

For Thomas I Dance with Mountains

Don't look around.

That was Dawa, my climbing Sherpa's, hand signal. He has limited English but makes up for it with his focus on my safety. He extends two fingers, points first to his eyes, then down to the ground and mimics squatting. I follow the command. The ice screw securing me is loose and at this altitude, with a gusty wind, I must lower my body height and focus on my three points. That was Dawa's mantra; maintain three points by placing both crampons wide apart and biting into the ice, with the third point being my ice-axe. That's how it is on these mountains. Focus or you fall.

I don't regard myself as a mountain climber. I'm a mother, with the ashes of my only son in my backpack. It's impossible to reconcile the loss of your child. I remember when Thomas was a newborn imagining, what I'd do if he died. I recoiled from such thoughts; they were viscerally repulsive and a part of me thought I shouldn't think such things lest they come true.

When it happened last year at age twelve, I prayed for a way to reverse things, a way to correct the elements that led to his destiny. Surely if God was real, he had the generosity to permit an exchange; my life for my son's. I would climb the highest mountain I could, in the sliver of hope that if I lost my life, Thomas would get his back. Or at the very least I may stand before him and wrap him in my arms again. And if none of that should pass, I could cast his ashes into the air where God can have what's left of his body, in addition to his soul.

And so here I stand. Brightly coloured Tibetan prayer flags flutter, and the wind buffets my hood as I watch Dawa secure a new static line. His aluminium figure eight and carabiner clank against his harness.

I'm at six-thousand two-hundred metres at the summit of a mountain called Island Peak. It lies in the Khumbu region of Nepal that hosts the eight-thousand-metre giants of Everest and Lhotse. A massive glacier flows off Lhotse with Island Peak standing in its way, causing it to divide and flow either side, thereby giving the mountain its name. There are no roads here, and reaching the basecamp of this mountain was a six-day trek requiring altitude acclimatisation. At the altitude of basecamp, there are no trees, just the occasional moss or tuft of grass struggling for life. There are no animals, not even birds.

Eight hours ago, at two a.m., I affixed my headlight, checked my harness and climbing gear, strapped my ice-axe to my backpack, and began the approach to where I now stand. Climbing at night is necessary to arrive at the summit and allow enough time to descend before the inevitable afternoon storms ravage the mountain.

At night, the world shrinks to a two-metre zone cast from my headlight. All else is a threatening dark-grey hiding jagged rocks that threaten to tear skin or cliff-edges with plummets that will break bones or worse. The cold thin air provides clarity to the night sky

that's only possible in remote regions—a deep black with streams of sapphire, pocked with silver rivets of light. Pre-dawn appears early at this altitude and after an hour and a half of climbing, golden hues appear on the towering ring of peaks.

Dawa has lectured me a thousand times, using mime and hand signals, about maintaining three points, but on the ascent, I shall receive a thousand more.

The path upwards is narrow, snaking at a steepness that requires hands and feet, and disappears over massive glassy boulders. My shoulders and hands ache from the constant effort to cling to the tiniest of handholds. I weigh forty-five kilograms and my backpack is a quarter of my weight. Every effort strains the muscles in my legs and shoulders. My lungs burn with the cold air and my nose won't stop running, forcing me to blow clear mucous every five minutes. My heart pounds in my ears and I suck deep drafts of air.

Dawa signals, *slow down*. I'm breathing too fast causing my carbon dioxide levels to lower, which could make me dizzy. The fear that I will hyperventilate and lose my balance at a critical moment, creeps into me. The earth whispers, *You might fall*. It reminds me, *You are less than halfway there. I don't think you can do this*. It reasons with me, *The mountain is unforgiving of mistakes, you should give up*. I push away the rising doubts and slow my breathing. Focus.

We continue the agonising mechanics of climbing upwards over boulders for six hours until we reach the edge of the glacier. I clip crampons to my boots and stare at a ten-metre sheet of perfectly smooth blue ice ahead of me. It slopes steeply to disappear into a dark abyss that frightens me. Turning off my headlight, I put on my polaroid goggles. I stomp the spikes of my crampons into the hard ice and dig the handle of the ice-axe in for a third point. I'm scared. My heart and lungs pump and Dawa tells me again to slow my breathing. I know he's right. This treacherous crossing is no place to become dizzy. Although I am clipped to a static line, falling even three metres with razor-sharp crampons and an ice axe in my hand could be disastrous.

The crossing is slow and complex and midway my left boot fails to penetrate the ice and slides downslope. I scream and hyperventilate. Dawa shouts in Nepali and signals to freeze. I am in a precarious posture—my left leg is extended with no purchase on the ice, while my right hand gripping the ice axe and my right leg, take the strain of my weight. Dawa signals to correct my centre of balance. I put all my weight on my ice axe, fearing it will come loose, and carefully adjust my posture against the slope. I raise my left boot and stomp the crampon to penetrate the ice.

Dawa, grim-faced, extends a thumb-up. Shaking, I return the gesture, just as the wind begins to taunt me. *That was close and you're not across the ice yet. Do you think the ice-stakes will hold you if you fall?*

“Shut up,” I mutter. “Just shut up.” I push away all thoughts and focus on each movement. I dare not look down.

When I make it to the end of the ice sheet, I give Dawa a broad smile and he nods. My smile disappears when he points to two aluminium ladders tied together, spanning a large crevasse with a drop that disappears into darkness.

“Oh, my God. Dawa I can’t do this.” I wave my hands at him. I try to explain that I’ve never completed a ladder crossing before. Dawa nods and picks up a loose rope on either side of the ladder, that stretches across the crevasse and attaches to large ice-stakes. He deftly walks across the ladder that’s no wider than his hips, ensuring his crampons fit neatly across the rungs.

Once across, Dawa turns and gestures. *See? It’s easy.*

I step onto the ladder and slot the spikes of my crampon over the rungs. Dawa calls to me and mimics lifting his foot clear of the rung. I nod in response. If I take a step and the spikes of my crampon clip the rung, I’m likely to trip and tumble into the crevasse.

“Oh, God.” I take a deep breath.

I slowly and carefully step long the ladder, and as I near the centre it bounces with my movement, just as the wind buffets me. I momentarily teeter, straighten, and hasten across. I squat and hyperventilate. I regain my composure and open my backpack to check that Thomas’ ashes are secure.

Ahead, another wide glacier slopes upwards to a massive ice wall that’s one-hundred metres high. Moving up this slope is agonising, but climbing a hundred-metre ice wall is horrifying. I clip onto a static line and begin a slow-motion sequence of ascender, crampons and ice axe that bursts a lung with each metre. The higher I climb, the more precarious I feel. The wind buffets me and whispers, *You are so very high* and I tell it to *Shut-up*. But the whispering continues, reminding me of my frailties, and after forty minutes of this agonising ascent, I begin to cry.

Dawa climbs to my side and sees the tears on my cheeks. He signals, *Look up*. It isn’t so far to the top and so the wind stops whispering, at least for the moment. It takes me an hour to reach the top of the ice-wall. The effort has depleted me and the reflected glare off the ice has burnt my face. Dawa and I rest and hydrate.

The final approach to the summit is a narrow ridge called ‘The Razors Edge.’ This forty-metre section is less than a hand’s width across. The drop to one side is a thousand metres and one-hundred-twenty metres on the other, though I do not dare look down. I clip onto another static line. This is the most dangerous moment and I am scared but I must concentrate. My lungs search for oxygen and I can feel my heart beat so strongly that I am certain my chest must be pulsating. The ridge is too narrow to walk along, so I drop just below the ridge so that I’m literally hanging off the side of the mountain. I perform three-point

movements. It is a painfully slow waltz that requires a meticulous performance. The points of my crampons, projecting forwards from my boots, punch the ice and I assess that they have adequately penetrated. I stare at the ice that's centimetres from my face and refuse to acknowledge that I am suspended in the air, with a potential kilometre fall. Left boot—*Steady your breathing and check the penetration.* Ice-axe—*Does it take your weight? No, slow your breathing and re-do it.* Right boot. I refuse to allow any emotion or thought other than the dance I have with this mountain.

The Razor's Edge suddenly inclines upwards at eighty degrees and a surge of panic flows through me. *Oh, my God. This is dangerous.* But I know this is the last two metres and I shall soon be upon the summit. I lecture myself, *Don't lose focus now. Be careful. Your three points are critical.*

I focus. I ignore the protests of muscles, heart and lungs. I attempt to haul myself up, my right leg starts to shake, and another wave of panic hits me. I stop and slow my breathing. I begin again and strain up the incline, sucking huge breaths. I prevail, ascend and stand atop the summit.

Oh, how good this feels. I scream, "Woooooooooooooo." I hold up my hand but do not get the customary *High Five* from Dawa. He's focused on my safety.

After he secures me, he pulls my hood back and the freezing wind slaps my face. He gestures, *Don't talk, just listen.* There's nothing to hear. It's silent.

Then it occurs to me it's anything but silent. The wind roars and makes a whistling sound through the ropes. It shushes the drifting snow off the edge of the tiny summit. My heart pounds in my ears and my accelerated breathing sends puffs of steam into the air. Prayer flags flutter while Dawa softly murmurs a Buddhist prayer of thanks to the mountain.

From my backpack, I remove the small urn of Thomas' ashes and a postage-stamp-sized photo of him. Dawa approaches me and opens my hand to reveal the photo of Thomas.

With his ice-axe, he chips a hole in the summit the size of my boot and forms a wind-break using his backpack. He cuts a piece from the Tibetan prayer flags and places it in the hole along with a cone of incense that he removes from his backpack. He gestures for me to place Thomas' photo on top of the prayer flag and ignites the incense and prayer flag. He stands, hands in supplication, and begins a deep guttural song. Without hesitation I remove the lid of the urn and cast Thomas' ashes to the wind and release a sound from somewhere deep in my chest; a sound well known to those who have lost a child. It echoes across the valley, carrying my heart and my love, as the wind carries the last of my son's body. The smoke sends his face to the universe along with Dawa's Buddhist prayers.

When my time comes, I will search the universe until the end of time to find you. Not now though, but soon.

What do I do now? I am here, alive, in this place. I have come to better understand that I have no control over the past, and limited control over the future. Everything can change in the blink of an eye. There is only now.

I turn around. Surrounding me, against a blue sky is an amphitheatre of colossal peaks roaring above eight thousand metres—Everest, Hilary peak, Nuptse and Cho Polu. Looking down to the south, low-level cloud creates an eerie white blanket through which the distinctive cone shape of Ama Dablam pokes through. To the east, massive glaciers disappear down a valley.

I am perched upon a tiny platform atop the Earth, remote and beautiful. Here there is only ice, wind and expanse. It is fragile and susceptible. The mountain whispers, *Walk gently.*

I smile at Dawa and point at the mountains. He returns the smile and holds his hands, mimicking a camera, and I pose triumphantly. I hold my hands together in supplication and bow my head towards him in an offer of thanks and gratitude. I motion for him to stand beside me, and with an arm around each other's shoulders, we scream as I take a selfie.

Dawa looks to the north and his expression changes. He stands for a full minute, silent. He points to dark clouds forming over Nuptse moving towards us, and makes another hand signal; *Show's over, let's get the hell out of here.*

See you soon, Thomas. Time to dance with the mountain again.