

days, and it was hard to believe that less than 12 hours before, we had been looking at polar bear tracks by the side of the floe edge. Warren and I had left a large stash of gear at the Illuaqs'; returning was only a matter of time.

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The Silver Chalice

A Himalayan odyssey

By Jeff Long

It was in the jails of Kathmandu that ghosts gave shape to me. It has been almost 20 years now, but I still see that rangy long-haired boy stumbling into the labyrinth. Half a lifetime later, I still accompany him following the dead back into the light of day. For the two men who helped guide me into manhood had already been killed as high within the Himalaya as they could get.

One of them climbed, the other killed. One was a pacifist, the other a medieval warrior. It was the gentle spirit — Fritz Stammberger — who carried his silver chalice from camp to camp and drank raw chang and rakshee from it like some Iron Age chieftain. And it was the warrior — Wongdu — who wore around his neck a silver prayer box containing a photo of the ultimate pacifist, the Dalai Lama. To this day, Fritz's widow claims her husband worked for the KGB or CIA, when in fact he was just a giant wearing crampons. It was Wongdu who fought the CIA's war. Both of them were exiles, condemned to circle the flame. No wonder I chased after them. Searching was everything.

I first entered Nepal in 1971 at the age of 19, alone, abandoning college, risking the draft and Vietnam for a dream of Everest. I wanted it to be the great mountains that shaped my soul. In those days Kathmandu was still a city of magic, not yet self-conscious or jaded, and only pilgrims ventured there. Each tribe had its look: the hard-core heads their heroin eyes and loincloths, the dharma bums their red puja threads and aloofness, the world travelers their Balti vests and visa scams, the looming mountaineers their health, cameras, and eagerness to get out of the city.

The Cold War was raging, though at the street level in Kathmandu it only

showed up as sideshow curios. For a few rupees you bought your Dostoevsky and Marx from the Soviet bookstore near a government hash shop, and your copies of Mao's Red Book from the People's Republic of China stall. Besides Peace Corps workers and embassy photos of astronauts on the moon, America's bid for the Third World mostly showed in the vestiges, in the whispers and shadows. Here and there, bits of jungle cammies from Vietnam flashed in the alleys. No worthwhile pie-shop gossip failed to mention the CIA. One evening I shared a meal of dahlboht with a paranoid Army deserter from Kansas City who carried a slingshot in his back pocket. We were the same age. Like me, he had always wanted to see the Himalaya.

Every traveler navigates with an interior map. Drawn part with prayer, part with the whispers of those who have gone before us, they chart a geography of expectations and fears and peculiar landmarks. For me, guidance always seemed to come in the form of eccentrics and radicals. Later on I would take my bearings from men like Fritz and Wongdu.

But in the beginning, it was two other characters who shaped my destinations and style. Ten years earlier, Woodrow Wilson Sayre had attempted a deliriously illegal ascent of Everest from the Tibetan side, creating an international scandal that almost wrecked the first "official" American expedition in 1963. During the same period, an equally maverick French scholar named Michel Peissel had infiltrated an ancient kingdom called Mustang, a tongue of the Tibetan plateau that extends into Nepal at an average elevation of 15,000 feet. Armed with accounts written by those men, I set off to conquer Everest and Mustang both.

I arrived to find Nepal a place of absolute freedom, and yet absolute limits. Nowhere was this more certain than along the border with Tibet, which was treated like a war zone. When I tried to travel north of the Annapurna Range into Mustang, a consular officer lectured me to the point of threat. No one went up there unless he wanted to disappear. Mustang had Khampas, I was told, whatever those were. They sounded more dangerous than yeti.

Turning to Everest, I landed one of the first permits to walk in along the northern route through Rolwaling Valley. I got to the top of Tesi Lapche pass, blew out my bum knee, retreated to a monastery for two weeks, and contracted worms. Fifty pounds thinner and limping ferociously, I returned to the University of Colorado looking like an opium addict.

My next foray to the Himalaya came in 1974. Through sheer luck I had landed a spot on an international expedition to Makalu put together by Fritz Stammberger. I'd never met Fritz, but in no time found myself under his spell. Big dreams, big heart, big calves. Fritz lived life the way I thought I wanted to. He was a German expatriate ski instructor who lived in Aspen, published *Climbing* magazine, and spent his free time climbing in remote ranges. Built

like Conan, married to a Playmate of the Year, multi-lingual, brimming with charisma and a worldful of stories, he seemed to represent a giant step beyond my mousey university existence. Where I was shy, he was flamboyant and reckless and conspicuous.

Later I would learn that Fritz had been 22, also, on his first expedition to the Himalaya. On the eve of summiting on Cho Oyu, his two companions had developed pulmonary edema, and Fritz should have descended for help. Instead he chose to solo to the top. By the time he returned to the tent, one climber was dead. The other died on the descent. A German climbing magazine damned Fritz. He fled, first to Asia, eventually to Aspen. There he plotted his return to the 8000-meter peaks, specifically Makalu in 1974.

Three days after graduating with a devoutly useless degree in philosophy, I joined a half dozen climbers from as many countries in Kathmandu. Between repackaging food and raiding the bazaar for last-minute gear, I made a point of collecting more stories about mysterious Mustang. There were rumors on the street about a crude bridge that crossed a gorge. In the middle of the bridge was a wooden door which the Khampas locked each night. Beyond that point Nepal belonged to them. A group of Japanese climbers had tried to enter the region, only to be robbed and turned back in their underwear.

The Khampas were the front line of a Tibetan resistance movement and had been occupying Mustang since the Chinese invasion in the late 1950s. Under the leadership of a legendary general named Wongdu, these guerrillas would slip across the Himalayan chain into their occupied homeland, hunt down Chinese soldiers, ambush truck convoys, and mine the tortuous "highway" to Pakistan. Rumor insisted that the CIA was somehow involved. A Peace Corps worker swore the guerrillas had been trained in my home state, at the 10th Mountain Division's old Camp Hale above Leadville, Colorado. None of it made much sense to me. Certainly it made no difference.

It took three weeks to approach Makalu through the leeches and monsoon rains, and another two months to spin our web to 8000 meters on the unclimbed south face. For the first month I climbed and humped loads with Fritz, who anointed me Little Fritz even though I was two inches taller. During a storm, he shared his silver chalice with me.

At the end of two months, we placed our highest camp, poised for a summit strike, and then suffered a collective surge of weather, personality conflicts, and injuries. We missed the first ascent by a thousand vertical feet. I was awestruck as grown men wept and cursed and drank themselves into Shakespearean unconsciousness. Being young, I couldn't yet distinguish between tragedy and farce. Happily, by the time we got back to Kathmandu, Fritz's spirit was fully revived. The first thing he did was obtain the next available permit for Makalu. Several of us vowed to return with Fritz in 1977. The

first crack in my immortality appeared a year later when Fritz's father, Wolfgang, called to say that his son had vanished in Pakistan. I was in Austria helping one of my Makalu comrades rebuild his burned home. It was here, in Arnold's bakery, that I read the German magazines about Fritz and the Cho Oyu tragedy.

When the news of Fritz's disappearance reached us, Arnold and I winked. Staging his own death would be vintage Fritz. Sooner or later he would show up, we knew, lofting some great story. But as the months passed and Arnold's Tyrolean chalet gained walls and a roof and it came time for me to return to the States, Fritz was still missing.

Fritz had gone alone, bent on soloing Tirich Mir. We debated the possibilities. Perhaps, seeing his silver chalice, some thief had waylaid him on the trail. His wife consulted mediums who believed Fritz was injured, but still alive, imprisoned in some Asian jail cell. None of us could fathom a mere mountain taking him down. Certainly I never thought it would be me who ended up in the Asian jail. As 1977 approached, I decided to carry on with Fritz's Makalu permit. By assuming the leadership, of course, I was making myself into Fritz, or trying to. At the time it seemed a duty. The expedition was mostly composed of friends, though I did allow on one stranger. He presented himself as a black-belt Born Again 5.10 bodybuilding bicycle-racing ex-football player with serious roots in Yosemite's Camp 4. His narcissism was staggering. No one could stand the sight, much less the sound of him, but his \$8000 in Alaska pipeline cash was impossible to refuse. We called him the Silver Surfer.

In February, I flew back to Kathmandu. Like an old friend, the Mustang rumors were still crawling around the temples and alleyways. The rest of the crew wasn't arriving for another two weeks, which gave me time to chase after what remains to this day a classified U.S. government secret. The Khampa-resistance-movement story had grown on me, or me on it. A budding journalist, I fancied a scoop.

Anxious whispers kept warning me away from the story, but nearly everyone wanted to talk, too. Darting after slim leads — a crippled monk, alleged gunrunner, an American "wife" of Wongdu, anthropologists, exiles, quasi-diplomats — I came to understand that each new source considered himself the final authority. The Mustang program had apparently been terminated. "Dixie Cups," a Christian missionary explained. That was the CIA's in-house slang for its various indigenous guerrilla operations. "Use once, throw away."

Nevertheless, some said, the guerrillas were still fighting farther west of Mustang or deep inside Tibet. Or they were counting their gold in Kathmandu or dying of fever in the jungles of southern Nepal. Wongdu had been betrayed and shot to death, according to one source. Another argued that it was a twin brother who'd been killed. Wongdu still rode the range. Tibet would rise again

— whatever Tibet was. I still had barely an inkling of its history or people.

The Makalu 1977 gang arrived and it was back to the business of fun. In the two and a half years since Fritz's 1974 expedition, a team of Yugoslavs had polished off the south face. But the west face direct had never been touched. Indeed, like the backside of the moon, there were virtually no photos of this hidden face. We could still be pioneers. Our 1977 wild bunch took two weeks to march in to the radiant pyramid of Makalu. Right away things started to run amok. The day after reaching the mountain, our English poet-climber decided he's rather go whoring in Bangkok and promptly departed. Next day, the Silver Surfer took ill and it surfaced that, because his body was temple of the Lord, he had declined to be vaccinated. Before the whole group got infected with what appeared to be typhus, I had him evacuated and he never returned.

Over the next eight weeks, we laid siege, failed low, and trickled back to Kathmandu. It was a mean and trivial defeat made all the more so by our feuds and cowardice. I took the failure personally. The expedition had been mounted in a certain spirit, and I had failed that spirit. I had failed my dead.

The rest of the expedition went home, or so I thought. I stayed in Kathmandu, bent on salvaging something — my honor or romance, or narrative strand. Borrowing from Fritz's legend, I banished myself from home. With his panache as my example, I approached the Nepalese Army and offered to teach mountaineering to the King's soldiers. To my astonishment, they accepted. The colonel promised me a salary and a year-long visa. My bad fortune had reversed itself. Immediately I began plotting to work Everest into the military curriculum. Maybe I could even schedule a training session in Mustang and finish tracking down the CIA's Colorado connection.

Tales of the guerrilla movement were accumulating. I literally slept with them, notes and tapes piled on the bed in my room at the Kathmandu Guesthouse. Wongdu was becoming my jewel in the lotus.

Like Fritz, he had provoked realities so exotic they were almost fictional. Each man had placed himself in exile and then used it as a form of authorship, actively fashioning his own story. As a mountaineer, I was already keenly aware of the autobiographical possibilities on the edge of wilderness. Fritz and Wongdu were not the first to use the Himalaya as their own blank page. We all try to write ourselves upon our landscape. Fritz and I had tried it with Makalu. What made Wongdu so compelling was that he transcended his landscape and time. His tragedy spoke a strange resonance to the American experience.

In attempting to reconquer his country, Wongdu had faced the same odds as Geronimo once did in our own deserts and mountains. Indeed, he confronted essentially the same genocide that played out on the American frontier a hundred years ago. Tibet, like Texas or Wyoming, appealed to a population of "settlers" who poured into it in search of a fresh start and an abundance of natural resources.

Deng Xiaoping — the architect of Tibet's conquest — simply voiced a Han echo of old-fashioned Manifest Destiny. He had only two serious opponents: the Dalai Lama in exile and Wongdu in Mustang.

As I assembled Wongdu's portrait — there in Kathmandu, later in the exile-Tibetan community in Dharamsala and in a newspaper morgue in Delhi and in government archives in the U.S. — it was clear that he had been at least as creative and daring as Fritz. Stealth, horses, and a cache of guns made up his resistance to a realpolitik anchored by the People's Liberation Army, tanks, and Ilyushin jets. Wongdu's hazards dwarfed mine on the west face of Makalu. They undermined my playground attitude toward ascent. Here was risk in the service of history.

Wongdu had been among the first six Tibetan guerrilla leaders to be trained by the United States. He and five other volunteers were flown to a Pacific island, perhaps Guam or Saipan, where they spent four months learning how to read a map and work a radio. In the fall of 1957 they boarded a small black airplane piloted by an American. Individually equipped with a pistol, a machine gun, an old Japanese radio, \$132 in Tibetan currency, and a bracelet containing poison to be swallowed upon capture, the guerrillas parachuted back into their homeland. Four of the six were destined for Lithang in southeastern Tibet. Of the four, only one was ever seen again — Wongdu.

Successive groups of guerrilla leaders were trained at Camp Hale in Colorado between 1959 and 1962. In an effort to cloak its covert training program in the heart of the Rockies, the CIA orchestrated a marvelous fiction, that an atomic "unit" was being tested near Leadville. Elk hunters, miners and the general citizenry of Colorado avoided Camp Hale.

My research continued to suffer one gaping hole. I had yet to locate a single guerrilla. Just the same, as I galloped around Kathmandu with a tape recorder and notepad in my jhola, it seemed only a matter of time. I was beginning to feel downright masterful in my self-made exile. On the Makalu climb, my judgments had crashed head-on against the huge west face. The Khampa story was like a balm, restoring my place in the world, however alternate that world was. Once again I had a purpose. Once again I had someone else's story to live.

Maybe I couldn't command an expedition, but through the authority of facts I could command an audience. In exile — even my artificial exile — I could belong somewhere. Mine was the sort of hubris Rudyard Kipling liked to inflict on his colonial dreamers and fools. Just when they think they've carved a foothold for themselves, the mountain vanishes.

My fall from grace arrived from out of nowhere. I was arrested for smuggling 7000 watches from Hong Kong, charged with ringleading an international racket, and drop-kicked into my first of three jails in Kathmandu. As it developed, upon returning from Makalu, the Silver Surfer had not gone home. He'd

fallen in with the Indian Mafia and become a mule. Sensing danger on his last run, he asked me to take delivery of his "trekking gear" waiting at the airport customs office. Since I had to return the expedition's walkie-talkies through the customs office anyway, I agreed. It was not the last time my trust in the brotherhood of fellow climbers backfired, just the worst. I later learned he watched me get busted at the airport, then took a taxi all the way to Delhi, hopped on a plane to the United States, and put himself beyond extradition.

Every day, I was certain the mistake would be resolved and the jail doors would swing open. Nepalese officials candidly admitted my innocence to the American embassy. But unless the Silver Surfer returned to face the charges, they said there was little that could be done. The Nepalese have a phrase: *Ke garne?* What to do? Shit happens.

Through a friend, my anguished family hired a lawyer. After a month, Nepal's Supreme Court took my case as a test piece of law versus the monarchy's corruption, and promptly freed me. The ministry responsible for my arrest was rebuked. Unfortunately for me, the monarchy was not about to take the affront sitting down. In a bald expression of power, the King's customs men re-arrested me on the same charge, imposed a fine of \$100,000, tacked on a five-year sentence for embarrassing them, and hauled me off to another jail.

Except for a raving tattooed Dutch schizophrenic who tore this clothes into one-inch shreds, talked to his anus, and ritually moussed his hair with and ate his own diarrhea, I was the sole Westerner in the Kingdom's prison system. Night and day I listened to men scream and moan, watched some die, witnessed cruelties large and small, sank into disgrace. I did push-ups and practiced my martial arts while guards spit on me from above. As the monsoon deepened and the rain turned dark green, I woke from dreams of Makalu to what seemed like some deep circle of hell.

Perhaps inevitably, it was the first prisoner on my first night who made the greatest impression on me. After 10 solid hours of interrogation, I got my handcuffs removed and was locked into a cell: bare concrete, bare light bulb, my own swarm of mosquitoes. There was no food or water, no bed, no blanket. Pooled in a dozen open rooms on the ground floor just below, several decades of raw sewage poisoned the night.

Part of me — the Huck Finn, the voluble Fritz — began to mentally catalogue my surroundings. In the morning, surely, they would release me and apologize and I could go on with my Nepalese lessons and my job with the army and my Everest and Mustang ambitions. What a war story this was going to make! My momentary enthusiasm flattened at a scream pitched so high it could have been the whine of mosquitoes. The scream quit. In its aftermath, all was silence and waiting. I stood stock-still.

Someone grunted at me, once, guttural. I peered through my bars across the

hallway to the facing cell. The prisoner was a cheerful soul in his mid-50s or so. Tall and burly, he had wide Sioux cheekbones and a gold tooth that gleamed in the ebb and surge of Kathmandu's primitive electrical supply. A Tibetan, of course, much larger than any Sherpa. The greasy red prayer beads wrapped around his left wrist reached through my disbelief. I felt hope.

America? he asked. I said yes. He tossed across a blanket. Next came a straw mat and two small bananas. Too late, I saw that these were all he had. I said thanks in Nepali. If the man spoke Nepali, he didn't show it. He retreated to his far wall and sat down on the bare floor and closed his eyes.

In the morning I woke to his prayers. He made sure I received a cup of tea and an omelet made by one of the stick-thin guards, and paid for it out of his own pocket. When I had to go the bathroom, he instructed the guard to be quick about it. Downstairs I made the mistake of actually entering one of the dark rooms, not realizing the prisoners and guards simply perched on the door sill for their business. One step and I went skating through the inside of the human intestine, years of it. I fell and rolled and bellowed in the foul liquid. A half hour later, soaking wet from the faucet, I was returned to my cell, exhausted by the guard's insults. The Tibetan prisoner looked at me. Ke garne? Truly. We laughed.

My samaritan was an elderly Khampa. He drew a map to show where his home province of Kham lay in eastern Tibet. His geography — plus his age and his size and bravado — inspired me to take a not-so-wild guess. I said the word Mustang and named some of its towns. Teh, Tsarang, Kagbeni, Jomosom, Surkhang. My pronunciation earned a grin. I tried the title of the Khampa resistance movement. Chushi Gangdruk, which referred to the "Four Rivers, Six Ranges" of the ancient Tibetan province of Kham. The grin faded. I said the name Wongdu. He grew solemn and jutted his chin at me. My first Tibetan guerrilla.

On the third day, a Sherpa who spoke English landed in a nearby cell. Through him, I harvested more of the Khampa's story. The guerrilla's name was Lokpa. Around 1960, he had fled to Ladakh in northern India with his family. Eventually, refugees like him had numbered 85,000. The Indian government had funneled this diaspora far from the border into sparsely populated jungles, where many of the refugees died of disease. The casualties included Lokpa's wife and all of his children. He was matter of fact about the loss.

For the next year, Lokpa worked on a road gang. Then word came that the Chusi Gangdruk was reorganizing in Mustang. On foot with a few others, Lokpa made his way along the Kali Gandaki between the Annapurnas and Dhaulagiri. He took up arms and stayed for over a decade.

Later I would learn that some 2000 men like Lokpa had flocked to Mustang, drawn by the promise of American aid. They had waited for a year in caves and nomad tents. As time passed, the Red Cross reported starvation in the area.

Many of the guerrillas practiced shooting with sticks for rifles. Some survived by eating boiled yak leather from their boots. Some died for lack of food and shelter. Finally, in late 1961, two aircraft dropped enough guns for 475 men, medicine, food, and \$1252 in local currency. Twenty-six Camp Hale-trained Tibetans parachuted in with the supplies, and 12 more Camp Hale graduates walked in from India.

Initially the guerrillas had every confidence that the reconquest of Tibet was at the tips of their trigger fingers. Until the Chinese fortified defenses along the Mustang border, guerrillas would ride horseback hundred of miles into Tibet, wreaking havoc on isolated garrisons and supply lines. At 35 cents per pound, the cost of trucking supplies thousands of miles into Tibet was an economic burden for China, and that was before the guerrilla sabotage. The raids were planned by CIA operatives who sometimes posed as Christian missionaries. Occasionally missions were led by agency contract mercenaries.

Then the operation was shut down. Ironically, the guerrillas provided information that helped doom their cause. Several mailbags of documents they had captured in Tibet were analyzed by China experts at the CIA's headquarters in Langley, Virginia. The documents clearly expressed China's determination to hang onto Tibet. The Chushi Gangdruk wasn't having the desired effect. The CIA began to lose interest in the Khampas, though it did continue to supply them into the late 1960s and to channel funds to them until 1971. But after Henry Kissinger's trip to Beijing in July of that year to explore detente with China, all American aid to the guerrillas ceased. The end was not far away.

I asked Lokpa about the CIA. He said firmly that he'd taken an oath not to talk about the Americans. Watching him, I could understand why some of the CIA's "special ops" officers involved in training the Khampas had become so attached to them. Instructed to encourage Tibetans' hope for reconquest, a number of the agents — some of whom were still chanting the Diamond Sutra and other Buddhist prayers years later — came to believe in the liberation of Tibet themselves. When the CIA pulled the plug on the operation, a number of agents furiously denounced Washington bureaucrats for selling them out.

I asked Lokpa about the final days in Mustang. I was thinking of what that British expatriate had told me: Dixie Cups. There was not a trace of bitterness as Lokpa supposed that the guerrillas had gotten too old. He had been on his way back to Tibet when Nepalese border guards apprehended him at the border and sent him here. What he had hoped to accomplish, I will never know. Possibly he was just closing a circle of his own. Born in Tibet, he may simply have wanted to die there. Lokpa's arrest held no great mystery. The key to understanding Nepalese justice is extortion. Lokpa was never booked or charged with any crime. He never broke any laws. Finally, after no eager relatives stepped forward to buy him out of our jail, the Nepalese shipped Lokpa away. He was sent north

again and handed over to the Chinese themselves. (To this day, Nepalese soldiers and police regularly capture refugees coming out of Tibet, plunder them, rape the women, and often hand them back to the Chinese.)

I missed Lokpa's calm. It was hard to see men and women abused like wild animals from day to day. The torture victims lay piled in their cells like road kill. Every now and then the dead would be carried out through the blue mist at dawn. As the weeks stretched on, I found myself recalling the way Lokpa made himself a pivot in the center of the world. It helped tame the chaos.

With time I learned how to tell the criminals from the political prisoners. The political prisoners were the ones who got tortured the longest. My education to the world of man, as opposed to the world of mountains, had begun. The King's jails were filled with the people who would, 13 years later, lead the revolution that overthrew the monarchy in 1990. Shackled together, Naxalites — radical Maoists — hobbled about in pairs, some sporting ball-and-chain rigs riveted on by a blacksmith.

Besides the garden-variety thieves, whores, and murderers, there were a baker's dozen of lepers who had put one of their own out of his misery at the colony outside Kathmandu. As their faces froze into lions' masks and their toes and fingers eroded to nubbins, all 13 of them were serving the 20-year sentence that passes for a death penalty in Nepal. They were shy and utterly impoverished and kept to their own enclosure. I always recycled my Hindi cinema magazines to them.

A sense of vertigo took over. In my third jail, one Tibetan guerrilla became seven. In hunting for the story of the guerrilla movement, I had come to have its very leaders for my neighbors. Their melancholy attendant was a Tibetan disfigured by what looked like scars of severe smallpox. Like me, he slept on the clay floor by the cook fire. Unlike the others, he never smiled and never said a word.

Three years earlier, during the spring and early summer of 1974, the Nepalese government had promised the aging guerrillas that if they put down their weapons they could keep all the land they had settled and their homes in Mustang. Also their group would be provided \$150,000 annually for three years for rehabilitation. The guerrillas hadn't budged. Why surrender? They had guns and high ground, and the Indian and Taiwanese governments were now feeding and supplying them. And Tibet remained occupied. The Chinese helpfully offered to cross Nepal's border and round up the Khampas for "development projects" in Tibet. It became a matter of national sovereignty for Nepal to take care of the problem.

In July 1974, as 10,000 Nepalese troops sealed off the southern approaches to Mustang, the Dalai Lama sent a 20-minute tape recording to Wongdu. Huddling with leaders of his scattered camps, Wongdu listened as the Dalai Lama greeted his Tibetan patriots. It was going to be difficult to put their

weapons down, the Dalai Lama said. But the guerrillas had to remember that the material world, apparently including the world of Tibet, is an illusion. Material possessions are secondary to determination. He asked his faithful to surrender their weapons. Dixie Cups. The CIA's term sobered me the first time I ever heard it, clean as a Zen koan. Sometimes I wonder if the Dalai Lama didn't use and throw away the Khampas, too.

The tape was played over loudspeakers at various camps up and down Mustang, and the leaders finally admitted that the end was at hand. There was deep sorrow and bitterness. One of the leaders killed himself. Several guerrillas slit their throats, jumped off cliffs, or drowned in the river. The Nepalese army entered the valley. Working north, camp by camp, they began disarming the warriors. Just as methodically they reneged on their bargain and began herding the guerrillas southward at gun point.

Outraged, the guerrillas spat on their leaders as they filed by. Lhoma Tsering, who had delivered the Dalai Lama's tape, and Wongdu's other lieutenants — Rara, Jurme, Tashi, Dhondup, Ngadrug, and Palga — were stripped of their guns and knives and either helicoptered or marched to captivity. These were the men I met in jail.

For three years the six leaders and their mute comrade had been imprisoned without trial by the Nepalese authorities. If and when they were brought to court, the charges would be "raising arms against the kingdom." Without these very men, however, the guerrillas would never have laid their guns down, and many Nepalese soldiers would probably have died. They would remain imprisoned for another three years when a letter-writing campaign in America helped force the issue.

The Khampas were purposeful, patient, vital. Before dawn they were always the first up and about, striding vigorously through the cool fog. Whenever one borrowed a book from me, even a dog-eared paperback it was always returned neatly clothed in a homemade dust jacket, the title in English and Tibetan. They gave me a 1957 Tibetan-English dictionary to help with the basics they were trying to teach me. It ignored Tibetan art, culture, and religion, focusing instead on such useful entries as the Tibetan for mortar, bazooka, drop zone, and parachute.

On hot, tedious September afternoons, Tashi would send his fighting kite up from the prison yard into the sky to challenge kites from elsewhere in the city. He was a squat, powerful Khampa who sported a sky-blue Maryland Yachting Club cap given him, he claimed, by a CIA operative. He made his own kites by hand. Once a week, he lovingly braided the upper 50 feet of his string with powdered glass and glue. "Sharpening the knife," he called it. One tug of wind and the warrior turned deadly, ready to saw his opponents' kites free with an exuberant "la." It was Tashi's way of transcending jail.

One afternoon a fellow prisoner — a Hindi entrepreneur from Patan — invited me to tea. This particular jail occupied an ancient Rana palace made of mud bricks. What was left of the window sills bore beautiful wooden carvings. Their paint had long ago peeled away and the gods and goddesses were melting away, season by season. Time was king in here. Seated on a carpet while Mr. Patan's boy servant cooked ginger-and-milk chai over a fire on the floor, it was almost possible to envision myself transported to a medieval court — Marco Polo enjoying a brief detour.

We played a game of chess. Finally Mr. Patan got around to his proposition. Through the various connections he had come to understand that I might know a certain mountaineer who had stored some belongings at a friend's house. For a price, I could inherit those belongings. Which mountaineer, I asked. Mr. Patan didn't know the man's name, but he had arranged to have a piece of the cache brought for my inspection. My curiosity grew. We walked to the front gate where Mr. Patan's friend was waiting. He opened a burlap sack. There stood Fritz's silver chalice.

It was like a hand reaching out from the grave. Arnold and I had decided the silver chalice was long gone in Pakistan. Now it faced me through a net of chains and bars, a glittering, slightly dented holy grail. The man arranged a few other items on the ground: Fritz's orange helmet, a blue ski sweater, a single jumar. There was even more in storage, Mr. Patan assured me. He was encouraged by my shock. Two thousand dollars, he told me, a bargain.

Shaken, I retreated to my cell. This was a haunting, plain and simple. For months, even while sensing the fit was all wrong, I'd been trying to imagine what Fritz would do in my shoes. In trying to emulate Fritz, I allowed him to inhabit me. Increasingly, the possession had become apparent and costly. More and more lately I had wanted myself back again, even if it meant discarding his memory. Now suddenly, Fritz had found me. How the prisoners had connected him with me, I didn't know. But here it was again, the demand to carry forward another man's legend.

The resurrection could not have come at a worse time. For weeks my despair had been deepening. With each new jail, it seemed as if another sheath of Asian quicksand were closing overhead. I was losing all sense of purpose, all hope. The five-year sentence was coming true. Thoughts of suicide crept in, but not just any suicide. Not with Fritz in mind.

I began studying the west wall with an eye to escape. Under the nonchalant pretext of my morning and evening piss in the sewage trough running through the compound, I would stand facing the wall and analyze its parts. Twenty feet high, it crested, unfortunately, directly in front of the machine-gun post. It was the only wall on which the wild monkeys appeared every morning, however, I reasoned that the monkeys were proof of vegetation on the far side, some-

thing dense enough to cover my footrace into freedom.

I envisioned a moonless night with Kathmandu's electricity on the blink and a grappling hook made of bamboo. Never mind that disease and the food had whittled me down to bone and that I couldn't have done a single pull-up. In my dreams, I saw myself gaining the wall's crest with Ninja stealth. From there my fantasies got even wilder. In a moment of true inspiration, I decided to dodge all expectations and run north. I would escape via Makalu into Tibet. If Heinrich Harrer could do it, why not me? I asked a friend to buy some 8mm perlon rope from the trekking stores and smuggle it in to me in short pieces wrapped around the flask inside a thermos.

I wanted out or I wanted to die. Like Fritz's final escapade on Tirisch Mir, this was going to be a solo. I carefully kept my plans secret from the other prisoners. Even so I emitted clues. My new cellmates asked if I always wept in my sleep. By the end of the week, I no longer saw the machine gun nest and sentinels, only the wall. I was beginning to believe the rope was unnecessary. I was a climber, after all. It was only a wall. Before my strength degraded any more, it was crystal clear that I had to go for it. Despite the moon. Despite the guns.

My foolishness peaked one day at dawn. The fog was thick. I was alone. From atop the wall, a pair of monkeys were casing the joint. The machine-gun barrel was a vaporous twig, barely visible. As per my daily subterfuge, I hauled out the penis and started to piss. The wall was mesmerizing. There was a thin crack system in its cheap cement facade. Ten feet up the cement gave way to raw brick and an abundance of finger holds.

Suddenly there seemed no reason to wait. My decision had the feel of genius. No one would expect an escape during the day. For all I could tell, the machine-gun post was empty.

Still pissing, I edged closer to the forbidden zone. The gun barrel didn't move. I was fixed on the crack, in my mind already halfway to the summit. When suddenly, from behind, I was lofted into the air. Two big arms wrapped around me and squeezed hard. My feet sailed high.

Whoever the villain was shook me like a rag doll. Urine flew right and left, soaking us both. I fought. He shook me some more. Then I got my feet under me again and twisted loose and whirled around.

Two-hundred and twenty pounds of Khampa stood there roaring with laughter. It was Rara. The bastard. He had purposely spoiled my moment. Overhead the gun barrel had shifted from a line to a point. It was pointed directly at me. The guard had been tracking me all along.

I wanted to hit Rara. Instead, dripping urine, I began to laugh. I cried. I surrendered.

The Khampas had been watching over me. They had diagnosed my self-absorption. Rara had just rescued me from melodrama. Possibly to distract me,

possibly to complete a different legend, they told me the rest of the story of Wongdu's death.

During the surrender in July 1974, Wongdu had waited at the northernmost tip of the Mustang valley. Possibly he anticipated the treachery. By the time word arrived of the betrayal, Wongdu knew it was too late to fight back. Instead, he and 35 men immediately mounted horses and climbed out of the stark valley, making their way into Tibet over two high passes. For several years, India had been recruiting Tibetan guerrillas for their Border Security Forces, and Wongdu knew that if he could reach India, his little band would be safe. For the next four weeks, India was his goal.

Back and forth over the high rugged watershed that forms the Tibet-Nepal border, Wongdu and followers rode and walked their horses. Twice the guerrillas had to retreat into Nepal to escape Chinese soldiers who were dogging their flight, but because the Nepalese terrain was too rough for their horses, they crossed back into Tibet each time. At one point, the Nepalese air-dropped soldiers to ambush Wongdu, but the guerrillas simply vanished. Traveling day and night, the group of Tibetans sped for the Indian border. Half a day short of the mountainous juncture of Tibet, Nepal, and India, looms Tinker, a 17,800-foot pass. In 1968 nearly 500 bedraggled refugees froze to death on this pass during a catastrophic mass escape from Tibet. It was in this haunted region that Wongdu sought to slip through the gauntlet of Chinese and Nepalese troops.

In the early afternoon of August 12, the party found itself hemmed in from the north by Chinese troops. Six men were selected to escort Wongdu over Tinker to the Nepal side while the rest stayed behind to fight the Chinese. Scant kilometers short of India, Wongdu and his tiny escort galloped straight into what was, this time, a well-prepared and massive ambush. Of his escort, four were killed on the spot, one escaped to warn his comrades, and was badly wounded and captured. He watched as Wongdu was riddled with bullets.

They pointed at the man with smallpox scars. Ask him, they said. That was the first I realized this was the survivor who watched Wongdu die. His scars were shrapnel wounds. He and I were the same thing, witnesses to men who had died in service to their own legends. The mute and I had survived more than their company. We had survived their obsessions, too. I put away my escape plans. The theater of suicide, the romance of soloing, were no longer options.

My release came abruptly. At the end of three months, having let Nepal's law — and lawlessness — play out, the American Embassy finally stepped in on my behalf. I was given barely one minute to collect my possessions, then ejected from the prison. Next morning I was to be deported from the kingdom, declared *persona non grata*. In a sense it was the exile I'd pretended in the first place. It was 3:55 p.m. That gave me only a few hours to finish what needed doing.

Against all advice, I returned to the jail and summoned Mr. Patan. Fifty dollars, I told him, take it or leave it. We settled on sixty-seven. He gave me his friend's address and I took a taxi out into the countryside. Fritz's effects lay piled in a mud-brick hut, rotting away.

Ravaged by the climate, it was a typical mountaineer's cache. Mildewed tents, soggy ropes, rusted pitons. In the corner stood a locked duffel stenciled with "Makalu International — 74." The sun was sinking fast. I slit the red cordura open with a knife.

Inside was a blue ski sweater and an orange climbing helmet. No journal, no maps, no clues. I rooted among worthless clothing and torn paperbacks. By handing the silver chalice to Fritz's widow, I was still hoping with one glorious relic to confirm the poetics of obsession. But the thieves had tricked me. The grail was gone, of course.

A year later, a Canadian expedition found a crumpled mummy on Tirisich Mir. An avalanche had rendered it to rags and bone. Another year passed before I saw a photo. It could have been anybody. A physician suggested that if I could find the body and bring back the jawbone or some fingers, simple forensics could determine if this was Fritz.

In all likelihood it was, though I never went. Also, I had learned everything I needed to from Fritz, dead or alive. Time passed. Apparently the glacier dragged its escapee back into the depths. The body has never been seen since. *Ke garne?*

The mountains are our underworld. If you doubt that, try the top of a Tibetan pass sometime. Lung ta — wind horses printed on slips of paper or cotton flags — gallop their prayers into eternity. Animal skulls, carved and painted, whistle into the void. Up there, every one of us is an exile only partway to somewhere, but with this difference between us: the living may not stay; the dead may not pass. The summits are our abyss.

Up there, one bears witness to the other, the summit to the abyss, what is half empty to what is half full. Just so we bear witness to our ghosts and they to us. In the end we are the measure of our desire. How full we fill the emptiness, that is our legend. How empty the legends are, that is the wind.

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