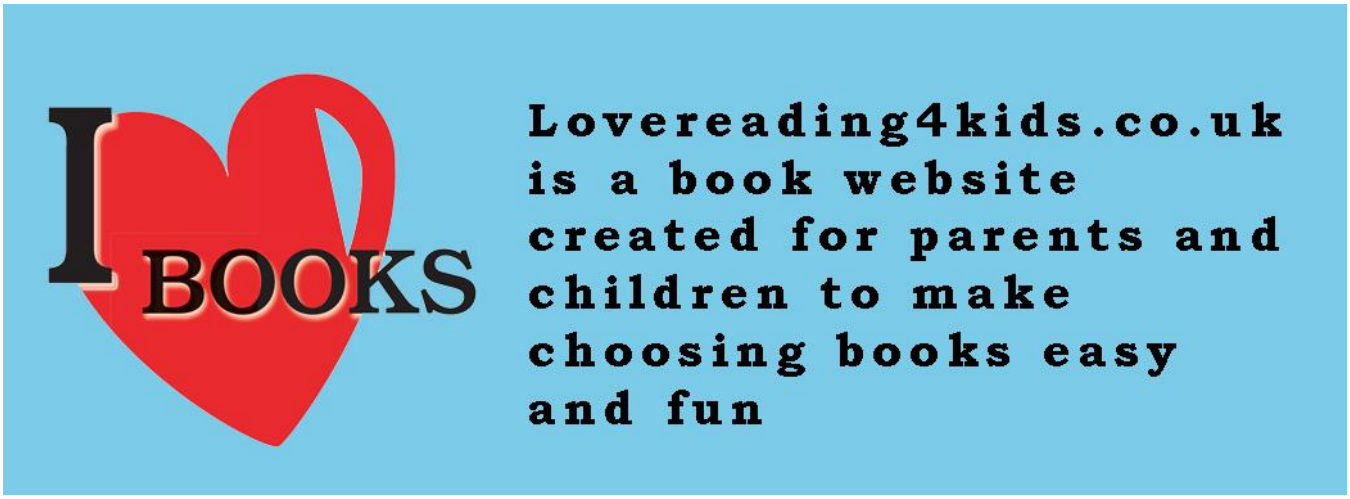

Opening extract from

North Face

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Published by

Vertebrate Publishing

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Chapter 1

EVEREST BASE CAMP

TIBET

The bus wheezed and spluttered as it struggled up the pass. Steam began to spew out of the engine bay. I heard the driver crunch down the gears, grumbling as the machine lost power.

Finally, just as it seemed the vehicle would suffer a mechanical heart attack, the driver coaxed a few more revs out of the old wreck and we lurched up the last switchback turn, arriving at a flat section of road adorned with brightly coloured prayer flags and Buddhist cairns.

The engine shuddered with a metallic clanking noise as the driver turned it off.

'Good photo place!' our guide exclaimed.

We climbed out of the cab. None of us uttered a sound, not wanting to spoil the moment with meaningless words of wonder. The only noise was the fluttering of the little silk pennants rippling in the light wind.

I let my eyes drink in the view. Twenty-five miles from our viewpoint stood the most stunning mountain vista I had ever seen.

Everest.

This was the vision of the mountain that I had heard so much about. The view of the North Face seen from the high passes of the Tibetan plateau.

'We've got a word in English,' I told my travelling companion, Klaus. 'We call something like this "gobsmacking".'

'*Gobsmacking?*' Klaus repeated with relish, his thick German accent giving bizarre emphasis to the word.

I wished my Nepali friend Kami could have been with me at that moment. It was him that had inspired me to make this journey. He had once climbed to within a stone's throw of the summit. Everest was a part of him; he would have loved this view. I felt Kami's presence. Almost like he was standing there beside me.

At that moment I reached into the side pocket of my fleece. The pocket that held the tiny metal shrine bell, Kami's most treasured possession. The brass seemed strangely warm to the touch, almost as if the proximity to Everest had fired up some unexpected power within it.

I shivered. I wasn't superstitious but I did sometimes wonder about this precious object which had been passed to my care.

A truck full of Chinese troops suddenly swept past at speed. The daydream was shattered.

A dozen ravens took flight, rising from nearby rocks, their wings beating black and hard against the thin air. The ground shuddered. Just the slightest tremor.

'What was that … ?' Klaus laughed nervously.

–

The camp at the foot of the North Col was a bustling hub of human activity: hundreds of red, yellow and green tents were clustered on the glacial terrain, yaks arriving continuously, carrying the special blue equipment barrels that seem universal to every expedition.

'There must be a thousand people here!' Klaus exclaimed.

There was an incredible energy to the place, the air filled with a distinctive mix of scents: kerosene, perfumed glacier cream, the pungent smell of animal dung.

'I smell bacon,' I told Klaus. The tantalising aroma of cooked breakfast was seeping from a nearby mess tent. 'Must be Brits around!'

Many of the teams had hoisted their national flags outside their camps. We took a walk; heard Russian voices laughing across the moraine. A team from Iran were newly arrived. Climbers from the Basque country of Spain were eating breakfast al fresco, sitting around a gas stove outside their mess tent.

Then, amongst the chaos, someone caught my eye. It was a girl, roughly my own age, leading three yaks into the camp.

At first I thought she was a Westerner, tricked by the fleece and trekking trousers she wore, but then, as she turned her head and we locked eyes for a moment, I saw her deeply tanned face and shoulder-length plaits of jet-black hair and realised it was a local Tibetan girl. I felt my breath catch.

She looked towards me, raised a camera and took a shot of me and Klaus. Then, with a cheeky smile, she turned back to her yaks.

'That's a pretty girl,' Klaus teased me. 'Love at first sight?'

I punched him lightly on the arm.

'Check out the mountain!' Klaus said suddenly.

Everest was illuminated by a burst of sunlight.

I took a series of photographs, pushing in ever closer with my telephoto lens to pick out details. I spotted the notches in the ridge that marked the famous 'first step', the notorious sections of almost vertical rock that cut into the climbing route. Further up was the even more impressive 'second step', the final cliff that guarded the summit ridge.

What would it be like to be up there? I wondered. In the Death Zone. Treading the wild margins between life and death. I felt a tinge of regret; the journey I was currently making was just a trek, a trip to Base Camp and no further. The permits and equipment to actually climb were far beyond my resources. For the moment.

'Seventy million years in the making and still rising by a few centimetres every year.' Klaus said.

'Let's go for a walk,' I said. 'Get some photos from a different angle.'

We crunched across the ice. A slight ache started to spread across the side of my chest. The thin air was causing me to breathe deeper than normal, stretching my chest muscles.

Fifteen minutes later we reached the viewpoint I had in mind.

And that was when the earthquake hit.

–

The earth gave a massive lurch and I was thrown to the ground, falling awkwardly. I hit the rocky floor of the glacier, the full weight of my body crashing on to my left wrist as I twisted instinctively to protect the camera.

Klaus stumbled but managed to stay upright.

'Was that what I think it was?' he said, his face pale.

Earthquake?

Stones clattered down the cliff face behind us. I sprang back to my feet, my heart thudding like crazy. Shouts rang out from the climbers down at the camp.

'Get away from the face!'

I looked up at the higher slopes which towered above us. At the ice fields, the vast quantity of wind-packed snow stacked a thousand metres above the camp.

'If that lot goes … '

The second tremor was more violent, the sound of it primeval. A dragon's roar. A grinding symphony of crushed rock that came from deep in the guts of the planet. Someone screamed. The ground shimmered. Dust plumed upwards.

A shark's fin serac of blue ice collapsed on the glacier about ten metres from us. Thousands of kilos of shattered ice went skittering across the ground.

'Look!' Klaus grabbed my arm and pointed at Everest.

I spun around. The entire face was alive with movement. Rock fall, avalanche, dust trails and ice flowing down the gullies and couloirs at incredible speed. For a split second I thought about the climbers in the high camps. They wouldn't stand a chance.

The ground shuddered again. A thunderous noise began.

Klaus screamed: 'Run!'

A cloud of ice and tumbling rock was racing down the sheer cliff behind us. We sprinted away from the face.

I think we managed about three strides.

–

The avalanche engulfed us. It felt like I'd been kicked in the back by a horse. I was blown off my feet, sent head over heels. Klaus smashed into me, our heads knocked together.

A fusillade of cracks and clunks came out of the dense cloud. Stone on stone. Stone on ice. Bullet-like impacts, half-seen objects flashing past in a blur of darkness. I kept my head down, skidding with my cheek pressed against gritty, frozen mud.

I snatched a look. Klaus had his head up. *Idiot!*

'Get down!'

A rock the size of a suitcase tumbled out of the void and smashed itself to smithereens on a boulder little more than an arm's length from our position. An even bigger missile went whirring overhead, disappearing into the white nightmare.

‘We have to get away from the face! Come on!’ Klaus yelled. He stood, moving quickly into the ice cloud.

I tried to stand. A frozen block cut through the avalanche, hitting me square in the ribs, smashing all the air out of my lungs.

‘Ryan … ?’ Klaus called back.

A dense thud came through the silver haze. A sharp exhalation of air. The sound of a human body hitting the ground. The voice was cut off.

I spat out pieces of gravel. Stars exploded across my vision. I drew in a huge breath, shivering as crystals of ice got sucked into my lungs. Ice fragments continued to zip out of nowhere. Smaller stones and pebbles.

I scrambled up, managed to get on to all fours, still winded from the blow.

A figure appeared by my side, the face slowly coming into focus. It was the Tibetan girl – the one who had been leading the yaks. She looked bruised and covered in dust but otherwise in one piece.

‘Are you OK?’ she said.

‘Can’t … breathe … ’

‘Come on!’ She yanked me upright and got my arm over her shoulders.

An aftershock undulated through the ground. The earthquake wasn’t done yet. A deep boom announced a further avalanche, somewhere far away on the other side of the valley.

‘Where’s my friend?’ I gasped.

I looked for Klaus, my guts twisting with dread.

Footsteps. A Sherpa came stumbling out of the gloom. Blood was dripping from a deep cut on his forehead.

‘This way! Quickly!’ he shouted. He pointed urgently into the ice cloud then vanished as swiftly as he had appeared, tripping unsteadily away.

‘Can you walk now?’ the girl asked.

Air flowed into my lungs. I gasped with relief. My ribcage flared with pain.

‘I guess.’

Seconds ticked by. The avalanche cloud began to clear.

Gradually the destruction became visible. The scene reminded me of battlefield photographs from the First World War.

‘Klaus?’ I called.

There was no reply.

–

The camp had been trashed. Hundreds of tents wiped away. Everything had been torn to the ground or spirited skywards in the blast.

‘The gods have spoken … ’ the girl said quietly.

Crumpled figures were lying prone, many with gruesome injuries. We saw a climber with a broken neck, his head almost severed from his body. Expedition medics were running to help their teammates, or rummaging amongst the wreckage of their tents for first aid kits. Distressed voices rang out across the glacier, calling for lost friends.

‘Klaus!’ I yelled again. No answer came.

I heard the sound of a camera shutter. A Western photographer was standing nearby, taking shots of the scene. I realised with a sick feeling that he was filming the bodies.

‘Klaus!’

We walked forward for ten or fifteen paces, finding odd bits of kit scattered around. Much of it was buried beneath the ice blocks that had cascaded down the cliff. We smelled gas, found one of the propane cylinders spewing its contents into the air. I turned off the valve. The girl stepped over to a deep crevasse.

‘Look!’

I went to join her, staring into the depths at an extraordinary confusion of smashed-up camp equipment. In the midst of it all a boot and section of lower leg could be seen sticking out. I felt acid rising in my throat.

Klaus’s boot.

‘It’s my friend,’ I said.

The boot twitched.

‘Quickly!’ the girl exclaimed.

She jumped down into the shallow end of the crevasse without a moment’s hesitation. I gritted my teeth and slid down next to her.

‘We need something to dig with,’ she said. We found a squashed saucepan and a baking tray amongst the debris.

The boot moved again. Klaus was buried head down. Entombed. Held fast in the grip of the ice.

The Tibetan girl was quick and strong, scraping out quantities of the rock-hard ice with each swing of her arms. I did the same with the metal tray, slicing down into the debris and throwing it into the far end of the crevasse.

I was soon out of breath.

‘He felt us!’ she said.

Klaus’s legs kicked. Half remembered facts from a documentary flashed into my mind: how long avalanche victims have got before they suffocate. Fifteen minutes? That was the figure that came to mind. But I wasn’t sure.

His waist was now exposed.

Dig. Dig. The girl was incredible, working twice as fast as me.

‘Pull now!’ she said.

I paused to draw oxygen into my lungs. I was dizzy, feeling faint. My chest ached with the effort of sucking in that super-thin air. The Tibetan girl took one leg. I took the other.

'Go!' she said.

We pulled like crazy.

Nothing happened. He was stuck fast.

'Harder!' the girl hissed.

We tugged with all our might. Klaus's upper body slipped suddenly free from the ice. He drew in a massive breath, flopping on to his side like a landed fish. His lips were bright blue. His face was creased with pain and shock.

'What took you so long?' he gasped.

–

Klaus was evacuated by military helicopter one hour later. The bodies of two dead climbers were loaded in beside him. My German friend was one of the lucky ones.

'He's inhaled a lot of ice,' an expedition doctor told me as the helicopter flew off down the valley. 'His lungs could take a couple of weeks to recover.'

'He's tough,' the girl told me. 'I get the feeling he'll be fine.'

I nodded my agreement.

'You saved his life,' I told her. 'What's your name?'

'Tashi.'

'Ryan.'

We stood there awkwardly. I saw her turn and look up towards the mountain.

'What are you going to do now?' I asked.

A shadow fell across her face.

'I have to find out about my brother.'

'Your *brother*?' I looked around the devastated camp. 'Was he here when the earthquake hit?'

She bit her lip, continued staring up at the mountain. Then she spoke slowly.

'No. He was up there. At Camp 6. Helping an expedition.'

I thought back to the rock and ice avalanches that had swept the upper slopes of Everest. It was hard to imagine that anyone could have survived.

'Maybe we can find some information,' I suggested. 'Which team was he with?'

'They were from Switzerland.'

We stumbled around the glacier for a while, asking for the whereabouts of the team. Finally we found a tent with a Swiss flag fluttering above it, one of the very few that hadn't been destroyed. There was

no one inside so we waited at the table for a while. Half an hour later a Sherpa man came in, limping heavily with a bloodied bandage round his leg.

'I haven't got anything to tell you,' he told us sadly. 'All I know is your brother was up there with one other climber.'

The Sherpa directed us to a large green tent stationed in the centre of the glacier. The buzz of urgent conversation came from inside.

'The Base Camp commander is in there,' he said. 'Maybe he can tell you more.'

We walked across the ice and pushed our way into the mess tent. The space was crammed with climbers all trying to talk at once. A radio set was squawking at high volume. In the middle of the mayhem a bad-tempered-looking Chinese military officer was fielding questions from the assembled expeditioners.

'You will get news when we have it!' he repeated over and over again. 'Now please leave the tent!'

The climbers showed no signs of leaving, but redoubled their efforts to get the man's attention.

I followed Tashi as she pushed her way through the crowd with grim determination. To my surprise the Base Camp commander seemed to recognise her, his face set instantly into a hostile stare.

'What do you want?' he asked.

'My brother Karma is at Camp 6,' she said. 'Do you have any information about him?'

'Your brother can't be on the mountain,' the commander said coldly. 'He hasn't got a permit.'

'He is there,' Tashi replied emphatically. 'Permit or not.'

The commander shook his head.

'Everyone at Camp 6 is dead,' he said firmly. 'You should forget about your brother.'

He stared at her with a strangely unsettling look and I saw Tashi wince.

'Now let me get on with my job!' he snapped.

We left the tent and stood in the freezing air for a few moments.

'He's under pressure,' I said finally. 'He probably didn't mean to be rude … '

Tashi didn't say anything but it was clear from her frown she didn't agree with what I'd said. I felt a bit stupid; why was I trying to make excuses for that guy? He obviously hated Tashi for some reason.

'I don't believe him,' she said stubbornly. 'I'm sure Karma is still alive.'

The ground shivered with an aftershock. Pebbles tumbled down a nearby slope.

I suddenly thought back to the first time I had seen her.

'Where are your animals?' I asked.

Tashi's face clouded. She pointed to the other side of the camp.

'This way,' she said uncertainly. 'They were tethered by those rocks.'

We walked for a few minutes, through further scenes of devastation. Climbers were working to rebuild their tents. Helicopters were still flying in to the makeshift landing pad to pick up the wounded.

Suddenly Tashi stopped, a new expression of horror passing across her face. We were looking at a messed-up patch of ground. Avalanche debris had reached even this remote spot. There were boulders and piles of ice everywhere.

'They were here,' Tashi said quietly. 'I thought they would have been safe … '

We stepped towards the small river that was cut in the glacier surface.

'Oh no!' Tashi ran forward. As I stepped beside her I saw three dark shapes entwined in a macabre embrace at the far end of the stream where it plunged into a hole in the glacier surface. Three yaks. Drowned. Swept into the river by the avalanche.

Tashi put a hand to her mouth. She stifled a sob.

I stood there, unsure what I could possibly do to help. I felt terrible for her. Her brother missing on Everest.

All three of her yaks killed.

At that moment a bitter wind sprang up. The air felt bruised and heavy, like a storm was on the way. We retrieved the bag containing Tashi's belongings from the river. Everything was soaked. Even her sleeping bag and tent were sopping wet.

'What are you going to do?' I asked her.

'I don't know,' she said. Her worried eyes flashed with determination. 'But I won't leave this place while my brother is in danger.'

I felt an overwhelming sense of sorrow for her. A need to help.

'We can make a shelter,' I said. 'But we'd better move fast.'

–

We began to scour the area, looking for canvas and tent poles. Within fifteen minutes we had collected a couple of flysheets and a heavy panel of Dacron from the piles of debris.

'A stove!' Tashi found a small cooker which looked like it might work.

Using lightweight para cord, we lashed the various bits of flysheet and canvas over four tent poles, creating a ramshackle shelter. There was no groundsheet, but a couple of strategically placed foam mats would protect us from the frozen glacier surface. Tashi fired up the little stove and put a pan of ice on to melt. We held our hands towards the flame, savouring the welcome wave of warmth coming off it.

'When was the last time you ate?' I asked her.

She shrugged.

'I had some rice last night.'

I found a Mars bar in my pack, split it in two and shared it with her. The taste was wonderfully sweet, a comforting burst of sugar.

‘You’re shivering,’ she said.

Luckily I still had my sleeping bag and we soon found Klaus’s bag inside his abandoned pack. We zipped them together to form one giant sleeping sack for the two of us, glad of the shared body warmth against the cold.

‘What are your plans now your friend has gone?’ Tashi asked. ‘Will you still try to climb?’

‘Climb Everest?’ I had to smile at the idea. ‘In my dreams! I’m just here on a trek. Travelling and taking photographs.’

I brought Tashi up to speed on the gap-year journey I was making, telling her also about the magical time I had recently had in Nepal, working for a medical charity.

‘I should have been home by now,’ I continued. ‘Working on my mum and dad’s farm before going to university. But I extended my trip, had to get a close-up look at Everest.’

‘Obsession,’ Tashi said flatly. ‘Like my brother.’

‘Definitely,’ I agreed. ‘Plus there is something else.’

I pulled the shrine bell from my fleece pocket and handed it to Tashi.

‘My Nepali friend Kami took this with him when he climbed Everest,’ I told her. ‘He wanted to put it on the summit but never quite made it.’

Tashi turned the pretty little bell in her hands.

‘These items are sacred,’ she said. ‘Powerful. The prayers of generations locked inside them.’

‘My friend wants me to get it to Everest summit one day,’ I told her, feeling slightly foolish. ‘Finish the quest.’

‘If the gods allow, anything is possible,’ Tashi replied.

She handed the shrine bell back.

I thought about Tashi’s brother, caught up there on the highest slopes of Everest. The chances of him still being alive seemed increasingly small.

‘How old is Karma?’ I asked her.

‘Fifteen.’

I stared at her in surprise. I had imagined he would be much older.

‘Isn’t he a bit young to be climbing Everest?’

‘Yes,’ Tashi agreed. I could see she was close to tears.

She pulled a battered postcard from her pocket. I saw that it was a portrait of the Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of the Tibetan people. I knew that he had been exiled from Tibet for most of his life, hounded out of the country after the Chinese invaded.

Tashi mumbled a prayer as she viewed the picture.

‘So how come your brother’s up there?’

‘It’s a long story,’ she said.

I noticed a dark stain across the photograph. I took it from her and looked at it closely.

‘That looks like blood,’ I said. ‘What happened?’

Tashi sighed, drew out a long, deep breath.

Then she began to talk.