

# NOTHING

ALL FROM

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TOM LIVINGSTONE

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et snow tumbles down the mountain toward me, hissing around my legs, piling against my knees. As the spindrift avalanches grow heavier, the crystals become as thick as tar. *Is this a good idea?* I wonder. But the situation demands instinctive action, not thought. I kick into the slope and hurry toward a vaguely defined rib of snow. I am protected here: the slides thunder harmlessly to my left and right. Forty meters below, Luka and Aleš watch in silence, staring blankly, as they feed the rope through gloved hands. I'm hypoxic and exhausted too, but it's my turn to keep us moving up. I kick again, and catch a glimpse of the 7145-meter summit of Latok I. Even though it's only a hundred meters above, the rocky pinnacle looks distant, innocent, unaware of what it means to us. Clouds and snow punch across the sky. It's hard to believe this is the apex we should try to reach.

This wasn't how I imagined my first Himalayan experience. Last night, eight inches of snow had fallen. My whole body had tensed as spindrift smashed into our fragile shelter, burying the tent and our summit hopes. Still, once the clouds thinned and flecks of sun appeared, we began to climb again.

Now, I move a few more steps, and then I lean head-first into the slope. When I recover my breath, I bury my axe in the snow and pretend to belay off it. We are far gone, committed, approaching 7000 meters in bad weather. But this is exactly where I want to be—if only I could feel something, anything, other than numbness and exhaustion.



## I'd always said, "I'd like go big in the Himalaya."

As a young teenager, I flicked through dusty black-and-white books, mesmerized by faded pictures of serpentine glaciers and towering peaks. I read of unclimbed walls and summits, and I pictured myself moving along a knife-edge ridge, backdropped by a cerulean sky, the sunlight rich and golden. I imagined strength of muscle and mind, a show of boldness and determination in an otherworldly arena. But these dreams were far removed from my family home near the south coast of England, amid the gentle woodlands and the chalk hills.

When I started climbing on the sea cliffs of Swanage, I realized the insignificance of the top of a route. There, it simply meant a return to the rolling slopes and wind-blown grasses above the precipices. In the mountains, however, it's rarely the end of the experience—as the common saying goes, the summit is only halfway. I began to focus more on the process of getting there and back: learning to relax on creaking limestone and shale edges, getting used to the crash and boom of the waves and taking the time to fiddle in plenty of nuts and cams to create some sense of safety—while my dad belayed from below, watching with keen eyes and a furrowed brow. Each time I topped out, my satisfaction lasted only as long as it took me to open the guidebook again. All too soon, I wondered: *What's next?*

But in my youthful naïveté, when I only cared about climbing as hard as possible, I managed at least some self-restraint: I realized that mountaineering in the Greater Ranges was a serious undertaking. It was no use merely to be able to extend my limits in sport climbing, or to battle up a hundred meters of rimed-up Scottish winter rock. I had to create a solid base of well-rounded experience, over many years of trad, winter and alpine climbing. I had to test myself against harder and harder routes in the mountains, venturing farther from my comfort zone—always wary of where the next step led and of my ultimate goal.

From 2014 to 2017, I devoted myself entirely to this passion, traveling to the Canadian Rockies, Alaska, Patagonia and the Alps. I scraped together a living as a hiking guide and a rope-access technician, arranging blocks of work to maximize the amount of time I could spend in the mountains. Before I could go to the Himalaya, I needed to know how far I could push myself. Could I move for pitch after pitch, day after day? What does it feel like to stand beneath a 1000-meter dark and icy north face in winter, without bivy gear? How much water was just enough for twenty-six hours of climbing?

When I reached the summit of the Petit Dru in the Alps late one night, I stared, transfixed, at the Madonna statue that glinted in my headlamp beam. My mouth parched and knuckles bloodied, I wanted to be home. But part of me still needed more. I longed to feel the euphoria that rushed through me once I'd climbed through a crux and the anchor was in sight. I wanted to fill my life with views from mountaintops, where bright ridgelines and valleys rippled before me—though invariably I arrived late in the day, when it was too dark to see anything.



At dusk, in March 2016, a small blizzard caught Pete Graham and me just below the top of the Grandes Jorasses during a winter ascent of the Walker Spur. As the landscape dimmed behind the falling snow, I felt the objective, inhuman danger of the mountains in a way that I never had before, a sense of oblivion just beyond the shadows—a void where all fantasies of crisp white mountains and spiny granite ridges might vanish into darkness, where boldness and determination crumbled, where no accumulation of knowledge or skill could save me, and strength of muscle and mind meant nothing.

Later, I wondered if the experience was something akin to what the American climber Hayden Kennedy called, “real fear... a deep pit that emerges... always when you least expect.” At the time, I thought, *This is something I can't simply back off from.* I wanted to be up, over and down from the wall, but night enveloped us. Pete—tough, quiet and experienced—couldn't resist squeezing in another bivy. Soon, he was falling asleep while eating a frozen Snickers bar. I pulled a yellow bivy bag over our heads. It flapped against my face, wet and icy. We hunched like gargoyles to weather the storm.

The next morning, when I cracked the ice from the stiff yellow fabric and squinted into the frosted air, the sun's rays flashed along the summit ridge. We had survived—chilled, damp and barely sleeping—but intact. Sixty meters above the bivy, the pale light reflected off the snow, and a part of me was already there, feeling the warmth prick the skin on my face. A subtle shift had taken place within me during the night: I'd somehow grown accustomed to the dark emotion that engulfed me. I was glad that I'd confronted this fear, for as it dissipated into the dawn, replaced by



a surreal emptiness, the contrast of sunshine above and shadows below seemed clearer to me; my urge to be alive grew stronger. I wanted my body to join my mind on that luminous ridge, to be silhouetted against the sky. Hungry and smiling, I stamped my feet and began climbing toward the light.

Soon, however, I wondered again, *What's next?* Inexorably, I felt drawn to other cold, dim, high places, craving a chance to test myself again, to glimpse what lay within the darkness once more. A year earlier, Uisdean Hawthorn and I had stood beneath the north face of Mt. Alberta in the Canadian Rockies. The wall overshadowed us like a breaking wave. I had trouble believing it was possible to climb. At the start of the technical pitches of the House-Anderson Route, I hung on the belay in a thick silence. The fear came back, and I felt as if it were clawing at my stomach from within. The wind bit. Limestone crumbled. I didn't know what to say. We turned back.

In September 2016, we returned to the same route. I'd barely slept the evening before, worried about the commitment. *No chance of a rescue*, I thought. I imagined the rock breaking, my axes ripping and screeching from their placements. I tried to push the thought of gear blowing and a body falling from my mind. I knew, with a stronger belief in our partnership and in myself, that Uisdean and I could climb whatever came above,

and that this route was an important step toward the bigger Himalayan objectives I still secretly harbored. I looked up toward the headwall once more, morbid black with shattered rock, and I pushed on into the night.

**I first met** Luka Stražar in Scotland on a British Mountaineering Council Winter Meet a few years ago. Although we never tied in together, we shared a few “typically Scottish” belays—the kind where you stand for hours on end, swinging your arms and legs, shivering as the damp creeps through each layer of your clothing. While his ropes flapped in a gale, he climbed a pitch of overhanging, hoared-up rock, calmly searching for gear with one arm and locking off the other (and that was after belaying for hours). Only when I pressed him, did Luka reveal he'd been on several Greater Ranges expeditions. His quiet, understated manner appealed to me, and we developed a friendship.

I was, predictably, on another alpine trip when Luka called in early 2018. He and another Slovenian, Aleš Česen, were looking for a third member for their expedition to the Choktoi Glacier in Pakistan. “We are flirting with the North Ridge,” he said. This was his bait. “After Scotland, I figured we'd climb together some day,” Luka continued.

I urged them to give me more information about Pakistan, but I only received short comments that made my mind race. They told me that

[Opening Spread] **The view from Tom Livingstone's base camp tent in 2018, with the North Ridge of Latok I (7145m) in profile.** Tom Livingstone | [Facing Page] **Livingstone during a warm acclimatization on Baintha Kabata (6250m).** Aleš Česen | [This Page] **Unable to pitch their three-person tent, Luka Stražar, Livingstone and Aleš Česen**

**squeeze onto a narrow bivy ledge. In the 1979 *American Alpine Journal*, Michael Kennedy recalled bivying “on tiny ledges hacked out of the ice.” Nonetheless, he said, “It wasn't all grim. The scenery was gorgeous. We had been on the climb so long that it seemed as if it was the only thing we had ever known.”** Luka Stražar

**“THE STILL-UNCLIMBED NORTH  
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STYLE OF COURSE!”—JEFF  
LOWE (1950–2018), ALPINIST 4**

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“one of our objectives is Latok I.” Of course, I knew of the mountain’s reputation. In 1978 the peak was still unclimbed when Americans George Lowe, Jeff Lowe, Michael Kennedy and Jim Donini spent twenty-six days on its legendary North Ridge, struggling with high-altitude storms, small rations and relentless technical climbing, until the mountain began to seem like a strange world of its own. In *Rock & Ice* 157, Kennedy recalled:

*Spindrift whispers by. Fingers of cold smoke penetrate every opening in my half-frozen shell. Fat snowflakes stick to my wool-clad hands as they clutch the sodden rope. Above, all is gray and white ice flutings, runnels, a few bits of rock, and wisps of wind-whipped cloud obscure the summit ridge 300 feet distant. The void below is non-existent, 7,000 feet of exposure gobbled up by a solid wall of mist. My mind is blank. We’ve been on the climb for 20 days (or is it 21?), so long it seems like the only thing I’ve ever known—a routine of getting up, peeing, putting on a brew, eating, dressing against the cold, packing gear, climbing, hauling loads, hacking out a tent platform, shitting, melting snow, eating, sleeping. And then starting all over again....*

Around that time, Jeff Lowe became ill. They were about two hundred meters below the summit when his coughing and fever became so severe that the team grew afraid that he would die. They turned back, only to be trapped, stormbound, in a snow cave at 6800 meters for three days. At last, with little food left and no other choice, they descended into a tempest of snow. By the time they got Jeff safely off the mountain, they’d made ninety rappels and exhausted every reserve they had. In *Rock & Ice*, Kennedy wrote:

*At one point or another, we each proclaimed some variation of the same sentiment, that this was the best climb we’d ever been on.... I never had any desire to return to Latok. Perhaps I was too lazy to repeat all that hard climbing, or afraid to fail again. I prefer to think, though, that the experience was complete in and of itself, despite the lack of a summit.... For me it is enough for Latok to remain a memory, an ideal once aspired to that still resonates today.*

About a year later, on July 19, 1979, Japanese climbers Tsuneo

[Photo] Latok I with ascent routes. After trying the North Ridge, Josh Wharton wrote in the 2009 *AAJ*: “Approximately 40 expeditions (a veritable who’s who of alpine climbing) have visited the Choktoi Glacier since the late ‘70s...[with] a success rate of zero percent on teams’ primary objectives.... It would be easy to write off the valley as cursed, but Latok and the other world-class objectives are too big and beautiful to pass up.” Luka Stražar





## LATOK I: IMPOSSIBLE IS NOT FOREVER

Alexander Gukov

"Sanya, I have a proposition for you that you can't refuse," Oleg Koltunov called to tell me. "The North Ridge of Latok I." It did turn out to be really hard to refuse. The mountain looked tremendous in the photos. It was spring 2013. Our team would consist of four Russian climbers: Oleg Koltunov, Vyacheslav Ivanov, Alexander Ruchkin and me. But that summer, a group of terrorists killed eleven climbers at a base camp below Nanga Parbat, and we didn't go to Pakistan. And now I'm the only one of the four still alive. Oleg fell to his death during the Russian Mountaineering Championship in May 2015. Alexander and Vyacheslav died during the descent from Mt. Huandoy Pico Sur three months later.

Since then, the North Ridge became my *idé fixe*. Alpinists had been trying to complete that route for forty years, to no avail. In 2017 I aimed to climb it with Anton Kashevnik and Valery Shamalo. Our attempt showed me that impossible is not forever. It was realistic to climb that ridge.

Three tough climbers with an ambitious goal, minimum equipment and maximum effort—that's what we needed. The North Ridge of Latok I isn't a mountain route on which you can spend two or three days and you're done. It's at least seven days from base camp to the top—that is, at today's level of alpinism. And even then, you need three things to happen at the same time: good weather, maximum acclimatization—and the best lucky streak of your lives.

Most of the past expeditions, if you take a look at them, lacked good weather, if nothing else. The North Ridge isn't just a ridge that from base camp, at first glance, just looks long and technically uncomplicated. No. It's impossible to walk merely on the crest itself. There are numerous snowy seracs that alternate with granite walls. Last time, it took Anton, Valery and me three hours to dig a fifty-meter horizontal path across the ridge from our bivouac to the rocky part with a shovel. It was brutal. So you have to climb to the right of the ridge, on the west wall. And the more the angle of the crest lessens, the more you must traverse, following its contour. It sounds strange, but that's the way it is. Moreover, the wall itself is cut by numerous small vertical snow crests, and each of these must be climbed, one after the other. And if the last person on the rope doesn't have an ice axe, and he just jumars, that means lots of leaping from one anchor to the next. I'll tell you, it's not a lot of fun.

But back to the preparation of this



year's expedition.... Three tough climbers. Whom should I call? The Glazunov brothers, ambitious young guys, known for their speedy ascents. Gukov and the Glazunovs: we'd be a force to be reckoned with, I thought.

Although they'd never climbed with me before, the brothers immediately agreed to my proposal. I believed we'd definitely succeed. I launched a crowdfunding campaign to raise money to make a film. I contracted with companies to sponsor us with equipment. Everything was going well.

But a couple of weeks before our departure for Pakistan, Yevgeny Glazunov began to have doubts. I got his final NO the day before we were leaving, on my birthday.

*Fuck fuck fuck.* Where was I going to find a third man? We were leaving the next day. Then thoughts began to creep in my mind: *It's not worth climbing as just a pair; it's dangerous; it's difficult. But mountains are always dangerous and difficult. Who can predict how accurate your misgivings will turn out to be? Maybe they're all just cowardice?*

"So, Sergey, should we go as a pair?" I asked.

"I'm ready," Sergey said.

"Then let's go. Five of us will start on the mountain together, at least."

At base camp, we met up with three guys from another Russian expedition—Victor Koval, Konstantin Markevich and Alexander Parfenov—who'd arrived five days earlier. They planned a direct climb of Latok I via the North Face. It looked like an amazing, but very, very serious route. Its lower third was blue-

grey ice; the middle third was snow; and the highest third was a rock wall. If they climbed it, their success would create a sensation.

But, as they drew nearer, they realized that the unbelievably warm air had melted the ice that sealed loose rocks to the face, and the entire wall was being bombarded with falling stones. They were forced to retreat.

Meanwhile, for two days, Sergey and I went over our gear—again and again—reducing it as far as was reasonable. There was an anxious feeling I couldn't shake. Oh, if only there were three of us! To our surprise, the weather stayed fine: blue skies with only a few, high clouds. All the summits around were uncovered. But at the same time, the heat was causing more and more of the mountain to crumble off: we could see the avalanches from camp, but not the rockfalls—they were still far away. From the start of the route, we looked around and didn't notice anything unusual. We planned our departure for the next day.

On the lower part, moving up the snow couloir, we tried to keep ourselves below the upper rocks to shelter from wet avalanches that rushed past. By the evening of the first day, we'd reached the spot where my partners and I had spent our second night the year before. Once we moved to the west side of the crest, however, the climbing got much harder. We knew that we'd violated the second condition for a successful ascent—maximum acclimatization. But there was no other way: either squander the good weather or finish the climb with extraordinary health.

Yes, it was difficult, but damn it, it's Latok



[Photo] **Sergey Glazunov on the final pitch that he climbed on the North Ridge of Latok I. "He was reaching for freedom, his mode of life was unsophisticated," Glazunov's wife, Nina, wrote to *Alpinist*.** Alexander Gukov

I. It's supposed to be difficult. Along the entire route, until we reached 6700 meters, we observed traces of past expeditions: pieces of ropes, slings, old-school pitons. The last thing we encountered was a small, dark blue haul bag, frozen into the ice. At that height, only the Jeff Lowe expedition could have left it.

"What's there, Sergey?" I yelled. "Is there food?" Food was the main thing we didn't have enough of by that point.

"No, Sanya, only stuff," Sergey said. Man, how I wanted to snack on a bit of chocolate from that long-ago expedition.

On the seventh day of climbing, when we clambered onto a huge serac, the weather turned bad: dark grey clouds covered the top of the mountain. It started snowing. What lay farther ahead, we didn't know. We remained in the tent waiting for a clearing in the clouds. I changed the points on my crampons and sharpened the ice tools and screws. There was only enough food left for two days, and we had to ration it, since we didn't know how much time we'd have to sit there. I really wanted to order a pizza on the satellite tracker-communicator, but I didn't know where to call.

We talked a lot. It turned out that Sergey and I had many of the same opinions: we both didn't like Putin and his corrupt power system; we both liked Navalny and his "wonderful Russian future"; we were both thinking about immigrating to other countries: me to the United States, Sergey to France, where his

wife Nina came from. Sergey dreamed of going to mountain guide school and learning how to lead people on trips in the Alps. A great dream. But fate had other plans.

After two days, the weather improved, and we could see the final wall. "Sanya, tomorrow is the best day, you have to get this mountain and then get the fuck off it," my friend Anna Piunova, the editor-in-chief of Mountain.ru, texted me from Moscow.

But that day didn't work out to be the best day. As soon as we began to get closer to the wall, half of the serac—on which we had spent three very quiet nights—collapsed under me with a *whooshing* sound. I hung over the precipice and watched the remnants of the serac sweep down and away, bringing with them everything in their path. I hadn't experienced such a surge of fear-based adrenaline in a long time.

After that near miss, we fixed two ropes on the rock wall, and we spent the night in the place that the serac had vacated. Once we'd eaten our last breakfast, we set off in the dark, traveling light. I tried to convince Sergey to take a tent with us, or at least a mat. No luck.

After 10 a.m. snow fell again, and our speed dropped. For such a height, the terrain was very difficult: steep rocks covered by drifts. Indeed, we got pretty tired. At last, the rocks ended. Ahead, however, the snow became almost vertical. *Seven o'clock in the evening. It will soon get dark. We need to go down, otherwise we will freeze here, I thought. But there, a little higher, it looks like that's it, like it's the end. It looks like it's the summit. We have to climb there.*

Ten to fifteen meters above me, Sergey shouted that there was nowhere farther to go: all he saw were steep downward slopes and snow mushrooms. He could perceive nothing above him, he said. Below him, the other side vanished into the whiteout. Snowflakes whirled in the air. He could not belay me up there: the snow was too friable. We decided that was the summit and that we should get the hell out of there. After all, four and a half hours earlier, the satellite tracker had indicated that the altitude was 6980 meters.

Then it was as if everything took place in a fog. I remember that we descended to

our tent and that we slept there for a long time; I remember that in the early morning we discussed whether or not Sergey had actually reached the apex of the mountain. He thought he'd arrived on the main summit. I thought he'd only gotten to the top of the North Ridge. We kept going down. Sergey went first. I went second.

For me, the descent is always the most important part. Once I've used my last iota of strength, and I've stood on the highest point of a climb, there's a click—as if one battery in my body turns off. I know I must be extremely attentive to continue safely on what energy remains.

Early the next morning, I heard the pleasant sound of a helicopter.

*Are they looking for us?* I thought. *Not likely. Maybe the guys from the second expedition called for help because of rockfall.* But the pilots were looking for us. They dropped some provisions and gas, and they flew off. It would have been impossible to pick us up at such a height and on such steep ground.

Later, from an Abalakov anchor, Sergey descended a snowy slope.

"Sergey, use two ice screws for the anchors. I don't like to stay on just one," I told him several times.

"No Alex, we don't have time for this," he replied.

He stopped on the edge, looked around intently, and then disappeared beyond a bend in a field of rocks. I never saw him again.

*What's taking so long?* I thought.

"Sergey, what's happening with the rappel? Off belay?" I shouted for a long time. But there was no answer.

The ropes seemed to have slackened. *This must mean everything is OK. The next belay is ready.*

I rappelled to the bend, but Sergey wasn't there.

*Fuck, fuck, fuck....*

I rappelled to the next anchor. Both ropes were attached to a solitary piton hammered into the rock. *Where is Seryoga? How did this happen? I told him to use two points for the anchors! I have absolutely nothing: nothing to make the descent, and nothing even to establish a reliable anchor here. Only one hammered piton and the ice axe on my belt. Fuck.* These were only some of the thoughts that coursed through my head. Then the worst realization sunk in: *Down there is the dizzying vertiginous*



kilometer-and-a-half of void where your friend fell.

I kept shouting and looking, but neither Sergey nor any traces of his fall were anywhere to be seen. All that appeared was a snow slope that plunged, empty, into the far distance below.

For two days, my satellite tracker wouldn't turn on—it had only 2 percent left of its battery charge. *But the SOS button should work.* Then: *Hallelujah.* It turned on. I sent a message: “I need help. Evacuation required. Sergey fell. I'm hanging on, without any gear.”

Anna Piunova replied: “The helicopters will be there soon, wait.”

If someone had told me right away that I'd have to stay there a week, I probably wouldn't have survived. I rappelled to a small stone ledge with the 6 or 8mm cord, tied the tent to it without poles, climbed in and began to wait.

But the helicopters didn't reach me that day. A storm blew in, and avalanches rumbled from above. And so it went on for the next six days. Each morning, I dug myself out of new-fallen snow. Over and over, I received the same messages: *The next day, there should be a weather window, and the helicopter should arrive.* But the next day, nothing changed. *If help never arrives at all, I wondered, what should I do? Maybe try to go down myself, draping a rope over rock features for anchors? Would I even find them?*

Day and night merged. The hallucinations began. I kept seeing Sergey, sitting somewhere below, half-frozen in the snow. Once, I even thought that he'd been saved.

*How did this happen? Such a young guy, and he died. Did he try to self-belay on a single piton, and he fell?*

The hallucinations became more and more frequent.

*What's going on? Where am I?* I asked myself.

*You're in Skardu. You've been saved. Climb on down,* unknown people answered.

As soon as I opened my eyes, I realized what there wasn't anyone nearby. All around me was just snow. The silence was broken only by the avalanches falling on me. I found half a candy bar in my jacket pocket, but heating snow for water when you're sitting in a bivy and you're constantly in the path of avalanches is problematic—to say the least. I only managed to melt four or five ounces twice a day.

After three days, the tracker finally died, and I was without a link to the outside world. Yet I could still hear the sounds of helicopters making new attempts to reach me.

*If I get out of here, I'm going to marry Julia, I promised the mountain. We already have two kids.*

One night, the air got noticeably colder. The avalanches stopped.

*It's got to clear up in the morning,* I thought. If the helicopters didn't fly in the next day, then they'd never arrive.

But they did fly in—and they rescued me. On the glacier, I saw the familiar faces of friends. They wrapped me with a sleeping bag and injected me with dexamethasone. My friends and the pilots were smiling and laughing. *I felt well and calm. Impossible is not forever, I told myself. Even if you think there's no chance to survive, it can be possible. Believe me.*

Then there was a helicopter, a military hospital in Pakistan, a plane, a surgical institute in Russian, and home.

And a month later I married Julia, as I'd promised.

Author's note: Thank you, thank you, everyone who arranged the rescue operation, who took part in it, who worried, believed and prayed. My sympathies are with Sergey's near and dear ones. His body was not found, but we will remember him forever.

—Translated from the Russian by Karen Freund

Shigehiro, Shin'e Matsumi and Yu Watanabe completed the first ascent of the peak, after a long siege of the South Face. “I stood on the summit as if on the tip of a sword. The north side dropped beneath us into night,” Shigehiro recounted in *Alpinist* 30. No one had reached the top of the peak since then, though dozens of teams attempted to complete the North Ridge. In 2010 Doug Chabot noted, “The longer it goes without getting climbed, the more appeal it has.” Over the course of the 2500-meter route, conditions can vary dramatically: from cool temperatures and solid ice at the bottom, to severe windchill and seemingly bottomless sugar snow near the summit. The toughest climbing is at high altitude, when you've already been moving for days. By then, storms may have rolled in, enveloping you in a murk of falling snow. Weather windows are short: when or if one appears, the right team would need to be acclimatized and ready to launch from Base Camp.

In 2017 Russian climbers Alexander Gukov, Anton Kashevnik and Valery Shamalo turned back at around 6700 meters—the highest that anyone had gotten on the North Ridge since 1978. In the *American Alpine Journal*, Gukov recounted a fifteen-day epic of nearly constant snowfall, of hours spent each day chopping out tent platforms, of pitches of fragile, vertical snow and ice and of Shamalo's increasingly dangerous illness—a cough that turned into pneumonia. “We...didn't want to die of hunger and fatigue,” Gukov concluded. Although all three survived, both Kashevnik and Shamalo lost digits to frostbite.

What had I signed myself up for? How long should I be prepared to suffer? The Slovenians told me that they thought we could reach the summit in seven days. I'd never spent more than four days on an alpine climb before. They said that they believed “there was a better way to climb Latok I than the full North Ridge,” but revealed nothing more. The history of the peak reminded me of the books I read as a child, though I felt my heart rate rise when I thought seriously about what it meant not just to dream about being one of the figures in old photographs—but to enter, perhaps, the actual landscape of their tales.

**Normally,** alpinists solidify a partnership years before a serious expedition. Aleš, Luka and I had just a few weeks to get used to each other as a team. In February, I traveled to meet them in Slovenia for some winter climbing. While the highest summit in the Julian Alps, Triglav, is only 2864 meters, this miniature range feels much bigger than its geographic scale. The limestone creates jagged, shapely peaks, but it isn't conducive to solid mountains. “On some routes, you do not fall,” Aleš said, and he gave me a cheerful smile. His nonchalant confidence made me instantly relax.

From the valleys, dense forests of pine trees point to the sky like rockets. The tree line thins as the slopes steepen, broken by rocky outcrops. Scree tumbles down—the perfect climber's descent path—and then the mountains and cliffs dominate: vast north faces and long ridgelines. From the summits, those mighty pines, once so tall, appear tiny and insignificant. Although we all laughed easily, Pakistan was always on our minds.

I have rarely felt such instant, biting cold as I did in Slovenia's Julian Alps. On the morning that we climbed the Travnik-Šite Gully, when I stepped out of the van and into the darkness, the chill pierced my fingers, and my breath froze instantly to my balaclava in a frosty beard. Our skis cut the crisp snow. Crystals sparkled in the white light of our headlamps. We followed switchbacks through the pines. The mountains seemed completely still and silent. Winter held the world, frozen and untouched. Only the slice of our skins and the clack of our ski poles shattered the peace.



**“I REMEMBER SHARING MY DOUBTS WITH SERGEY AS TO WHETHER WE’D ACTUALLY BEEN ON THE SUMMIT.... PERHAPS SOMEONE WOULD BEND THE FACTS AND SAY THAT HE HAD BEEN THERE, BUT NOT ME.”—ALEXANDER GUKOV, MOUNTAIN.RU**

Later that day, Luka, Aleš and I stepped from the freezer-like temperatures of the north face, and into the sunshine. We simul-soloed until we reached an avalanche-prone slope, and then we roped up for the rest of the way to the top. I agreed with their decisions, and little needed to be said. They smiled at the rising pitch as I hammered a peg into shattered rock, and I laughed when they swore in English. We joked when the mood was casual, but turned serious when the climbing dictated it. Each time that airplanes rumbled overhead, we instinctively looked for the avalanche, Aleš laughed and said, “In the mountains of Pakistan, there are no planes. Only avalanches!”

During the following months, I tried to prepare myself mentally for the Karakoram. But how do you get ready for the quasi-possible? For the rest of the winter, I ran around in crampons, training and climbing as much as possible. In the summer, I just ran. Each step, each strike of my foot against the rough talus, every mile I slogged uphill, transformed into another meter I could move when on the expedition. Sweat trickled. A horizon as clear as glass advanced ever farther. Gradually, the buzz and chatter of my mind slipped away. I expected nothing, other than to give everything.

**All too soon**, the date of our departure, July 5, arrived. In a four-day daze of sleepless travel, Aleš, Luka and I journeyed through multiple airports and into a waiting jeep in Skardu. A cigarette smoldered in the driver’s smile. He drove with an air of nonchalant confidence along a boulder-strewn track, taking us toward the village of Askole. Outside the windows, the landscape was a dusty, dry brown. Brief oases of green

appeared wherever water gave life. The silty Indus River churned below the scree. We sweated and winced in the back seats. I imagined us crashing into the raging water at the bottom of the gorge. The driver sang and lit another cigarette.

Most of the local Balti people live as subsistence farmers, and working for expeditions provides one of the few options to earn extra income for their families. The twenty-one porters we hired in Askole to take our gear to base camp shouldered our twenty-five-kilo loads, and they started walking toward the mountains. We walked with them for four days toward the Choktoi glacier and Latok I. The lush green vegetation of Askole was replaced by desert, and with each turn of the glacier, the mountains rose higher. When the Latok group came into view, I stared in disbelief at their enormous size. “Oh shit. This is the real deal,” I shouted.

**Base camp life suited me well.** Our cook, Jamil Hushevi, served the best dahl and curries I’ve ever tasted. Latok I, II and III rose above us, with the largest walls I’d ever seen. I don’t mind admitting they looked improbable to me. With 2500 meters of vertical gain to the top, the northern side of Latok I was divided into days, not pitches. *I could squeeze two Grandes Jorasses into this mountain*, I thought. *Or two Mt. Albertas*. The North Ridge formed a twisting spine that bucked and rolled. “Oh. Shit,” I said again. I could see little beauty or glamour here, only thousands of meters of orange granite and white ice. “Remember,” Aleš said, “the summit is optional. We have to come back.”

Aleš and Luka proposed a logical line that followed the North Ridge

[This Page, Left] **At the fourth camp (ca. 6000m) during another 2018 attempt on the North Ridge, by Konstantin Markevich, Victor Koval and Alexander Parfenov.** | [This Page] **Around 5500 meters, on the third day of Markevich, Koval and Parfenov’s attempt. After initially trying the North Face, they attained around 6300 meters on the North Ridge. To**

**Alpinist, Markevich recalled “soberly weighing the pros and cons. The mountains were in a very dangerous condition. The descent was very difficult and dangerous because of the rockfalls and avalanches all over the wall.... Already at the bottom I got into an avalanche and broke a rib. But this is a topic for a separate story.”** Konstantin Markevich (both)



[This Page] Heavy snow on the fifth day of Livingstone's Latok I ascent, with Cesen and Stražar. Brendan Murphy describes being snowbound on the North Ridge in the 1997 *Alpine Journal*: "Funnily enough, the tedium of spending 80 hours in a bivouac tent wasn't too hard to deal with; must have a low mental metabolic rate!" Aleš Cesen  
| [Facing Page] Cesen searches for a path around the cornices in 2018. Tom Livingstone

to three quarters of its height, and then traversed to the west col between Latok I and II. From here, we could climb on the southern aspect to the summit. This route avoided the full North Ridge, but it seemed the most likely itinerary to succeed from this side. We would also avoid the complex-looking upper crest, which was littered with giant cornices and snow mushrooms above 6500 meters. Of course, we'd miss the historical mystique and allure of the complete North Ridge, but I hoped the experience of simply climbing on this enormous mountain would suffice for us. We reiterated our aim: to find a fast, alpine-style and sensible way to the summit.

When we arrived on the Choktoi Glacier, I tried not to think too much about what lay ahead. First, we had to acclimatize—which we did on the nearby peak of Baintha Kabata. At 6250 meters, a thumping headache emitted from deep within my brain, and I scrunched my face into what must have looked like a permanently pained expression.

"Agghhh," was the only greeting I gave to the summit of Baintha Kabata. Luka and Aleš made knowing smiles: they'd been on many Himalayan trips before. "Have some speck," they said. The endless amounts of dried meat didn't help my headache, but I felt better for their support. "Always take špeck," they said in stern voices.

Back on the glacier, the temperature dropped, and slushy snow began to fall. On the fifth day of rain or snow in Base Camp, I pushed away the plastic sheeting that covered the mess tent, and I stepped outside to check the mountain and the weather. I tiptoed through the snow in my sneakers, cursing. Latok I was still draped in smog-like clouds. When I glimpsed the North Ridge through a clearing, I winced: it looked completely white, plastered with snow.



**Meanwhile**, before the onset of the heavy snowfall, Russian climbers Victor Koval, Alexander Parfenov and Konstantin Markevich had already turned back on the North Face and the North Ridge. Another Russian team—Alexander Gukov and Sergey Glazunov—continued for a few more days. In an article for Mountain.ru, Gukov later reported that his partner believed they'd reached the apex of the mountain on July 23. Gukov himself thought they'd only attained a lower summit at the top of the North Ridge. As the storm gathered in force, they descended. At about 6300 meters, on their thirteenth day since leaving Base Camp, Sergey fell to his death while rappelling, leaving Alexander stranded



without enough gear to get down. The Pakistani Army attempted to reach him by helicopter, and we offered one of our ropes to the other Russians in Base Camp, as well as our own assistance. Blizzards and low clouds prevented an air rescue, and none of us could climb up to Alexander through the storm. We tried not to think about what it would be like to be stuck above 6000 meters, under the cold, heavy snowfall, without the means to descend, with no food, and with only a tent to survive. Every day we asked the other Russians in Base Camp for news. They received only short messages, confirming Alexander was still alive.

Early on July 31, Alexander's nineteenth day on the mountain, I was

woken by the *thump-thump-thump* of rotors. The weather had cleared, and with a *whoosh* of loose snow, the helicopter took off toward Latok I, directed by pilots Major Qazi Muhammad Mazhar-ud-Din, Major Abid Rafique, Lieutenant Colonel Muhammad Anjum Rafique and Major Fakhar-e-Abbas. Afterward, the pilots told Aleš that they long-line rescued Alexander using a piece of climbing rope with a bag of sand tied to the end to act as ballast. Alexander couldn't unclip from his anchor, but the helicopter managed to pull him free. In the process, a ten-inch section of the rope's sheath ripped, exposing the core. When Alexander was lowered onto the glacier, Aleš said, "I've never seen anyone so close to death, but still alive."

**“UP CLOSE, I UNDERSTOOD WHY PEOPLE SAID LATOK I WAS UNCLIMBABLE. FROM OUR BASE CAMP...THE PEAK LOOKED HOPELESS... STEEP ICE PROTRUDED INTO THE AIR, EERIE AND SUSPENDED LIKE A WHITE SKYSCRAPER.”—  
TSUNEO SHIGEHIRO, ALPINIST 30**

With Alexander recovering in hospital, we discussed our options. “It is impossible not to be affected by the rescue,” Aleš said. “But...I am still motivated to try our route.”

“If we get an opportunity, of course,” Luka said.

Out loud, I agreed that we should still make an attempt, if the weather permitted, but we should remain wary of the dangers. Inside, my mind churned and my stomach tensed.

On August 3, the forecast predicted good weather for several days, so we decided to launch the day after next. This gave time for the fresh snowfall to shed from the faces and to consolidate on the ridge.

The alarm chimed merrily at midnight, and I cursed as I struggled to find it amid the debris around the tent. I’d only been pretending to sleep, though. The *what-ifs* tumbled in my mind like a hamster wheel.

As I walked across the gently undulating glacier, the snow felt firm beneath my boots. The night sky was scattered with countless twinkling orbs. To the south, the stars were suddenly blackened by the bulk of Latok I. The mountain loomed in total darkness, and the peace of the sky—and my calm—vanished. I tried not to let my fear show to Luka and Aleš. They walked beside me in silence, so I kept walking too. Still, my mind asked: *Do you know what you’re about to attempt?*

We soloed over a monstrous, four-tiered bergschrund and began climbing low-angled ice to the right of the true North Ridge. Although cornices arced directly above us, we accepted a higher immediate risk for greater speed and possible future safety. This alternative start would save us about a day of climbing and perhaps help us avoid a storm. After so many months of anticipation, I felt relieved to be able to focus on just the steady, efficient rhythm of kicking and swinging. Steam from my breath curled and spun in my headlamp beam, floating freely. I wished I could be as effortless. Instead, my calves strained with each step, and the pack pulled at my shoulders.

By 9 a.m. we reached the North Ridge at a small notch. We’d been climbing gritty, gray ice for about seven hours, gaining around 800 meters in altitude. As shafts of light struck the upper mountain, debris fell and tumbled toward the glacier. Watching the chaos from the safety of our notch, we drifted off to sleep in the sunshine. It made sense to stop for the night. Using our snow hammock to reinforce and widen the bivy ledge, we could just about lie side-by-side. *Wowoweewah*, Aleš said as he wriggled into the double sleeping bag, making us chuckle. I shared that bag with him, and Luka crawled into the single one. With my hood cinched tight, I watched the pastel orange, pink and blue colors drain from a clear sky. The stars reappeared like shining beacons in the fading daylight.

**August 6.** A muffled sound came from Luka’s direction, causing Aleš to sit upright. A draft of cold air rushed into the double sleeping bag, and I resigned myself to the inevitable discomfort of a 3 a.m. start. Although the brilliance of the stars overhead consoled me, they were quickly dimmed by the glaring light of my headlamp and the orange glow of the stove thrust into my lap. Soon, we were climbing constantly up and right, up and right, axes and crampons cracking the smooth frozen-blue sheets.

The dawn light colored the summit of Latok I orange and yellow, and then began to creep down toward us. We took turns leading long blocks, always choosing the fastest and easiest line amid the steep walls and snow flutings. I made the most of our minimal rack (eight ice screws, a set of cams, a few pitons and six wires): belays were a single ice screw, and I often climbed forty meters before placing another. I hardly needed to remind myself not to fall—instead I simply looked past my feet. The rope snaked uselessly against the ice, down, down and down to Luka and Aleš.

Around noon, Aleš wove through a corniced section of the ridge, turning left and right under snow mushrooms that overhung on all sides like giant balloons. By late afternoon, we were eagerly searching for a bivy site. Eventually, we collapsed on top of one of the snow mushrooms. It was barely flat enough for all three of us to lie down. It was my turn to sleep in the single sleeping bag, and I was worried I’d roll off the ledge. I wrapped myself in the snow hammock, and I pulled my hood down tight. Worn out by stress and dehydration, I slept only sporadically. Again and again, I woke with a start, my feet hanging off the edge of the platform, and I wiggled back into place. I passed several minutes—or was it hours?—staring up at the countless stars that once more speckled the sky.

**August 7.** Aleš stretched out his arm from his sleeping bag, and he turned his gloved hand in the golden rays of the morning sun as if he could catch the warmth. At 6000 meters, our bodies had already become sluggish. I silently started the stove, spooning chunks of snow into the pot. Water droplets hissed as they evaporated. Luka lay motionless, trying to get another few minutes of sleep. Breakfast—only two freeze-dried meals between three people—wasn’t enough. My muscles felt empty, but it was my turn to lead again.

Sheltered in a corner from any sun, the bulges of 80-degree ice seemed as hard as concrete, and I needed several swings to make each axe placement stick. The crisp air made my lungs feel ragged as I breathed hard. Wordlessly, at the junction with our west col variation, Luka led us rightward. Simul-climbing, we passed over large vertical ridges of snow and into deep runnels of ice. Our single half rope seemed to stretch for miles before the next screw, and by the time Aleš and I reached a belay, Luka was already climbing again. I slumped my head against the snow at every anchor, trying to catch my breath as we neared 6400 meters.

At 1 p.m., I was grateful to stop at a bivy site, even if it was beneath a serac wall. Although I could see no fresh debris nearby, I tried not to think about the eight meters of overhanging ice above us. Facing out to appreciate my surroundings, I stared in wonder: the shark-tooth shapes of the Ogre I and II and the tall distant bulk of the Kunyang Chhish massif reminded me of the images I’d seen in those dusty monochrome volumes as a child—except these peaks gleamed with vivid hues of intensely dark blue shadows and bright yellow light. Snow-capped peaks and sweeping glaciers stretched to the horizon, appearing increasingly luminous and

[Facing Page] **Grateful for some slack in the rope, Livingstone steals a brief moment of rest on the third day of the Latok I climb, while fighting the effects of altitude.** Aleš Cesen





Jeff forged a strong bond, and Jeff became an active participant in Thomas' Latok I expedition later that summer, texting weather forecasts, advice and encouragement. In December 2016, Thomas and his partners Stephan Siegrist and Roger Schaeli sought the coveted second ascent of Metanoia, Jeff's 1991 seminal solo ascent on the Eiger's North Face. Thwarted by weather and route-finding problems on their first two tries, Thomas reached out to Jeff, who provided advice and a hand-drawn map that showed the right path. Successful on the next attempt, Huber's team called Jeff from the summit with the news. That spring, when Jeff went to Grenoble to receive his Piolet d'Or Lifetime Achievement Award,

Thomas was there to present him with a cam and some pitons that Jeff had left behind on Metanoia a quarter of a century earlier. Jeff later told me that he hoped that Thomas would be the one to bring closure to Latok's North Ridge.

Now, as Thomas and I sat in the shadow of the mountain, we reminisced about how Jeff had always thought ahead. It had taken climbers more than a century, since the early days of mountaineering in the Alps, to discover the simplicity of frontpointing instead of the repetitive labor of step-cutting on icy slopes. Jeff, in a few short years, demonstrated how innovative tools and technique could facilitate climbing on mosaics of thin ice and steep rock that had earlier seemed impassable. In doing so, he became a father of modern ice/mixed climbing, and he opened up a new realm in alpine climbing. Thomas and I agreed that while Jeff's climbing accomplishments will be a lasting legacy, for those who knew him, his strength and good humor—as he faced the uncertainties of a terminal illness—will always be his defining qualities.

It was a bittersweet moment. The sun was setting behind Latok I, a single golden beam illuminated the upper part of the North Ridge, and I could see Jeff's face through forty years of time lit up with his broad smile. I could see the grace of his climbing and the resolute character that had eased our burden so many years ago. I remembered him sitting in his wheelchair in a climbers' pub in Boulder a couple of months earlier, unable to speak, but still, somehow, making everyone warm in his orbit, and I realized that my life had been enriched by having known such a man.

## JEFF LOWE: THE MEASURE OF THE MAN

Jim Donini

Thomas Huber and I had a clear view of the North Ridge of Latok I when we heard via satellite phone that Jeff Lowe's long struggle with a debilitating disease had ended. Rising abruptly from the Choktoi Glacier, the Ridge makes a continuous sweep through the air. Its stark line forms the centerpiece of the mountain cirque where Latok I, Baintha Brakk (Ogre) II and Baintha Brakk (the Ogre) stand shoulder to shoulder piercing the ink-blue sky. These summits are some of the most challenging on the planet to attain. Razor cut and immense, its difficulties evident to all, the Ridge intimidates the world's best alpinists, and yet, somehow, it also beckons. Nowhere else—except this special place where so many climbers' dreams have died—is the call of the alpine world heard quite so distinctly.

Forty years earlier, Jeff, his cousin George Lowe, Michael Kennedy and I had made eighty-five rappels down the Ridge during four days of storm—thus ending a twenty-six-day epic which became a defining moment in our lives. Jeff had taken ill on the climb—likely a recurrence of an earlier virus exacerbated by altitude—and he had been in and out of consciousness for several days while windblown snow buffeted the entrance of our snow cave. During a brief lull in the storm, we decided to try to reach the summit, so tantalizingly close. Jeff resolved to be a part of the attempt despite feeling so sick. Two pitches up, a hundred meters or so from the top of the ridge, heavy snowfall swirled around us again as Jeff slumped semiconscious onto the belay ledge. We had

given everything that we had, but it was over... No words were needed as we made our way back to the snow cave. Now out of food and critically low on fuel, we waited for a break in the storm or an improvement in Jeff's condition before we started our perilous descent.

Granted neither, two days later we began to make our way down 8,500 feet of steep rock, ice and snow. During the climb, Jeff had showcased the technical brilliance and creativity that would establish him as one of the finest alpinists the world had ever seen. At times the route had been confusing, the way forward hard to discern. Jeff climbed effortlessly there, employing his almost preternatural ability to link nebulous features of rock and ice to create an intricate passage through the difficult terrain.

The descent, however, showed the resilience that would be his true measure. Barely able to stand and struggling for every breath, Jeff willed himself down the mountain. On all of his climbs, Jeff would continue to find that clarity of purpose and inner strength, whenever it was truly necessary.

Years later, when degenerative illness began to rob Jeff of his marvelous athletic gifts, and when his life became the kind of physical struggle few have to endure, he still had his strongest asset—his mind. His last years became an adventure of that mind: writing his memoir, offering guidance to climbers, contemplating world events. He not only lived far longer than the experts predicted, he lived a much richer and more meaningful life than his physical infirmities would have seemed to warrant.

In June 2016, Thomas Huber had come to Lafayette, Colorado, solely to join what would prove to be our last Latok I reunion. He and

transparent until they merged with the sky. Endless Himalayan giants stacked up like books on shelves. They all appeared so close, now, within my reach.

**August 8.** The cold dawn air felt sharp and crystalline. As the stars washed out, the soft hues of grey brightened to pink and cobalt. I could feel my throat chill with each frozen breath. We shook the ice from our sleeping bags, and then set our reluctant bodies into motion. I swung my arms, desperately windmilling blood into frozen fingers. Luka led a short pitch of overhanging ice, breaching the lip of a serac. As I followed, I could hook my axes into his placements, and I was grateful for his strength when he took the rack again. This was the highest I'd ever been. The altitude made me feel as if I were climbing with a plastic bag over my head. I tried to ignore the remaining 600 meters above.

We climbed toward the col, creeping under another giant mushroom. Rocks poked up from the ice like shattered teeth, and we threaded over and around them, always apprehensive of what lay on the southern side. In the few pictures that we had of that aspect of the mountain, we'd seen what looked like steeply angled snow slopes, but there was always a shadowed, hidden section. Our uncertainty grew with every pitch.

At the col, at last, we found the southern side overcast, windy and cold. "Huh!" Aleš said, before he immediately led off to stay warm. As we crossed over wide basins, I became lost in the monotony of plunging axes into slushy snow. By mid-afternoon, Aleš, Luka and I perched on rocky seats a few meters apart. Below my feet, the ground dropped continuously to a jumbled glacier, and the view of all that empty space reinforced the sense of remoteness. As the wind chilled the intermittent sun, we put on all our clothes. The three of us appeared wasted, empty, hunched in shrunken bodies. My waist felt a little thinner, rib bones more defined. Only the occasional hacking cough broke the silence as we passed around a single freeze-dried meal.

My lungs heaved and heart pounded while my body desperately tried to find enough oxygen at 6800 meters. The apex of the mountain was only about 300 meters above. I wanted to get it over with; a few inches of snow were forecast tomorrow, and I was concerned we'd lose our only chance of reaching the top. It would be herculean to climb to the summit and back this evening, but could we risk retreating in a storm tomorrow? Eager for more information, we sent messages from a satellite communication device to friends at home. Their reports varied, but overall it seemed that Thursday would have only minor precipitation. Ahead a bergschrund appeared to offer some shelter. We'd soon know whether we were feeling strong enough to continue.

Ninety minutes later, we reached the bergschrund, and we sat silently on our packs for a few minutes, chests rising and falling. Eventually, Aleš started stamping out a tent platform; I pulled out the tent from my pack; and Luka began to attach his shovel to his modified ice axe. We coughed and bared our teeth, stopping to rest between each simple act of establishing a bivouac. This was as far as we'd climb tonight.



**August 9.** Overnight, the snow had begun to fall heavily. I lay as if comatose in the double sleeping bag, not caring about the drifts that rose up the walls of our tent and engulfed the roof. With every wind gust, ghostly whispers of snowflakes funneled through the small zipped opening, and a trail of crystals spiraled in the frigid air. Aleš spat, seemingly drawing up the contents of his lungs. Luka's hacking cough produced chunks of solid, green phlegm. We chuckled grimly as he flicked them out the door. I thought of Jeff Lowe's illness on his North Ridge attempt, and I wondered whether we'd get stuck here or whether we were also on the verge of some lengthy retreat. Luka stared at the ceiling. "I didn't sleep," he murmured. I knew he'd almost been trapped high on a mountain in a similar situation a few years ago. "I don't want to repeat that experience."

As the wind dumped more snow onto our tent, and we smacked the walls to clear it, all thoughts of the summit vanished. Ideas of how to descend flew between pauses for breath. Could we return to the col, via avalanche-prone slopes? Or would the south side be better? We messaged a friend, Urban Novak, for information on the Japanese route, and he spoke to Michael Kennedy. "Don't do that," came the warning. "It's more dangerous. Avalanches. Seracs. Not obvious which way to descend." I didn't fancy 2500 meters of on-sight rappelling, either. Could we wait here another day? The forecast predicted tomorrow to be fair weather, at least. Only half an hour after Luka had shoveled snow away from the tent, I crawled outside to do the same, cursing the spindrift and our situation as I became absorbed in a world of grey.

By mid-morning, the snow had eased, and the sky looked brighter to the west. We'd slept intermittently, and now, with food in our stomachs, our hopes lifted with the clouds. "Maybe," I said. "I saw a snow ridge on the slopes above. Maybe we could climb that and be protected from spindrift avalanches. We could always take a look." A flash of hope appeared in Aleš's and Luka's eyes. I knew they wanted to try as well.

Luka led several pitches across runnels as thick avalanches poured down. We climbed toward a snow ridge, hoping for a safer passage up

[Facing Page] **George Lowe, Michael Kennedy, and Jeff Lowe bask in 1978 on the North Ridge. George recalls his cousin's tenacity: "I have a photo of Jeff in the snow cave two pitches below our high point when he was semi-conscious and so hypoxic that**

**his face was blue. Yet his toughness somehow enabled him to get [farther] down...and then survive the night sitting on a ledge with the tents draped over us in the storm."** Jim Donini | [This Page] **Stražar ascends an icy overhang at 6500 meters.** Tom Livingstone





**“THE EXPERIENCE WAS COMPLETE  
IN AND OF ITSELF.... FOR ME IT IS  
ENOUGH FOR LATOK TO REMAIN A  
MEMORY, AN IDEAL ONCE ASPIRED  
TO THAT STILL RESONATES TODAY.”—  
MICHAEL KENNEDY, *ROCK & ICE* 157**

the summit slopes. The gradient was steep enough to shed much of the falling snow, but spindrift still thundered down at regular intervals. *Avalanches, windblown snow and an endless snow slope. This would almost be funny if it was in Scotland,* I thought. But we were approaching 7000 meters in the Karakoram. Words such as *wild* and *out there* now seemed inadequate to describe the seemingly endless drop to the rubble-strewn glacier, occasionally visible thousands of meters below our feet.

**I feel nothing.** There is no pain or hunger, only places in my mind and body that should hurt or be hungry. As if operating on automatic, I kick my foot into the slope, but I am numb and drained of energy. Aleš comes up to my ice-axe belay first. “We’re over 7000 meters, full *dobro!* [“really good!” in Slovenian]”

I can only smile. I silently begin climbing into the falling snow again. *Find the rhythm. It all comes down to motivation,* I think. *I have nothing left, but how much do I want this?*

I know that we all want the summit. I know that we’ll give whatever it takes, that we’ll carry each other mentally. I know that Luka and Aleš are strong. With the combined ability of three, I know that we believe it’s possible. I kick harder and with more determination. The freezing wind, the blowing snow, where I am, where I’m going—none of it matters any more. Not the old black-and-white photos in the dusty books or my dreams of prowess, not any of the meanings or metaphors that climbers give to their ascents. Not even the summit, really, except as an arbitrary point to orient the ceaseless, unthinking flow of my hands and feet. I am no longer troubled by my fear of darkness and oblivion or by thoughts of *what’s next*. I’ve given everything, at last, to be here—with nothing. Perhaps, beyond this emptiness, there’s a new kind of strength. Or perhaps this is simply it, and there is nothing more. As Michael Kennedy wrote, *the experience is complete in and of itself.*

Luka is the first to climb as high as he dares onto the summit cornice. Then I come up, shuffling past and onto a narrow ridge. Clouds obscure the view I’ve imagined for so long, and the wind and snow intensify. A few steps, and then I’m also leaning against the cornice, whooping with relief and joy. I pose for Luka’s photo, and I teeter back toward him. “What the fuck is going on?” Aleš shouts from below. Last on the rope,

[This Page, Top] **Livingstone balances on the summit cornice.** Luka Stražar | [This Page, Bottom] **According to Livingstone, the 700-meter rappel was a “total nightmare.”** Maxime Turgeon recalls his own descent in the 2007 *Canadian Alpine Journal*: “By the time we completed four desperate pitches on steep, unconsolidated slush, serac falls had twice swept the base of the face...we were all wet and had bloodied faces. We rapped and ran down...tails between our legs, before the menacing seracs...collapsed again.” Tom Livingstone | [Facing Page] **Cesen and Stražar size up the North Ridge.** Tom Livingstone



he has been standing still, getting colder and colder. “Come up, this is the top!” I shout, and we all penguin-wobble past each other, huddling on the ridge. When it’s Aleš’s turn to summit, I step down to make room, and I begin to rig a rappel.

**Of course**, the summit is only halfway. We find nothing on the top. It’s simply the end of one part of the journey, and the limit of one form of suffering. It’s only the farthest point from which we must return.

Soon, we are down climbing the snow slope, each lost in his own rhythm. With no available belay or protection, I focus my attention like the point of a knife. When I lean back a little too much, I feel as if I’m losing my balance, and I grab my axes for support. *Don’t fuck up now!* I think.

As we descend, the weather clears, the sun warms us. Though we were denied a view from the summit, this will suffice: the sinking clouds reveal the gold and white spires of Latok II and III. The lone, square-cut castle of Masherbrum dominates the left skyline. It’s a landscape unlike any I’ve seen before on earth.

When we finally reach our tent again, we throw down our packs and exchange knowing, breathless grins. But in the morning, we still have to get back to the right side of the mountain, and then rappel and down climb 2100 more vertical meters. I look down to the tongue of the glacier on the south side, still so far below, and I know we have a long ordeal before we’re truly safe.

**Of course**, the descent is a blur. Rappelling is my least favorite aspect of climbing, and also the scariest. I know the Abalakov anchors are solid, but I gingerly weight them, my gaze fixed on the single, icy thread. At 6400 meters, we wait for the safety of darkness and then plunge downward again. Luka leads us once more, deeper and deeper into the black. He’s barely able to speak because of his cough.

To pass the time and satisfy my curiosity, I ask Aleš about the larger stars that pulsate with an orange glow. “This is Mars,” he points, “and this is Jupiter,” at another faint light. The planets slowly arc through the sky as night draws on, and we rappel over and over again. Aleš and I slump against the ice, waiting for the ropes to go slack so we can take our turns. I vaguely remember using a newly learned Slovenian word, *Jebi se [fuck you]!*

Finally, incredibly, we emerge from the other side of the darkness. Shortly before sunrise, we slouch onto the chopped ledge of our first bivvy. The glacier looks tantalizingly close. Aleš falls asleep immediately, drawing deep sighs through gaunt cheeks. I touch my own cheeks, and they feel just as hollow. Luka and I are so tired that our minds turn elaborate shapes and colors around us into semi-hallucinations. We burst out laughing at

rude forms of clouds overhead and at lichenous images in the granite. I find comfort in my mind’s ability to create elaborate illusions seemingly from nothing—limited only by my imagination and senses. *Do I control more or less of my mind when I see these pictures?*

The first rays of golden light stretch down Latok I, until I’m squinting in the sunshine. My cheeks flush with warmth. It’s as if life itself is being breathed back into my lungs. I taste the heat, breathe in the rich orange hue, feel the sun’s rays tingle in my eyes. Blissfully, slowly, I close my eyes and float into a bottomless sleep.

**A climber once said** to the famous psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi:

*The mystique of rock climbing is climbing; you get to the top of a rock glad it’s over but really wish it would go on forever. The justification of climbing is climbing, like the justification of poetry is writing; you don’t conquer anything except things in yourself. . . . The act of writing justifies poetry. Climbing is the same: recognizing that you are a flow. The purpose of the flow is to keep on flowing, not looking for a peak or utopia but staying in the flow.*

My partners and I had found nothing at the summit. But by the time we got to the summit, none of us were looking for anything anymore, except the wind and snow—and an openness above us that stretched to infinity. For the first time in five days—five lifetimes—there was nothing left. In that moment, I was only two pure emotions, two essences: silence and satisfaction. And that experience was complete in itself.

When my boots land on the soft snow of the glacier and I unclip from the ropes for the last time, I drop to my knees. Holding my breath, I realize this is it—the end of the biggest route I’ve ever climbed. Gradually, my breath returns. I fill my lungs with rich, sweet air, lean back, and scream as loud as I can with joy.

Luka and Aleš do the same when they hit the glacier, and now three shouts echo around the Choktoi, three cries of relief and happiness fading into the open sky.

Once we’re safely back in Base Camp, we can stare up at the mountain on a perfect alpine day. The sun tracks and burns through shades of blue, and Latok I looks unchanged. I can see the sheer walls streaked with snow and the distant point of the summit. I realize our own passage has left nothing against the mountain’s vast walls and faces. *We were up there, I think. For seven days, we swung and kicked and fought our way to the highest point, only to return—right back to where we started!* ■