

Into the Shadow

Nick Bullock

S tars flicker in a slow-spinning sky. Old snow crackles. The moraine—a rubble-strewn lunar surface—creaks under our feet. A yellow moon lights our path. Ice gleams. Houseman and I are creeping like thieves. We're scared the mountain might hear our approach. The north face of Chang Himal seems to penetrate the Milky Way: one thousand eight hundred meters of snow, cold rotten granite, thin ice skin, fluted sugar spines pierce the mist of galaxies.





EACH DAY IN OUR COUNTDOWN to the climb, a cold wind blasted. Ghostly reefs of snow tumbled down Kangchenjunga. Spirits tore from the summit crest of Chang Himal. Now, twisting and turning into the dark entrance gully, I think of Eric Escoffier, blown without a trace from Broad Peak in 1998. That same evening, from our cornice bivy high on Savoia Kangri, Paul Schwitzer and I could see a plume of snow and cloud lift off the top of K2 and vanish into the fading sky. We tried not to think about the darkness beneath us.

The wind is an unknown, unseen quantity: How do you prepare for the invisible? “Write a will, mate,” Stevie Haston told me before I left my home in Llanberis, North Wales.

Houseman and I reach the snow cone at the base of what we’d christened the “Narrows.” Relief floods: the snow pack is hard. I look behind: Houseman is retching. “That’s not in the plan,” I say. He vomits again. “Do you want to go down, try again in a few days?”

“No,” he says. His voice is strained. I imagine his mind twisting with doubt and guilt. “I feel really weak, but if you don’t mind leading, I’ll keep going. I don’t feel sick enough to justify going down.” His gaunt face and dark, intense eyes remind me of Pete Boardman, lost on the Northeast Ridge of Everest in 1982. Ten years later, Boardman’s body was found near the top of a black tower. Houseman is only twenty-eight, and so young for his age, I call him “Youth.” He’s one of few climbers with whom I’d want to be on this face.

Stars dim. Snow ripples like sea-scoured sand. Flotsam emerges above the white sea: a black boulder, a corniced crest, the detritus of mountainfall. I dreamed about these fragments when they were just small forms of dark and light through my binoculars. Close up, they feel familiar. Now they are real.

Youth follows, haggard. He leans on his axe. The boyish smile is missing. Would I still be climbing if I were this ill? We’ve left behind the seracs that may or may not pour down our line. The face tilts up. Under a shallow crust, rock sparks our crampons. The plan had been to abseil the line on V-threads. I push the descent to the back of my mind.

“I’m feeling weak,” Houseman says again. I stop and turn: gray light unveils snow-covered mountains, hard ribs and hollow shadows, sharp radiating patterns—a vast coral skeleton against an oceanic sky. There’s the jumbled moraine. There’s our single, convoluted track cutting toward the dots of base-camp tents and the small stone huts of Pangpema. *Welcome to my life, mate.*

Houseman is the same age as I was when I first started to climb. It doesn’t seem that long ago, but it’s been fifteen years. Time on a mountain is unearthly time, slow time. Still, it does not stop.

Ever since my twenties I’ve imagined so many out-of-reach scenarios. Each daydream chilled me. I knew that one day I’d act them all out—whatever the cost.

FROM UNDER A SMALL DOOR, a glow melted into wet pavement—wan light that neither warmed nor welcomed. That morning, as always, I pulled the latch shut on my tiny red brick cottage in Burton Overly, a small Leicestershire village, to drive down dark lanes as the rain danced.

[Opening Photo] **Peter Doucette enjoys a Way in the Wilderness (WI5, Cole-Dunn-Hartrich, 1978), North Conway, New Hampshire. This line requires perfect conditions to form; luckily New England’s abundance of frozen waterfalls means there’s always something “in excellent condition somewhere” (Rick Wilcox, *An Ice Climber’s Guide to Northern New England*).** Anne Skidmore **I** [Facing Page] **Todd Swain on Fafnir (IV 5, Bouchard-Mar-**

The red-berry hawthorn trees were leafless. A few brown wisps clung to twigs of skeletal oak.

I barely noticed them. I’d lost myself in fantasies about quitting the Prison Service to climb full-time: *high peaks in the Himalaya amid spin-drift plumes and clouds and the sound of bells; warm rock and bright water in Spain; the blue ripple of an icefall in the winter Alps; the crumbling blaze of Gogarth stone.* A path had been instilled in me since my youth: “You work hard; you take the job that pays the best whether it gives satisfaction or not; you meet a girl; get married; have kids; support your family; buy a house.” And as my granddad said, “Neither a borrower, nor a lender be.”

At age twenty-one I’d walked through that prison door into a life that was supposed to be regimented until my retirement. By the time I was twenty-eight, my mind jumped in and out of dreams of escape. Climbing seemed like anarchy. *No one resigns. No one gives up security. Just a few more minutes to dream....* Routine is safe. But safe is minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, years. Safe is a quick existence.

All too soon, Welford Road Prison loomed in the yellow sulfur center of Leicester City, the solid sandstone fortification, the castellated towers, the large wooden double entranceway—and the small door, with the pallid glow. *Got to leave; time is running out.* One last deep breath of exhaust air, then I stepped through the ghostly light into the shadow of cast-iron girders, steel stairways and exposed pipes, polished handrails worn smooth by weary, desperate hands.

“Three’s landing unlock for slop out, medication, bang up the one’s, unlock the cleaners....” The shout came from the Senior Prison Officer, in the center of the two Victorian wings. Echoes reverberated like the calls of climbers scaling canyons. Here, three levels of railing, thick metal doors and wire netting stretched like trampolines to catch falling bodies. Which world was the dream? I’d entered a space turned inside out. Everyday values were a sign of vulnerability. The rules of survival kept changing. The smell of waste rose, pungent as the sea. Flotsam and detritus. Unwanted lives.

I inserted the key into the lock of a cell door. Against a dark corner, a shadow waited. *Just another dreamer* rattled in my head. Security is a sentence.

YOUTH STRUGGLES TOWARD ME. Dawn glows from under the horizon. The shadow fades to clear air and white slopes. I close my eyes while I wait. The key turns. The cell door opens to another, unexpected view: last summer in North Wales. Six years had passed since I’d finally saved enough to quit the Prison Service at age thirty-seven. Tim Neil and I were attempting Helmet Boiler, a Mick Fowler route in Mousetrap Zawn, Craig Gogarth, on the island of Anglesey.

Helmet Boiler was a route most climbers wouldn’t consider—a kick against a certain outcome. Only a handful of people knew its runout horror, and the grade wouldn’t impress anyone. Soon my mind was dragging me into fiery depths of red, yellow and gray quartzite, walls sprayed with white guano and rippled with gray mud.

The ropes ran in a long, traversing arc below me, held only by a

tin-Zajchowski, 1975), Cannon Cliff, New Hampshire, 1981. Todd Swain on Fafnir (IV 5, Bouchard-Martin-Zajchowski, 1975), Cannon Cliff, New Hampshire, 1981. Todd Swain on Fafnir (IV 5, Bouchard-Martin-Zajchowski, 1975), Cannon Cliff, New Hampshire, 1981. Swain comments 100 first ascents in the winter of ’82–83: “I can’t remember setting a particular number.... I know I did a lot (75 or so)...that winter.” Ed Webster

quartz protrusion with a sling around it and a rotting twenty-five-year-old peg. I stood on an island of relatively good rock in a sea of softness, digging and scratching, scraping mud from more mud, searching for something solid.

I excavated a crack, and it crumbled. In the midst of the overhanging mud, a quartz hold jutted like a glass doorknob. I'd have to use it to escape this wall. *Quartz has a tendency to snap.* I climbed toward it and reversed back to my island several times. At last I wrapped a hand around the knob. Seagulls shrieked on the wind, flight feathers ripping. Waves washed in fishing floats, tangled orange nets, yellow bubbled scum.

The hold didn't break.

Yet higher up, a smooth quartz band did.

The clock hands spun, and I was falling—*mud and madness and pain, that crusty old peg won't catch me*—and just as quick I slapped for the knob and caught it. Once more, it didn't tear. I screamed at Tim, and he screamed back. The sea swept into the zawn, and the seagulls cried *life*. The clock hands slowed.... Minutes became hours again. By the time I slithered from the mud runnel's exit, I overflowed with energy and light.

The key would never turn for most of the prisoners. In that moment, at least I was free.

THIS IS WHAT I DID: I imagined my way into these insecure places, fighting spindrift toward summits or pulling on loose summer rock, stuffed tightly into overhanging runnels of ice or mud. A week before we began to climb Chang Himal, I stared up and pictured my small figure on its north face, where the shadows curled from spines of summit snow.

"I can't imagine setting off to climb something so big and unknown," my friend Tom Briggs said. We were sitting in chairs, side by side at base camp. He was a bold British trad climber, who'd joined us for the trek in. I was intimidated by the routes he climbed. "It scares me just looking and imagining being up there," Tom said, "in the middle of that. What makes you want to put yourself in that position?"

My eyes watered with the intensity of the sun. Brown grass withered

around us. Wallowing yaks cut crescent trenches into the earth. High above, seracs tilted and tottered, just enough to warn and tempt. Black rock, overhanging rock, serrated ridges, scalloped snowfields wavered across a vast white sheet. Shade and light arced over it, with the sweeping of the day. Ravens circled. The wind dug the trenches deeper. I wanted Tom to stop talking. *How do you prepare yourself for the invisible?*

Now Houseman and I reach the first in a series of questions, the smaller of the two rockbands.

"Do you mind leading this?" Houseman says. I can hear his honest Northern childhood almost choking him: *Neither a borrower, nor a lender be*. In the pub, Youth liked to tell stories of breaking trail for me or catching my falls. If I led for a whole day, he might be quiet in the future.

Soon I'm adding up rotten snow, thin ice, limited protection, exposure and a big pack. *No rescue.... No rescue....* Nine days of walking lie behind us: green-tangled forests and flowing water; rough-turned patches of dark earth, flooded rice fields bright with reflected sky; spiderwebs that stretched from bamboo stalk to bamboo stalk, thick with insect cadavers; icefalls that slithered above a village of weathered wood; and those yak bells that made our base camp feel at once like home.

No rescue. Write a will, mate. Home is a lifetime away. A block—flat-topped—gives respite. I stand on my frozen island and try to swing the blood back into my wooden hands. *Control yourself. Warm your fingers. Place some protection. Warm your fingers. Swing your arms.* I swap feet, hook a glass-thin piece of ice, a lump of rotten snow.

An hour later, we're digging into the center of the face. I imagined our first bivy in dreams back in base camp, while I lay warmly wrapped, listening to the bells; in dreams during the hike in; in dreams before we reached Nepal. I saw us settling in for the night on a snow step. Our words were hushed, our minds excited. The wind and the warmth of partnership wove a closeness around us that did not seem possible in the valley. The step gave a feeling of belonging more than any brick house or profession could.

Here, snow sloughs, and the wind blows only cold. Mick Fowler grades his bivies for comfort. "Five" was a lie-down. "One" was hell. I



zip up my two jackets and pull the sleeping bag around my shoulders. Base camp is a glowing dot. *Three.* The summit cuts the gray clouds in pieces. They stream and swirl about the face, covering the stars, hiding base camp.

"I don't like the look of the weather," Houseman says. "It'll be desperate if it craps out." His face is pale. I think of the inmates I fought, pressing their heads against the cold floor until the blood drained from their cheeks.

"Stop being negative," I say. With one thousand meters already behind us, I don't want to contemplate bailing. "Or at least keep the obvious to yourself."

I've retreated too many times. I only imagine *up* on Chang Himal.

THE BEDROOM WAS DARK. *Ten minutes, just ten more minutes.* I curled the covers over my head. *How do you prepare yourself?* Soon I'd get up and make the daily prison commute. Soon ten heavy steel doors would open and close with a clunk as sharp as a cork pulled: ten inmates escorted to the gymnasium.

Each time I supervised gym time, hours felt like days. I jumped on and off, on and off the benches, to a pounding hard-house beat. Inmates' feet hammered the flaking varnish. Blue denim plimsoll shoes, some laced, some flapping, thumped on and off. The bench tops creaked. Blue cotton shorts, thin white legs, blue cotton vests, soft baggy drug-wasted shoulders, hollow cheeks, sunken eyes rose up and down. The wind flapped snow across the room. A soft drift of deep powder cushioned the green pimple floor.

I tilted the angle of the running machine to up. *A mountain summit twists into cloud. An unclimbed face appears through a hole in the mist. A moraine stretches and groans.*

During my dinner break, I ran along the canal bank. A dealer stood in the dark beneath the ornate iron bridge. Scum and wrappers floated

on the surface of stagnant water. Feet skidded in mud. *Or is it ice?* Shards of bottles glittered. *Or are they slivers of glaciers?* Crumbling red brick cotton mills, now empty, towered over the canal. My lungs were burning, my sweat stinging. Broken windows, rusty frames, graffiti dissolved into mountains. *Just a few more minutes.* Behind the clock hands, the arcing shadows traced their own time, ticking a silent beat. Better to stay asleep. *Better to retreat. Better to dream.*

FROM BASE CAMP I'D DREAMED about the second rockband of Chang Himal. I'd pictured fragile snow. It rattled my mind. We'd told Buddy, our cook, not to send for porters until we were above it. Buddy had a proud paunch. He'd lift his shirt and stroke it when he laughed. We couldn't help laughing with him. He'd been on many expeditions, but mostly to large, nontechnical peaks. His only trip to a small, difficult mountain had ended with the whole team running away. Buddy told this story frequently between bouts of laughter. Houseman and I had failed twice on our warm-up peak, an easy plod opposite Chang Himal. We didn't think Buddy had much faith in us.

"It looks OK," Houseman says, as he climbs from the snow ledge where we spent the night. I think the rockband looks steep and difficult. After about an hour, Houseman agrees. When I follow him, the hot-aches burn in my hands. "You're obviously feeling OK, now?" I shout between screams.

Youth laughs atop the overhanging runnel. His face is ruddy with wind and health. One of his massive red mittens points. "One of three ways, I reckon?"

Three thinly iced corners invert. I don't like the look of any of them. Eventually I take the left-hand line. *It's going to be OK.* After the first thirty meters of good ice, my fingers are wooden again, my calves burn, and the voice in my head screams: *You're going to fall. It's miles from anywhere. Write a will, mate.* The angle of the face now bulges. The ice turns

[Facing Page, Top] **Madara on Diedre, thirty-three years after its first ascent, "before cameras were made," he jokes. "What was once a major effort, is now a 'Hey what do you feel like doing today?'"** Jim Surette | [Facing Page, Left] **In 1971 Yvon Chouniard described the Black Dike as "a black, filthy, horrendous icicle 600 feet high." That winter, nineteen-year-old John Bouchard soloed the first ascent, ditching his stuck rope. Today, as Ed Webster**

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thin and hollow. It creaks to me: *Trust, security, friendship*. I imagine it detaching in a sheet, my picks ripping out, my body bouncing, crampons catching, knee joints rupturing, pain jarring, then a final thud.

I wedge into an overhanging corner and slot a large blue Hex into a wide crack. Spindrift starts to pour. I swing left into a trough and tap at a greasy millimeter-thin sheen. Flakes of green ice spin, caught on the gusting wind, like plankton in a cold, vertical ocean. “Watch me, Youth.” Ridiculous: a normal phrase shouted all the time across low, sunny canyons. Up here it’s the scariest phrase imaginable. Houseman, tied to the poor belay, must be willing me on. *Watch me, Youth*.

The weight of my pack drags. Houseman and I are trying to climb everything free. It’s our upbringing. My granddad’s voice resounds in my head, and I’m sure Houseman can hear his, too: *If a job’s worth doing, it’s worth doing well*. I need to work hard, to make up for lost time. My picks are less than a centimeter in. The bulge pushes. More than a thousand meters of air pull. The ice is a slick on the surface of the sea, and the snow is yellow-bubbled scum. Some of the inmates liked to add sugar to red-hot pans of oil, to make it stick to the skin and burn more. *The mountains are not violent; humans are. Neither a borrower, nor a lender be*.

Screwed against tiny rock edges, my frontpoints teeter. Ice skin peels. Snow lumps rip. We’re over a week’s walk and a two-day drive from anywhere. With each move, I expect ice to break, feet to sheer, picks to tear, body to drop. Time would slow at first, then after ten, twenty, thirty-fourty-fifty feet, the speed would increase to a blur. *The smell of sweat, shit, fear*. With numb fingers, wide eyes, burning arms, I tap, hold my breath, and tap again. My granddad would be shocked, but proud. The angle eases. The clock hands turn.

CONFRONTATION IS UNAVOIDABLE. “What the hell have you done?” In the rafters of the cavernous prison warehouse, fluorescent tubes hung from chains. The gas glow projected shadows of railings on painted brick and painted doors. It gave an eerie radiance to the white fatty fascia protruding from the length of his forearm. “What the hell have you done?” He smiled at my question. He appeared pleased with my shock, pleased with the attention. “I cut myself.”

Tattered with scar tissue, his flayed forearm revealed a crisscross of welts, fat and blood and congealed skin matter. He’d cut into the largest wound repeatedly, through the stitches and the veins. Prison Officers walked past, too burdened with their workload, their life load, to be interested. He’d been a regular in the gym. I thought the exercise was helping his confidence.

“The doctors can’t sew it together anymore,” he said. “The skin isn’t strong enough.” We stared into the inside of his flesh, for a moment, unable to move or speak. In the streaks of red and white, a hidden universe had broken free.

Six years later, in North Wales, I’d seen a line like an overhanging razor-blade welt of pebble that sliced the far wall of the zawn, cutting directly through the obvious, classic climbs. The guidebook named it the “the softest line in the world” and “the best line at Gogarth.” Only four people had ever climbed it. From the viewing promontory opposite, the salt wind and the crashing sea seemed to speak: *It’s there, just*

there. Why don’t you climb it? It scares you. It’s uncertain. You are useless, just another dreamer.

Opening climbing magazines and books, I kept seeing one of the first ascensionists, Paul Pritchard, with his thin Lycra-clad legs tucked into socks pulled high, his dyed blond hair or black Mohawk or giant rhubarb-leaf hat. The pictures shouted: *Skin-of-the-teeth, bold, crazy, thrilling, life-on-the-cusp-of-society, an individual’s own rules, imagination, fun*. The sea frothed white below him. The rock crumbled red, gray clay. He climbed the lines that others called “unjustifiable.”

In 1997 I met him in a pub on the outskirts of Llanberis. Three friends and I were about to travel to India to attempt the Shark’s Fin on Meru Central, a climb Pritchard had tried in 1993 with Jonny Dawes, Noel Craine and Phillip Lloyd. Rain ran down the windows and the wind shook the privet hedge that bordered the dark lane. I’d only been climbing for four years. I was so in awe of Pritchard, I couldn’t talk.

Last summer, he returned to Llanberis, and I had the courage to ask: “Tell me about Rubble, Paul.”

Paul’s suntanned face cracked into a cheeky grin. Beneath the stubble, the laugh lines grew. Crow’s-feet deepened. Bleached by the sun, feathered with blond streaks, his hair jutted out in all directions. His eyes burned bright. And he was back in Wen Zawn, an amphitheater he’d made his own, lined with his routes, echoing with his fall. On the boulders, the shadow of his body still seemed to lie unconscious as the sea rushed in. Just for a second he was there.

In that second I was there with him, in a dark space lit by his stories. Salt stuck to my skin. The wind ripped through the zawn with the smell of seaweed. Gray seals circled beneath white and turquoise eddies. The sea crashed, like rockfall. My hands touched greasy stone. My heart pulsed.

Then we were back in the packed pub, jostling and shouting, feet sticking to the carpet, in a fug of music, swaying bodies and sweat. Paul stood off-balance. A large support brace wrapped around his ankle. A sling cradled his arm. And the rain ran down the window.

“It’s HVS...except for the E7 bits!” Laughing, he limped away, his pint sloshing as he bumped and merged into the throng.

FAR AWAY, IN THE DARK, a light flashes on and off, on and off, swinging yellow against a silver-green background, like the South Stack lighthouse over Gogarth’s Red Wall. Buddy is signaling us from our Chang Himal base camp, as he does now, every night. I stand still, belaying Houseman. The cold penetrates my skin. The small bright spot warms me. I imagine Buddy’s laughter ringing toward us. Youth climbs alongside, and in the night we dig.

The wind slings spindrift. The stars flicker, as the black sky slowly turns. After only a few minutes of chopping, we hit ice. A small shelf, probably one-and-a-half on the Fowler scale. “This is going to be comfy,” Houseman says. I laugh. He has tried to sound positive ever since I bickered with him. “Only another six hundred meters.”

“Two days, then?”

It’s already Day Three. Light and wind sweep across a frigid wasteland. Peruvian-style flutings curve into deep, wave-like troughs. Walls

filthy, horrendous icicle 600 feet high.” That winter, nineteen-year-old John Bouchard soloed the first ascent, ditching his stuck rope, ditching his stuck rope. Today, as Ed Webster writes, Bouchard’s story still casts a legendary “mystique.” Today, as Ed Webster writes, Bouchard’s story still casts a legendary “mystique.” Ed Webster



[Facing Page, Top] **Madara on Diedre, thirty-three years after its first ascent, “before cameras were made,” he jokes. Madara on Diedre, thirty-three years after its first ascent, “before cameras were made,” he jokes. “What was once a major effort, is now a ‘Hey what do you feel like doing today?’” In 1971 Yvon Chouinard described the Black Dike as “a black,**

of unconsolidated snow funnel spindrift. Rock interlaces arabesques of exfoliating and compact granite—and for an instant I’m back on Rubble, tearing at the zawn’s quartzite fascia, feeling deep beneath what seemed like solid skin, through dirt and guts, pebbledash and veins, until I reach the end. *I am not useless.*

Midafternoon, three hundred meters below the summit of Chang Himal, we dig and worry. The flutings between us and the west ridge are convoluted monsters, layered and twisted with seams of rotten snow like driftwood grain. We’ve opted for a more direct approach. Just above our bivy, a peak of aerated snow rises ten meters. Like sand, it gives no support. I didn’t fancy climbing it so far from Houseman’s belay.

But we have no clue anymore whether we can continue or not. In my mind I see us on some false summit, separated from the real by a thousand unconsolidated meters of snow, unable to cross the void. *We’ve made a mistake. I know we’ve made a mistake. We’re going to fail. We’re so near and failure is going to tear my heart out. I’ve started climbing so late. How many ascents like this do I have left?*

Spindrift slices into our small cave. Crystals like broken seashell gather speed, blow up my face and cut into soft exposed skin. Drohma Peak glows, a sharp red outline. I sit, holding the stove. The outside of the gas canister has frosted. The flame saws, beating blue.

All night in our small cave, while Houseman appears to sleep, I make conversation in my head: “*Why did you fail?*”

“*We failed because of bad conditions, poor weather, dangerous climbing, sickness. Because we went the wrong way. Because the gear was stolen. Because we weren’t strong enough, hard enough, good enough. Because we are useless dreamers.*”

For once, all I want is to answer the question, “Did you summit?” with a simple “Yes.”

I imagine myself on the summit, teetering, smiling.

AFTER DINNER, THE PRISON GYM WAS EMPTY, the inmates locked inside their own heads behind heavy doors. I lay on a bench. My head sweat smeared against blue plastic. I held a knurled Olympic weight bar with silver 10kg plates at arm’s length in the air. I lowered it, until the bar touched my chest. I pushed, looked at the ceiling, and dreamed. Bend, dream; push, dream; bend, dream; push, dream.... Routine is a quick existence, the odor of sweat, shit and fear.

At 8 p.m. I threw my keys down a slot. Behind thick Perspex, other prison officers waved goodnight and pushed the button that opened the electronic door. The door creaked and slid: *Come again soon, dreamer. No one resigns.*

Outside, a yellow sulfur glow blinded the night. I turned my face upward and imagined the stars in a slow spinning sky. The exhaust air smelled like escape.

THE NIGHT WEARS THROUGH ME. Tired from thin air and the sense of failure, I start the stove early. Gas fumes choke. The stars quiver. I shout at Houseman. He mumbles and shuffles. Neither of us is good at rising from bivies. I shout again. We’ll need all the time the day will allow. We have one day of food, but we’ll spend two or three days

more if necessary.

I plunge arms and legs into and over the snow dune above our bivy. Relief: a steep runnel sidewall leads into another runnel system. The line wavers, direct as a sunset ray across the surface of a soft-lapping sea. Straight to the summit. *It’s on. It’s really on.* I want to tease Youth by keeping the good news to myself. Instead, I shout, “It’s on, mate.”

We leave our packs in the snow cave. We hope the decreased load will help us levitate.

The cold sears my lungs. I try to take my mind off the pain. All I can think about is Tom’s question: *What makes you want to put yourself in that position?* I dig into the snow, looking for ice, for something solid, but find nothing. Two of my friends from the Shark’s Fin expedition, Jules Cartwright and Jamie Fisher, are gone. So is Phillip Lloyd from Pritchard’s attempt. In the valley, the losses make no sense. But up high, surrounded by thousands of mountains, something seems to expand, briefly. Minutes swell to contain hours. Infinity bursts within an instant. One life holds many lives, many possible ascents. One existence races along several paths, each way leading to liberation; and nothing good or bad ever ends. In such moments, mountaineering makes every sense.

Houseman leads out of the fluting and onto a broad, dazzling crest. We meet at a snow bollard. Youth is silent. His eyes are hidden, but I know they’re shining. Home is a lifetime away. Home is here.

Taking no gear apart from what I collected on the way, I continue. The sun lights my soul. Snow crystals catch on the wind, spark with light, then blow out into the clear blue sky, never to return. I try not to stop kicking, but the gusts push me back. Between imagination and memory, I’ve been here before: battling the wind and the invisible, leaning toward the slope, driving the shaft of the axe. The light, the emptiness, the solitude. Ice granules scour my skin like pumice. Images pierce my mind. I pray for no more false summits. *Kick, breathe, pray. It’s HVS...except for the E7 bits!*

Crystals fly like sea spume. The sun refracts into rainbows. Just a few more meters, and all that I had dreamed from the shadows will take form. My axe cuts the crest. Through the slot appears Kangchenjunga’s huge serac-strewn north face and its three summits, part of another distant parallel universe. Jannu is a dark gravestone. I turn and shout to Houseman. He doesn’t hear. Above his stooped body, a thousand days of despair catch on the wind and dissipate like grains of salt across the vast Himalayan chain. But in an instant, the hands of the clock quicken.

During the long descent into the next evening, Houseman searches for solid anchors amid the crumbling rock. Somehow, he always finds them.

I look up: in a slow-spinning sky, innumerable stars flicker. And from below, in the still night, the soft jangle of yak bells floats across the creaking moraine. Even before we reach the ground, Chang Himal has dimmed into the past. Dreams resolve into shadows. With the door about to shut, the key unlocks another image. Youth fantasizes, his new success behind him: *Where do I go from here?* ■

SUMMARY OF STATISTICS: The North Face (ED+: M6, 1800m); Chang Himal (6802m); Kanchenjunga Himal, Nepal, October 29–November 1, 2009, Nick Bullock and Andy Houseman, first ascent.

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