

Jon Krakauer

1954–

Other Works

Eiger Dreams
Into the Wild

Dreaming of Everest When Jon Krakauer was nine years old, Willi Unsoeld and another man reached the top of Everest by a difficult route that no one had ever used. Krakauer knew Unsoeld personally. The climber was a friend of Krakauer's father and had accompanied the Krakauers when Jon reached the top of his first mountain, a 10,000-foot peak. Inspired by Unsoeld, Krakauer dreamed of climbing Mount Everest himself.

Living to Climb By the time Krakauer was in his 20s, he "lived to climb." He would work as a carpenter or a commercial fisherman just long enough to finance his next expedition. Climbing fascinated Krakauer because, "unlike most of life, what you do really matters. . . . Your actions have real consequences." However, he gave up the idea of Everest because he'd heard that the route wasn't challenging.

Nature Writer In the 1970s, Krakauer wrote a couple of articles about his exploits. Then a friend suggested that he try writing full-time, so in 1983 he quit carpentry and launched a new career. Many of his articles have to do with the outdoors, although he also writes on other subjects. When *Outside* magazine asked Krakauer to do an article on Everest, his childhood dream flamed up again. He agreed to take the assignment, but only if he could try to summit the world's highest peak himself instead of just reporting on others' attempts. Krakauer still goes mountain climbing but says, "I won't go back to Everest; I'm afraid of that."

Author Activity

Expedition Outcome What happened to the 19 people trapped on the mountain at the end of this account? Find out by investigating Krakauer's entire book *Into Thin Air*, his September 1996 article from *Outside* magazine, or a newspaper from May 1996 that ran an article on the expedition.



from Into Thin Air

Eyewitness Account by JON KRAKAUER

Connect to Your Life

Risk Takers What do you think is the most dangerous sport—white-water rafting, skydiving, or something else? With a classmate, choose a sport that is extremely risky and list the dangers it involves. As you read this selection, compare those risks with the risks involved in climbing Mount Everest.

“Ten minutes later
all my oxygen
was gone.”

Build Background

Gasping for Breath With an altitude of 29,028 feet, Mount Everest is the highest peak on earth. Mountain climbers call the region above 26,000 feet the Death Zone because the air is too thin for humans. At that altitude, brain cells die, the blood grows thick, the heart speeds up, and the brain can swell—leading to death.

In spite of those risks, reaching the top of Everest has become a status symbol. By the 1990s, even people with little experience and poor physical conditioning were climbing Everest.

Jon Krakauer was one of those climbers. A journalist, he was hired by *Outside* magazine to write about the trend of unskilled climbers buying their way onto Everest. The selection opens with Krakauer on top of the mountain and the hardest part still to come. He had been warned that “any idiot can get up this hill. The trick is to get back down alive.”

WORDS TO KNOW

Vocabulary Preview

cognizant	initiative
compulsively	meander
critical	obscuring
escalate	obstinacy
hindsight	supplemental

Focus Your Reading

LITERARY ANALYSIS WORD CHOICE Writers use language to express their particular thoughts and feelings. To do this well, they must choose exactly the right words. In one passage, Jon Krakauer describes a delay that occurred as he was climbing down Everest with a low oxygen supply:

I encountered a clot of climbers chuffing up the single strand of rope.

The word *clot* can also mean a lump that obstructs blood flow. By choosing this word, Krakauer conveys not only the obstacle to his descent but also his sense of danger. As you read, notice how the word choices Krakauer makes reveal his feelings about his subject.

ACTIVE READING DETERMINING A WRITER'S MOTIVES Many different motives, or reasons, prompt people to write. Possible motives for writers of eyewitness accounts include:

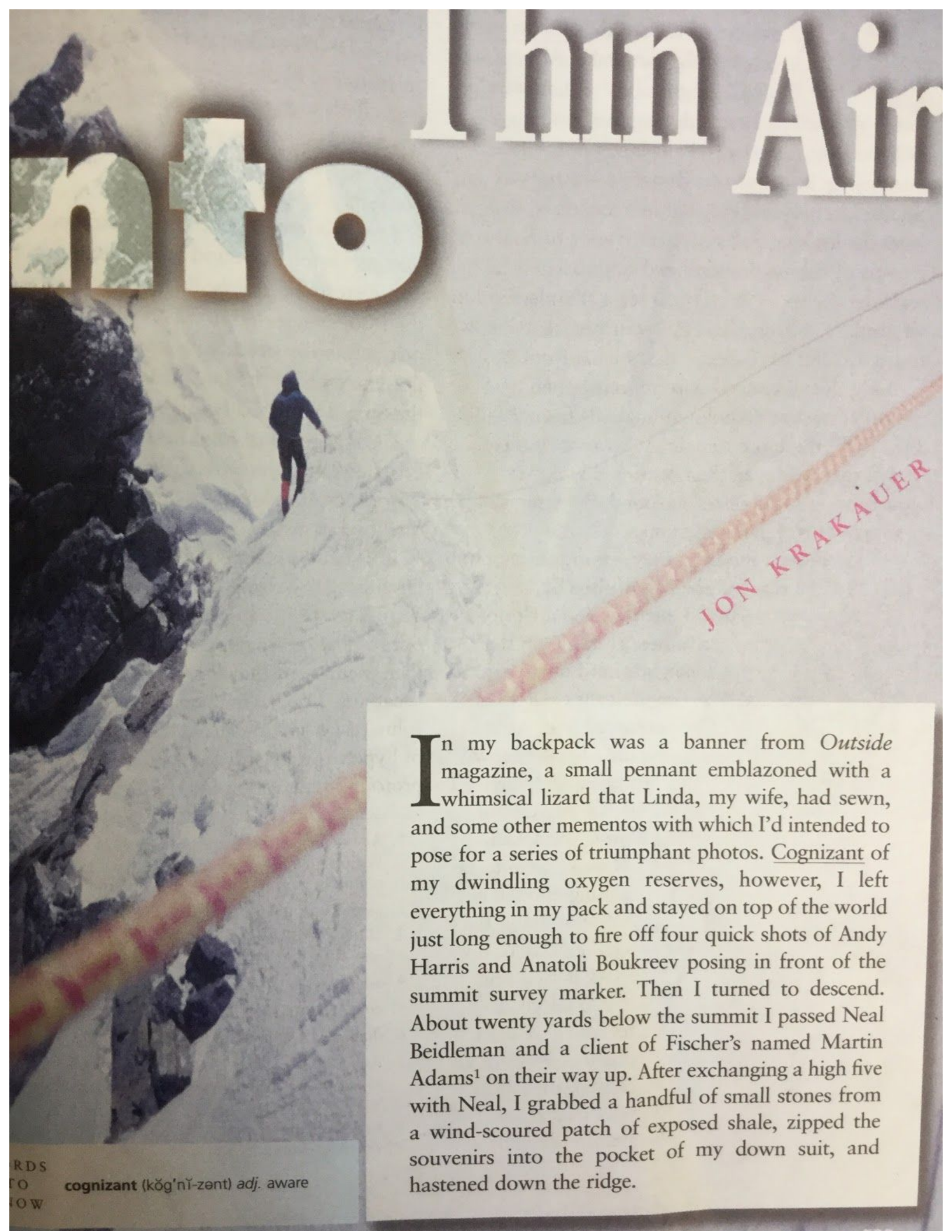
- to record the facts for history
- to analyze mistakes in order to prevent future problems
- to explain their own behavior
- to explain the behavior of others

When choosing which events and people to include in their accounts, writers must decide which material will best serve their purpose. For example, Krakauer records a blinded climber's response to his offer of help:

“Thanks anyway,” Beck said. “I think I’ll just wait for Mike. He’s got a rope.”

Krakauer includes this exchange to explain why he left Beck alone on the mountain—an act that endangered Beck's life.

READER'S NOTEBOOK As you read this account, look for clues to Krakauer's motives for writing. You may want to add other motives to the list above.



Into Thin Air

JON KRAKAUER

In my backpack was a banner from *Outside* magazine, a small pennant emblazoned with a whimsical lizard that Linda, my wife, had sewn, and some other mementos with which I'd intended to pose for a series of triumphant photos. Cognizant of my dwindling oxygen reserves, however, I left everything in my pack and stayed on top of the world just long enough to fire off four quick shots of Andy Harris and Anatoli Boukreev posing in front of the summit survey marker. Then I turned to descend. About twenty yards below the summit I passed Neal Beidleman and a client of Fischer's named Martin Adams¹ on their way up. After exchanging a high five with Neal, I grabbed a handful of small stones from a wind-scoured patch of exposed shale, zipped the souvenirs into the pocket of my down suit, and hastened down the ridge.

RDS
TO
OW
cognizant (kɒg'nɪ-zənt) *adj.* aware



moment earlier I'd noticed that wispy clouds now filled the valleys to the south, obscuring all but the highest peaks. Adams—a small, pugnacious² Texan who'd gotten rich selling bonds during the booming 1980s—is an experienced airplane pilot who'd spent many hours gazing down on the tops of clouds; later he told me that he recognized these innocent-looking puffs of water vapor to be the crowns of robust thunderheads immediately after reaching the top. “When you see a thunderhead in an airplane,” he explained, “your first reaction is to get . . . out of there. So that's what I did.”

But unlike Adams, I was unaccustomed to peering down at cumulonimbus cells from 29,000 feet, and I therefore remained ignorant of the storm that was even then bearing down. My concerns revolved instead around the diminishing supply of oxygen in my tank.

Fifteen minutes after leaving the summit

I reached the top of the Hillary Step,³

where I encountered a clot of climbers chuffing up the single strand of rope, and my descent came to an enforced halt. As I waited for the crowd to pass, Andy arrived on his way down.

“Jon,” he asked, “I don't seem to be getting enough air. Can you tell if the intake valve to my mask is iced up?”

A quick check revealed a fist-sized chunk of frozen drool blocking the rubber valve that admitted ambient⁴ air into the

mask from the atmosphere. I chipped it off with the pick of my ice ax, then asked Andy to return the favor by turning off my regulator in order to conserve my gas until the Step cleared. He mistakenly opened the valve instead of closing it, however, and ten minutes later all my oxygen was gone. My cognitive functions,⁵ which had been marginal before, instantly went into a nosedive. I felt like I'd been slipped an overdose of a powerful sedative.

I fuzzily remember Sandy Pittman climbing past as I waited, bound for the summit, followed an indeterminate time later by Charlotte Fox and then Lopsang Jangbu. Yasuko materialized next, just below my precarious stance, but was flummoxed⁶ by the last and steepest portion of the Step. I watched helplessly for fifteen minutes as she struggled to haul herself up the uppermost brow of rock, too exhausted to manage it. Finally Tim Madsen, who was waiting impatiently directly below her, . . . pushed her to the top.

Rob Hall⁷ appeared not long after that. Disguising my rising panic, I thanked him for getting me to the top of Everest. “Yeah, it's turned out to be a pretty good expedition,” he replied, then mentioned that Frank Fischbeck, Beck Weathers, Lou Kasischke, Stuart Hutchison, and John Taske had all turned back. Even in my state of hypoxic imbecility,⁸ it was obvious Hall was profoundly disappointed that five of his eight

1. **Andy Harris . . . Martin Adams:** Harris, Boukreev, and Beidleman were professional guides; Adams was a client of another guide, Scott Fischer.
2. **pugnacious** (pŭg-nā'shəs): aggressive and tough.
3. **Hillary** (hīl'ə-rē) **Step:** a steep, smooth wall of rock that is one of the most difficult obstacles in a climb of Everest.
4. **ambient** (ām'bē-ənt): surrounding.
5. **cognitive functions:** thought processes.
6. **flummoxed** (flŭm'əkst): frustrated; baffled.
7. **Rob Hall:** the guide who organized and led Krakauer's expedition. Hall was competing with expedition leader Scott Fischer.
8. **hypoxic imbecility** (hī-pŏk'sīk ūm'bə-sīl'ī-tə): mental slowness caused by a lack of oxygen.



clients had packed it in—a sentiment that I suspected was heightened by the fact that Fischer’s entire crew appeared to be plugging toward the summit. “I only wish we could have gotten more clients to the top,” Rob lamented before continuing on his way.

Soon thereafter, Adams and Boukreev arrived on their way down, stopping immediately above me to wait for the traffic to clear. A minute later the overcrowding atop the Step intensified further as Makalu Gau, Ang Dorje, and several other Sherpas⁹ came up the rope, followed by Doug Hansen and Scott Fischer. Then, finally, the Hillary Step was clear—but only after I’d spent more than an hour at 28,900 feet without supplemental oxygen.

By that point, entire sectors of my cerebral cortex¹⁰ seemed to have shut down altogether. Dizzy, fearing that I would black out, I was frantic to reach the South Summit, where my third bottle was waiting. I started tenuously down the fixed lines, stiff with dread. Just below the step, Anatoli and Martin scooted around me and hurried down. Exercising extreme caution, I continued descending the tightrope of the ridge, but fifty feet above the oxygen cache the rope ended, and I balked at going farther without gas.

Over at the South Summit, I could see Andy Harris sorting through a pile of orange oxygen bottles. “Yo, Harold!”¹¹ I yelled, “Could you bring me a fresh bottle?”

“There’s no oxygen here!” the guide shouted back. “These bottles are all empty!” This was disturbing news. My brain screamed for oxygen. I didn’t know what to do. Just then, Mike Groom caught up to me on his way down from the summit. Mike had climbed Everest in 1993 without gas, and he wasn’t overly concerned about going without. He gave me his oxygen bottle, and we quickly scrambled over to the South Summit.

When we got there, an examination of the oxygen cache immediately revealed that there were at least six full bottles. Andy, however, refused to believe it. He kept insisting that they were all empty, and nothing Mike or I said could convince him otherwise.

The only way to know how much gas is in a canister is to attach it to your regulator and read the gauge; presumably this is how Andy had checked the bottles at the South Summit. After the expedition, Neal Beidleman pointed out that if Andy’s regulator had become fouled with ice, the gauge might have registered empty even though the canisters were full, which would explain his bizarre obstinacy. And if his regulator was perhaps on the fritz and not delivering oxygen to his mask, that would also explain Andy’s apparent lack of lucidity.¹²

This possibility—which now seems so self-evident—didn’t occur to either Mike or me at the time, however. In hindsight, Andy was acting irrationally and had plainly slipped well beyond routine hypoxia, but I was so mentally impeded¹³ myself that it simply didn’t register.

My inability to discern the obvious was exacerbated to some degree by the guide-client protocol. Andy and I were very similar in terms of physical ability and technical expertise; had we been climbing together in a nonguided situation as equal partners, it’s inconceivable to me that I would have neglected to recognize his plight. But on this expedition he had been cast in the role of

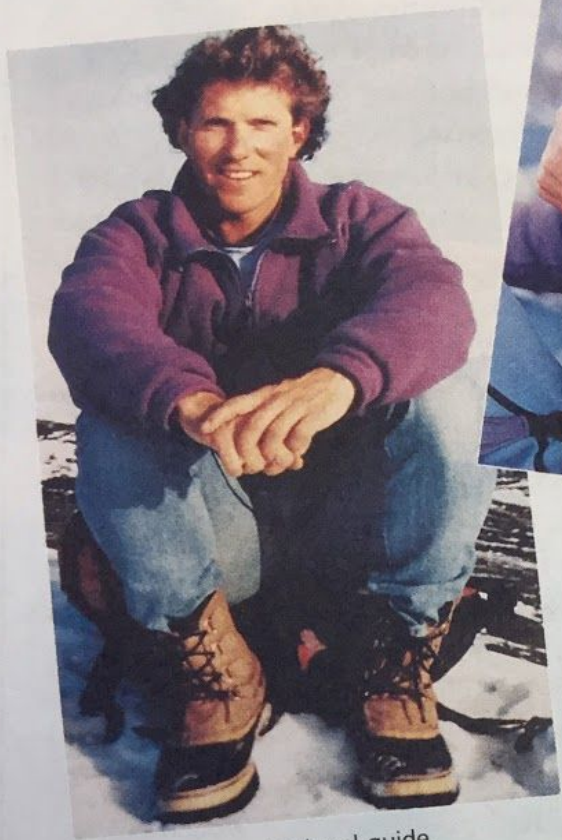
9. **Sherpas** (shûr’pəz): members of a native people of the Himalayas, who have traditionally worked as guides and porters on Everest expeditions.

10. **cerebral (sĕr’ə-brəl) cortex**: the outer layer of the brain, responsible for higher brain functions, such as thought, reasoning, and memory.

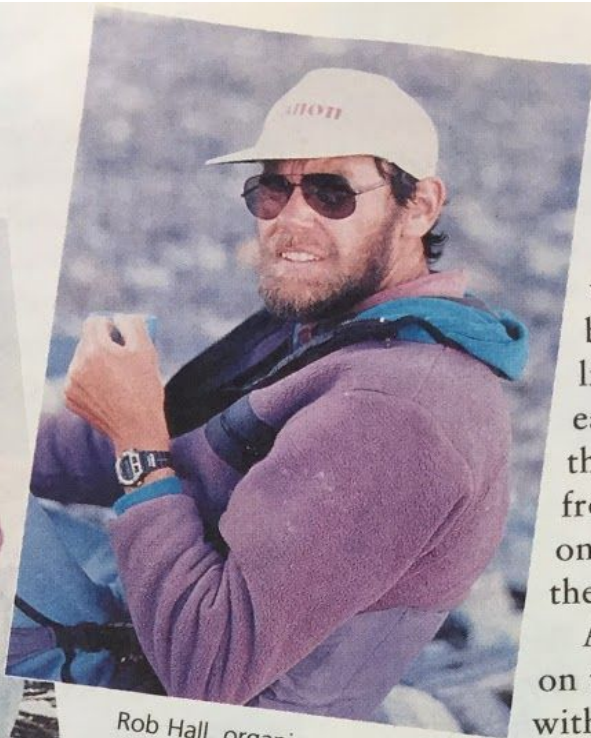
11. **Harold**: Andy Harris’s nickname.

12. **lucidity** (lū-sĭd’ĭ-tē): mental clarity.

13. **impeded** (ĭm-pĕ’dĭd): hampered.



Andy Harris, professional guide



Rob Hall, organizer of Krakauer's expedition

invincible guide, there to look after me and the other clients; we had been specifically indoctrinated not to question our guides' judgment. The thought never entered my crippled mind that Andy might in fact be in terrible straits—that a guide might urgently need help from me.

As Andy continued to assert that there were no full bottles at the South Summit, Mike looked at me quizzically. I looked back and shrugged. Turning to Andy, I said, "No big deal, Harold. Much ado about nothing."¹⁴ Then I grabbed a new oxygen canister, screwed it onto my regulator, and headed down the mountain. Given what unfolded over the hours that followed, the ease with which I abdicated responsibility—my utter failure to consider that Andy might have been in serious trouble—was a lapse that's likely to haunt me for the rest of my life.

Around 3:30 p.m. I left the South Summit ahead of Mike, Yasuko, and Andy, and almost

immediately descended into a dense layer of clouds. Light snow started to fall. I could scarcely tell where the mountain ended and where the sky began in the flat, diminishing light; it would have been very easy to blunder off the edge of the ridge and never be heard from again. And the conditions only worsened as I moved down the peak.

At the bottom of the rock steps on the Southeast Ridge I stopped with Mike to wait for Yasuko, who was having difficulty negotiating the fixed ropes.¹⁵ He attempted to call Rob on the radio,

but Mike's transmitter was working only intermittently and he couldn't raise anybody. With Mike looking after Yasuko, and both Rob and Andy accompanying Doug Hansen—the only other client still above us—I assumed the situation was under control. So as Yasuko caught up to us, I asked Mike's permission to continue down alone. "Fine," he replied. "Just don't walk off any cornices."¹⁶

About 4:45 p.m., when I reached the Balcony—the promontory¹⁷ at 27,600 feet on the Southeast Ridge where I'd sat watching the sunrise with Ang Dorje—I was shocked to encounter Beck Weathers, standing alone in the snow, shivering violently. I'd assumed that he'd descended to Camp Four hours earlier. "Beck!" I exclaimed, "what . . . are you still doing up here?"

14. **Much ado about nothing:** a lot of fuss for no reason.

15. **fixed ropes:** guide ropes anchored to rock, marking the best trail.

16. **cornices** (kôr'nĭs-əz): masses of snow extending beyond the edges of ridges.

17. **promontory** (prŏm'ən-tŏr'ē): a projecting mass of land.

Years earlier, Beck had undergone a radial keratotomy¹⁸ to correct his vision. A side effect of the surgery, he discovered early in the Everest climb, was that the low barometric pressure that exists at high altitude caused his eyesight to fail. The higher he climbed, the lower the barometric pressure fell, and the worse his vision became.

The previous afternoon as he was ascending from Camp Three to Camp Four, Beck later confessed to me, "my vision had gotten so bad that I couldn't see more than a few feet. So I just tucked right behind John Taske and when he'd lift a foot I'd place my foot right in his footprint."

Beck had spoken openly of his vision problem earlier, but with the summit in reach he neglected to mention its increasing severity to Rob or anyone else. His bad eyes notwithstanding, he was climbing well and feeling stronger than he had since the beginning of the expedition, and, he explained, "I didn't want to bail out prematurely."

Climbing above the South Col through the night, Beck managed to keep up with the group by employing the same strategy he'd used the previous afternoon—stepping in the footsteps of the person directly in front of him. But by the time he reached the Balcony and the sun came up, he realized his vision was worse than ever. In addition, he'd inadvertently rubbed some ice crystals into his eyes, lacerating both corneas.

"At that point," Beck revealed, "one eye was completely blurred over, I could barely see out of the other, and I'd lost all depth perception. I felt that I couldn't see well enough to climb higher without being a danger to myself or a burden to someone else, so I told Rob what was going on."

"Sorry pal," Rob immediately announced, "you're going down. I'll send one of the Sherpas down with you." But Beck wasn't quite ready to give up his summit hopes: "I explained to Rob that I thought there was a pretty good chance my vision would improve once the sun got higher and my pupils contracted. I said I wanted to wait a little while, and then boogie on up after everybody else if I started seeing more clearly."

Rob considered Beck's proposal, then decreed, "O.K., fair enough. I'll give you half an hour to find out. But I can't have you going down to Camp Four on your own. If your vision isn't better in thirty minutes I want you to stay here so I know exactly where you are until I come back from the summit, then we can go down together. I'm very serious about this: either you go down right now, or you promise me you'll sit right here until I return."

"So I crossed my heart and hoped to die," Beck told me good-naturedly as we stood in the blowing snow and waning light. "And I've kept my word. Which is why I'm still standing here."

Shortly after noon, Stuart Hutchison, John Taske, and Lou Kasischke had gone past on their way down with Lhakpa and Kami, but Weathers elected not to accompany them. "The weather was still good," he explains, "and I saw no reason to break my promise to Rob at that point."

Now, however, it was getting dark and conditions were turning grim. "Come down with me," I implored. "It will be at least another two or three hours before Rob shows up. I'll be your eyes. I'll get you down, no problem." Beck was nearly persuaded to descend with me when I made the mistake of mentioning that Mike Groom was on his way down with Yasuko, a few minutes behind me. In a day of many mistakes, this would turn out to be one of the larger ones.

"Thanks anyway," Beck said. "I think I'll just wait for Mike. He's got a rope; he'll be able to short-rope¹⁹ me down."

"O.K., Beck," I replied. "It's your call. I guess I'll see you in camp, then." Secretly, I was relieved that I wouldn't have to deal with getting Beck down the problematic slopes to come, most of which were not protected by fixed lines. Daylight was waning, the weather was worsening, my

18. **radial keratotomy** (rā'dē-əl kēr'ə-tōt'ə-mē): a surgical procedure to correct nearsightedness.

19. **short-rope**: to pull a weaker climber along by means of a rope attached to a stronger climber.

reserves of strength were nearly gone. Yet I still didn't have any sense that calamity²⁰ was around the corner. Indeed, after talking with Beck I even took the time to find a spent oxygen canister that I'd stashed in the snow on the way up some ten hours earlier. Wanting to remove all my trash from the mountain, I stuffed it into my pack with my other two bottles (one empty, one partially full) and then hurried toward the South Col, 1,600 feet below.

From the Balcony I descended a few hundred feet down a broad, gentle snow gully without incident, but then things began to get sketchy. The route meandered through outcroppings of broken shale blanketed with six inches of fresh snow. Negotiating the puzzling, infirm terrain demanded unceasing concentration, an all-but-impossible feat in my punch-drunk state.

Because the wind had erased the tracks of the climbers who'd gone down before me, I had difficulty determining the correct route. In 1993, Mike Groom's partner—Lopsang Tshering Bhutia, a skilled Himalayan climber who was a nephew of Tenzing Norgay's²¹—had taken a wrong turn in this area and fallen to his death. Fighting to maintain a grip on reality, I started talking to myself out loud. "Keep it together, keep it together, keep it together," I chanted over and over, mantra-like. "... This is way serious. Keep it together."

I sat down to rest on a broad, sloping ledge, but after a few minutes a deafening boom! frightened me back to my feet. Enough new snow had accumulated that I feared a massive slab avalanche had released on the slopes above, but when I spun around to look I saw nothing. Then there was another boom!, accompanied by a flash that momentarily lit up the sky, and I realized I was hearing the crash of thunder.

In the morning, on the way up, I'd made a point of continually studying the route on this part of the mountain, frequently looking down to pick out landmarks that would be helpful on the descent, compulsively memorizing the terrain:

"Remember to turn left at the buttress²² that looks like a ship's prow. Then follow that skinny line of snow until it curves sharply to the right." This was something I'd trained myself to do many years earlier, a drill I forced myself to go through every time I climbed, and on Everest it may have saved my life. By 6:00 p.m., as the storm escalated into a full-scale blizzard with driving snow and winds gusting in excess of 60 knots,²³ I came upon the rope that had been fixed by the Montenegrins on the snow slope 600 feet above the Col. Sobered by the force of the rising tempest, I realized that I'd gotten down the trickiest ground just in the nick of time.

Wrapping the fixed line around my arms to rappel,²⁴ I continued down through the blizzard. Some minutes later I was overwhelmed by a disturbingly familiar feeling of suffocation, and I realized that my oxygen had once again run out. Three hours earlier when I'd attached my regulator to my third and last oxygen canister, I'd noticed that the gauge indicated that the bottle was only half full. I'd figured that would be enough to get me most of the way down, though, so I hadn't bothered exchanging it for a full one. And now the gas was gone.

I pulled the mask from my face, left it hanging around my neck, and pressed onward, surprisingly unconcerned. However, without supplemental oxygen, I moved more slowly, and I had to stop and rest more often.

The literature of Everest is rife with accounts of hallucinatory experiences attributable to hypoxia and fatigue. In 1933, the noted English climber Frank Smythe observed "two curious looking

20. **calamity** (kə-lām'ĭ-tē): disaster.

21. **a nephew of Tenzing Norgay's**: a nephew of the Sherpa who, along with Edmund Hillary, first reached the summit of Everest.

22. **buttress**: projecting mass of rock.

23. **60 knots**: a knot is about 1.15 miles per hour.

24. **rappel** (ră-pěl'): to descend the face of a cliff by sliding down a rope while using one's feet to push off the rock.

WORDS
TO
KNOW

meander (mē-ăn'dər) *v.* to follow a winding path

compulsively (kəm-pŭl'sĭv-lē) *adv.* in obedience to an irresistible impulse

escalate (ēs'kə-lăt') *v.* to increase in intensity

supplemental (sŭp'lə-mĕn'tl) *adj.* extra; additional

objects floating in the sky” directly above him at 27,000 feet: “[One] possessed what appeared to be squat underdeveloped wings, and the other a protuberance²⁵ suggestive of a beak. They hovered motionless but seemed slowly to pulsate.” In 1980, during his solo ascent, Reinhold Messner imagined that an invisible companion was climbing beside him. Gradually, I became aware that my mind had gone haywire in a similar fashion, and I observed my own slide from reality with a blend of fascination and horror.

I was so far beyond ordinary exhaustion that I experienced a queer detachment from my body, as if I were observing my descent from a few feet overhead. I imagined that I was dressed in a green cardigan and wingtips.²⁶ And although the gale was generating a windchill in excess of seventy below zero Fahrenheit, I felt strangely, disturbingly warm.

At 6:30, as the last of the daylight seeped from the sky, I’d descended to within 200 vertical feet of Camp Four. Only one obstacle now stood between me and safety: a bulging incline of hard, glassy ice that I would have to descend without a rope. Snow pellets borne by 70-knot gusts stung my face; any exposed flesh was instantly frozen. The tents, no more than 650 horizontal feet away, were only intermittently²⁷ visible through the whiteout. There was no margin for error. Worried about making a critical blunder, I sat down to marshal my energy before descending further.

Once I was off my feet, inertia²⁸ took hold. It was so much easier to remain at rest than to summon the initiative to tackle the dangerous ice slope; so I just sat there as the storm roared around me, letting my mind drift, doing nothing for perhaps forty-five minutes.

I’d tightened the drawstrings on my hood until only a tiny opening remained around my eyes, and I was removing the useless, frozen oxygen mask from beneath my chin when Andy Harris suddenly appeared out of the gloom beside me.

I imagined that I was dressed in a green cardigan and wingtips.

Shining my headlamp in his direction, I reflexively recoiled when I saw the appalling condition of his face. His cheeks were coated with an armor of frost, one eye was frozen shut, and he was slurring his words badly. He looked in serious trouble. “Which way to the tents?” Andy blurted, frantic to reach shelter.

I pointed in the direction of Camp Four, then warned him about the ice just below us. “It’s steeper than it looks!” I yelled, straining to make myself heard over the tempest. “Maybe I should go down first and get a rope from camp—” As I was in midsentence, Andy abruptly turned away and moved over the lip of the ice slope, leaving me sitting there dumbfounded.²⁹

Scooting on his butt, he started down the steepest part of the incline. “Andy,” I shouted

25. **protuberance** (prō-tōō’bər-əns): something sticking out.

26. **cardigan and wingtips**: vestlike sweater and dress shoes.

27. **intermittently**: occasionally.

28. **inertia** (ī-nîr’shə): the tendency of an object at rest to remain at rest.

29. **dumbfounded**: speechless with surprise.

after him, "it's crazy to try it like that! You're going to blow it for sure!" He yelled something back, but his words were carried off by the screaming wind. A second later he lost his purchase, flipped . . . over . . . , and was suddenly rocketing headfirst down the ice.

Two hundred feet below, I could just make out Andy's motionless form slumped at the foot of the incline. I was sure he'd broken at least a leg, maybe his neck. But then, incredibly, he stood up, waved that he was O.K., and started lurching toward Camp Four, which at the moment was in plain sight, 500 feet beyond.

I could see the shadowy forms of three or four people standing outside the tents; their headlamps flickered through curtains of blowing snow. I watched Harris walk toward them across the flats, a distance he covered in less than ten minutes. When the clouds closed in a moment later, cutting off my view, he was within sixty feet of the tents, maybe closer. I didn't see him again after that, but I was certain that he'd reached the security of camp, where Chuldum and Arita would doubtless be waiting with hot tea. Sitting out in the storm, with the ice bulge still standing between me and the tents, I felt a pang of envy. I was angry that my guide hadn't waited for me.

My backpack held little more than three empty oxygen canisters and a pint of frozen lemonade; it probably weighed no more than sixteen or eighteen pounds. But I was tired, and worried about getting down the incline

without breaking a leg, so I tossed the pack over the edge and hoped it would come to rest where I could retrieve it. Then I stood up and started down the ice, which was as smooth and hard as the surface of a bowling ball.

Fifteen minutes of dicey, fatiguing crampon³⁰ work brought me safely to the bottom of the incline, where I easily located my pack, and another ten minutes after that I was in camp myself. I lunged into my tent with my crampons still on, zipped the door tight, and sprawled across the frost-covered floor too tired to even sit upright. For the first time I had a sense of how wasted I really was: I was more exhausted than I'd ever been in my life. But I was safe. Andy was safe.³¹ The others would be coming into camp soon. We'd . . . done it. We'd climbed Everest. It had been a little sketchy there for a while, but in the end everything had turned out great.

It would be many hours before I learned that everything had not in fact turned out great—that nineteen men and women were stranded up on the mountain by the storm, caught in a desperate struggle for their lives. ❖

30. **crampon work:** climbing with steel spikes attached to one's boots to prevent slipping on ice.

31. **Andy was safe:** Confused by the lack of oxygen, Krakauer thought he had seen Andy Harris reach safety, but the man he had talked to and watched was actually Martin Adams. He later learned that Harris had died farther up the mountain while trying to save others.