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Introduction to Altitude Sickness

My wife had once wondered what it felt like to breathe the thin air of the Khumbu Himalayas. The day after I climbed Gokyo Peak (5357m) I sat down in the lodge and wrote her a letter. A blizzard was blowing outside the window, and the kettle was boiling on the cast iron stove fueled by yak droppings.

It feels like this. Imagine putting a plastic bag over your head. Tie it around your neck with a string so no air goes in. Then you start breathing. 3,000 meters is like ten pinholes poked in the plastic, 4,000 meters is like seven holes, and 5,000 meters is like five. Breathe in. Then you take a heavy backpack and climb up the stairs for three or four hours, and you've got a pretty similar experience.

I pictured my wife's face screwing up with effort as she took a deep breath.

1. Symptoms

“Would you like to go on a trip somewhere?”

My wife's question caught me completely by surprise. We were at home on a weekend night, a few weeks before the Lunar New Year. She was not saying, “When are you going to get a job?” or “I want you to move out.” She was asking me gently, with a fond look in her eye, if I wanted to go travelling somewhere.

“D-do you mean, you'll send me on a trip wherever I want to go?”

I searched her face incredulously. My lovely wife nodded calmly and explained. According to her, a section chief at a multinational insurance company who is as kind as she is successful, I had earned some brownie points last year. After being a stay-at-home husband for nearly four years without ever holding a job, I had earned the princely sum of 2,700 dollars last year, 300 dollars for nine months, gluing appliqué pads to the paws of teddy bears. This was my reward for being such a conscientious worker. Overcome by her fabulous offer, and being an opportunist when it comes to taking advantage of my wife's generosity-- unlike my public persona as selfless, devoted husband--I shouted, “Mt. Everest!”

My wife looked at me curiously, like someone observing a thirty-three-year-old kindergartner, and asked, “Mt. Everest? Why this sudden urge to go there?”

It was not a sudden urge. I had wanted to go there for a long time. I could not really say why. I could hardly be expected to have a legitimate reason when even professional alpinists have a hard time explaining why they choose to risk their lives climbing mountains. It was a crazy idea that could have only come out of the mind of a slacker that spends years living off his wife before guilt prompts him to find a side job of sorts. I had to make up some kind of answer, however, if I did not want to waste this opportunity.

“Actually, I've been suffering from a debilitating sickness for a while. I think this trip is my only cure.”
“May I ask what sort of sickness?”

“Altitude sickness.”

“Isn’t that what you get at high altitudes?”

“No, you can get it at high altitudes, but it’s also a sickness that you get because you want to go to high altitudes. I want to see the summit of the Khumbu Himalayas, the backbone of the Earth!”

I babbled, nodding like an excited kindergartner. My wife also nodded enthusiastically. She was already aware of this. Of my obsession with hiking documentaries, of all the moments I spend lingering in front of the hiking equipment store when we go to the mall. What she might not be aware of, however, was this: climbing snow-capped mountains is the dream of those whose self-esteem is at rock bottom, of those who feel the need to validate their existence by going up the toughest mountain they can find and seeing the world at their feet for a change.

“OK. Take this. Get yourself any equipment you need.”

Just like that, my wife took a credit card out of her wallet and gave it to me. It was the first time I ever held a credit card in my hands. I jumped up from my seat and threw my arms in the air, shouting, “Hooray! Hip, hip, hooray for my beloved wife!”

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“Have a safe trip then.”

My wife smiled tiredly in front of the elevator of our apartment. It was February, and the crack of dawn, and it was freezing. I tried my best to keep from swaying under the weight of the 70-liter backpack on my back and smaller daypack on my front. The next-door neighbor’s dog barked softly, sensing somebody was near.

“And take this.”

My wife held out an international credit card, saying to use it in an emergency. I put it in my pocket, although I had already received enough cash to cover my travel expenses.

“Thanks. I’m going to try not to use it if I can help it, though,” I promised, still guilt-stricken by my recent shopping spree to buy the equipment. With that I lurched over to give my wife a hug. It felt awkward somehow, perhaps because of the daypack I was carrying in front. I wanted to say something special to her but could not think of anything. Just before the elevator doors closed, I waved to her exaggeratedly like a kid going on his first field trip.

2. First Stage

I was able to find a Korean hotel and restaurant readily enough in Thamel, Kathmandu, capital of Nepal. At these places it was easy to meet other travelers and exchange information. Solo travelers would team up if they discovered that somebody was going the same way. A unique sense of camaraderie quickly sprung up even among strangers.

On my second day, I was having kimchi stew for dinner when a man in his early forties struck up a conversation with me. One could tell just by looking at him that he was an experienced mountaineer. He cut a striking figure with his heavy beard, weather-beaten face, and broad shoulders. What struck me the most, however was his attitude—that combination of dignity and weariness of the hiker that has just finished his trek.

“This your first time here?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Where did you say you were headed?”

“I’m going to Gokyo Peak.”

I poured him a “Everest 50th Anniversary Commemorative” beer. The label sported a picture of Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay Sherpa, the first people known to have reached the summit of

Mt. Everest. I was just about to ask him for trekking advice when the mountaineer said to himself, looking at his glass,

“Some nerve for a beginner, going there alone in this weather.”

His deep, hoarse voice was more than a bit intimidating. I sipped my beer quietly and waited for him to continue.

“So much depends on luck here. First thing you should look out for is plane crashes.”

“Planes crash here?”

“Every year. Sir Hillary’s wife and daughter were killed in a plane crash right here.”

I spit up my beer. This was not reassuring news, but then it occurred to me that no matter how careful I was, there was no way I could stop a plane crash. My best bet would be to avoid taking very cheap flights.

“And be careful of bandits.”

I burst out laughing. I thought bandits were a bit over the top.

“Oh, so you think it’s funny?”

The mountaineer’s thick brows twitched. I clapped my hands over my mouth apologetically.

“Don’t be naïve. Tourists and trekkers from all over the world come to Khumbu. If the locals can steal even just a camera from one of them, it’s worth more than what they make in a year. You know that people steal things in places as small as the classroom or an alley. You don’t think there’s at least one robber in all of these mountains? There are missing reports every year, last year two young Englishmen were found dead.”

By this time I was holding my beer glass in a death grip.

“That is very scary.”

I was more and more worried. I had never even considered such dangers. Refilling the mountaineer’s glass, I asked,

“What else do I need to be careful about that?”

“Altitude sickness, of course.”

“I read about that in a book. You have to walk slowly, don’t go higher than three hundred meters a day, and drink lots of water. I wrote it down so I won’t forget it.”

“Yes, that’s it. You just have to stick to what you already know. If you feel sick you should come down immediately. Quite a few people have ended up dead or worse.”

The mountaineer threw his glass back in one go, Adam’s apple bobbing in his thick throat. Without another word he stood up abruptly. I got to my feet as well.

“Are you going already?”

“I don’t have anything else to say. And I’m tired.”

I, however, was bursting with questions. Reading fear in my expression, the mountaineer gave me a final piece of advice.

“By the way, you have a credit card, don’t you?”

“Yes, I do, but...?”

“Always keep it in your back pocket. And try not to use it if you can help it. Good luck.”

He shook my hand with his massive paw and strode out of the restaurant. Only after he disappeared did I wonder why he had told me to keep my credit card in my back pocket when I was going trekking in the mountains.

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Most Everest trekkers take the plane to Lukla, the entryway to the Khumbu Himalayas, and I was no exception. It was the exact same route where Sir Hillary’s wife and daughter had crashed. My first reaction as I set foot in the plane was disbelief, then laughter. The inside of the plane looked like the sort of 12-seat minivan that was popular twenty years ago. Parts of the finishing were patched with

wood, and the backs of the seats flopped every which way like folding chairs. I could see the captain and first officer manning the controls a few steps ahead. The antique operational equipment looked like a child's play set.

As the plane got ready for takeoff, the entire aircraft shook so hard my teeth were chattering. The Nepali grandmother sitting next to me started to turn her rosary as she chanted a prayer. Faster and faster she chanted, ending with a sprinkling of rice in the air. The chant and ritual sprinkling felt ominous and did nothing to improve my mood. The grains of rice rained down on my head and jacket. The shaking grew even worse after takeoff as the plane was met by severe turbulence. Crash be damned, at this rate the plane was going to fall apart in mid-air. The aircraft slid alarmingly from side to side like a ship tossed by heavy waves. Each time this happened my seatmate clutched my arm and buried her face in my shoulder. The flight lasted only forty minutes, but in that time I had not a moment of peace.

I was at the baggage claim in Lukla Airport, waiting for my things, when a Sherpa walked over to me. As the only Asian trekker to arrive with the flight I was easily recognizable. I nodded at his question of "Korean?" upon which he bowed with his hands pressed together.

"Namaste!"

"Namaste."

I bowed to him as well. With his curly hair, deep tan, and honest expression, the Sherpa looked like a typical mountain villager. His eyes were so guileless I could have told what he was thinking in two seconds. We shook hands and introduced ourselves. His name was Phurba and he was two years older than me. The day before I left for Lukla, I hired a Sherpa through a travel agency. Most importantly, I needed someone to guide me through the whole trip in Mt. Everest, where it is said that paths disappear at the first sight of snow.

3. Second Stage

Starting from Lukla, we passed Namche (3,440m) after three days or so of trekking. We were now in sight of the snowy peaks. As I had been already warned by the mountaineer in the restaurant, there is no greater danger to trekkers in the Khumbu region, where the world's highest peaks loom at an imposing 8,000 meters, than acute mountain sickness. The best cure for altitude sickness is prevention, which may be accomplished by not ascending more than 300 meters a day and walking slowly.

I got my first taste of mountain sickness at the altitude of 3,973 meters in Mong La. A heavy snow began falling soon after we left Namche, the 3,440 meter mark. The snow fell so thickly it cloaked everything in darkness. It stung like there was somebody persistently shaking pepper over my head. After three hours of trekking in that snow, I felt myself walking as if in a dream, slowing losing consciousness.

By the time we reached the lodge after four hours of trekking, I could not even muster the strength to speak. Having ascended over 500 meters that day, I was overcome by dizziness as soon as I set down my backpack. My fingers refused to cooperate as I struggled out of my wet hiking shoes and socks.

I gasped for air, shivering heavily. My nose refused to stop running no matter how many times I wiped it. I was in very bad shape because I had climbed uphill in the heavy snow, walking slowly under the weight of my pack

With the snow showing no signs of letting up, however, there was no way I could continue in my present condition. My body was sinking into a state of inertia as if I had drunk several bottle of whisky.

I was so woozy over dinner I had no idea whether my dal baht was going down my throat or up my nose. I chewed without tasting my food. Less than half through the meal, I was forced to lay down my spoon because even chewing proved to be too much for me. I had become overly confident because the altitude had not affected me up to that point.

I did not sleep that night because I could not stop coughing. My nose was frozen from taking deep breaths in the cold air all night, trying to compensate for lack of oxygen in temperatures of minus thirty degrees Celsius. I thought wistfully of my wife's cozy embrace and our warm bed at home.

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On my twelfth day of trekking, after lunch at the lodge in Machhermo (4,450m) I was outside enjoying the sun when I saw him. An old Sherpa was sitting on a folding chair, slowly enjoying a cigarette as he gazed at the snow-capped peaks in the distance. The weather was excellent, for a change. I could barely open my eyes from the glare of snow in thick piles everywhere. The colorful *lungdars* rigged on a pole in front of the lodge fluttered like multinational flag bunting on Field Day. "Beautiful weather today, isn't it?"

The Sherpa turned to acknowledge me, his eyes still closed. His face was deeply tanned and wrinkled, but the aquiline nose above his mustache still gave it a sense of haughty dignity. According to what I heard from the owner of the lodge last night, the old man had climbed Mt. Everest many times in his youth with expeditions from many countries and had been decorated by the King in the royal palace. "It's good now, but there's going to be a lot of snow later."

The old man's voice was thick with phlegm but his English was fluent. We chatted for a while. Then an enormous sound of machinery reverberated through the valley.

"What's that?"

"A helicopter. People don't know how to take it easy these days. Trekking is about the process. That's what happens when you push yourself too hard."

"What happened? Why did they fly a helicopter all the way here?"

"It happens sometimes. I flew in one of those myself, once. Fell in a crevasse and broke my right knee on a piece of ice. The rope saved my life but I stopped climbing mountains after that. Don't really care to take one again in this place."

I nodded, inhaling the nutty scent of the old man's tobacco smoke. For the first time I noticed that there was a cane leaning next to him.

"So, I heard you were a first-timer. How are you doing?"

"I had a bit of a scare a few days ago. It was the day I ascended over 500 meters. I must have been out of my mind. When I was eating dinner that day, it felt like the food was going up my nose in a dream."

The old man hawked up his phlegm and spat it on the snow, then let out a hoarse cackle that showed his missing teeth.

"Well, I can tell you you wouldn't be here if you were in your right mind. You have to be out of your mind to climb all the way here."

I snickered, following suit. Perhaps I was still out of my mind and merely reacting instinctively. The old man raised his head for the first time and took a good look at me. When he grinned, thick lines creased his face like a contour map. One immediately felt the weight of his years spent in alpine regions.

"I guess I was the same when I was climbing at my highest and fastest. But you should still take it easy. Don't be like me."

"I'm still worried, though. I don't know if I can get there in one piece."

I gazed at the snowy landscape in front of me. Whirls of snow and dust blew up like puffs of flour with each gust of the wind. A herd of yaks grazed in front of the majestic peaks, a black eagle circling

the blue sky above them; the sight felt suddenly felt rather desolate. This was at 4,500 meters above sea level.

“Wait here for moment.”

The old man suddenly got to his feet, supporting himself with his cane, and came back with something from the lodge.

“Here, take this. When you feel that your life is in danger, open this and pray to the gods of the Himalayas. They will help you.”

With that he pressed a small, grimy envelop into my hand. It was tightly sealed, so I could not tell what the contents were. I pressed my hands together thanked the old man for the unexpected gift.

“I’ll be on my way, then. Take care of yourself.”

The old man limped back to the lodge, leaning on his cane. It was time I started packing as well. I still wanted to ask the old man one more question, however, so I called out to him as he was about to open the door,

“Will the gods really hear my prayers?”

The old man cackled dryly, showing his missing teeth, and replied,

“You got a credit card?”

I gave an affirmative thumbs-up to the old man as he disappeared inside the lodge, after which I had a quiet laugh myself. For the twelve days now since I boarded the plane for Lukla, the hard plastic card had never left my back pocket. It pressed against my buttocks uncomfortably whenever I sat down for a rest on the trail.

4. Advanced Stage

There was only one other guest when I arrived at Namaste Lodge in Gokyo, 4,750 meters above sea. The other guest was a 27-year-old white man by the name of Scott, from Ireland. When I first saw him in the lodge’s sun room he was sitting in front of the stove, almost hugging it, in a thick down jumper zipped up to the neck.

Over dinner I found out that Scott was a hardcore trekker who had crossed the notoriously treacherous Cho La Pass in very good time. Cho La Pass is the shortest way from the EBC (Everest Base Camp) in the east to Gokyo Peak in the west. It was infamously known among seasoned Korean trekkers as the “Hella Difficult Pass.” Crossing the route in winter, in particular, with yawning crevasses waiting like ready traps, was supposed to be difficult even for Sherpas born and bred in the Himalayas.

While it had taken me thirteen days to reach where I was, it had taken Scott nine days via Cho La Pass from EBC. It was a remarkable display of speed and strength, knowing that the snowfall had been equally heavy in the east. I could tell how hard he must have pushed himself to do it. When asked why he was in such a rush, he replied that he wanted to save on traveling costs and pass those landmarks faster than other people.

Unfortunately, just in sight of his final goal, Gokyo Peak, Scott was suffering from mountain sickness. He had already spent two days waiting for his body to recover, but was still sitting pale-faced by the fireside, plagued by a hacking cough. The owner of the lodge and Scott’s Sherpa wanted him to go down, but he was insisting on waiting for his condition to improve. Then again, nobody likes to throw away the amount of time and money it takes to reach this place.

The next day, lightly packed, Phurba and I climbed Gokyo Peak. It was the highest summit amateur hikers could reach on the west side of Mt. Everest. Clouds drifted by under my head and above. The

8,000-meter peaks of Pumori, Changtse, Chomolungma, Nupse, Lhotse, Lhotse Shar, and Makalu lay before me in all their snow-capped glory. There it was, the ‘white spine of the Earth.’

Far from being ecstatic about having conquered the peak of my dreams, however, I did not feel particularly moved. It was just a better place to see the highest peak of Mt. Everest standing higher and further away in the distance. I thought that the world would look so small from the shoulders of a giant, but in reality my view was blocked by the shoulders and heads of even taller giants. To see all the highest peaks in the world at once is like being struck by a barrage of impossible desires. The world above my eyes commanded such majesty and power compared to the world under my feet, it was unreal. And so the whole view spread out in front of me felt like a lie.

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Heavy snow began falling as we were descending Gokyo Peak. The vast quantities of snow instantly erased the path we had made on our way up. Phurba led the way, breaking the path, which was immediately buried under snow the moment I set foot on it behind him. The whirling snow blocked my vision and struck at my cheeks unforgivingly. Every step was nerve-wracking, as I knew the consequences of slipping and falling on the snow-covered incline and possibly twisting an ankle. When we finally arrived at the lodge, I practically fell into my room and stuffed my body into my sleeping bag without even undressing.

That night, I was in too much pain to sleep at all. I had a headache, a full-body ache, difficulty breathing, and nausea. The pain was much worse than the time I was sick in Mong La. The otherworldly peaks I saw during the day swam before my eyes as I floated in and out of consciousness. The more I gazed upon them the higher they rose, and the more I tried to banish them the icier they gleamed. Theirs was a beauty I feared, yet could not resist. On the few occasions I opened my eyes I would hear a great clap of wind and see powdery snow like white sugar blowing through the chinks of the wooden shutters. All that separated the inside and outside of the room was a single slab of wood. I could hear an avalanche somewhere far, far away in the distance. It kept snowing for two solid days. The blizzard came from the valleys of 8,000-meter peaks, screaming on the wind. There was nothing to be done but wait inside the lodge for the snow to let up. Thankfully, my bout of mountain sickness was responding well to the warmth, good food, and plenty of rest.

Meanwhile, Scott was more anxious than ever to go to Gokyo Peak now that I had been there. His symptoms, however, were daily getting worse, not better. His breathing and coughs were hoarser, and his lips and nails were turning black. With the roads blocked by the snow there was no going down now. Lying next to me in a deck chair by the fire as I wrote my letter, his body wracked by hacking coughs, Scott blinked his sunken eyes and said,

“Honestly, I’m afraid.”

“Of what?”

“I’m afraid of dying like this.”

“Hey, Scott. Who said anything about dying?”

I wanted to cheer him up, but could not think of anything special to say. Then I remembered the gift I received from the old Sherpa some time ago. I dashed to my room and came back with the grimy envelope I had stashed inside my backpack. The old man had told me to pray to the gods of the Himalayas when I felt that my life was in danger. Opened, the contents of the envelope turned out to be a thin piece of paper with what looked like a prayer written on it, and a handful of rice. I decided to imitate the Nepali grandmother that sat next to me on the plane to Lukla.

“Scott, I’m going to say a prayer for you. This is going to work.”

As I could not read what was written on the paper, I mustered all the Nepalese that I had learned during my trip.

“Hajur (excuse me), namaste (hello), om mani padme hum (I pray), batti (light), uthnu (rise), gohar (help), dhanyabad (thank you), pheri bhetaunla (see you again)!”

With that I flung the rice into the air, rapidly chanting this improvised prayer over and over again. The grains of rice fell on Scott's woolly hat, his pale face, and unkempt beard. He snickered faintly as I performed my bogus ceremony before quietly asking a question. It was the same question that I had asked the old Sherpa.

“But will they really listen to your prayer?”

I let out a dry cackle, showing my teeth, and answered as the old man had done.

“Scott, you got a credit card?”

He nodded and raised a lifeless finger to gesture towards his back pocket.

“It's all right then. You're not going to die.”

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The day after the snow let up, Scott began babbling deliriously. He needed to be transported to the hospital in Kathmandu immediately. He would not take his credit card out of his back pocket even though he was slowly dying. There was no other choice than to send him down against his will, as the patient was mentally incapable.

In the end I had to resort to turning him over and taking the card out of his back pocket. It is taboo for Sherpas to lay hands on their employers in Nepal where the caste system is still observed, so I was the only one who could go through his pockets. Scott's Sherpa dashed out of the lodge the moment I handed over the card to him. The owner of the lodge and Phurba drove a pair of yaks up to the lodge and fixed a stretcher to them to carry Scott to the launch pad.

Over the trip I learned that rescue helicopters never fly here even when people are dying. When they did come, they would dawdle so much that it was often too late. The helicopters would depart from Kathmandu only after it had been confirmed that the cardholder had signed for three thousand dollars. Only very few trekkers ever traded their lives for three thousand dollars. The credit card in the back pocket that presses into the buttocks of trekkers whenever they sit down, it turns out, is both a reminder to the trekker to always be wary of mountain sickness in the Everest and their ticket out when their life is in mortal danger.

5. After the Recovery

My heart was pounding in the elevator all the way up to my apartment. I had made it back safely to my beloved home. The mirror in the elevator showed that I had become quite the mountaineer. My nose and cheeks were red from frostbite, and I had grown a bushy beard around my lips that had been burnt a deep purple. I pictured my wife's expression of surprise when she saw me. Ding dong, the elevator chimed as the doors opened, making the next-door neighbor's dog bark a few times. I stood in front of my door and pressed the buzzer, full of anticipation.

No matter how many times I pressed, however, there was no answer, so I entered the password in the lock. Shortly the door unlocked with the whirring sound of machinery and I let myself in. When the foyer lighting went on and I could see as far as it illuminated, however, my heart began pounding faster. I switched on the light in the living room and took a look around disbelievingly. The house was completely empty. Even all of the things in my room had been removed.

I scuttled outside to the nearest phone booth. And I pressed the number of my wife's cell phone. I did not think she would have changed her number, considering her responsibilities at the company.

Just as I thought, I was rewarded by the sound of her voice at the other end of the line. It was the voice I had missed so much in the mountains.

“It’s me. I just got back from the Himalayas.”

“Yes, how are you?”

My wife said calmly.

“I’m good. But what happened to the house...?”

I trailed off in bewilderment, and my wife said nothing for a long time. When she finally spoke it was in the same calm tone.

“You still don’t get it, do you.”

Of all my wife’s sayings, this was the last thing I wanted to hear from her. Except that this time I did get it. My wife continued, her voice betraying no emotion whatsoever.

“Listen. You are an immature slacker who has given me nothing but pain for the last four years. I have given you so many chances. But you used up all your credit.”

The warning signal beeped loudly in my ear, telling me to insert more coins. I wiped at my wet eyes with the back of my hand and pushed a few more into the machine.

“How could you do this to me? Come on, this isn’t fair.”

I was sobbing by this time, but my wife was as cool and businesslike as ever.

“I did my best. I even paid for your trip, for Pete’s sake. So please don’t go on whining like a child.

The papers are on top of the cabinet in the foyer, take care of them and I’ll see you in front of the office in two days.”

The line went dead as I had used up all my coins. My legs buckled under me. I reeled from dizziness and labored for breath as if another bout of altitude sickness was taking over me, although I was most certainly not at a high altitude now. I had been tossed into a world that was even steeper and harsher than the Khumbu Himalayas. I slumped against the glass of the phone booth, cracking my forehead against the glass.

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Bang, the impact registered, making me sit up reflexively as my eyes snapped open. I was inside the airport shuttle bus. I had been nodding in my sleep, hitting my head against the window, until a particularly hard bang woke me up as the bus went over a speed bump. I smiled sheepishly at the few passengers that looked my way. The bus was already moving into my city. I was relieved that it was only a dream, but my mind was hardly set at rest. It could have been an omen. My body was drenched in cold sweat and my eyes were wet with tears.

My heart was pounding in the elevator all the way up to my apartment. I had returned safely to my beloved home. The mirror in the elevator showed that I looked quite the mountaineer. My cheeks and nose were frozen red, my beard had grown out around my lips that had been burnt a deep purple. I wondered what my wife’s face would look like when she saw me. The elevator chimed as the doors opened, making the next-door neighbor’s dog bark a few times. I stood in front of my door and took a deep breath before pressing my finger to the bell.

“Ding dong.”

I pressed the bell and peered into the lens of the door viewer, but there was no response. I pressed again and waited for somebody to come. There had never been such a long moment as I waited, heart in throat. I was sweating down to my fingertips. Just when I was about to enter the password of the lock, the door swung open with the whirring sound of machinery.

“Wow, look who’s here!”

My wife welcomed me, beaming. I dropped the daypack I had been carrying in front and grabbed her for a hug. And I rubbed my cheeks all over her face. I was afraid I was going to cry.

“Ow, stop it. Your beard is prickly. What’s up with you?”

My wife asked, her eyes widening.

“I thought you went away someplace!”

This was the first thing I managed to say after coming back from Mt. Everest.

“Why?”

I could not stop the tears from rolling down my cheeks then.

“Because I’m unemployed and I don’t make any money and I’m such a slacker!”

My wife grinned and wiped my tears away with the back of her hand.

“You still don’t get it, do you? Think of all the work I’ve already put into you. I can’t just walk away from all that, can I?”

I felt like throwing my hands in the air and shouting, “Hooray! Hip, hip, hooray for my beloved wife!”

My wife went to the kitchen to check on the stove and said,

“Put your stuff down and wash your hands. You must be hungry.”

Dinner was already on the table. The sound of dwenjang soup gurgling in the pot and the smell of fresh cutlass on the grill was positively heavenly.

“You have to hear this story. Something really interesting happened in the Everest!”

I told my wife about Scott as we ate. She acted surprised at just the right part, when I told her how Scott had to be flown down the mountain in a helicopter. Encouraged by her reaction, I really began warming up to my story, increasing the volume of my voice. My gestures grew more extravagant as well, and I waved my spoon in the air as I said,

“I’m telling you, it’s a disgrace. Three thousand dollars for a man’s life!”

And I proudly showed her the credit card that I had been sitting on for the past twenty days, now scratched and battered beyond recognition, and said,

“See, I didn’t use this even once! So that’s like three thousand dollars saved! Aren’t you glad?”

My wife buried her face in her hands and laughed for a long time. At first I thought it was because she was proud of me for coming back safely without wasting the money on the card. I felt like I had been hit by an avalanche and tossed down the mountain thousands of meters, however, when I heard her next words.

“Oh dear, didn’t you know? That card has a limit of two thousand dollars!”

Translated from the Korean by Yoona Amy CHO