

BEYOND THE MOUNTAIN

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OVERVIEW

Beyond The Mountain sets reflective memoir about mental illness, addiction and the effects of childhood trauma in the context of a mountaineering life in which climbs, descents, falls and summits are simultaneously both subtly metaphorical and brutally real.

In 2010 I was the epitome of external success, having built a life at the pinnacle of the corporate world, with a happy marriage, and with holidays climbing hard mountains. Then I broke down, tumbling into an internal rocky hell. For eight years I was in and out of psychiatric wards, near-constantly on the verge of suicide, my personality fragmented, and everything external lost. I was desperate – and in search of salvation I returned repeatedly to the mountains. There I began to re-find strength – and to rebuild my marriage – until in 2019 I was recovered enough to travel back to the Himalaya to attempt a high, hard peak. It would be the proof of my recovery, I thought.

What came to pass, though, was disaster. Eight of my team died in an accident that became global front-page news. I was forced to reassess everything I thought I knew about life, the world, and ‘what recovery is’. I needed that knowledge: merely ten weeks later a freak accident in the Alps killed my husband as well. I was thrown back into the depths – and needed to draw on everything I’d previously learned in order to survive.

The book is metaphorically complex, but above all story-driven – and therefore is structurally chronological: breakdown, addiction, recovery, re-climbing narrative, mountain tragedy. My husband’s injury and death forms the prologue. In the epilogue

grief is transmuted to form a conclusion in which none of the harsh realities of life and death are shied away from, but out of which new hope can emerge.

PROLOGUE

It was two blocks of granite, silhouetted against a summer sky, and it was the instant knowledge that they were coming for my face.

It was Matthew's scream as he fell – my body, hurled backwards, hitting rough ground, stopped.

It was that second, less than a second, of the rocks, the sky, the scream, the thud and whiplash as I landed: it stopped time, and it lasted an age.

There was a pause, and then Matthew's voice, close when he had a moment earlier been on the rockface thirty metres above, his gasping breaths, his terror, and his attempt to sound calm.

'Why did I keep falling? What happened to the rope?'

The rope? Our trust and safety? I'd been holding it. Dear god, had I somehow let him fall? But, no, as I sat up from the point on the slope where my body had stopped, the rope was still in my hand.

'What happened?'

I didn't know which of us was asking.

I didn't know because they were frantic, those first few moments. Shot through with sudden adrenalin our bodies were shaking, my brain moving my eyes faster than it could take in what they saw. The rockface above; Matthew; our friend Jane who was the third person there that day. There was the coil of green rope still on the

ground where if I had let go of it it was impossible for the rope to be. And there was rope in my hand, its roughness as well in the feel of my fingers – but if he'd fallen then it was impossible I was still holding on.

I pulled and came to a frayed end. Then we saw: the falling rocks had sliced the rope straight through.

That was why, when the mountain came apart in Matthew's hands, he had not been held as he should have been but instead had tumbled down the cliff. That was how, as well, those rocks that had come towards me had not, as they should have done, slammed into my face and pulled me with them off the ledge and into the boulder-filled gully a hundred metres below. It was the recoil of the breaking rope – it must have been – that had thrown me backwards, and the rocks – blocks of granite the size of kitchen units – had gone past, bouncing and shattering as they went, and they hadn't touched me or Jane at all.

There was no time to think that this could not be happening, no moment in which to realise the incredibly low chance that this sequence of events could have occurred. No space from which to rail at the world: not this, not now, not after everything. There was just the reality, and Jane was quicker to move than I was; she was already at Matthew's side.

There was a lot of blood. It came from Matthew's bare arms, and from the wide tear in the leg of his climbing trousers.

'I think I'm okay,' he said. 'My ankle, and I've broken some ribs.'

'Your knee.'

'My knee's okay.'

'It isn't. I can see the bone.'

Now Jane had her hands on him, checking him over – she'd been a doctor in the past; she knew what to do – and as she did, all of us, all the time, were talking.

'We need a helicopter.'

'Is there a phone signal?'

'We need to get somewhere safe.'

The ledge we were on – on which Matthew and then I had stopped falling – was narrow, and there was that sudden drop below. Here no rescue could get close. But a hundred metres back in the direction we'd come from there was a more open slope, still steep, but grassy between the rocks. We tied Matthew into the remaining rope, and I wedged myself into a crevice, running the green line off my harness and through the belay plate. Matthew half stood, and Jane held him, her long blonde hair blowing into both of their faces, her body taking Matthew's weight as his ankle and knee gave way under him, and as the two of them shuffled step by step across to gentler ground.

Still no phone signal, but Jane scrambled up to the col above and got through. I heard her broken French from where I crouched with my arms around Matthew; and then because my French was better and she was the doctor we swapped over.

'The Perrons ridge. Three people. One man injured.'

This is impossible, my brain was telling me.

'How is his head?'

This cannot be happening again.

'His head is okay. His knee....' My thinking was scrambled with shock. Ribs, what was the French for ribs, and I cast around, remembered duck breast was poitrine, used that. 'His breast, his chest is injured.' Ankle, ankle – I couldn't remember the word for ankle. 'He fell thirty metres.'

'Thirty metres?' said the operator. 'That far? You are sure?'

I was sure. The rope was sixty metres long, and as usual as the marker on the halfway point had gone through my hands I had called up to Matthew, 'that's halfway.' 'Okay,' he'd called back. Then that fragment of a second that had lasted through all of time.

'Thirty metres.' I told them. 'Half the rope. The rope was broken. When the rocks fell. They sliced the rope.'

There was shock on the other end of the phone. Comprehension. 'The helicopter is coming,' they said. 'Forty-five minutes. Maybe fifty.'

I scrambled back down to the others. Still our bodies surged with adrenalin. Again Jane was checking Matthew over – his legs, then his chest and back. He was conscious, never lost consciousness, but he was closing in on himself; usually so energetic and so clearly in charge, now he was pliable under her hands.

'You have to tell them,' he said, over and over again. Even in extremis, I would recall later, his instinct was to care for others, for me. 'You have to tell them it's three people, that they need to take you off as well.'

'They know,' we told him. 'They're coming.'

Jane and I dug in the rucksacks for all the spare clothing we had, and wrapped it around Matthew head to toe. We held him to keep him warm, to stop his body going into shock.

'We're lucky,' one or other of the three of us said, and the other two joined in. 'He stopped falling.' 'It's daylight.' 'We're on the sunny side of the ridge; it's summer; it isn't cold.'

We were high on the mountain. Rock faces, boulders, steep gullies all around.

'I'm so lucky,' Matthew said, and his voice was shaking with tears.

Every distant rumble was magnified. 'I can hear it,' someone said, 'that's a helicopter; it must be,' but then the sound faded and our heart rates fell from hope back to baseline fear. A motorbike, only, on the mountain road; a car; rockfall on the far side of the valley.

'It's like this, waiting for a helicopter,' I blurted out. Because I knew. But in this surreal state of shock rational memory did not help. It could not calm our bodies' adrenalin, could not stop Matthew's bleeding. And he was injured, though we didn't know how badly. Jane thought his back was undamaged, but he'd fallen so far. Soon it was going to be dark.

'Hurry,' someone said, 'I wish they would hurry.'

When the sound came it was unmistakable. A low throb that immediately was louder, and then louder still. Put on brightly coloured clothes, the operator had told us, and wave your arms. But it was unnecessary. We'd given our exact location, named the two rock spurs we were between, and as the helicopter wheeled round the end of the ridge it came directly for us. Desperate to shield Matthew from the noise and debris, I wrapped my whole body around his and felt him shudder in my arms.

The team was practised. No need for the helicopter actually to land, the pilot merely touched the front skids to the slope and three people were out. As the machine lifted off they were with us and peeling me away. Two of them – a man and a woman – tended to Matthew, feeling him over, asking questions, checking his visible injuries, inserting a cannula for morphine into the back of his hand.

'Come,' said the third, pulling at me and Jane. It had only been two minutes, but the helicopter was back, again coming right into the thirty-degree slope, touching at an angle onto a patch of grass between rocks. Our heads were pushed down and,

half-blind, we scrambled up and through the open side panel as though climbing into the air. Then we were lifted away. Still the panic through our shaking bodies. Still our broken French, now shouting above the howl of the rotors.

‘Which hospital will they take him to?’

‘Sallanches, they’re going to Sallanches. You have a car? Where is your car?’

The instant before the pilot touched down in the car park, I pressed my phone into the other man’s hand.

‘Give it to my husband,’ I shouted over the noise. ‘So that he can call.’

The helicopter landed for fifteen seconds, maybe less. Jane – our dear friend, Jane – and I lay on the grass as it roared away to return to the mountain, and then we ran for her car.

It was four weeks later that we held Matthew’s funeral. After it, his body in its oak coffin was driven north through England to the village of Ambleside in the Lake District, where he’d lived as a child. On an August day of low cloud and persistent wetting rain, we buried him in a plot from which, my numb brain told me, he could look out on his beloved hills. The vicar said something. I didn’t hear her. Instead I felt my hand go into my pocket and there I fingered a piece of card Matthew had given me years before. On it, in his untidy handwriting, was a quote from the naturalist John Muir:

Walk away quietly in any direction and taste the freedom of the mountaineer. Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature’s peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees.

*The winds will blow their freshness into you, and the storms
their energy, while cares will drop off like autumn leaves.*

Later that same week I sat in the familiar space of my psychiatrist's office.

'You will survive this,' she said. 'I'm going to help you survive this.'

I can merely look at her. I am dazed. Muir no longer makes sense. Nothing makes sense. I am sure that I am irreparably broken.

'I know it must be possible,' I say. 'I know I have got through other things.' My psychiatrist knows as well as I do that I have been broken many times before. 'I know that it must be possible to get through this.'

But my bravery is pretence, and the words are automatic. They mean nothing against the repeated phrase throbbing through my brain: *Matthew is dead, he is dead, he is dead*. And Matthew is my tether to the world. We have fought for each other. Our love is everything. *Matthew is dead*. For all I have survived in the past, I do not know how I will get through this. I do not know whether I will.

'You have to take it a day at a time,' Indira says, as our appointment ends, and she opens the door to send me out again into the world. Then her arms move wide, and she hugs me; in all the years she has known me, she has never hugged me before.

Out of her office, I walk down the stairs and reach the street. I stop. For a moment even on this familiar pavement my brain is empty of where I'm meant to go.

One day at a time. One step at a time. Take the first step.

Through the shock and grief that envelops me, I cannot see how.

But even as I stood motionless on that London pavement, with the traffic buzzing past leaving exhaust fumes in the late August air – even as I stood there, I realised there were some things I did know.

I knew what it was for a fall to destroy a life.

I knew how – after that fall, and despite hopelessness – to move forward.

I knew how to scramble my way back towards even the slightest chance of reaching a sunlit ridge.

This particular route – it was going to be new to me. The mountains, though, were not. Climbing was not. And though ahead of me right now I could see nothing, behind was all my experience of what I'd done before. And so, I cast my mind back, and back, and back – until what appeared, as if in a vision of saving hope, was a mountain in Nepal, and a moment nine years earlier, in November, at nearly midday, when the high places were still about achievement and adventure, and all the darkness lay ahead.

CHAPTER ONE: AMA DABLAM

“O the mind, mind has mountains; cliffs of fall
Frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed. Hold them cheap
May who ne'er hung there.”
– Gerard Manley Hopkins

Three hours now that I'd been climbing along this ridge with the clear blue of the high-altitude sky above me, and, beneath my feet and hands, some of the world's finest granite, hued in yellow and pink, coarse-textured, solidly attached to the mountain. Snow lay patterned across the granite – on the sunny east side of the ridge honeycombed and soft, and on the west side, in the shade, still frozen hard. A tangle of ropes led across and through that snow, skirting and traversing a series of extraordinary rock pinnacles. Ama Dablam. The Matterhorn of the Himalaya. Getting on for seven thousand metres high. Perhaps the most beautiful mountain in the world.

Below me, barely in sight, was the previous night's camp: three yellow tents pitched crookedly on top of the biggest pinnacle of the ridge, their guy ropes held down with stones. Beyond that pinnacle the ridge ran irregularly back towards the south as though giants had built a crazy wall several miles long right at the top of the

world. Off the far end, blue in the distance, I could see the boulder moraines and, tiny beyond them, the fifteen bright tents of our base camp.

I was thirty-one years old, fit, on a leave of absence from the successes of a well-paid job. Climbing this mountain would develop my leadership skills, I'd told my employer. I also thought it would help me stand out from my peers. I was, I knew, enacting the cliché of a certain type of corporate overachiever, even as I told myself that I was no novice; I was an experienced mountaineer. But I didn't care. What mattered was the chance to come to Nepal.

For years now I'd been reading the classic mountaineering books, thrilled by the situations, the personalities, the drama, and the sheer beauty of it all. And now here I was myself – up in the high thin air, clambering along fixed ropes, carefully clipping myself in and out and in again at every anchor. One cramponed foot onto the residual ice; the next into a crack in the rock. My fingers on the rough slabs. My rucksack heavy on my back. Either side the ground dropped away near-vertically for hundreds of metres, forcing my concentration to an intensity at which all sea-level concerns fell away.

My tent-mate from the previous night, Shaw, was about thirty minutes ahead of me, and there were another few climbers an hour or two behind. Matthew – the charismatic, energetic schoolteacher, I'd married three years previously – wasn't here at all; he couldn't be. The Himalayan climbing season takes place in spring and autumn. It clashes with school termtimes. 'But you should absolutely go, if you want to,' Matthew had said. I knew what that generosity had cost him: he'd loved the mountains long before the two of us had met. He was the one who'd first taken me up high.

Now, though, I needed to shake him out of my head – to concentrate on shifting my left foot the next step along the narrow passageway. Then my right. Metal gear clipped to my harness jingled and scraped against the rock as I moved off the ridge to cross thirty feet of the face to the east. At the next anchor I changed ropes again, stepping up into what in my intensive internet searches before I'd left home had been described as 'the Grey Tower', but which, now I was here, felt more like a gully.

I climbed the Grey Tower that day, my crampons scraping on rock, then biting into ice, then on rock again; my now-gloved hands feeling for holds, testing them for solidity, using them only where I was sure they were well attached. Then at the top I reached a sudden sense of space.

The view had shifted. I was high now. There was Pumori in my eyeline – over seven thousand metres. Everest was just further to the right. A week later, back in Kathmandu, I'd be saying to Tim, my expedition leader, that I might be interested in joining his trip to climb Everest the following year. 'We'd have to discuss it,' he'd be replying, 'But it isn't out of your league.' There was the mass of my own mountain pressed against my face; and then, behind me, Baruntse and Makalu.

It was my first time in the Himalaya. These faces and peaks were on a scale I could never have imagined. They ran as though in a grey-blue tapestry as far as the horizon, and beyond.

I stood there; catching my breath, admiring that view, dizzy from the lack of oxygen that came with being at this height – and also, for the first time that day, rattled.

Ropes make the high places possible for mountaineers. They protect when a boot slips on ice, or when a foothold in the snow collapses with a heart-stopping jolt. They hold when a climber makes a mistake, or when the external environment shifts

unexpectedly with ice falls from above, or a rock, or a sudden increase in wind. Ropes mark a route, especially in bad weather. They enable rapid descents to get out of harm's way. They can tangle and knot or catch on protruding crags, but you can rely on them: I knew back then, as I know now, that the chance of a modern rope in good condition breaking is vanishingly small. In Alpine climbing ropes bind a climber to her partner in trust, physical assistance, safety, and psychological support. On Ama Dablam where the ropes were fixed and I was moving without a partner, my safety was dependent on them binding me to the mountain.

Breathing hard, I stood on the ridge, and I inspected the ropes.