

# A S C E N T

*The world lay at his feet; he could see the whole of humanity from his seat; every direction he looked he could see white – the whiteness of the mountains screamed Mankind’s smallness, His atrocities lost in timelessness, His loves lost in space – and he could sense his victory; atop the world’s second highest peak, he found peace. For him, now, the only direction that had meaning was down. He spread his hands and hugged the warped times and the skewed air – no weatherman counted up here. He knew he had immortalized himself among his peers – his rivals and his friends – waiting down at the Base Camp, 14,000 feet below him. Rubbing his two-day beard and squinting against the harshness of the uninhibited sun, he smiled to himself. Two days, he wondered. Two days and two nights of a fearful solo ascent; paying no heed to his guides – the natives of the beautiful land of Nepal – he’d done it against all hope. He took out the photograph of his wife from the outermost pocket and held it before his face. The visibility was fading despite the brilliant sun – clouds gathered around him, below him, above him – and the distant screams of rolling thunder were faintly discernable. “I love you,” he said, looking at her. “I told you I’d give you the world, and now, I have.” The world lay at his feet. He kissed her and put her back into his pocket, against his heart, and adjusting his heavy backpack, he turned around to face the fear all over again. His descent.*

*As he made his way down the side of the unforgiving mountain, he pushed all thoughts away from his mind. His sole objective now was to get home to his wife’s bosom, the warm fireplace and the cozy bed. Dreaming about her touch, he stepped into a crevasse and fell, headfirst into the void of death – into the black hole of mercilessness and as he fell, his hand reached out to his heart and he took out her photograph. In the fast-receding light, he saw her face fade away as darkness closed around him.*

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“Wake up, honey,” came the sweet voice of his wife, nestled up close to him and kissing his neck. He moaned and turned to her, looked into her lovely face and murmured, “Why are you so beautiful?” She just smiled and bit his neck playfully. “That’s because, He didn’t have a choice,” she said. “When He realized how ugly you were, He had to make up for His mistake, didn’t He?”

“Ouch,” he said, responding to her seduction by biting her ear, “That made my day.”

They played around for a while, enjoying each other’s love, when the cruel machinery of daily life played spoilsport, literally, when the telephone by the bed jarred to life.

Later that day, sitting at the kitchen table, munching his toast, he said, “I’ve got some bad news.”

She turned from the stove where she was making eggs and looked at him. “What is it?” she asked.

“The call was from Pickles,” he said and resumed munching, not meeting her eye.

“No, Tommy!” she said, vehemently. “Tell that creep that you’re out! No way am I allowing you to go out, risking yourself again.” She walked up to him and drew up a chair next to him.

“They’re offering me seventy thousand dollars, honey,” he said quietly. And looked at her. He wanted to see her face when he mentioned the money. There was a barely perceptible change in her expression – she softened up a bit.

“I – I don’t care if they offer you a hundred. Tommy, please!” she pleaded. But she knew she was losing the argument fast.

“Come on, Pam,” he said. “Be reasonable. One climb, seventy grand and I’m back home. That’s it! After that I’m out. I swear. Believe it or not, I *do* miss you when I’m up on those peaks. How I wish you were there with me to share the moment.”

“Well,” she said, “I miss you more!”

“Ok, how about a deal?” he asked. “You can come with me to Nepal and we won’t miss each other that much.” He smiled, knowing that he’d got her.

He eyes widened in surprise and it took some time for the words to sink in. she stifled a scream and hugged him tightly. “Thomas Moss, you have no idea how much I love you!” she cried and stepped across him and sat on his lap. They looked into each other’s eyes and kissed. The eyes said all that was needed to be said.

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*As he fell, Tommy remembered that day in the kitchen where they’d made love on the floor, he remembered the hurried packing, the countless times they’d kissed each other passionately – he was proud of himself for not allowing his twenty-year marriage to fail despite his demanding climbing schedules – the wildly enjoyable plane trip across oceans and the first sight of the white land of Nepal, when Pam had whooped with joy on the aisle of the plane, the check-in at the hotel at the base of the mountaineering club, those nights of wild, animalistic sex they’d enjoyed...*

*He remembered all this as he fell into the void. He clutched the photo close to his heart and fell silently, not screaming. He remembered something much more important too.*

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The fumes from the hookah seemed do vibrant; they danced merry, seductive numbers in front of her eyes – those eyes, those two lifeless black dots of ignominy, Those two black mirrors reflecting shame and hatred, anger and rebellion, searching, so far in vain, for love... She puffed at the intoxicating, curvaceous column of the hookah and felt so defeated. There was nothing in her life worth fighting for anymore, nothing worth living for; she had so much life in her, so much love; now, she felt drained. She felt cheated, soiled by the disgusting, unrelenting machinery of the world that just rolled on and on, without caring for minuscule specks like her. She wanted to cry; the tears wouldn’t come. *No, the tears said, don’t expose me to the alien world. I’ll just vaporize, like all your hopes have.*

*Hopes, she replied back, and fears...*

*And confidence.*

*And clarity.*

*And happiness.*

*And my will to live...*

She puffed at the glowing coal of tobacco until the smoke filled her lungs and the nicotine filled her brain and forced the hesitant tears out. Her eyes watered. She looked away as she didn't want him to see her crying. He, who had been seated quietly opposite her, smoking his cigarette, lost in his own world of turmoil and upheavals. They'd been sitting there for quite some time – time, it seemed, had taken a vacation.

*Please*, she cried out silently, to him, to the world, *spare me! Don't do this to me! I don't have the strength to go on like this alone...* that was when she made up her mind.

"I gotta go," she said, breaking the void of silence, shattering the calm, and reaching for her bag, she stood up.

Taken by surprise, he put out his cigarette and looked up at her. "Where to? Come on, don't ditch me like this."

She shook her head, her mane of auburn hair catching whatever little breeze there was and flailing around her face. He couldn't help but admire her beauty, the brilliance of her face, but also couldn't help but notice the death in her eyes, that sadness that seemed to beg for mercy.

Without waiting, she made her way through the other coffee tables and out onto the busy thoroughfare. She paused for a second to strengthen her resolve and looked around her. Asinine faces everywhere; looks of lust, greed and disgust met her from every direction. She clutched her bag against herself, against her full bosom, protecting it from the harsh evil and it, in turn shielding her, and made her way down the road.

The church building looked huge, bleak and uninviting. She stood outside the church and closed her eyes. She didn't know what else to do, where else to go. Blasphemy entered her mind; *I'm not a Christian*, it said. *This is a sin!* The days of her schooling spent in a Christian Convent came to her in a weirdly malignant dose of nostalgia. Her body shuddered momentarily, not against the cold, but against the coldness inside her – the hollow space inside her that seemed to reverberate against her mind, "*LOSER! LOSER!*"

She breathed deeply and climbed the four sets of stairs to arrive at the oaken doors of the church. An imperceptible change came over her as she stepped over the threshold into the long, silent, almost silken interior. The pews were empty, the altar was empty; in fact, there was no one around. The silence seemed to fill her soul, press her from every angle and when she closed the door behind her, the cool, silent web of silent peace cocooned her. She felt the voices die down within her, felt the knot in her stomach loosen a little. She felt so small, so helpless in front of the divine magnitude of the church and the divinity and peace that the walls, floors and furniture seemed to emanate...

She sat down in one of the pews, put her head on her hands, resting on the pew in front and cried. She cried silently, not wanting to disturb the silence of the silent sanctum; the silence of her soul was now a deafening thunder.

She cried and didn't think of anything else. Didn't do anything else, but cried.

"God," she prayed silently, "I've never asked you for anything in my life. I've accepted whatever you've given me as a gift – both challenges and opportunities. All I ask of you now is your company. Don't desert me. Please give me courage to face the world. That's all I ask. Give me the courage..."

"I think he heard you, Pam," came a voice from behind her. She looked up in surprise to see him sitting two rows behind, smiling at her, his arms folded and smiling, not in mockery, but in serenity. *Serenity?*

"How long have you been there, Tom?" she asked, wiping her tears.

“Long enough to realize that its my job to wipe your tears,” he said and came up to her side. He knelt down by her side and brushed the strands of her soft, auburn hair from her face and wiped her moist face. “I’ve lost my dad too, you know,” he said softly looking into her eyes. “Its hard, I know, but not the end of the world. Don’t give up, Pam. This is not the Sophia Penh I know.”

“Why do you call me Pam?” she asked.

“I like the name,” he said. “Besides, I don’t think you’d like being called panda, would you?”

She laughed gently, and nestled her face against his warm hands. “Hey,” he said. “Will you marry me?”

She looked at him with her brilliant eyes and said with a smile, “Don’t you think its blasphemy for me, who’s not a Christian, to say yes in a church?”

He didn’t say anything. He just waited for her to sort out her confusion and smiled in response. Shrugging, she said, “Yes. I will.”

He kissed her right there, him, kneeling and she, sitting on the pew, in front of the idol of the Christian God, and made a silent promise, a vow, never to desert each other. “I love you,” he said. “You have no idea how tough it has been for me to say it.”

“Same here,” she said.

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*His body banged against an outcropping of hard, frozen stone and he lost sense of his legs. The pain spread through him like a cancer, eating into his body and his mind. He knew he was dead before his head hit the solid permafrost at the bottom of the crevasse and shattered his skull. His body was found three days later by his team. Penh came to know of his death four days later.*

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She found herself at the same church again, in much the same state of mind, as she had been the last time she had been here. The words wouldn’t come. She looked back to see if he was sitting behind her, knowing that it was in vain. This time, even the tears refused to come. Anger flooded her, anger at herself for letting this happen, anger at Tommy for allowing his old, worn body to endure the pain, anger at the management, and finally anger at the God in front of her. “Are you deaf?” she demanded quietly. “Where were you when I needed you?”

The silence answered her. Of course, she couldn’t hear it.

When the bishop came into the church on Monday after a satisfying Sunday break, he found her lying there, at the altar, in a pool of her own blood, with a gun by her side. She looked almost regal in death too. He crossed himself and looked up at his God.

“Were you deaf, My Lord?” he asked and proceeded with the last rites.