

Prelude

Recent research by British psychologists has taught us that people need warmth, comforting sounds, and the nurturing smell of another's body in order to thrive. Without these things, people shiver, waste away, and die. So how do we explain a mountain climber's joy as he walks through empty cold space many thousands of feet above the rest of us? In fact, the word 'joy' robs the moment of its true scale. The experience is bloody well life-affirming.

Zachary Hoover was no different from any other climber who came before or after him. The word he had used in his journal was "ebullient." He had been climbing the mountain for almost one month. The rest of the team remained at lower camps, as planned, leaving Hoover and the team's Sherpa sardar, Chhiri Tendi, to conquer Fumu together. Chhiri Tendi was known to be the most knowledgeable Sherpa in Nepal, but even he felt uneasy today. As far as he knew, no one from his village – or the world for that matter - had ever been this high up what some locals called "The Frozen Bosom." But this was no time for fear. Their moods were high and the ascent was rapid. September 1st, 1939 was a cloudless day across Nepal. The rarefied air was cold, dry, and as is common in the mountains of winter, scentless. The weather had played along nicely since the beginning of the month, the cold had been tolerable, and the wind had been mild enough to avoid any tragic tumbles over cliff edges. The only unpleasant characteristic of the current environment was the din coming from above them. Explosions could be heard; violent, stomach-vibrating explosions with very little pause between them. It was the sound of lava, steam, and smoke being wretched up by the old girl that they planned to conquer that very day.

Hoover was a daredevil. The fawned-over older son of a shipping magnate, he had developed a reckless streak the moment he left for college. By the time of the Fumu ascent, he had been climbing for only ten years, but in that time he had gained a reputation for stealing glory from more conservative climbers. One person would get press for climbing Mount Hood in record time. One week later, Hoover would climb an untraveled, more dangerous path up the mountain, and still beat the other poor bastard's record. He was 29-years-old and had already been written up in national newspapers, journals, and popular magazines. Tall, strong, and handsome, with a long, blond mane and the jaw line of Apollo, Hoover was popular with the women of the day. He had dated Lindberghs, cavorted with Rockefellers, and gamboled with Getty's. Before he attempted to climb to the top of the physical world, Hoover had already conquered society's apex.

While skiing in British Columbia with a group of friendly climbers in the late spring of 1939, Hoover had first heard about Fumu. No one knew of its superior height yet, but even then, the mountain's existence was a well-guarded secret among the highest caliber American and European climbers. The Tibetans and Nepalese did not talk about it either. Because it was hard to see from anywhere but the highest surrounding peaks, cloaking it in mystery was not difficult. Everest got all of the attention, but Fumu was the goal of the truly driven. Knowledgeable climbers of the time said that Everest was the tallest, K2 was the most technically challenging, but Fumu was the most *non-technically* challenging. After all, negotiating magma explosions was not in any climbing manual. Fumu is an active volcano. It has been known to have occasional mini-eruptions that shoot not out of the top, but out of random fumaroles, caves, and crags that often cannot

be seen under the year-round snow cover. Even when it is not erupting, sulfurous chemicals released by magma are constantly escaping from innumerable vents. This results in a brownish-yellow smoke that cloaks the peak at all times. The smoke is so voluminous and is released at such a rapid pace that even in high wind the peak of the mountain is veiled.

Fumu is also considered the most non-technically challenging because there is no good way to quantify and rate terror. There was something about the structure of Fumu – more so than Everest or K2 – that made you feel as if the Grim Reaper himself was climbing behind you, attached to you at the waist by a rope with no slack.

The group in British Columbia told Hoover that no one had successfully reached the peak of Fumu. This was enough to get him organizing an expedition within the week. Three months after the ski trip, Hoover now hiked along a part of the mountain known by the Sherpa as “The Set Up.” The name did not have a folksy ring to it. It seemed more like the name of a Raymond Chandler mystery.

Hoover had not been keeping track of their altitude. When he got into a rhythm, he did not like to break it. He was thrilled with the pace of their ascent and did not want to slow things down for any reason at all. He avoided the daily regimen of taking measurements and writing them down. With the exception of the single word “ebullient,” Hoover had also stopped writing in his journal (His last entry had been four days prior. It had simply read: “Calm night. I am dreaming of Dearest Janice at home and Chhiri Tendi is reading Wordsworth.”) His day consisted exclusively of sleeping and climbing. The only thing Hoover knew about his location was that they required supplemental oxygen at

this point, and that the peak – eternally shrouded in a grey sulfuric cloud - looked to be less than a half-mile hike away.

Chhiri Tendi was in back, not because he was slow, but because he took the safety of his Western customers seriously. He never wanted Hoover to be out of his site. That sense of responsibility along with his disarming sense of humor made Chhiri Tendi stand out. If these qualities were not enough to draw others near, Chhiri Tendi was also physically impressive. He was tall for his people, taller even than Hoover. The man was handsome – so handsome, in fact, that he had a knife wound in his lower-left back, put there by a man who feared that the wives of their village, including his own, were too infatuated with Chhiri Tendi. “Many of the wives *were* infatuated with me,” said Chhiri Tendi many years later. “But it had nothing to do with my looks. It had to do with my sense of humor and the fact that my dancing was so exceptional, it got every woman in the room pregnant.” Chhiri Tendi had been born and raised in Thame, a small village in the Khumbu region of Nepal. He had no siblings, making him the pride of his father, Phurbu Tawa. Phurbu Tawa had once been a very successful porter of paper between Tibet and Nepal. After a youth of bliss, Chhiri Tendi watched his father’s life collapse after a single traumatic event. Several nationalist rebels arrived at a festive harvest gathering in Thame and tried to recruit the local Sherpa for their cause. Phurbu Tawa had words with them. Words turned to violence and his father ended up taking the life of one of the men. Phurbu Tawa became overwhelmed with guilt after turning his back on his pacifist Buddhist beliefs. He grew a taste for the local liquor, *rakshi*, and quickly descended into a blur of alcoholism and sleep. “He drank himself into a stupor, before I even had facial hair,” Chhiri Tendi recounts. Before he could kill himself with spirits,

more rebels came to town to finish Phurbu Tawa off. A group of them cut him down with knives. “My mother had also died shortly before. With my parents dead, it was left to me to make money for myself. I ended up doing what was easiest – taking my father’s place porting paper.” Chhiri Tendi was a strong porter, but he aspired to more. At about the age of twenty, while picking up a load in Lhasa, Chhiri Tendi was fortunate enough to stumble across a British expedition to Kanchenjunga in need of more Sherpa. He quickly signed up. Within a few expeditions, Chhiri Tendi began to stand out. He was hired on as a lead Sherpa, or sardar, with another British expedition after only five years of mountaineering. Now here he was, climbing the most unforgiving mountain in the world. And for the first time since his maiden climb up Kanchenjunga, he was starting to feel nervous.

Chhiri Tendi had fallen behind because he wanted Hoover in his field of vision, but also because he was busy telling filthy jokes through his mask. Chhiri Tendi loved dirty humor, told eloquently in the Queen’s English. He had picked up his material at different base camps over the years. He knew randy wisecracks and playful waggery from multiple nations: Switzerland, America, Germany, and the Belgian Congo. Telling blue jokes kept him calm in stressful situations. Most Sherpa hummed the folk music of places like Pangboche to relax. But Chhiri Tendi preferred cursing like a stevedore. Now he was telling joke after joke, some of which he had repeated several times since the start of the ascent. Hoover was polite and would give out at least a brief chortle in response to each one. The timing of the punch lines must have been horrible, given that they were being told in between huge inhalations of oxygen and had to be timed to fall between noisy eruptions from on high. But Hoover laughed regardless.

Since breaking camp that morning, they had been hiking on a gradual rise that was wide and surrounded by gentle inclines on both sides. It was completely safe, non-technical climbing. Hoover had likely felt more peril in the snowy driveway of his house in Mendham, New Jersey. They were also hiking along a northeastern face so some morning sun reached them during their climb.

At approximately 11am, Hoover rounded a corner that brought them to a due-north-facing wall of ice. Their wide path turned into an icy precipice slightly narrower than their backpacks and the sun disappeared. The wall rose above them roughly eight hundred feet and the drop below was another eight hundred. Using ice picks and moving very slowly, they proceeded out into the shade of the monstrous cliff. Chhiri Tendi's jokes stopped immediately. The only sound was the high wind and irregular rhythm of nearby eruptions.

Each step was calculated and then re-calculated. As footfalls came down, strength of the ice was tested. Body weight would gradually shift to favor the leading foot. Then the process would start again. Every other forward movement was accompanied by a piton driven into the wall next to them, a carabiner pulled through the piton's eye hole, a rope pulled through the carabiner, and finally the rope secured to the climbers' belts. They did not permit the eruptions to startle them. They proceeded with the sluggishness of hour hands. Hoover may have been a daredevil, but he was able to attain patience at moments like this and focus obsessively on details. He saw the possibility of death even through the rolling boil of his youth.

The men agreed to stop and take a break when the ledge took a gentle turn to the left. The turn proved difficult because the icy wall sloped slightly outward as it rose over

the ledge, forcing them to lean into the vast nothingness of space. When they finally stopped, Chhiri Tendi was about four yards behind Hoover. He took off his mitts and oxygen mask for a moment and began to eat a piece of frozen bread he had stored in his pocket. He was famished, and finished the food quickly. He also needed to get his mask on again soon, because this was no place to get lightheaded. He was about to put the mask back on when he noticed an unusual look on Hoover's face. The oxygen mask temporarily resting on the top of his head, Hoover's mouth was open, his icy brow was furrowed, and his eyes were squinting and gazing out at a point on the horizon. Chhiri Tendi looked out to see the source of Hoover's befuddlement.

It was Everest. They were staring at her southern face, reflecting the morning sun so brightly that it looked as if the mountain was emitting light. They could make out the Khumbu Icefall just above Base Camp, the saddle of the South Kol, and the dreaded step just below the summit that would later be named for Edmund Hillary. Chhiri Tendi estimated that Everest was roughly fifty miles away – a minuscule distance when seen in the context of the monstrous Himalaya. He felt like he could practically reach out and touch it.

What had grabbed Hoover's attention had not been Everest's beauty or its proximity. What had made Hoover's inner workings completely recalibrate was the fact that they were *looking down* at her. How could this be? It must have taken a long moment for Hoover to absorb the gravity of what he was seeing.

“Chhiri Tendi. We're...”

According to Chhiri Tendi, those were Hoover's last words. The cliff next to Hoover shot out a high-pressured, horizontal geyser of black smoke and ash, which

cleanly detached and jettisoned Hoover's head far out into the rarefied Himalayan atmosphere. His body remained tied to the wall. Chhiri Tendi did not have time or breath to scream before the wall around the steam exploded into a flood of lava. The sound was deafening. It removed Hoover's body from the ledge and created a hole in the ice wall about the size of a London Underground tunnel. As the ice evaporated, the hole grew larger, quickly. Chhiri Tendi had to backtrack to get away from the ever-growing danger, but now he had an additional handicap. Somehow, the hemp rope attaching him to Hoover had managed not to break, which spoke well of the rope manufacturers, but put Chhiri Tendi in an unpleasant situation. Hoover's headless body was now hanging four yards below him, on fire.

For a moment, Chhiri Tendi felt himself give up. There was no way a person could possibly live through such a scenario. "I remember not thinking rationally at all, and knowing I was not thinking rationally, but allowing it to happen anyway because it was comforting. A military fighter plane flew very near the mountain at about that time and I remember thinking for a brief moment 'I'm rescued!' But of course there was nothing they could do and it looked like the mountain's violence had taken the pilot by surprise as well, as he was struggling to get the plane under control. Part of the left wing was dangling and trailing smoke. No one could help me. Absolutely no one."

Hoover's corpse was pulling Chhiri Tendi off the ledge. Granted, he was attached to the wall, but the presence of the lava flow was causing the air to warm up and the ice screws in the wall to lose their purchase. Chhiri Tendi felt like he was suffocating, because hyperventilation was being prohibited by his regulated oxygen supply. But despite the entire hullabaloo, the feeling of helplessness passed. Raw emotion was tamed

by reason. Chhiri Tendi wished to return home to see his wife, son, and daughter. He decided that his only option was to cut the rope that attached him to Hoover and the wall, discard his equipment except for some food, water, mask, and oxygen tank, and run for safety.

Things became more complicated before he could execute his plan. Several yards down, the tank of compressed oxygen that was still attached to Hoover's body exploded, obliterating what was left of Hoover, as well as the part of the ledge upon which Chhiri Tendi had just been standing. Now he was hanging by his waist, and the ice screws that held him were popping out of the melting ice wall one by one, each dropping him down further. Chhiri Tendi looked around helplessly at the scene of destruction. The lava flow had subsided to a trickle, the hole billowing black smoke and still growing larger. The ledge above him was gone. Hanging from his rope, he felt like an abandoned marionette.

Finally, Chhiri Tendi caught a lucky break. When Hoover's oxygen tank had exploded, it had gouged out a part of the cliff right near him. Chhiri Tendi patiently began to swing over to the absence. Once he had gathered enough momentum, he was able to land on the newly-formed shelf, gather his wits, and plan his next steps.

After about an hour of catching what little breath was available to him, Chhiri Tendi had his plan. He removed his backpack and stuffed his pockets with food and water. He then managed to rappel down to a thin ledge below him that just so happened to lead to "The Set Up." The rappel had been treacherous because he was low on oxygen, his hands were frozen, and although Chhiri Tendi would never admit this, the experience an hour previous must have placed him in a state of total shock.

Over the course of the day, Chhiri Tendi would descend to the nearest camp, Camp Four, with almost no equipment. Each breath was nearly pointless. Movement had to be slow, even though his mind kept urging him to hurry before frostbite, hypothermia, or hypoxia finished him off. When he reached the camp, Chhiri Tendi collapsed into his tent and slept for an entire day. After eating a meal the next morning, he descended to Camp Three, where several more members of the expedition were waiting. He shared with them the tragic news of Hoover's grim demise and the failure to reach the top. Camp after camp they descended, gathering more men and equipment. The team members at Base Camp remember a miserable line of souls coming down from the mountain; "A funeral march" as one climber put it.

Chhiri Tendi went home to his village, and basked in the presence of his wife and children. To this day, he has not shared the details of what happened on the mountain with his family.

He is now 51-years-old. He sits on the patio of his Phoenix, Arizona ranch home, looking down at the pipe he is tapping on the edge of an ashtray. Although his hair is snow white and his face weathered by the elements, Chhiri Tendi looks remarkably good for his age. Chhiri Tendi explains his youthfulness thusly: "It's because of all of the sex I'm getting. My wife is still with me after all of these years, and she still puts out." Chhiri Tendi laughs at his own bawdiness, even though his wife, who is handing us tea, looks displeased.

As Chhiri Tendi's laughter subsides, he stares out at the four lanes of traffic that run in front of his house. It seems as if he is seeing something much grander – like Everest from the ledge, moments before the world went haywire.

“No two ways about it,” he said. “It was a monumental goat-fuck at thirty-thousand feet. I am lucky to be here telling you about it.” But the Hoover expedition was only the beginning of Chhiri Tendi’s story. Chhiri Tendi was not done with Fumu. Nor was Fumu done with him.