



JOURNEY TO THE ROOF OF AFRICA

A SHORT STORY OF A MANS ATTEMPT
TO CLIMB ALONG THE MARANGU ROUTE
AND STAND ON TOP OF MOUNT KILIMANJARO

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I will turn fifty soon, a full half-century, five whole decades. Before that happens, I want to do something special, something I won't regret never trying.

"Girls, I'm going to Africa to climb Mount Kilimanjaro."

Without hesitation or looking up from their devices, my two daughters reply in unison,

"Did you ask Mom?"

I never climbed a mountain before nor have I ever considered Everest¹. I'm not *that* ambitious, but Kilimanjaro, sure, that's doable. Fifty thousand people from all over the world attempt it every year. Me? The opportunity had come. Why not?

This winter is an excellent time to begin preparations. It is another nasty long, dark, and cold one - perfect for breaking in the new clothing I need for the climb. The boots are critical. I buy the expensive quality ones with strong ankle support. I take a few hikes that are all on flat ground. I mistakenly believe my boots are now adequately broken in. The ankle support will pay off, but my mistake will come back later to punish me.

There is much equipment and clothing I need according to a book I am reading. The author² is a person who has extensive experience with Kilimanjaro and it seems reputable. Among the many things needed for the climb, there are hiking poles, a down jacket, wind breaker, balaclava, camelback, daypack, duffel bag, electronic devices, spare batteries, thermal underwear, fleeces, liner gloves, buff, sleeping bag, torch, toilet paper, sunscreen, lip balm, UV sunglasses, and a few pairs of heavy wool socks. It's seems strange that I need all this warm clothing for a place located near the equator.

Medication is needed for altitude sickness. The pills I have are acquired from a physician who specializes in such medications for travel off the beaten path. They will prove their worth for the climb. Its name is Diamox. The risk of altitude sickness comes to people when they are above 2500 meters and they ascend more than 300 meters per day. The rate I plan to climb the mountain is triple that, hence, the need for the drug.

Next, I need inoculations: yellow fever, diphtheria, typhoid, and tetanus. Tanzania requires visitors to show that they have been vaccinated against yellow fever on their immunization card. Lastly, there are more pills. I pack a hefty supply ASA, Ibuprophen, Imodium, Melatonin, and another set of pills for malaria. On the mountain, I will be a portable pharmacy.

Several months pass between my decision to go and the first step of the climb.

My starting point is the Marangu Gate at Kilimanjaro National Park at an elevation of nearly two kilometers or over 6000 feet. Not a bad head start. The view from here is already amazing.

I am a lone trekker with one guide - a man by the name of Nagubona. I ask him how many times he has climbed Kilimanjaro. He replies that he stopped counting after three hundred! "Well", I think to myself, "It's comforting to have a guide with some experience." It will pay off in the end.

Accompanying us is our crew. They are comprised of a cook, and four porters. These men do not have the build of an NFL linebacker. They are all lean with an average weight of, say, 160 pounds. Appearances are far from reality here. Despite their lanky physique, they prove to be the toughest guys I probably will ever come across.

When I climb up the mountain, I will carry my daypack, water, and hiking poles. All that weighs, easily, less than 10 pounds. The porters carry everything else. By "everything", I mean, my duffel bag full of all my other gear, the propane burning stove for cooking, their extra clothes and gear, and all the food that will feed the seven of us for six days. Plus, after a certain point on the climb, the water too will have to be added to their load. The weight limit a porter can carry is 15 kilograms or 32 pounds.

It will look and feel uncomfortable to watch the porters climb with their heavy loads, but it seems they know what they're doing. Each carries a backpack on their backs, another bag or container with their right hand, and a large sack balanced on their heads. They take the same route I do and all are faster than me. Thanks to them, all my belongings wait for me at each destination point on the mountain. And at the end of each exhausting day, they always greet me with a smile.

Back at Marangu Gate just prior to starting, other climbers are with me, perhaps a dozen or so groups each with their own guide and crew. There are two pairs of young women from the States (Colorado and Massachusetts), a young Swiss couple, an Indian family, a small group of Germans, two young Japanese men, a young French couple, and others from several more countries. Although the average age of everyone is lower than me, I feel comfortable with this friendly group because I can sense that we share certain unspoken feelings: namely, a swelling anticipation of starting the climb, giddiness, and high spirits. Or is the altitude getting to me already?

The porters line up with their loads to be measured by the scale located next to the triangular-shaped Marangu entry gate. At registration, my name is signed in a large hardcover book. With it are other required bits of info like my address, nationality, occupation, and age. All the climbers check their daypack belongings one last time. A light cool breeze and a warm sun are with us. It is a comfortable twenty degrees Celsius. We're set to go.

Nagubona and I approach the Marangu Gate and see other climbers descending. They are at the end of their trek and look no worse for wear. "Encouraging", I think to myself. There is a park employee manning the gate sitting next to a small table with another hardcover registration book. Nagubona shows him our receipt for park admission. The park employee then waves at us to pass through. We begin to walk.

The thrill of starting the climb has the same intensity as the thrill you feel on a roller coaster just as you are about to go down that first big plunge. It feels exhilarating to simply start putting one foot in front of the other. No more planning, worry, or anticipations - I am now climbing.

Nagubona and I trek alone. The rest of the crew, only for this part of the climb, take an alternate route to avoid congestion. The other climbers begin to depart every few minutes.

Although it is a maintained trail, it is not an entirely smooth, well-graded path. This is the dry season, but during the rainy season, there is a lot of,...well, rain. There is so much that the run-off water can quickly erode and destroy the trail. To compensate, many (very many) gutters and ruts are dug in and around it to divert the water. Also, there is the mud that inevitably forms. To deal with that problem, rocks are placed on the trail - lots of them. There are many jagged and

irregularly shaped rocks. I quickly see why good ankle support for hiking boots is strongly recommended. I'm glad the rains are not here now.

The first ecological zone I pass through is a rain forest. If you have seen films that are set in deep jungles like King Kong or Predator, then you have an idea of what this is like. This place is lush! I am surrounded by an array of large trees all tangled with vines. Moss covers everything. Small streams trickle by here and there. A large colony of ants march across the path. I breathe air full of the smell of moist vegetation. The only thing that is dead here is the silence. Once in a while it is broken by the sound of some wildlife moving through the canopy like a Colobus monkey. My spirits are high as I climb through this strange and wonderful place.

The mantra here in Swahili is "pole, pole" which means "slowly, slowly". And that's how we walk. I first believed that walking speed was a choice. That is, either abide by the rule, or let your ego take control. In all honesty though, "pole, pole" is the only option there is. The four-day trail goes up ceaselessly. However, there is plenty of time to make it to all our destinations along the way. Therefore, there is no room in my backpack for ego - it is best to leave such burdens behind.

The lunch break arrives just in time. Three kilometers or so is not a very long distance to walk, but if it involves an ascent of close to half a kilometer, the effect of gravity certainly takes its toll. The tangible effect of reduced air pressure is yet to come. I gladly sit down to eat and give my legs a short break. An opportunist mongoose lurks nearby in the shadows hoping to munch on some crumbs we leave behind. After I finish eating, we resume the climb.

By mid afternoon, tired, but still feeling good, we arrive at Mandara Hut. It's a concentration of triangular-shaped huts that are used for lodging. Two larger ones are for the registration office and dining hall. Blue monkeys are seen at the edge of the trees looking at a group of newcomers. I meet two young men who I will share my hut with. They are friendly Japanese fellows. The language barrier does not pose a problem. What few words we know in each other's mother tongue, coupled with a shared enthusiasm for doing this climb, is enough to communicate and get along.

The porters arrived earlier, and hot tea and popcorn awaits me in the dining hall. It's not a combination of food I would have chosen to snack on, but it feels

surprisingly nourishing. And a good thing too - Nagubona informs me we must acclimatize a little more before I can relax. This time without our daypacks, we climb light to a picturesque small crater. It does not take long to get to. The light from the setting sun shines through the trees and makes the scenery surreal and almost hypnotic. The crater itself is almost hidden with a dense growth of trees and grass but is clearly circular with a diameter of roughly one hundred meters. We climb back down and get ready for dinner.

Sunset comes early at half past six. The wind cools down. Inside our hut, it's perfectly comfortable in a cozy sleeping bag. I remember to take my scheduled dose of Diamox before I retire. We are still at less than ten thousand feet but the effects of altitude have already and unknowingly begun.

The silence of the forest is occasionally broken by the loud and distinct calls of Colobus monkeys. I swear it sounds like they are communicating with each other. I take everything as a good omen. I can feel that everyone, myself included, still feels the exhilaration of being here and the anticipation of tomorrow.

Sleep does not come easy. I learn the hard way that it's unfortunately another symptom of altitude sickness. As tired and content as I feel, sleep is an almost total stranger. The amount of time I actually do sleep on my first night on Kilimanjaro is an hour or so, on and off. I try to relax. I lie on my back wrapped in a warm sleeping bag. I can't sleep, but I enjoy the rest in my cozy cocoon.

Drinking plenty of water throughout the day is of course vital to the success of the climb. The purpose of which is to reduce the potentially severe unpleasantness of altitude sickness. I'm talking about three to four liters per day, minimum. Given that it takes the body time to process all that liquid, it goes without saying that the urge to relieve oneself in the middle of the night is inevitable.

My dear reader - should you attempt to climb Kilimanjaro, or some similar endeavor, the value of this next bit of advice alone is worth the time and trouble you have put into reading this. If you are a woman, worry not. You too are covered. Feminine-specific solutions are available on the Internet.

My two Japanese hut-mates are sleeping better than me, however, their sleep is interrupted by that all too familiar urge. Eventually, both unwillingly climb out of

their bags, stumble through the darkness, and the chill wind, and visit the men's restroom. As I cannot sleep, my urge is not really an interruption. But good preparation allows me the luxury of using a spare water container with a screw cap lid strategically positioned inside my sleeping bag. Yes, sleep eludes me, but I stay cozy.

Dawn. The sun is bright and the forest is damp. One of the porters serves me breakfast in the dining hut as I sit with all the other climbers. My guide Nagubona is also here with me. He is here with me not to share breakfast. He already ate. He is here to see how much I am eating. He is here to encourage me to eat as much as possible. He is here to make sure I am drinking enough, to ask me how I am feeling, to check if I took my Diamox, ASA, or Ibuprophen, to ask if I slept enough, to recommend how many layers of clothing to wear, to see if I applied sunscreen, and the list goes on. As we discuss all this, an inescapable truth suddenly becomes clear - Nagubona is my mother.

Day two of the climb now begins. I am surprisingly refreshed and eager to continue. The air is cool but I am warmly dressed. Well within the first hour of the climb, the forest changes. The larger trees and vines are gone. Instead of a green canopy, a blue sky is now above me. Some of the hanging moss still remains. And again, a short distance ahead, there is another change. I cross the tree line. Surrounding me, there are now only bushes and thick tufts of grass. The visibility increases from one hundred feet to the horizon. I enter a new ecological zone - a moorland. I am now exposed to the sun and the sun is strong. I began the climb with three layers of clothing, and now, well before noon, I am down to one. High noon is precisely that. During this time, the sun shines almost directly overhead.

Suddenly, directly in front of me, it appears - Uhuru Peak, the very top of this beast of a mountain. It catches me by surprise and it's closer than I've ever seen it. It's roughly twenty kilometers away. A sense of enormity makes me stop and stare at this monster of rock jeweled with brilliant white icy patches along its rim. That sense of enormity strikes when I realize that, although the peak is not that far in distance, I am not scheduled to reach it for another seventy-two hours.

The climb is not as steep as it was yesterday, but the distance is longer. Through the rocky path, Nagubona and I continue our ascent to the next hut on our route. It is almost lunchtime, which means I can rest soon. This will be a small relief because already fatigue has set in. The feeling is not quite pronounced,

but certainly noticeable. My steps are shorter and my pace is slower. I feel the beginnings of strain in my heart and lungs. The first blister appears on my right heel, but thankfully, I have no headaches. (A common symptom of high altitude.)

At lunch, I rest and force-feed myself the contents of a tupperware container my cook provided me this morning. It's not as bad as it sounds. The food is actually good. A lack of appetite is yet another symptom of altitude sickness, which is surprising considering the number of calories I am burning per hour. But remember, my mother Nagubona is here. I manage to eat ninety-percent of it.

After lunch, my trusty guide and I continue. The view from here is something I would normally see while flying in a jet airliner. I am walking on the side of a mountain looking down at the tops of an endless sea of clouds. I feel ecstatic. The thrill of this sight makes me forget the fatigue. The reality of the moment seeps into my head and forms a thought - "Shit, I'm getting pretty high."

We continue westward along the route and slowly the kilometers pass by. Finally, situated over one last ridge, Horombo Hut comes into view. I'm not exhausted, but I'm pretty close. Climbing for today is over and I am now one kilometer higher. Horombo - this is where I will spend the next two nights plus a third on the way down. It's time to settle into my new hut with the two Japanese fellows again, tend to that blister, and try to get some well-deserved sleep. Tomorrow is another day on Kilimanjaro.

There will come two points in time during this journey where my mood will change. The first arrives this morning. Yet, it is subtle. I feel something between concern and worry. I attribute the cause to more than one thing: it was again another sleepless night, and my nose is runny and congested from a newly formed head cold. I wonder how my body will function today.

From my sleeping bag, I can now see the inside of the hut as the light of dawn shines through the door window. Graffiti is everywhere and some bits are more interesting than others. Most simply state the who, when, and where of past climbers that have reached their objective. But one in particular is somewhat unique as it describes a somewhat different objective. I read it and then feel almost honored to learn that I am staying in the very hut that an Australian man did when he enjoyed a threesome with two Swedish women.

My two hut mates have already risen, ate breakfast, and packed. Their destination today is not the same as mine. I have another plan.

One of my porters knocks on the door. "Come in", I say. He opens it and greets me with a hearty "Good morning!" and then places before me a white ceramic mug, a thermos of boiling water, and three containers: powdered milk, sugar, and coffee. The day is looking better already. I climb out of my sleeping bag, prepare my first cup of coffee, and then add two layers of clothing. I replace the band-aids on my blisters, carefully put on my running shoes, grab my cup, and walk outside.

The air temperature is four degrees Celsius. My first view outside the hut is the long slope of the mountain stretching down to a vast sea of clouds whose tops are a gleaming white from the sunrise. I stand there looking at it while drinking my coffee. It feels like I'm in a television commercial and I can almost hear the voice of Ricardo Montalban.

Later, inside the dining hut, Nagubona asks, "How did you sleep?" I reply, "Cozy". In the meantime, my cook prepares me breakfast. Sadly, we are now alone. All my climbing companions have already left to the next hut because their schedule is one day less than mine. It's more aggressive, and more risky.

The human body needs time to adapt to large increases in elevation. The chances of altitude sickness are good for anyone 2500 meters above sea level and ascending more than 300 meters per day. The rate at which we ascend is triple that. I swallow my morning dose of Diamox before I eat breakfast as Nagubona and I discuss today's plan. My fingertips react with a distinct tingling sensation. It's a common side effect that goes away once you eat. Every so often, a Striped Grass Mouse or two run by underneath our table. As I listen to my guide, I try to avoid the sinking feeling of abandonment.

Over the past two days my fellow climbers and I hiked up the mountain together. Naturally, friendships started to form. At the Marangu gate, just before the climb began, I spoke with a charming and friendly man from Switzerland. I was happy to learn that he and his wife also planned an acclimatization day during the climb. That meant we would complete the journey together from beginning to end. The purpose of which is a precautionary measure to reduce the effects of altitude sickness and increase the chances of reaching the summit. Unfortunately, the Swiss couple did not even make it this far. The wife began to

suffer from a severe headache, which forced them to climb back down. It then looked like Nagubona and I would be on our own when we tackle the summit. Everyone else, it seemed, was in a rush for some reason or another. For one cheery woman from Boston, the reason was a wedding she had to attend in nearby Dar es Salaam.

Nagubona tells me the acclimatization climb will be short. I replace my runners with my hiking boots, fill my camelback with boiled water, and grab my hiking poles. We don't need to take a lunch because we'll be back by then. Nagubona assures me that the climb is not difficult. Regardless, I am tired before step one. I am almost permanently aware of my blisters now and our pace is a bit slower than yesterday. More and more soccer ball-sized loose rocks get in the way of the climb. And again, the heat of the sun blazes down through the cold air. I pull out and apply another liberal coat of chapstick on my dry lips, and have another drink of water.

Breathing is not a problem. That is, unless I begin to overexert myself by trying to climb faster. Then I begin to gasp for breath. It's a direct message from the mountain kindly reminding me of my new and ever-shrinking physical limitations. We cover almost three and a half kilometers and climb three hundred meters. Our destination is now in view. It's an odd formation called Zebra Rocks.

Among a vast expanse of broken stones, I see a house-sized group that towers perhaps fifty feet into the air. They look slightly out-of-place. Over uncounted years, the slow run off of water from the top of the rocks left an almost black set of streaks along its entire face. It is here I find my first piece of ice. One small icicle hangs high up on the rocks and slowly melts in the shade. Soon after, we leave these patterned rocks head back down to Horombo Hut.

For the first time in days, I climb *down*. This is fascinating. I feel an almost forgotten sensation as I use a completely different set of leg muscles. It's still tiring but I'm not complaining. I can walk much faster now.

Upon our return, one of the porters delivers a large bowl of hot water outside my hut so I can wash. I remove all my top layers and scrub myself with biodegradable soap. The sensation on my skin feels like a war between the warmth of the sun and the cold of the air. It's as refreshing as quenching a thirst. After lunch, I rest and try to pass the time. New climbers occasionally arrive now to Horombo from Mandara: an Indian family, more Japanese, a large group of

Germans, and two Swedish women. (Didn't see any Australians.)

Night falls on the mountain and I am almost ready to retire. My two old hut mates are gone and I now look forward to the luxury of having the entire hut to myself. I am in my sleeping bag. I reach for my torch to turn it off when suddenly, there's a knock on the door. I pause in surprise and slight annoyance. Another knock. "Come in", I say. It's another porter and he is with a climber. The porter explains that this climber has just returned from the summit of Kilimanjaro and she needs a place to sleep.

My torch provides a meager light inside the hut, but it is strong enough to see that this poor girl looks like she's been through a war. She has a small body frame and is fully layered with all her gear. Her movements clearly show she is exhausted. Without yet removing a single piece of her gear, she slowly lowers herself on one of the vacant bunks and rests, probably for the first time since she last woke up.

After a moment, we exchange greetings and she begins to tell me about her day. She is a young and charming British woman who is also a sole climber. For some reason, she began her ascent to the summit of Kilimanjaro from Kibo Hut at 5AM, not midnight, as is the norm. This delay explains why she is so late to arrive back at Horombo Hut. Hiking on the rocky trail returning to Horombo is treacherous enough, but this poor woman had to do it in the dark as well.

She then tells me about the great effort she exerted during her ascent and how it affected her on more than one level. I admit, this part doesn't offer me much encouragement, but there is cheer in the background of her fascinating tale. Before she even spoke it, I knew from her tone and apparent stamina that she had made it to the top. I sit listening in quiet admiration to this small person who is almost drained of all energy. "Good for her", I think to myself, and duly congratulate her.

Our conversation now must end. This woman needs to sleep. Once she finally retires into her sleeping bag, she is unconscious in seconds. I once again face another sleepless night courtesy of altitude side effects, but I don't complain - the new information I now have about what to expect when climbing to the summit gives me something to think about.

Morning arrives. Nagubona and I continue our trek. Our destination today is Kibo Hut, the last hut. Not long after the start, we leave the moorland behind. We now enter yet another ecological zone of the mountain - alpine desert. Vegetation is virtually non-existent. Lichen is the only form of life other than ourselves that I can see. The sun is shining again but this time, I keep my layers on. The wind is strong and so is the wind chill. I see a small sign on the trail that indicates this is the last source of water. It stands next to what looks like no more than a puddle. Nagubona informs me that it is not safe to drink. So much for that.

My steps are noticeably shorter and so is my breathing. When I speak to Nagubona, I can no longer finish a complete sentence without pausing for a breath. One consolation is the slope. We are in a place called the Saddle, and here the trail is relatively flat. I can see the route stretching for kilometers in front of me and the cone of Kilimanjaro is now an unmistakable presence. Another consolation is the occasional reunion of some of my original climbing group returning from the summit who are heading back to Horombo. Each greeting is a happy one. They briefly describe their adventure of reaching the top earlier today. One of them kindly offers me a spare strawberry-flavoured power bar, which I gratefully accept.

Eventually, Kibo Hut comes into sight. It cannot be more than a mile away. I am surprised when Nagubona tells me we will first stop for lunch at a large formation of rocks just ahead. I wonder, "Kibo is in sight and we are stopping for lunch now?" It is actually an excellent idea. I am quickly reminded how near exhaustion I am once I sit down on a rock to eat. Kibo may not look far, but it is still at least a full hour away. The Saddle is past us but the slope is now steeper and we must climb it one slow step at a time.

I am not hungry, at least that is what my body is telling me, but I listen to my guide and force-feed myself as much as I can. During lunch, I chat with a young Canadian couple, Anna and Dave, now living in Britain. I learn that the woman is no stranger to mountains. She had been to Nepal but suffered from altitude sickness there. That forced her to cut the climb short and descend. Perhaps the three of us will attempt the summit together, I think optimistically. They graciously offer me some pills for my runny nose and congestion. Their generosity renews some of my hope that I will be fine.

The rest of today's hike, the last mile or so, even after a rest, nourishment, and water, is surprisingly grueling. At the end, another wooden sign welcomes us that read we have arrived to Kibo Hut, at 15,466 feet. This is the base of the cone of Kilimanjaro. We have gained another kilometer in elevation today. There is now one more to go.

This place is not the same as the other huts. Here, there are only two buildings. One is for porters and guides, and the other is for climbers. Both have a plain rectangular design. The Canadian couple and I settle in to our room, which has a dozen bunks. The only other climbers here are a group of Japanese in another room directly across the hall.

In a short while, dinner is served and I am once again force-feeding myself. As usual, Nagubona sits at the table and briefs me on the final plan to reach the summit. Previously, I mentioned that there are two times my mood changes during this climb. The first mood change, I described as something between concern and worry. The second happens during this briefing and is somewhat stronger.

This journey, challenging as it has been so far, I can still call fun and enjoyable. We are now on the verge of the final leg of the climb and as I listen to my guide speak of what is to come, a distinctly sobering mood washes over me. I can make no more food go down my throat.

Nagubona looks directly into my eyes and says, "Mark, it is imperative that you get as much sleep as possible tonight before the climb. If you don't, you will suffer."

I then do a quick review of my situation. I'm at an altitude that doesn't allow me to move any faster than walking speed. My nose is congested and runny. My energy is low. The fear of altitude sickness is at its strongest. We are six hours away from starting the final climb. For the last three nights, I've slept a total of perhaps two hours, tops. And now, as if my anxiety wasn't bad enough, my guide gives me this wonderful news about "suffering" if I don't get some sleep.

"I'll see you soon. Goodnight Mark.", Nagubona says as he leaves the room.

I reply, "Uh, yeah,...goodnight to you too."

I think that perhaps it's best to deal with any unpleasantness when it comes. At least this line of thinking helps me relax a bit.

In the meantime, there's another issue brewing with Anna and Dave. I am ever so thankful they spared some of their decongestant pills. They give me moderate relief. Yet Anna is not doing well.

As it once happened to Anna in Nepal, she is suffering again from some of the effects of altitude sickness: a headache and nausea. Dave does his best to comfort her while she rests in her sleeping bag. Their guide comes to see Anna. His first question to her is, "How much water did you drink today?" She replies, "Less than two liters." Mistake number one.

The second question he asks is, "Are you taking Diamox?" She shakes her head. Mistake number two. Dave is next to tears knowing that it is now unlikely that they will reach the summit together. Dave must now decide; does he continue up the mountain alone without his wife, or do they stay together and abandon the climb? As the hours pass, Dave stays close to Anna and broods over how he must decide.

There are only the three of us sharing this large room full of bunk beds. As Anna rests, I pack my gear as quietly as possible so as not to disturb her. The sun starts to set. My body is still processing all the water I drank today and I have time to make one last trip to the outdoor toilet. I approach the door and grab the doorknob. It won't turn. I try again. Nothing. I look between the thin space between the door and the frame. I can see that there is a bolt on the outside holding the door shut.

Hmm, interesting. The guide must have inadvertently locked us in when he left to return to his own hut. Dave comes to help me. All our attempts at picking the lock fail. It's time for plan B.

We can see through the keyhole. There is another door directly across from us in the hallway. That is the room assigned to the group of Japanese climbers. Dave and I put our heads together and form a solution. All we have to do is wait until one of the Japanese return to their room and we will shout for help. Once we have someone's attention, they will unlock our door. Simple.

We wait. I ignore the strain of my bladder. Finally, we hear someone approach from down the hallway. Through the keyhole, I see a Japanese woman opening the door across the hall. Dave and I both shout, "Konnichiwa! Konnichiwa!" I can see her face and something about it does not look comforting.

We continue to yell, "Konnichiwa! Her facial expression reveals what is going through her mind in great detail; "There are two men yelling "hello" to me in Japanese on the other side of that door. One of them is peering at me through the keyhole. I will blankly stare away from the keyhole and pretend I do not see the peering eye. I will pretend I do not hear the desperate shouting. I will now make haste in opening my door and closing it behind me as quickly as possible. Then I will be safe. No more will I hear the luring calls of strange men behind closed doors."

Plan B is foiled! Bladder to brain - "Situation now critical."

To make a seemingly long story short, another Japanese person eventually comes by and does clue in as to what's going on. We are rescued. Anna, Dave, me, and my bladder are free.

Darkness comes. I lie on my back in my sleeping bag. It is seven o'clock in the evening and I am aware that I have only a four-hour window of sleep available. I try to relax, but there is one part of my body that refuses to cooperate - my heart.

At rest, and nearer to sea level, my heart rate can reach less than fifty beats per minute. Now, it is going well above one hundred. But more worrisome than that, is the unusual force of every beat.

I am lying flat on my back completely still and yet my heart behaves as if I am running in a marathon. Every pump of blood stirs my chest. Every beat pounds against my ribs and makes my sleeping bag quiver. I can feel every surge of blood pumping through my veins. I am not in any discomfort, but it feels like my old ticker can blow up at any minute. I check the time. "Oh lovely", I say to myself, "another three hours and fifty-eight minutes to go." Sleep is as far away from me as the summit. An old Sonny & Cher tune then comes to mind, "La da da-dee, La da-da dee-da, And the beat goes on".

My porter arrives right on time. He turns on the light and places a thermos of boiling water, tea, sugar, powdered milk, and a plate of cookies on the table. This is the last food the porters will give me for the next twelve hours. I get up and see Dave and Anna still lying in their sleeping bags. Alas, they will not join me on this last climb. Nagubona greets me as he enters the room. His first question is, "How did you sleep?" I lie to him and think to myself, let the suffering begin.

I now layer myself up with all my warmest clothes that I prepared a few hours before. Starting at the feet, I wear liner socks, extra thick wool socks, and boots. On my legs, I have Merino wool thermal underwear, hiking pants, and windbreakers. On my torso, I have Merino wool thermal underwear, a light fleece, a heavy fleece, down jacket, and a windbreaker jacket. My hands have liner gloves underneath heavy winter gloves. On my head are my buff, balaclava, wool hat, and a fully charged headlight. Inside my daypack are my video camera and camelbak. The camelbak is full of three liters of boiled water mixed with an electrolyte powder. Lastly, in my hands are my hiking poles.

It is now midnight. Nagubona asks me if I feel ready. I lie to him again.

Nagubona and I walk to the exit at the end of the hallway and then step outside. I don't have my torch on yet and the only source of light is a hundred watt bulb hanging from the neighbouring hut. Beyond that, all is dark around me. It's a strange mix of emotion I feel: excitement and wonder mixed with small amounts of fear and apprehension. It is so quiet, every footstep we make sounds amplified. Nagubona tells me something that helps calm my nerves. "We are very lucky", he says. "The sky is clear, there is hardly any wind, and it is not that cold." It's difficult to estimate what "not that cold" is in degrees Celsius, but with respect to the several layers of good clothing I have on, the temperature actually feels like it's,...not that cold. I get the impression that the conditions are ideal for tackling the last leg of the climb.

Nagubona displayed his motherly attitude toward me many times during this climb, but in his efforts to ensure that I reach my goal, his next gesture topped them all. As a rule, the guide on the final ascent to the summit carries only his clothes, hiking poles, torch, water, and nothing else. I too am lightly packed with only my water and video camera stored in my daypack. To give me every advantage, Nagubona offers to carry my water! All I need to carry now are my hiking poles. Nagubona is one dedicated guide.

His last words before we start are, "Just stay directly behind me. Do what I do." He turns on his torch and we begin to walk. I turn on mine as well, but use the dimmer red light instead of the brighter white one because its reflection from Nagubona's back is blinding. I am no more than twelve inches away from him. The slope is not yet steep, but the distance we cover from each step, from step number one, is less than the length of my foot. We move between one and one and a half kilometers per hour. Baby steps indeed.

I can't tell if the direction we are heading in is correct because of the darkness. The light that surrounds us is like a small bubble with a radius of perhaps two meters. Despite his experience, how Nagubona stays true to the path is beyond me. Within this small world of light, I see only loose gravel at our feet with the odd rock here and there. Our boots make a crunching sound with every step, but I hear something else - Nagubona is quietly singing to himself. It sounds Swahili. I don't recognize it of course, but the low sound of my guide's voice singing this song is oddly comforting. I do not feel tired. I am at peace. Slow and steadfast, we continue.

Not before long, the ground gets steeper. The angle of the slope is equal to that of a regular staircase. Our path follows a zigzag pattern. We travel in one direction for no more than twenty meters, often even less, then we turn - zig. We trudge along in the other direction for a few more meters, then turn again - zag. Again, we turn in the other direction - zig. And again - zag. Zig, zag, zig, zag, over, and over again. All the while our boots crunch at the gravel beneath our feet. Nagubona continues his hypnotic song. I stay inches away from my guides back following like a rat of the Pied Piper.

After a while, we stop at a resting place beside an immense house-sized boulder. Nagubona informs me that we have climbed for one hour. "An hour?", I think to myself. "That leaves five to go." I find it quite surprising because the climb so far has been actually quite pleasant. Only once in a while when I walk toward the wind do I feel a slight chill. I am layered well with warm clothes, but only just enough. I drink some water out of my camelbak, and when I finish, I forget to blow the remaining water in the plastic tube back into the container sac.

The rest is short, but in that time I take a good look around. In the immediate vicinity, where there is light from our torches, it is clear we are on a rock and gravel-laden mountain slope. I see no animal life. Although lichen can grow at

extreme polar latitudes, there are none that I can see here. Beyond the bubble of light, the darkness hides all other detail. Behind me, to the east, the silhouette of this mountain's secondary peak, Mawenzi, is visible against the night sky. Its top is very jagged and inhospitable-looking. I look ahead and up along our zigzag path, and I see, far in the distance, a few solitary lights. Among them is one group of lights that forms a line like a string of pearls. Other climbers are ahead of us. I look higher and see the featureless black slope of the mountainside. The top of it ends at the rim of Kilimanjaro. Like the outlined shape of Mawenzi, the rim of Kilimanjaro is a jagged black edge of rock against a cloudless night sky. I look higher still and gaze directly overhead. My eyes see something that is truly a wonder to behold.

The stars. I stand there gazing and wonder how many have seen stars like this.

My home is a place where light pollution is significant, and it is not far above sea level. So when I stare up at the night sky in my backyard, only the brightest ones are visible. Several constellations reveal themselves such as the Big Dipper, Cassiopeia, Orion, and so forth. And I've always lived in the northern hemisphere. But Kilimanjaro sits just below the equator, so the stars I see now are completely new to me. I recognize no constellations. It is not a stretch of the imagination to think I am standing on a planet from another solar system.

But one feature is familiar. The Milky Way is still there. It spreads a random pattern of the faintest points of light in a wide swath across the sky from horizon to horizon. Joining this stellar display, I count a total of five meteors that silently streak across the blackness. All these uncounted points of light are there above me, so clear and so vivid, that they seem completely unfiltered by the Earth's atmosphere.

Mauna Loa Observatory in Hawaii sits on top of a dormant volcano at over eleven thousand feet, the highest place on that island. I have a long way yet to climb, but I am now standing four thousand feet above that altitude. If you want to read about a brilliant infinite sea of stars seen at high altitude, then my dear reader, you have my apologies for not being a poet. The limitations of my writing skills allow me to only convey that there are awe-inspiring moments and then there are awe-inspiring moments. This one is the latter. Nagubona and I continue our climb. Was the rest really that short?

From here on, things start to become difficult. The altitude now affects me more and my strength begins to fail. I am using my hiking poles more often to correct my balance, lest I fall to the ground either on my left or right. And worse, my weakness starts to play on my mind. For reasons yet unknown, Nagubona has stopped talking to me. There has been no update for what seems a long while. I no longer know the altitude nor the time. My mind begins to wander. "How long has it been since we started? How high are we now?", I wonder.

Previously, Nagubona warned me not to look up as we climb. It's a helpful little tip. Given that we need to climb another kilometer this night, the consequences of doing so, he believes, causes discouragement. There's no telling just how far the top really is. But the view of the stars and meteors make that a difficult temptation to resist. Every so often, I disobey and look up. In doing so, I try to find a way to guess our rate of progress by comparing the shape of the jagged rim above us over different lengths of time. I also try to look behind me at the silhouette of Mawenzi peak to see if it looks any lower as we ascend. No luck. It is a useless exercise. As well, every time I take my eyes off of Nagubona to look around, I begin to lose my balance again and quickly stick out one of my hiking poles to save myself from falling.

I decide to abandon the attempt of figuring out how high we are and simply focus on nothing else but my guide. I continue to stare at his back only inches away from him and listen to his singing. Not long afterwards, I am in a peaceful and relaxed state-of-mind. It is like walking in a trance. Nothing exists but what is visible in this small ball of light. Zig. I am in a mental zone where the only brain activity I have is in the control of moving one foot in front of the other and my arms rhythmically swinging my hiking poles. Zag.

Suddenly, we stop. We are at another massive boulder and we have caught up to another climber. She is, like me, a single climber with a guide and is taking a short rest next to the big rock. She is a kind, young, and fragile-looking woman from Hong Kong, no more than a hundred pounds. Graciously, she offers me a power bar. "I have plenty", she explains. I thank her heartily and although I do not feel hungry, I eat it anyway. Surely, I must have burned many more calories since I started this last ascent than what this morsel can give. I remind myself that I still have the strawberry power bar. I save that for later.

I try to drink some more water and then realize the mistake I made. The water left in the tube from my last drink is now frozen. I can no longer suck any liquid

out. It took a bit of chewing and slow thawing from the heat of my mouth, but the ice finally cleared. Relieved, I drank. Lesson learned.

We do not stay long with the girl from Hong Kong. I wish her luck and continue the monotonous and now laborious routine of zig and zag. Annoying questions begin to buzz around my head. They cause a conflict between two sides of my brain. "How much longer?", one side asks. "Ignore the question. Focus on climbing", the other side retorts. Zig. "How high are we?", the one side persists. "Ignore it. Focus on climbing." Zag.

The terrain changed. The gravel and rock are now just rock. And it's steeper. Every so often, we reach a section where it is necessary to use both hands and feet to go higher. The rocks get larger and become more of an obstacle. Our speed, slow as it is, now gets even slower as the slope of the mountain increases. The climb now requires more exertion and seems endless. In this rocky section, we intercept a group of climbers. They look like the group of Japanese that rescued me from imprisonment from the day before. We briefly exchange greetings and pass one another on our ascent.

Exhaustion slowly creeps back into my bones. Nagubona still does not stop. We are in a place that is particularly steep and somewhat treacherous if one is not careful. Oddly, my guide pushes me hard to go faster in this place so we may clear this tough section quickly. I gasp for breath. The effort is such that I am quite decided now that I will insist on a rest once we get past these steep rocks. It turns out that this was Nagubona's plan all along.

There is one more hard push to clear the last rock, then, we finally stop. I now catch my breath. Suddenly, I notice that we are not alone. A group of about half a dozen men is here with us standing on a small flat piece of rock taking a rest. And beside them I see something else quite unexpected - a large wooden sign. "We are not at the top yet. Why is there a sign here?", I wonder. It reads, "Congratulations! You are now at Gillman's Point. 5685m/18652ft". We are on the rim of Kilimanjaro!

I quickly turn around and look to the east. There it was, low on the horizon behind Mawenzi; the soft glowing twilight before dawn. My mind races. "It's morning! Has it been six hours already?!" Perhaps the exhaustion and altitude are partly to blame, but whatever the reason, the impact of this sudden new information hits me hard. Tears start to well up in my eyes. Luckily, my machismo

quickly intervenes. It duly reminds me that I am about to cry like a girl in front of a group of grown men. I quickly reel it back in and regain emotional control.

Amidst this crazy cocktail of feelings, happiness eventually does emerge. The steep climbing is over. It is now a more leisurely hike along the rim to the summit - only two more hours. What better time to eat that strawberry power bar? As I eat, Nagubona urges me to hurry. The view of dawn will come soon. I have no saliva and the power bar does not go down my throat willingly. Almost immediately, I start to feel sick. Before I resume the climb, I use what's left of my willpower to finish the strawberry power bar. My stomach is barely back under control.

We continue. Ever so gradually, the morning twilight strengthens and the light from our torches becomes less noticeable. Soon, we turn them off for good and the full grandeur of the mountaintop comes into view. It's huge. The top of Kilimanjaro looks like roughly two or three kilometers in diameter. I can now see the patches of ice crowning the top of the mountain no more than half a kilometer away. There is not so little of it as it seems when looking at it from the base of the mountain. Here, the ice looks as high as apartment buildings and covers large areas of the rim. The crater in the middle has a gentle rolling terrain of low hills and looks completely barren of life. Its colour in the morning light is an eerie greenish-grey. Although it's completely made of rock, its surface looks like frost-covered moss.

Then it happened. The sunrise came. Bold, clear, unobstructed, distinct, and gloriously bright. I was witness to a previous awe-inspiring sight that happened just a few hours ago, and now another one is blazing in my face. Wow! For hours, we were surrounded by darkness, and now the brightness of the morning sun adds a new sense of reality to my surroundings. I am here.

We are now roughly two hundred meters from the summit. We can see two wooden signs that stand atop the mountain. The goal, Uhuru Peak, is finally in sight. We are also not alone.

There are half a dozen or so different paths that lead to the top. Like the march of the penguins, lines of climbers slowly converge together as they ascend on their respective winding paths. All are moving toward the wooden signs. Their pace is as slow as mine. The image of the climbers slowly assembling to the top looks like a scene from a zombie film. All are moving in lines at less than one

kilometer per hour. Their heads are face down and their boots drag on the ground.

Two climbers assist one poor soul back down the mountain because he can no longer stand on his own. Another is sitting on the ground trying to recover after throwing up. And in the distance, I can see someone remote controlling a quadcopter. "Amazing", I think, "that they can fly at this altitude."

It's fifty meters away and only another five meters in elevation. In my current weakened state, the effort I need to exert to climb another five meters feels extraordinarily hard. My excitement builds but does nothing to increase my speed. I can approach it only so fast. I am now walking through a crowd of climbers and go as straight as I can to the peak. I approach one of the two signs and raise my right hand to reach out and touch it. It reads, "Congratulations! You are now at Uhuru Peak, Tanzania, 5895m/19341ft." My hand touches the sign.

"Got it!"

Some climbers choose to celebrate their success by opening a bottle and making a toast with the rest of their group. The immediate sequence of events after my success is a little different. Nagubona comes up to me and gives me a big hug and exclaims, "Congratulations Mark, you did it!", to which I immediately turn away and vomit while surrounded by one hundred people. A sick aftertaste of strawberry lingers in my mouth. The nausea fades as quickly as it came and I resume my celebration of reaching the top in a somewhat healthier fashion.

I shoot as much video as I can with the small amount time we have at Uhuru Peak. In between shots, I look out in all directions. The sun steadily climbs and Kilimanjaro casts a shadow across the land the length of which can be covered by car in several hours if it had a straight road to follow.

Everyone takes pictures. Some do so while displaying their national flags. They represent many countries. Gradually, the crowd disperses and the climbers start their trek back down the mountain the same way they came.

"Back down!", I suddenly realize. For the first time, the thought of climbing back down the mountain occurs to me. I gave so much attention over the past several

months on the plan to get here, that I never considered the part about getting back down. Oh well, I'm sure Nagubona can find our way back to Kibo Hut in daylight.

There's one last chance to revel in the moment before I leave. Here I stand on Uhuru Peak almost six kilometers above sea level and at the top of the African continent breathing the thin air. It is August 20th at 8AM local time. I turn around and start heading back. I think to myself, "That's enough for today".

I also think of my family. It is the only thought that turns the moment into a slightly bittersweet one. I could not share this experience with them. Although, I honestly can't complain - it wasn't such a bad way to spend ones fiftieth birthday.

1. My perceived dangers of trying reach the top of Everest was confirmed after I read "Into Thin Air", by Jon Krakauer. The number of people that attempt Everest is less than one thousand per year.

2. Henry Stedman, "Kilimanjaro, The Trekking Guide to Africa's Highest Mountain", 2014, www.trailblazer-guides.com

See the accompanying video at <https://vimeo.com/139162310>