

# from INTO THIN AIR

by Jon Krakauer

## BACKGROUND

Mount Everest is the tallest mountain in the world. The first successful climb to the top was in 1953 by Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay. Hundreds have died attempting to make it to the top. Here, Jon Krakauer writes of a particularly deadly day in the history of Everest.

### A LANGUAGE COACH

Underline the **context clues** in this paragraph that help you determine the meaning of *summit*. Then, write the meaning on the lines below.

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### B READING FOCUS

What is the **cause** of Krakauer's inability to think clearly?

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Straddling the top of the world, one foot in Tibet and the other in Nepal, I cleared the ice from my oxygen mask, hunched a shoulder against the wind, and stared absently at the vast sweep of earth below. I understood on some dim, detached level that it was a spectacular sight. I'd been fantasizing about this moment, and the release of emotion that would accompany it, for many months. But now that I was finally here, standing on the summit of Mount Everest, I just couldn't summon the energy to care. **A**

10 It was the afternoon of May 10. I hadn't slept in 57 hours. The only food I'd been able to force down over the preceding three days was a bowl of Ramen soup and a handful of peanut M&M's. Weeks of violent coughing had left me with two separated ribs, making it excruciatingly painful to breathe. Twenty-nine thousand twenty-eight feet<sup>1</sup> up in the troposphere,<sup>2</sup> there was so little oxygen reaching my brain that my mental capacity was that of a slow child. Under the circumstances, I was incapable of feeling much of anything except cold and tired. **B**

1. In 1999, after this article was written, scientists using sophisticated equipment determined the elevation of Everest to be 29,035 feet, not 29,028 feet, as previously believed.
2. **troposphere** (TROH PUHS FEER): portion of the atmosphere directly below the stratosphere (it extends from six to eight miles above the earth's surface).

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**C LITERARY ANALYSIS**

Why might Krakauer be worried about approaching clouds?

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20 I'd arrived on the summit a few minutes after Anatoli Boukreev,<sup>3</sup> a Russian guide with an American expedition, and just ahead of Andy Harris, a guide with the New Zealand-based commercial team that I was a part of and someone with whom I'd grown to be friends during the last six weeks. I snapped four quick photos of Harris and Boukreev striking summit poses, and then turned and started down. My watch read 1:17 P.M. All told, I'd spent less than five minutes on the roof of the world.

30 After a few steps, I paused to take another photo, this one looking down the Southeast Ridge, the route we had ascended. Training my lens on a pair of climbers approaching the summit, I saw something that until that moment had escaped my attention. To the south, where the sky had been perfectly clear just an hour earlier, a blanket of clouds now hid Pumori, Ama Dablam, and the other lesser peaks surrounding Everest. **C**

Days later—after six bodies had been found, after a search for two others had been abandoned, after surgeons had amputated<sup>4</sup> the gangrenous<sup>5</sup> right hand of my teammate Beck

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- 3. Anatoli Boukreev:** Boukreev was killed in an avalanche about a year and a half later, on December 25, 1997, while climbing Annapurna in the Himalayas.
  - 4. amputated:** surgically removed, usually a limb or another body part.
  - 5. gangrenous (GANG GRUH NUHS):** affected by the decay of tissue resulting from a lack of blood supply.

**A** LITERARY FOCUS

What is the **mood** at the beginning of this paragraph? Describe how the mood changes throughout the paragraph.

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**B** LITERARY FOCUS

Look at the **sentence structure** in this paragraph. Count the number of words in each sentence. Why do you think the author chose sentences of this length?

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Weathers—people would ask why, if the weather had begun to deteriorate, had climbers on the upper mountain not heeded the signs? Why did veteran Himalayan guides keep moving upward, leading a gaggle of amateurs, each of whom had paid as much as \$65,000 to be ushered safely up Everest, into an apparent death trap?

40 Nobody can speak for the leaders of the two guided groups involved, for both men are now dead. But I can attest that nothing I saw early on the afternoon of May 10 suggested that a murderous storm was about to bear down on us. To my oxygen-depleted mind, the clouds drifting up the grand valley of ice known as the Western Cwm looked innocuous, wispy, insubstantial. Gleaming in the brilliant midday sun, they appeared no different from the harmless puffs of convection  
50 condensation that rose from the valley almost daily. As I began my descent, I was indeed anxious, but my concern had little to do with the weather. A check of the gauge on my oxygen tank had revealed that it was almost empty. I needed to get down, fast. **A**

The uppermost shank of the Southeast Ridge is a slender, heavily corniced fin<sup>6</sup> of rock and wind-scoured snow that snakes for a quarter-mile toward a secondary pinnacle known as the South Summit. Negotiating the serrated<sup>7</sup> ridge presents few great technical hurdles, but the route is dreadfully exposed. After 15  
60 minutes of cautious shuffling over a 7,000-foot abyss,<sup>8</sup> I arrived at the notorious Hillary Step, a pronounced notch in the ridge named after Sir Edmund Hillary, the first Westerner to climb the mountain, and a spot that does require a fair amount of technical maneuvering. As I clipped into a fixed rope and prepared to rappel<sup>9</sup> over the lip, I was greeted by an alarming sight. **B**

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6. **corniced** (KAWR NIHST) **fin**: ridge with an overhanging mass of snow or ice deposited by the wind.
  7. **serrated**: notched like a saw.
  8. **abyss** (UH BIHS): deep crack or opening in the earth's surface.
  9. **rappel** (RA PEHL): descend a mountain by means of a double rope arranged around the climber's body so that he or she can control the slide downward.

Thirty feet below, some 20 people were queued up<sup>10</sup> at the base of the Step, and three climbers were hauling themselves up the rope that I was attempting to descend. I had no choice but to unclip from the line and step aside.

70 The traffic jam comprised climbers from three separate expeditions: the team I belonged to, a group of paying clients under the leadership of the celebrated New Zealand guide Rob Hall; another guided party headed by American Scott Fischer; and a nonguided team from Taiwan. Moving at the snail's pace that is the norm above 8,000 meters, the throng labored up the Hillary Step one by one, while I nervously bided my time. **C**

Harris, who left the summit shortly after I did, soon pulled up behind me. Wanting to conserve whatever oxygen remained in my tank, I asked him to reach inside my backpack and turn off  
80 the valve on my regulator, which he did. For the next ten minutes I felt surprisingly good. My head cleared. I actually seemed less tired than with the gas turned on. Then, abruptly, I felt like I was suffocating. My vision dimmed and my head began to spin. I was on the brink of losing consciousness.

Instead of turning my oxygen off, Harris, in his hypoxically<sup>11</sup> impaired state, had mistakenly cranked the valve open to full flow, draining the tank. I'd just squandered the last of my gas going nowhere. **D** There was another tank waiting for me at the South Summit, 250 feet below, but to get there I would have  
90 to descend the most exposed terrain on the entire route without benefit of supplemental oxygen.

But first I had to wait for the crowd to thin. I removed my now useless mask, planted my ice ax into the mountain's frozen hide, and hunkered on the ridge crest. As I exchanged banal<sup>12</sup> congratulations with the climbers filing past, inwardly I was frantic: "Hurry it up, hurry it up!" I silently pleaded. "While you

### **C** LANGUAGE COACH

Based on the **context clues** in this paragraph, what do you think *throng* means?

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### **D** READING FOCUS

What was the **effect** of Harris's error?

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10. **queued up** (KYOOD) **up**: lined up.

11. **hypoxically**: characterized by hypoxia, a condition resulting from a decrease in the oxygen reaching body tissues. Hypoxia is a common condition at very high altitudes.

12. **banal** (BUH NAL): everyday; commonplace.

**A** VOCABULARY

**Word Study**

The adjective *reserved* has more than one meaning. What is the meaning of *reserved* as it used here? What is another meaning of *reserved*?

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**B** VOCABULARY

**Selection Vocabulary**

Krakauer notices that the weather no longer looks *benign*. Write an antonym of *benign* that describes what the weather might look like. Recall that an antonym is a word that means the opposite of another word.

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guys are messing around here, I'm losing brain cells by the millions!"

100 Most of the passing crowd belonged to Fischer's group, but near the back of the parade two of my teammates eventually appeared: Hall and Yasuko Namba. Girlish and reserved, the 47-year-old Namba was 40 minutes away from becoming the oldest woman to climb Everest and the second Japanese woman to reach the highest point on each continent, the so-called Seven Summits. **A**

110 Later still, Doug Hansen—another member of our expedition, a postal worker from Seattle who had become my closest friend on the mountain—arrived atop the Step. "It's in the bag!" I yelled over the wind, trying to sound more upbeat than I felt. Plainly exhausted, Doug mumbled something from behind his oxygen mask that I didn't catch, shook my hand weakly, and continued plodding upward.

120 The last climber up the rope was Fischer, whom I knew casually from Seattle, where we both lived. His strength and drive were legendary—in 1994 he'd climbed Everest without using bottled oxygen—so I was surprised at how slowly he was moving and how hammered he looked when he pulled his mask aside to say hello. "Bruuuuuuce!" he wheezed with forced cheer, employing his trademark, fratboyish greeting. When I asked how he was doing, Fischer insisted he was feeling fine: "Just dragging a little today for some reason. No big deal." With the Hillary Step finally clear, I clipped into the strand of orange rope, swung quickly around Fischer as he slumped over his ice ax, and rappelled over the edge.

130 It was after 2:30 when I made it down to the South Summit. By now tendrils of mist were wrapping across the top of 27,890-foot Lhotse and lapping at Everest's summit pyramid. No longer did the weather look so benign. **B** I grabbed a fresh oxygen cylinder, jammed it onto my regulator, and hurried down into the gathering cloud.

Four hundred vertical feet above, where the summit was still washed in bright sunlight under an immaculate cobalt sky, my



compadres<sup>13</sup> were dallying,<sup>14</sup> memorializing their arrival at the apex of the planet with photos and high-fives—and using up precious ticks of the clock. None of them imagined that a horrible ordeal was drawing nigh. None of them suspected that by the end of that long day, every minute would matter. . . . **C**

At 3 P.M., within minutes of leaving the South Summit, I descended into clouds ahead of the others. Snow started to fall.

140 In the flat, diminishing light, it became hard to tell where the mountain ended and where the sky began. It would have been very easy to blunder off the edge of the ridge and never be heard from again. The lower I went, the worse the weather became.

When I reached the Balcony again, about 4 P.M., I encountered Beck Weathers standing alone, shivering violently. Years earlier, Weathers had undergone radial keratotomy to correct his vision. A side effect, which he discovered on Everest and consequently hid from Hall, was that in the low barometric pressure at high altitude, his eyesight failed. Nearly blind when  
150 he'd left Camp Four in the middle of the night but hopeful that his vision would improve at daybreak, he stuck close to the person in front of him and kept climbing. **D**

Upon reaching the Southeast Ridge shortly after sunrise, Weathers had confessed to Hall that he was having trouble seeing, at which point Hall declared, "Sorry, pal, you're going down. I'll send one of the Sherpas<sup>15</sup> with you." Weathers countered that his vision was likely to improve as soon as the sun crept higher in the sky; Hall said he'd give Weathers 30 minutes to find out—after that, he'd have to wait there at 27,500 feet for  
160 Hall and the rest of the group to come back down. Hall didn't want Weathers descending alone. **E** "I'm dead serious about this," Hall admonished his client. "Promise me that you'll sit right here until I return."

13. **compadres** (KUHM PAH DRAYZ): close friends; in this case, fellow members of the climbing team.

14. **dallying**: wasting time.

15. **Sherpas**: members of a Tibetan people living on the southern slopes of the Himalayas. As experienced mountain climbers, Sherpas are often hired to assist or act as guides for mountaineering.

### **C** LITERARY FOCUS

Underline the sentences in this paragraph in which the **mood** is joyous. Circle the sentences in which the mood is dark and threatening.

### **D** QUICK CHECK

Why was Weathers "nearly blind"?

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### **E** LITERARY ANALYSIS

What might have happened if Weathers were to have climbed down the mountain by himself?

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**A** VOCABULARY

**Selection Vocabulary**

Underline the phrases and sentences in this paragraph that show that the weather has *deteriorated*, or gotten worse.

**B** LANGUAGE COACH

Based on the **context clues** in this paragraph, what do you think is the meaning of *appalling*?

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“I crossed my heart and hoped to die,” Weathers recalls now, “and promised I wouldn’t go anywhere.” Shortly after noon, Hutchison, Taske, and Kasischke<sup>16</sup> passed by with their Sherpa escorts, 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.”

170 By the time I encountered Weathers, however, conditions were turning ugly. “Come down with me,” I implored, “I’ll get you down, no problem.” He was nearly convinced, until I made the mistake of mentioning that Groom was on his way down, too. In a day of many mistakes, this would turn out to be a crucial one. “Thanks anyway,” Weathers said. “I’ll just wait for Mike. He’s got a rope; he’ll be able to short-rope<sup>17</sup> me.” Secretly relieved, I hurried toward the South Col, 1,500 feet below.

180 These lower slopes proved to be the most difficult part of the descent. Six inches of powder snow blanketed outcroppings of loose shale. Climbing down them demanded unceasing concentration, an all but impossible feat in my current state. By 5:30, however, I was finally within 200 vertical feet of Camp Four, and only one obstacle stood between me and safety: a steep bulge of rock-hard ice that I’d have to descend without a rope. But the weather had deteriorated into a full-scale blizzard. Snow pellets born on 70-mph winds stung my face; any exposed skin was instantly frozen. The tents, no more than 200 horizontal yards away, were only intermittently visible through the whiteout. **A** There was zero margin for error. Worried about making a critical blunder, I sat down to marshal my energy.

190 Suddenly, Harris appeared out of the gloom and sat beside me.<sup>18</sup> At this point there was no mistaking that he was in appalling shape. **B** His cheeks were coated with an armor of frost, one eye was frozen shut, and his speech was slurred. He was frantic to

16. Stuart Hutchison, Dr. John Taske, and Lou Kasischke were three clients on Rob Hall’s team.

17. **short-rope:** assist a weak or injured climber by hauling him or her.

18. After writing this article, Krakauer discovered through conversations with Martin Adams (a client on Scott Fischer’s team) that the person he thought was Harris was, in fact, Martin Adams.

reach the tents. After briefly discussing the best way to negotiate the ice, Harris started scooting down on his butt, facing forward. “Andy,” I yelled after him, “it’s crazy to try it like that!” He yelled something back, but the words were carried off by the screaming wind. A second later he lost his purchase<sup>19</sup> and was rocketing  
200 down on his back.

Two hundred feet below, I could make out Harris’s motionless form. I was sure he’d broken at least a leg, maybe his neck. But then he stood up, waved that he was OK, and started stumbling toward camp, which was for the moment in plain sight, 150 yards beyond.

I could see three or four people shining lights outside the tents. I watched Harris walk across the flats to the edge of camp, a distance he covered in less than ten minutes. When the clouds closed in a moment later, cutting off my view, he was within  
210 30 yards of the tents. I didn’t see him again after that, but I was certain that he’d reached the security of camp, where Sherpas would 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.

Twenty minutes later I was in camp. I fell into my tent with my crampons still on, zipped the door tight, and sprawled across the frost-covered floor. I was drained, more exhausted than I’d ever been in my life. But I was safe. Andy was safe. The others would be coming into camp soon. We’d done it. We’d climbed  
220 Mount Everest. **C**

It would be many hours before I learned that everyone had in fact not made it back to camp—that one teammate was already dead and that 23 other men and women were caught in a desperate struggle for their lives. . . .

Meanwhile, Hall and Hansen were still on the frightfully exposed summit ridge, engaged in a grim struggle of their own. The 46-year-old Hansen, whom Hall had turned back just below this spot exactly a year ago, had been determined to bag the

**C LITERARY FOCUS**

Describe the **sentence structure** in this paragraph. Why do you think the author chooses to use this structure here?

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19. **purchase:** firm hold.



**A** **READING FOCUS**

What do you think **causes** someone to continue to climb even if he or she is in life-threatening danger?

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230 summit this time around. “I want to get this thing done and out of my life,” he’d told me a couple of days earlier. “I don’t want to have to come back here.”

Indeed Hansen had reached the top this time, though not until after 3 P.M., well after Hall’s predetermined turnaround time. Given Hall’s conservative, systematic nature, many people wonder why he didn’t turn Hansen around when it became obvious that he was running late. It’s not far-fetched to speculate that because Hall had talked Hansen into coming back to Everest this year, it would have been especially hard for him to deny Hansen the summit a second time—especially when all of  
240 Fischer’s clients were still marching blithely toward the top.

“It’s very difficult to turn someone around high on the mountain,” cautions Guy Cotter, a New Zealand guide who summited Everest with Hall in 1992 and was guiding the peak for him in 1995 when Hansen made his first attempt. “If a client sees that the summit is close and they’re dead set on getting there, they’re going to laugh in your face and keep going up.” **A**

In any case, for whatever reason, Hall did not turn Hansen around. Instead, after reaching the summit at 2:10 P.M., Hall waited for more than an hour for Hansen to arrive and then  
250 headed down with him. Soon after they began their descent, just below the top, Hansen apparently ran out of oxygen and collapsed. “Pretty much the same thing happened to Doug in ’95,” says Ed Viesturs, an American who guided the peak for Hall that year. “He was fine during the ascent, but as soon as he started down he lost it mentally and physically. He turned into a real zombie, like he’d used everything up.”

At 4:31 P.M., Hall radioed Base Camp to say that he and Hansen were above the Hillary Step and urgently needed oxygen. Two full bottles were waiting for them at the South Summit; if  
260 Hall had known this he could have retrieved the gas fairly quickly and then climbed back up to give Hansen a fresh tank. But Harris, in the throes of his oxygen-starved dementia,<sup>20</sup> overheard

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20. **dementia** (DIH MEHN SHUH): mental impairment.

the 4:31 radio call while descending the Southeast Ridge and broke in to tell Hall that all the bottles at the South Summit were empty. So Hall stayed with Hansen and tried to bring the helpless client down without oxygen, but could get him no farther than the top of the Hillary Step. **B**

270 Cotter, a very close friend of both Hall and Harris, happened to be a few miles from Everest Base Camp at the time, guiding an expedition on Pumori. Overhearing the radio conversations between Hall and Base Camp, he called Hall at 5:36 and again at 5:57, urging his mate to leave Hansen and come down alone. . . . Hall, however, wouldn't consider going down without Hansen.

There was no further word from Hall until the middle of the night. At 2:46 A.M. on May 11, Cotter woke up to hear a long, broken transmission, probably unintended: Hall was wearing a remote microphone clipped to the shoulder strap of his backpack, which was occasionally keyed on by mistake. **C** In this instance, says Cotter, "I suspect Rob didn't even know he was transmitting. I  
280 could hear someone yelling—it might have been Rob, but I couldn't be sure because the wind was so loud in the background. He was saying something like 'Keep moving! Keep going!' presumably to Doug, urging him on."

If that was indeed the case, it meant that in the wee hours of the morning Hall and Hansen were still struggling from the Hillary Step toward the South Summit, taking more than 12 hours to traverse a stretch of ridge typically covered by descending climbers in half an hour.

290 Hall's next call to Base Camp was at 4:43 A.M. He'd finally reached the South Summit but was unable to descend farther, and in a series of transmissions over the next two hours he sounded confused and irrational. "Harold<sup>21</sup> was with me last night," Hall insisted, when in fact Harris had reached the South Col at sunset. "But he doesn't seem to be with me now. He was very weak."

**B** READING FOCUS

What **causes** Hall to not retrieve the full oxygen tanks?

**C** LANGUAGE COACH

Based on the **context clues** in this sentence, what does *unintended* mean?

21. **Harold:** Andy Harris's nickname.

**A QUICK CHECK**

What does Krakauer think happened to Hansen?

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**B VOCABULARY**

**Word Study**

The noun *gravity* has more than one meaning. What is the meaning used here? Use a dictionary if you need help.

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Mackenzie<sup>22</sup> asked him how Hansen was doing. “Doug,” Hall replied, “is gone.” That was all he said, and it was the last mention he ever made of Hansen.

300 On May 23, when Breashears and Viesturs, of the IMAX team,<sup>23</sup> reached the summit, they found no sign of Hansen’s body but they did find an ice ax planted about 50 feet below the Hillary Step, along a highly exposed section of ridge where the fixed ropes came to an end. It is quite possible that Hall managed to get Hansen down the ropes to this point, only to have him lose his footing and fall 7,000 feet down the sheer Southwest Face, leaving his ice ax jammed into the ridge crest where he slipped. **A**

310 During the radio calls to Base Camp early on May 11, Hall revealed that something was wrong with his legs, that he was no longer able to walk and was shaking uncontrollably. This was very disturbing news to the people down below, but it was amazing that Hall was even alive after spending a night without shelter or oxygen at 28,700 feet in hurricane-force wind and minus-100-degree windchill.

320 At 5 A.M., Base Camp patched through a call on the satellite telephone to Jan Arnold, Hall’s wife, seven months pregnant with their first child in Christchurch, New Zealand. Arnold, a respected physician, had summited Everest with Hall in 1993 and entertained no illusions about the gravity of her husband’s predicament. **B** “My heart really sank when I heard his voice,” she recalls. “He was slurring his words markedly. He sounded like Major Tom<sup>24</sup> or something, like he was just floating away. I’d been up there; I knew what it could be like in bad weather. Rob and I had talked about the impossibility of being

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22. **Mackenzie:** Dr. Caroline Mackenzie was Base Camp doctor for Rob Hall’s team.  
23. **IMAX team:** another team of climbers, who were shooting a \$5.5-million giant-screen movie about Mount Everest. The movie was released in 1998.  
24. **Major Tom:** reference to the David Bowie song “Space Oddity,” which is about an astronaut, Major Tom, who is lost in space.

rescued from the summit ridge. As he himself had put it, “You might as well be on the moon.”

By that time, Hall had located two full oxygen bottles, and after struggling for four hours trying to de-ice his mask, around 8:30 A.M. he finally started breathing the life-sustaining gas.

330 Several times he announced that he was preparing to descend, only to change his mind and remain at the South Summit. The day had started out sunny and clear, but the wind remained fierce, and by late morning the upper mountain was wrapped with thick clouds. Climbers at Camp Two reported that the wind over the summit sounded like a squadron of 747s, even from 8,000 feet below. . . .

Throughout that day, Hall’s friends begged him to make an effort to descend from the South Summit under his own power. At 3:20 P.M., after one such transmission from Cotter, Hall began  
340 to sound annoyed. “Look,” he said, “if I thought I could manage the knots on the fixed ropes with me frostbitten hands, I would have gone down six hours ago, pal. Just send a couple of the boys up with a big thermos of something hot—then I’ll be fine.” C

At 6:20 P.M., Hall was patched through a second time to Arnold in Christchurch. “Hi, my sweetheart,” he said in a slow, painfully distorted voice. “I hope you’re tucked up in a nice warm bed. How are you doing?”

350 “I can’t tell you how much I’m thinking about you!” Arnold replied. “You sound so much better than I expected. . . . Are you warm, my darling?”

“In the context of the altitude, the setting, I’m reasonably comfortable,” Hall answered, doing his best not to alarm her.

“How are your feet?”

“I haven’t taken me boots off to check, but I think I may have a bit of frostbite.”

360 “I’m looking forward to making you completely better when you come home,” said Arnold. “I just know you’re going to be rescued. Don’t feel that you’re alone. I’m sending all my positive energy your way!” Before signing off, Hall told his wife, “I love you. Sleep well, my sweetheart. Please don’t worry too much.” D

**C** READING FOCUS

What **caused** Hall to be unable to descend on his own?

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**D** LITERARY FOCUS

Describe the **mood** of the story during the conversation between Hall and his wife.

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**A****VOCABULARY****Word Study**

Which word in this sentence is a synonym for *carapace*, which appears in line 380?

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**B****LITERARY FOCUS**

What **mood** does Hutchison's descriptions of Namba and Weathers create?

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These would be the last words anyone would hear him utter. Attempts to make radio contact with Hall later that night and the next day went unanswered. Twelve days later, when Breashears and Viesturs climbed over the South Summit on their way to the top, they found Hall lying on his right side in a shallow ice-hollow, his upper body buried beneath a drift of snow.

370 Early on the morning of May 11, when I returned to Camp Four, Hutchison, standing in for Groom, who was unconscious in his tent, organized a team of four Sherpas to locate the bodies of our teammates Weathers and Namba. The Sherpa search party, headed by Lhakpa Chhiri, departed ahead of Hutchison, who was so exhausted and befuddled that he forgot to put his boots on and left camp in his light, smooth-soled liners. Only when Lhakpa Chhiri pointed out the blunder did Hutchison return for his boots. Following Boukreev's directions, the Sherpas had no trouble locating the two bodies at the edge of the Kangshung Face.

380 The first body turned out to be Namba, but Hutchison couldn't tell who it was until he knelt in the howling wind and chipped a three-inch-thick carapace of ice from her face. To his shock, he discovered that she was still breathing. Both her gloves were gone, and her bare hands appeared to be frozen solid. Her eyes were dilated.<sup>25</sup> The skin on her face was the color of porcelain. "It was terrible," Hutchison recalls. "I was overwhelmed. She was very near death. I didn't know what to do."

390 He turned his attention to Weathers, who lay 20 feet away. His face was also caked with a thick armor of frost. **A** Balls of ice the size of grapes were matted to his hair and eyelids. After cleaning the frozen detritus<sup>26</sup> from his face, Hutchison discovered that he, too, was still alive: "Beck was mumbling something, I think, but I couldn't tell what he was trying to say. His right glove was missing and he had terrible frostbite. He was as close to death as a person can be and still be breathing." **B**

25. **dilated**: made wider; here, referring to the pupil of the eye.

26. **detritus** (DEE TRYT UHS): debris.



Badly shaken, Hutchison went over to the Sherpas and asked Lhakpa Chhiri's advice. Lhakpa Chhiri, an Everest veteran respected by Sherpas and sahibs<sup>27</sup> alike for his mountain savvy, urged Hutchison to leave Weathers and Namba where they lay. Even if they survived long enough to be dragged back to Camp Four, they would certainly die before they could be carried down  
400 to Base Camp, and attempting a rescue would needlessly jeopardize the lives of the other climbers on the Col, most of whom were going to have enough trouble getting themselves down safely.

Hutchison decided that Chhiri was right. There was only one choice, however difficult: Let nature take its inevitable course with Weathers and Namba, and save the group's resources for those who could actually be helped. It was a classic act of triage.<sup>28</sup> When Hutchison returned to camp at 8:30 A.M. and told the rest of us of his decision, nobody doubted that it was the correct  
410 thing to do.

Later that day a rescue team headed by two of Everest's most experienced guides, Pete Athans and Todd Burleson, who were on the mountain with their own clients, arrived at Camp Four. Burleson was standing outside the tents about 4:30 P.M. when he noticed someone lurching slowly toward camp. The person's bare right hand, naked to the wind and horribly frostbitten, was outstretched in a weird, frozen salute. Whoever it was reminded Athans of a mummy in a low-budget horror film. The mummy turned out to be none other than Beck Weathers, somehow risen  
420 from the dead.

A couple of hours earlier, a light must have gone on in the reptilian core of Weathers' comatose<sup>29</sup> brain, and he regained consciousness. **C** "Initially I thought I was in a dream," he recalls. "Then I saw how badly frozen my right hand was, and that helped bring me around to reality. Finally I woke up enough

27. **sahibs** (SAH IHbz): term used by Sherpas to refer to the paying members of the expeditions.

28. **triage** (TREE AHZH): assigning of priorities of medical care based on chances for survival.

29. **comatose**: deeply unconscious due to injury or disease.

**C****QUICK CHECK**

What had been the last we knew of Weathers?

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**A** READING FOCUS

Underline in this paragraph what the **effect** of going in the wrong direction would have been.

to recognize that the cavalry<sup>30</sup> wasn't coming so I better do something about it myself."

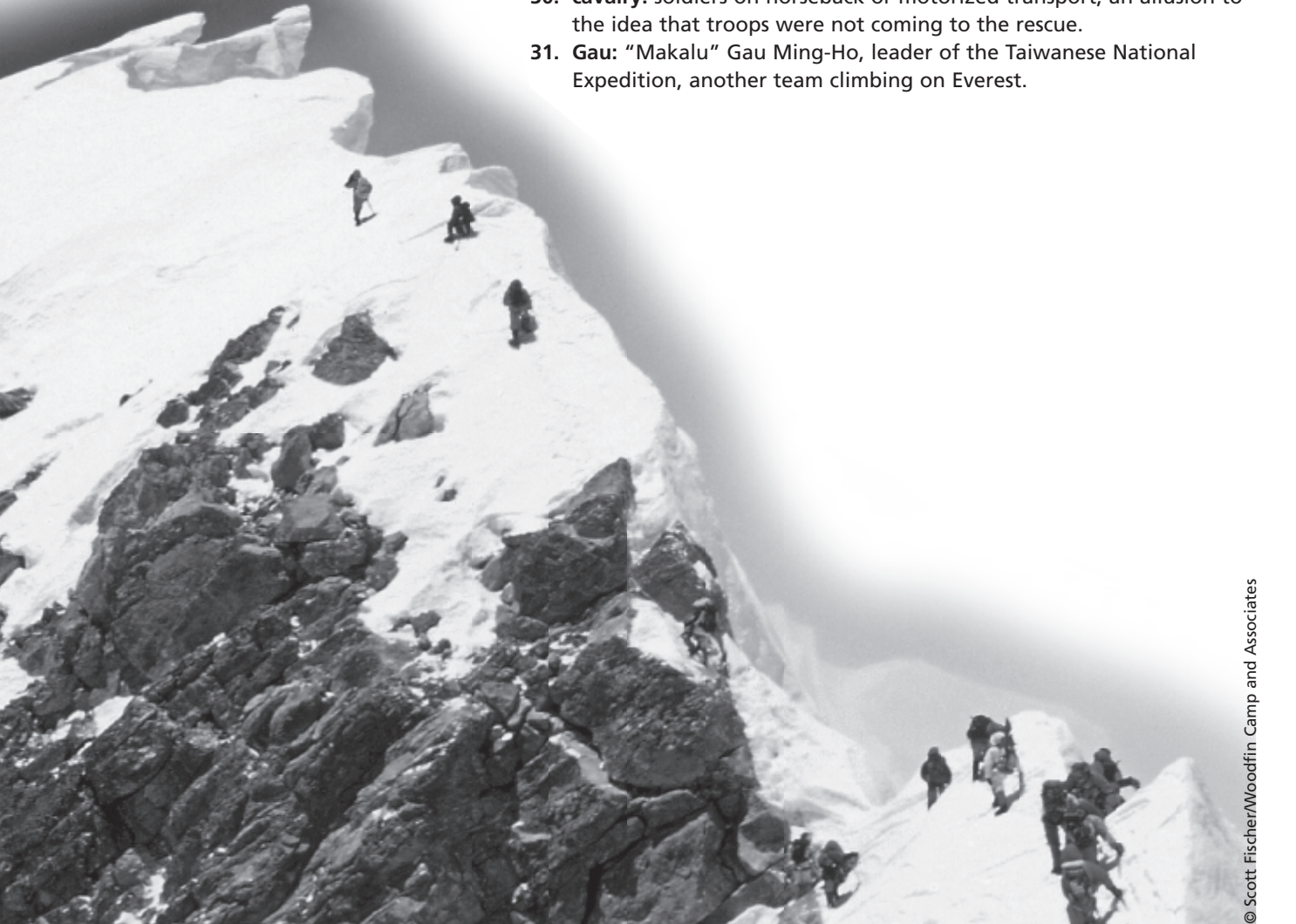
430 Although Weathers was blind in his right eye and able to focus his left eye within a radius of only three or four feet, he started walking into the teeth of the wind, deducing correctly that camp lay in that direction. If he'd been wrong he would have stumbled immediately down the Kangshung Face, the edge of which was a few yards in the opposite direction. Ninety minutes later he encountered "some unnaturally smooth, bluish-looking rocks," which turned out to be the tents of Camp Four. **A**

The next morning, May 12, Athans, Burleson, and climbers from the IMAX team short-roped Weathers down to Camp Two. On the morning of May 13, in a hazardous helicopter rescue, Weathers and Gau<sup>31</sup> were evacuated from the top of the icefall

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30. **cavalry**: soldiers on horseback or motorized transport; an allusion to the idea that troops were not coming to the rescue.

31. **Gau**: "Makalu" Gau Ming-Ho, leader of the Taiwanese National Expedition, another team climbing on Everest.



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440 by Lieutenant Colonel Madan Khatri Chhetri of the Nepalese army. A month later, a team of Dallas surgeons would amputate Weathers' dead right hand just below the wrist and use skin grafts to reconstruct his left hand.

After helping to load Weathers and Gau into the rescue chopper, I sat in the snow for a long while, staring at my boots, trying to get some grip, however tenuous, on what had happened over the preceding 72 hours. Then, nervous as a cat, I headed down into the icefall for one last trip through the maze of decaying seracs.<sup>32</sup>

450 I'd always known, in the abstract, that climbing mountains was a dangerous pursuit. But until I climbed in the Himalayas this spring, I'd never actually seen death at close range. And there was so much of it: Including three members of an Indo-Tibetan team who died on the north side just below the summit in the same May 10 storm and an Austrian killed some days later, 11 men and women lost their lives on Everest in May 1996, a tie with 1982 for the worst single-season death toll in the peak's history. . . .<sup>33</sup> **B**

460 Climbing mountains will never be a safe, predictable, rule-bound enterprise. It is an activity that idealizes risk-taking; its most celebrated figures have always been those who stuck their necks out the farthest and managed to get away with it. **C** Climbers, as a species, are simply not distinguished by an excess of common sense. And that holds especially true for Everest climbers: When presented with a chance to reach the planet's highest summit, people are surprisingly quick to abandon prudence altogether. "Eventually," warns Tom Hornbein, 33 years after his ascent of the West Ridge, "what happened on Everest this season is certain to happen again." **D**

**B** VOCABULARY

**Academic Vocabulary**

The number of deaths in May 1996 was *equivalent*, or equal, to that of the number in 1982, according to Krakauer. What were some of the reasons this count was so high?

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**C** LITERARY ANALYSIS

What does Krakauer mean in this sentence?

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**D** LITERARY FOCUS

Describe the **mood** of the final paragraph. What feeling are you left with at the end of the story?

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32. **seracs**: pointed masses of ice.

33. It was actually the worst death toll on record. After Krakauer wrote this article, a twelfth death was discovered.