Top of the World

by Tenzing Norgay

Many times I think of that morning at Camp Nine. We have spent the night there, Hillary and I, in our little tent at almost 28,000 feet, which is the highest that men have ever slept. It has been a cold night. Hillary's boots are frozen, and we are almost frozen too. But now in the gray light, when we creep from the tent, there is almost no wind. The sky is clear and still. And that is good.

We look up. For weeks, for months, that is all we have done. Look up. And there it is—the top of Everest. Only it is different now: so near, so close, only a little more than 1,000 feet above us. It is no longer just a dream, a high dream in the sky, but a real and solid thing, a thing of rock and snow, that men can climb. We make ready. We will climb it. This time, we will climb on to the end.

Then I look down. All the rest of the world is under us. Below the glacier, 16,000 feet down, you can just see in the gray light the old monastery of Thyangboche. To Hillary perhaps it does not mean much. To a man from the West it is only a far, strange place in a far, strange country. But for me it is home.

Beyond Thyangboche are the valleys and villages where I was born and grew up. On the tall hillsides above them I climbed as a boy, tending my father's yaks.

And so we climb, through the morning. About 100 feet below the top we come to the highest bare rocks. There is enough almost level space here for two tents, and I wonder if men will ever camp in this place, so near the summit of the earth. I pick up two small stones and put them in my pocket to bring back to the world below. Then the rocks, too, are beneath us. We are among snowy humps. Each time we pass one I wonder, "Is the next the last one? Is the next the last?" Finally we reach a place where we can see past the humps, and beyond them is the great open sky and brown plains. We are looking down the far side of the mountain upon Tibet.

Then finally, it is the last rise. We stepped up. We were there. The dream had come true!

I waved my arms in the air and then threw them around Hillary, and we thumped each other on the back until, even with the oxygen, we were

almost breathless. Then we looked around. It was 11:30 in the morning, the sun was shining, and the sky was the deepest blue I have ever seen. Around us on every side were the great Himalayas, stretching away through Nepal and Tibet. And the whole sweep of the greatest range on Earth seemed only like little bumps under the spreading sky. It was such a sight as I have never seen before and would never see again: wild, wonderful and terrible.

At that great moment for which I had waited all my life, the mountain did not seem to me a lifeless thing of rock and ice, but warm and friendly and living. She was a mother hen, and the other mountains were chicks under her wings. Chomolungma, "The Mountain So High No Bird Can Fly Over It." That is what all Sherpa mothers used to tell their children—what my own mother told me—and it is the name I still like best for this mountain that I love.

From my pocket I took the package of sweets I had been carrying. I took the little red-and-blue pencil that my daughter Nima had given me. And scraping a hollow in the snow, I laid them there.

I am a lucky man. I have had a dream, and it has come true, and that is not a thing that happens often to men. To climb Everest—or Chomolungma—is what I have wanted most of all in my life. Seven times I have tried. Now at last I have been granted success, and I give thanks. "Thuji chey"—that is how we say it in Sherpa. "I am grateful."

Tenzing Norgay, "The Top of the World," Ask, April 2014.