle and replenish the snow supply in my hat as it melted into my matted hair.

At 21,000 feet, dizzy from the heat, I came upon a large object wrapped in blue plastic sheeting beside the trail. It took my altitude-impaired gray matter a minute or two to comprehend that the object was a human body. Shocked and disturbed, I

stared at it for several minutes. That night when I asked Rob about it he said he wasn't certain, but he thought the victim was a Sherpa who'd died three years earlier.

At 21,300 feet, Camp Two consisted of some 120 tents scattered across the bare rocks of the lateral moraine along the glacier's edge. The altitude here manifested itself as a malicious force, making me feel as though I were afflicted with a raging red-wine hangover. Too miserable to eat or even read, for the next two days I mostly lay in my tent with my head in my hands, trying to exert myself as little as possible. Feeling slightly better on Saturday, I climbed a thousand feet above camp to get some exercise and accelerate my acclimatization, and there, at the head of the Cwm, fifty yards off the main track, I came upon another body in the snow, or more accurately the lower half of a body. The style of the clothing and the vintage leather boots suggested that the victim was European and that the corpse had lain on the mountain at least ten or fifteen years.

The first body had left me badly shaken for several hours; the shock of encountering the second wore off almost immediately. Few of the climbers trudging by had given either corpse more than a passing glance. It was as if there were an unspoken agreement on the mountain to pretend that these desiccated remains weren't real—as if none of us dared to acknowledge what was at stake here.

On Monday, April 22, a day after returning from Camp Two to Base Camp, Andy Harris and I hiked over to the South African compound to meet their team and try to gain some insight into why they had become such pariahs. Fifteen minutes down the glacier from our tents, their camp was clustered atop a hump of glacial debris. The national flags of Nepal and South Africa, along with banners from Kodak, Apple Computer, and other sponsors, flew from a pair of tall aluminum flagpoles. Andy stuck his head inside the door of their mess tent, flashed his most winning smile, and inquired, "Hi, there. Is anybody home?"

omit

There is a great danger in acknowledging the dead. From then on bring on self-doubt.

It turned out that Ian Woodall, Cathy O'Dowd, and Bruce Herrod were in the Icefall, making their way down from Camp Two, but Woodall's girlfriend, Alexandrine Gaudin, was present, as was his brother, Phillip. Also in the mess tent was an effervescent young woman who introduced herself as Deshun Deyzel and immediately invited Andy and me in for tea. The three teammates seemed unconcerned by the reports of Ian's reprehensible behavior and rumors predicting their expedition's imminent disintegration.

"I went ice climbing for the first time the other day," Deyzel offered enthusiastically, gesturing toward a nearby serac where climbers from several expeditions had been practicing their ice craft. "I thought it was quite exciting. I hope to go up the Icefall in a few days." I'd intended to ask her about Ian's dishonesty and how she felt when she learned she'd been left off the Everest permit, but she was so cheerful and ingenious that I didn't have the stomach for it. After chatting for twenty minutes Andy extended an invitation to their whole team, including Ian, "to come round our camp for a wee snort" later that evening.

I arrived back at our own camp to find Rob, Dr. Caroline Mackenzie, and Scott Fischer's doctor, Ingrid Hunt, engaged in a tense radio conversation with someone higher on the mountain. Earlier in the day, Fischer was descending from Camp Two to Base Camp when he encountered one of his Sherpas, Ngawang Topche, sitting on the glacier at 21,000 feet. A veteran thirty-eight-year-old climber from the Rolwaling Valley, gap-toothed and sweet-natured, Ngawang had been hauling loads and performing other duties above Base Camp for three days, but his Sherpa cohorts complained that he had been sitting around a lot and not doing his share of the work.

When Fischer questioned Ngawang, he admitted that he'd been feeling weak, groggy, and short of breath for more than two days, so Fischer directed him to descend to Base Camp immediately. But there is an element of machismo in the Sherpa culture that makes many men extremely reluctant to acknowledge physical infirmities. Sherpas aren't supposed to get altitude illness, especially those from Rolwaling, a region famous for its powerful

climbers. Those who do become sick and openly acknowledge it, moreover, will often be blacklisted from future employment on expeditions. Thus it came to pass that Ngawang ignored Scott's instructions and, instead of going down, went up to Camp Two to spend the night.

By the time he arrived at the tents late that afternoon Ngawang was delirious, stumbling like a drunk, and coughing up pink, blood-laced froth: symptoms indicating an advanced case of High Altitude Pulmonary Edema, or HAPE—a mysterious, potentially lethal illness typically brought on by climbing too high, too fast in which the lungs fill with fluid.* The only real cure for HAPE is rapid descent; if the victim remains at high altitude very long, death is the most likely outcome.

Unlike Hall, who insisted that our group stay together while climbing above Base Camp, under the close watch of the guides, Fischer believed in giving his clients free rein to go up and down the mountain independently during the acclimatization period. As a consequence, when it was recognized that Ngawang was seriously ill at Camp Two, four of Fischer's clients were present—Dale Kruse, Pete Schoening, Klev Schoening, and Tim Madsen—but no guides. Responsibility for initiating Ngawang's rescue thus fell to Klev Schoening and Madsen—the latter a thirty-three-year-old ski patrolman from Aspen, Colorado, who'd never been higher than 14,000 feet before this expedition, which he had been persuaded to join by his girlfriend, Himalayan veteran Charlotte Fox.

When I walked into Hall's mess tent, Dr. Mackenzie was on the radio telling somebody at Camp Two, "give Ngawang acetazolamide, dexamethasone, and ten milligrams of sublingual nifedipine. . . . Yes, I know the risk. Give it to him anyway. . . . I'm telling you, the danger that he will die from HAPF before we can get him down is much, much greater than the danger that the nifedipine will reduce his blood pressure to a dangerous level. Please, trust me on this! Just give him the medication! Quickly!"

*The root of the problem is believed to be a paucity of oxygen, compounded by high pressure in the pulmonary arteries, causing the arteries to leak fluid into the lungs.

Sharp - skull problem

Symptoms of HAPF

Fischer's independence

or

Fischer's

some fear,

what's nature?

He is responsible for all

Shirko.

**Ola to guide*

handout

None of the drugs seemed to help, however, nor did giving Ngawang supplemental oxygen or placing him inside a Gamow Bag—an inflatable plastic chamber about the size of a coffin in which the atmospheric pressure is increased to simulate a lower altitude. With daylight waning, Schoening and Madsen therefore began dragging Ngawang laboriously down the mountain, using the deflated Gamow Bag as a makeshift toboggan, while guide Neal Beidleman and a team of Sherpas climbed as quickly as they could from Base Camp to meet them.

Beidleman reached Ngawang at sunset near the top of the Icefall and took over the rescue, allowing Schoening and Madsen to return to Camp Two to continue their acclimatization. The sick Sherpa had so much fluid in his lungs, Beidleman recalled, "that when he breathed it sounded like a straw slurping a milkshake from the bottom of a glass. Halfway down the Icefall, Ngawang took off his oxygen mask and reached inside to clear some snot from the intake valve. When he pulled his hand out I shined my headlamp on his glove and it was totally red, soaked with blood he'd been coughing up into the mask. Then I shined the light on his face and it was covered with blood, too.

"Ngawang's eyes met mine and I could see how frightened he was," Beidleman continued. "Thinking fast, I lied and told him not to worry, that the blood was from a cut on his lip. That calmed him a little, and we continued down." To keep Ngawang from having to exert himself, which would have exacerbated his edema, at several points during the descent, Beidleman picked up the ailing Sherpa and carried him on his back. It was after midnight by the time they arrived in Base Camp.

Kept on oxygen and watched closely throughout the night by Dr. Hunt, by morning Ngawang was doing slightly better. Fischer, Hunt, and most of the other doctors involved were confident that the Sherpa's condition would continue to improve now that he was 3,700 feet lower than Camp Two; descending as little as 2,000 feet is typically enough to bring about complete recovery from HAPF. For this reason, Hunt explains, "there was no discussion of a helicopter" to evacuate Ngawang from Base Camp to Kathmandu, which would have cost \$5,000.

"Unfortunately," says Hunt, Ngawang "did not continue to improve. By late morning he started to deteriorate again." At this point Hunt concluded that he needed to be evacuated, but by now the sky had turned cloudy, ruling out the possibility of a helicopter flight. She proposed to Ngima Kale Sherpa, Fischer's Base Camp sirdar, that they assemble a team of Sherpas to take Ngawang down the valley on foot. Ngima balked at this idea, however. According to Hunt, the sirdar was adamant that Ngawang didn't have HAPF or any other form of altitude illness, "but rather was suffering from 'gastric,' the Nepali term for stomach ache," and that an evacuation was unnecessary.

Hunt persuaded Ngima to allow two Sherpas to help her escort Ngawang to a lower elevation. The stricken man walked so slowly and with such difficulty, though, that after covering less than a quarter-mile it became obvious to Hunt that he couldn't travel under his own power, and that she would need a lot more help. So she turned around and brought Ngawang back to the Mountain Madness encampment, she says, "to reconsider my options."

Ngawang's condition continued to worsen as the day dragged on. When Hunt attempted to put him back in the Gamow Bag, Ngawang refused, arguing, as Ngima had, that he didn't have HAPF. Hunt consulted with the other doctors at Base Camp (as she had throughout the expedition), but she didn't have an opportunity to discuss the situation with Fischer: By this time Scott had embarked for Camp Two to bring down Tim Madsen, who had overexerted himself while hauling Ngawang down the Western Cwm and had subsequently come down with HAPF himself. With Fischer absent, the Sherpas were disinclined to do what Hunt asked of them. The situation was growing more critical by the hour. As one of her fellow physicians observed, "Ingrid was in way over her head."

Thirty-two years old, Hunt had completed her residency only months doing volunteer medical-relief work in the foothills of eastern Nepal. She'd met Fischer by chance some months earlier

possible, Ngawang was loaded into a basket and, under Hunt's care, carried down the glacier to Pheriche on the backs of

Sherpas.

That afternoon Hall's furtrowed brow betrayed his concern. "Ngawang is in a bad way," he said. "He has one of the worst cases of pulmonary edema I've ever seen. They should have flown him out yesterday morning when they had a chance. If it had been one of Scott's clients who was this sick, instead of a Sherpa, I don't think he would have been treated so haphazardly. By the time they get Ngawang down to Pheriche, it may be too late to save him."

When the sick Sherpa arrived in Pheriche Wednesday evening after a nine-hour journey from Base Camp, his condition continued its downward spiral, despite the fact that he had been kept on bottled oxygen and was now at 14,000 feet, an elevation not substantially higher than the village where he'd spent most of his life. Perplexed, Hunt decided to put him inside the pressurized Gamow Bag, which was set up in a lodge adjacent to the HRA clinic. Unable to grasp the potential benefits of the inflatable chamber and terrified of it, Ngawang asked that a Buddhist lama be summoned. Before consenting to being zipped into its claustrophobic interior, he requested that prayer books be placed in the bag with him.

For the Gamow Bag to function properly, an attendant must continuously inject fresh air into the chamber with a foot pump. Two Sherpas took turns at the pump while an exhausted Hunt monitored Ngawang's condition through a plastic window at the head of the bag. Around 8:00 p.m., one of the Sherpas, Jeta, noticed that Ngawang was frothing at the mouth and had apparently stopped breathing; Hunt immediately tore open the bag and determined that he had gone into cardiac arrest, apparently after aspirating on some vomit. As she commenced cardiopulmonary resuscitation, she yelled for Dr. Larry Silver, one of the volunteers staffing the HRA clinic, who was in the next room. "I got there in a few seconds," Silver recalls. "Ngawang's skin looked blue. He had vomited all over the place, and his face and chest were covered with frothy pink sputum. It was an ugly

in Kathmandu when he was finalizing his Everest permit, and he subsequently invited her to accompany his upcoming Everest expedition in the dual roles of team physician and Base Camp manager.

Although she expressed some ambivalence about the invitation in a letter Fischer received in January, ultimately Hunt accepted the unpaid job and met the team in Nepal at the end of March, eager to contribute to the expedition's success. But the demands of simultaneously running Base Camp and meeting the medical needs of some twenty-five people in a remote, high-altitude environment proved to be more than she'd bargained for. (By comparison, Rob Hall paid two highly experienced staff members—team physician Caroline Mackenzie and Base Camp manager Helen Wilton—to do what Hunt did alone, without pay.) Compounding her difficulties, moreover, Hunt had trouble acclimatizing and suffered severe headaches and shortness of breath during most of her stay at Base Camp.

Tuesday evening, after the evacuation was aborted and Ngawang returned to Base Camp, the Sherpa grew increasingly sick, partly because both he and Nigma stubbornly contended Hunt's efforts to treat him, continuing to insist that he didn't have HAPE. Earlier in the day, Dr. Mackenzie had sent an urgent radio message to the American doctor Jim Litch, requesting that he hurry to Base Camp to assist in Ngawang's treatment. Dr. Litch—a respected expert in high-altitude medicine who had summited Everest in 1995—arrived at 7:00 p.m. after running up from Pheriche, where he was serving as a volunteer at the Himalayan Rescue Association clinic. He found Ngawang lying in a tent, attended by a Sherpa who had allowed Ngawang to remove his oxygen mask. Profoundly alarmed by Ngawang's condition, Litch was shocked that he wasn't on oxygen and didn't understand why he hadn't been evacuated from Base Camp. Litch located Hunt, ill in her own tent, and expressed his concerns. By this time Ngawang was breathing with extreme difficulty. He was immediately put back on oxygen, and a helicopter evacuation was requested for first light the following morning, Wednesday, April 24. When clouds and snow squalls made a flight im-

mess. Ingrid was giving him mouth-to-mouth through all the vomit. I took one look at the situation and thought, "This guy is going to die unless he gets intubated." Silver sprinted to the nearby clinic for emergency equipment, inserted an endotracheal tube down Ngawang's throat, and began forcing oxygen into his lungs, first by mouth and then with a manual pump known as an "ambu bag," at which point the Sherpa spontaneously regained a pulse and blood pressure. By the time Ngawang's heart started beating again, however, a period of approximately ten minutes had passed in which little oxygen had reached his brain. As Silver observes, "Ten minutes without a pulse or sufficient blood oxygen levels is more than enough time to do severe neurological damage."

For the next forty hours, Silver, Hunt, and Litch took turns pumping oxygen into Ngawang's lungs with the ambu bag, squeezing it by hand twenty times each minute. When secretions built up and clogged the tube down the Sherpa's throat, Hunt would suck the tube clear with her mouth. Finally, on Friday, April 26, the weather improved enough to allow a helicopter evacuation, and Ngawang was flown to a hospital in Kathmandu, but he did not recover. Over the weeks that followed he languished in the hospital, arms curled grotesquely at his sides, muscles atrophying, his weight dropping below 80 pounds. By mid-June Ngawang would be dead, leaving behind a wife and four daughters in Rolwaling.

Oddly, most climbers on Everest knew less about Ngawang's plight than tens of thousands of people who were nowhere near the mountain. The information warp was due to the Internet, and to those of us at Base Camp it was nothing less than surreal. A teammate might call home on a satellite phone, for instance, and learn what the South Africans were doing at Camp Two from a spouse in New Zealand or Michigan who'd been surfing the World Wide Web.

At least five Internet sites were posting dispatches* from correspondents at Everest Base Camp. The South African team maintained a website, as did Mal Duff's International Commercial Expedition. *Now*, the PBS television show, produced an elaborate and very informative website featuring daily updates from Liesl Clark and the eminent Everest historian Audrey Sal-keld, who were members of the MacGillivray Freeman IMAX expedition. (Headed by the award-winning filmmaker and expert climber David Breashears, who'd guided Dick Bass up Everest in 1985, the IMAX team was shooting a \$5.5 million giant-screen movie about climbing the mountain.) Scott Fischer's expedition had no less than two correspondents filing online dispatches for a pair of competing websites.

Jane Bromet, who phoned in daily reports for Outside Online,† was one of the correspondents on Fischer's team, but she wasn't a client and didn't have permission to climb higher than Base Camp. The other Internet correspondent on Fischer's expedition, however, was a client who intended to go all the way to the summit and file daily dispatches for NBC Interactive Media en route. Her name was Sandy Hill Pitman, and nobody on the mountain cut a higher profile or generated as much gossip.

Pitman, a millionaire socialite-cum-climber, was back for her

*Despite considerable hoopla about "direct, interactive links between the slopes of Mount Everest and the World Wide Web," technological limitations prevented direct hookups from Base Camp to the Internet. Instead, correspondents filed their reports by voice or fax via satellite phone, and those reports were typed into computers for dissemination on the Web by editors in New York, Boston, and Seattle. E-mail was received in Kathmandu, printed out, and the hard copy was transported by yak to Base Camp. Likewise, all photos that ran on the Web had first been sent by yak and then air courier to New York for transmission. Internet chat sessions were done via satellite phone and a typist in New York.

†Several magazines and newspapers have erroneously reported that I was a correspondent for Outside Online. The confusion stemmed from the fact that Jane Bromet interviewed me at Base Camp and posted a transcript of the interview on the Outside Online website. I was not, however, affiliated with Outside Online in any capacity. I had gone to Everest on assignment for *Outside* magazine, an independent entity (based in Santa Fe, New Mexico) that works in loose partnership with Outside Online (based in the Seattle area) to publish a version of the magazine on the Internet. But *Outside* magazine and Outside Online are autonomous to such a degree that I didn't even know Outside Online had sent a correspondent to Everest until I arrived at Base Camp.

third attempt on Everest. This year she was more determined than ever to reach the top and thereby complete her much publicized crusade to climb the Seven Summits.

In 1993 Pittman joined a guided expedition attempting the South Col and Southeast Ridge route, and she caused a minor stir by showing up at Base Camp with her nine-year-old son, Bob, along with a nanny to look after him. Pittman experienced a number of problems, however, and reached only 24,000 feet before turning around.

She was back on Everest in 1994 after raising more than a

quarter of a million dollars from corporate sponsors to secure the talents of four of the finest alpinists in North America: Breshars (who was under contract to film the expedition for NBC television), Steve Swenson, Barry Blanchard, and Alex Lowe. Lowe—

arguably the world's pre-eminent all-around climber—was hired to be Sandy's personal guide, a job for which he was paid a substantial sum. In advance of Pittman, the four men strung ropes partway up the Kangshung Face, an extremely difficult and

hazardous wall on the Tibetan side of the mountain. With a great deal of assistance from Lowe, Pittman ascended the fixed ropes to 22,000 feet, but once again she was forced to surrender her attempt before the summit; this time the problem was dangerously unstable snow conditions that forced the whole team to

abandon the mountain.

Until I bumped into her at Gorak Shep during the trek to

Base Camp, I'd never met Pittman face-to-face, although I'd been hearing about her for years. In 1992, *Men's Journal* assigned me to write an article about riding a Harley-Davidson motorcycle from New York to San Francisco in the company of Jann Wen-

ner—the legendary, exceedingly rich publisher of *Rolling Stone*, *Men's Journal*, and *Us*—and several of his wealthy friends, including Rocky Hill, Pittman's brother and her husband, Bob Pittman, the co-founder of MTV.

The ear-splitting, chrome-encrusted Hog that Jann loaned me was a thrilling ride, and my high-rolling companions were friendly enough. But I had precious little in common with any of them, and there was no forgetting that I had been brought along

as Jann's hired help. Over dinner Bob and Jann and Rocky compared the various aircraft they owned (Jann recommended a Gulfstream IV the next time I was in the market for a personal jet), discussed their country estates, and talked about Sandy—who happened to be climbing Mount McKinley at the time. "Hey," Bob suggested when he learned that I, too, was a climber, "you and Sandy ought to get together and go climb a mountain." Now, four years later, we were.

At five foot eleven, Sandy Pittman stood two inches taller than me. Her tomboyishly short hair looked expertly coiffed, even here at 17,000 feet. Ebuilient and direct, she'd grown up in northern California, where her father had introduced her to camping, hiking, and skiing as a young girl. Delighting in the freedoms and pleasures of the hills, she continued to dabble in outdoor pursuits through her college years and beyond, although the frequency of her visits to the mountains diminished sharply after she moved to New York in the mid-1970s in the aftermath of a failed first marriage.

In Manhattan Pittman worked variously as a buyer at Bonwit

Teller, a merchandising editor at *Mademoiselle*, and a beauty editor at a magazine called *Bride's*, and in 1979 married Bob Pittman. An indefatigable seeker of public attention, Sandy made her name and picture regular fare in New York society columns. She hobnobbed with Blaine Trump, Tom and Meredith Brokaw, Isaac Mizrahi, Martha Stewart. In order to commute more efficiently between their opulent Connecticut manor and an art-filled apartment on Central Park West staffed with uniformed servants, she and her husband bought a helicopter and learned to fly it. In 1990 Sandy and Bob Pittman were featured on the cover of *New York* magazine as "The Couple of the Minute."

Soon thereafter Sandy began her expensive, widely trumpeted campaign to become the first American woman to climb the Seven Summits. The last—Everest—proved elusive, however, and in March 1994 Pittman lost the race to a forty-seven-year-old Alaskan mountaineer and midwife named Dolly Lefever. She continued her dogged pursuit of Everest just the same. As Beck Weathers observed one night at Base Camp, "when

Sandy goes to climb a mountain, she doesn't do it exactly like you and me." In 1993 Beck had been in Antarctica making a guided ascent of Vinson Massif at the same time Pittman was climbing the mountain with a different guided group, and he recalled with a chuckle that "she brought this humongous duffel bag full of gourmet food that took about four people to even lift. She also brought a portable television and video player so she could watch movies in her tent. I mean, hey, you've got to hand it to Sandy: there aren't too many people who climb mountains in that kind of high style." Beck reported that Pittman had generously shared the swag she'd brought with the other climbers and that "she was pleasant and interesting to be around."

For her assault on Everest in 1996, Pittman once again assembled the sort of kit not commonly seen in climbers' encampments. The day before departing for Nepal, in one of her first Web postings for NBC Interactive Media, she gushed,

* All my personal stuff is packed. . . . It looks like I'll have as much computer and electronic equipment as I will have climbing gear. . . . Two IBM laptops, a video camera, three 35mm cameras, one Kodak digital camera, two tape recorders, a CD-ROM player, a printer, and enough (I hope) solar panels and batteries to power the whole project. . . . I wouldn't dream of leaving town without an ample supply of Dean & DeLuca's Near East blend and my espresso maker. Since we'll be on Everest on Easter, I brought four wrapped chocolate eggs. An Easter egg hunt at 18,000 feet? We'll see!

That night, the society columnist Billy Norwich hosted a farewell party for Pittman at Nell's in downtown Manhattan. The guest list included Bianca Jagger and Calvin Klein. Fond of costumes, Sandy appeared wearing a high-altitude climbing suit over her evening dress, complemented by mountaineering boots, crampons, ice ax, and a bandolier of carabiners.

Upon arrival in the Himalaya, Pittman appeared to adhere as closely as possible to the proprieties of high society. During the trek to Base Camp, a young Sherpa named Pemba rolled up her sleeping bag every morning and packed her rucksack for her. When she reached the foot of Everest with the rest of Fischer's group in early April, her pile of luggage included stacks of press clippings about herself to hand out to the other denizens of Base Camp. Within a few days Sherpa runners began to arrive on a regular basis with packages for Pittman, shipped to Base Camp via DHL Worldwide Express; they included the latest issues of *Vogue*, *Vanity Fair*, *People*, *Allure*. The Sherpas were fascinated by the lingerie ads and thought the perfume scent-strips were a

Scott Fischer's team was a congenial and cohesive group; most of Pittman's teammates took her idiosyncrasies in stride and seemed to have little trouble accepting her into their midst. "Sandy could be exhausting to be around, because she needed to be the center of attention and was always yapping away about herself," remembers Jane Bromet. "But she wasn't a negative person. She didn't bring down the mood of the group. She was energetic and upbeat almost every day."

Nevertheless, several accomplished alpinists not on her team regarded Pittman as a grandstanding dilettante. Following her unsuccessful 1994 attempt on Everest's Kangshung Face, a television commercial for Vaseline Intensive Care (the expedition's primary sponsor) was loudly derided by knowledgeable mountaineers because it advertised Pittman as a "world-class climber." But Pittman never overtly made such a claim herself; indeed, she emphasized in an article for *Men's Journal* that she wanted Breshears, Lowe, Swenson, and Blanchard "to understand that I didn't confuse my avid-hobbyist abilities with their world-class skill."

Her eminent companions on the 1994 attempt said nothing disparaging about Pittman, at least not in public. After that expedition, in fact, Breshears became a close friend of hers, and Swenson repeatedly defended Pittman against her critics. "Look," Swenson had explained to me at a social gathering in

BUT...
 just
 because
 people
 disapprove
 of her
 lifestyle
 doesn't
 mean she
 shouldn't
 be allowed
 to
 climb

Seattle shortly after they'd both returned from Everest, "maybe Sandy's not a great climber, but on the Kangshung Face she recognized her limitations. Yes, it's true that Alex and Barry and David and I did all the leading and fixed all the ropes, but she contributed to the effort in her own way by having a positive attitude, by raising money, and by dealing with the media." Pitman did not lack for detractors, however. A great many people were offended by her ostentatious displays of wealth, and by the shameless way she chased the limelight. As Joanne Kaufman reported in the *Wall Street Journal*,

Ms. Pitman was known in certain elevated circles more as a social climber than mountain climber. She and Mr. Pitman were habitues of all the correct soirees and benefits and staples of all the right gossip columns. "Many coat-tails were wrinkled by Sandy Pitman latching on to them," says a former business associate of Mr. Pitman who insisted on anonymity. "She's interested in publicity. If she had to do it anonymously I don't think she'd be climbing mountains."

Fairly or unfairly, to her derogators Pitman epitomized all that was reprehensible about Dick Bass's popularization of the Seven Summits and the ensuing debasement of the world's highest mountain. But insulated by her money, a staff of paid attendants, and unwavering self-absorption, Pitman was heedless of the resentment and scorn she inspired in others; she remained as oblivious as Jane Austen's Emma.

She has no idea that she offends people. The way she looks quite her and she don't seem to care or notice what other people think.

Chapter Nine
CAMP TWO APRIL 28, 1996 21,300 FEET

