

1920

‘Tell me the story of Everest,’ she said, a fervent smile sweeping across her face, creasing the corners of her eyes. ‘Tell me about this mountain that’s stealing you away from me.’

George and Ruth sat on the drawing-room floor, laughing and tipsy, dinner growing cold on the table in the next room. Ruth was cross-legged opposite him, her grey skirt pulled tight across her knees. She picked up the single sheet of thick ivory paper from her lap and read the invitation from the newly formed Mount Everest Committee again. ‘My husband, the world-famous explorer.’ Ruth held up her glass of wine and he reached out with his own, the crystal ringing in the lamp-lit room. She was fairly bursting with happiness.

‘I like the sound of that,’ George said, and let himself imagine what it would be like to have people thinking about him, talking about him. The opportunities that success on Everest would bring. ‘I might be able to leave teaching, maybe even write full time. We could travel,’ he said. ‘Have our own adventures.’

Handing him the invitation, Ruth rose unsteadily to her feet and

gulped at her wine. He scanned the words again – *hope that you'll join the Everest reconnaissance, pursuit of the final Pole, for the honour of King and Country* – as she crossed the room to the bookcase. Stretching up on her bare feet, she reached for the atlas on the top shelf before turning to pad back to him. ‘Show me,’ she said, sitting back down beside him. Her hair had come loose from where it had been pinned up and haloed her in the dim light. She pushed it off her brow with the back of her hand.

He laid out *The Times Atlas of the World* on the floor, on the blue Turkish rug with its woven colours of water and sky, ice and snow. When he found the proper map, George took Ruth’s hand and with her finger drew a line around Europe, the path of a ship past France, around capes and narrow islands and the ruins of the Greeks. Through the canal that split the desert in two and past the land of Lawrence’s Arabs. Their hands described reckless adventure, sailing over longitudes and latitudes, past *Here there be monsters* and the arched backs of sea serpents painted on the blue of the Indian Ocean, and into the port of Bombay. George drew lines across the plains of India, around bazaars and villages, landscapes of tea and Hindu cows, into the curved spine of the Himalayas with their foothills and plateaus.

‘It’s blank,’ Ruth exclaimed when their hands reached the spot where Everest should be; there was only a series of names – no relief, no lines of ridges or elevations. Just words floating in an empty space, waiting to be claimed by him.

‘No one has mapped her yet. That’s what we’re going to do, Ruth – reconnoitre her, bring back the shape of her.’ He stroked his fingers across the map, as if he could explore the range through the pages, feeling for the relief of peaks. ‘These are the highest mountains on earth.’ There was an awe in his voice that he wanted

her to share. He recited names and caressed the page before moving from the map to navigate her skin beneath the folds of her skirt. ‘West to east – imagine them. Cho Uyo, Gyanchungkang, Everest, Makalu, Kangchenjunga.’ They were like spices on his tongue, on hers, tingling.

In a cloud of lavender soap and cloves for the toothache she had complained of earlier, Ruth pressed against him, promised curries for dinner. ‘You’ll have to write to me about everything. Every detail so it will be almost like I am with you.’ There was a thread unraveling at her collar, marking a line on her pale throat.

‘You *will* be with me,’ he said. ‘Every step of the way.’

‘Everest,’ she said, ‘sounds like a foreigner.’

He took her hands again and traced the lines of her palms, like horizons. ‘She was named for George Everest. He was the surveyor general of India, but he died before he ever saw her. From malaria, after blindness, paralysis and wild bouts of insanity. He was a bully apparently – drove his men mad. He set out to force some order on the world with his maps. He started at the bottom and swept his survey up the whole arc of India.’

He whispered words such as ‘trigonometrical’ and ‘triangulation’ against her throat, at the pulse below her ear. With the back of his fingers he skimmed the long declension of her throat, traced the line of her collarbone where it slipped beneath her blouse.

‘Everest was measured from a horizon away.’ He traced the curvature of the earth along the concave of her stomach. Pushed her back onto the blue carpet, unearthed her.

‘They crept from hill to hill, building towers and measuring the angle of peaks on the horizon. A fraction of a degree could make all the difference.’ He pressed on top of her, tilted her hips, and pulled her to him.

TANIS RIDEOUT

The atlas ripped under her, the paper stuck to her wet skin.

After a few minutes, Ruth rolled onto her side, curved her body around his and tucked her head under his chin. She could smell herself on him.

‘There were three problems with the measurements. Corrections to be made, all by mathematics. The curvature of the earth, the refraction of the light through the thinner air and colder temperatures. And the weight of the mountain.’

The air was cooling now on her naked skin. After a moment, Ruth began to shiver despite still being slick with sweat. She pulled herself up, sat facing him, hugged her knees to her chest. She couldn’t believe how happy she felt, how proud, that George had been chosen. The scent of him rose off her skin. ‘The weight of the mountain?’ she asked.

The light was thinning in the room, etching the two of them in dusk-blue lines. George stood, strode to the window and gazed out towards the towers of Charterhouse while Ruth shrugged into the jacket he had thrown aside. He shut the window tight and came back, kneeled in front of her. He tugged at the lapels of his jacket, drawing it tight around her shoulders.

‘It’s so massive it affects the gravity around it. They used theodolites to survey her, but the pull of the mountain threw the measurements off. Can you imagine anything so powerful, Ruth? This mountain has a presence. Everest knew it when he planned to measure her – and he didn’t even go near her, never even saw her.’ Closing her eyes, Ruth leaned against his shoulder and pictured the jagged skyline of the mountain.

‘Twenty-nine thousand feet.’ A whispered invocation. A prayer.

She imagined his letters arriving from the Himalayas, herself curled up by the fire to read them. She thought about his returning

ABOVE ALL THINGS

home to her, victorious. Her face split into another smile, her cheeks aching from it. She couldn't help it. The happiness she felt for him swept through her. She tried not to think that being apart only seemed romantic when you were together.

'How do they know?' she asked. 'How do they know how tall it is if no one's been there?'

He reached out again and Ruth stretched out her hand to meet his. She would take his hand, pull him to his feet, lead him up the stairs to their bedroom. But he brushed past her to touch the waiting emptiness of the map.

*A little while longer, then,* she thought. She would wait while he planned for and dreamed about the mountain, the future. 'How do they know?' she asked again. 'Maybe it isn't even the tallest.'

'It has to be,' he said, his fingers lingering on the map. 'It has to be.'



# THE VOYAGE OUT

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## *Sea Level*

1924

He still remembered the first time he saw her. He felt the pull of her, even then.

In 1921 the members of the expedition had planned the sighting, knew roughly where they would get their first glimpse of her. But when the group arrived at the predetermined Himalayan pass, they saw nothing but banks of clouds pierced by the nearer ridges. Still, they set up camp and over the course of the afternoon and evening Everest slowly unveiled herself. They watched her stripping away clouds and light.

‘There!’ someone had called out when the summit finally appeared – a great fang thrust into the expanse of sky. She towered head and shoulders over all the other peaks nearby.

They camped overnight at the apex of the pass and watched her reappear in the morning, noting the play of light and weather on her. The way the clouds rushed up to veil her again in the afternoon. They had already come closer than anyone else had ever been.

The first time, George thought, he'd been successful before he even left.

By the time he returned to England from the second Everest expedition a year later, success was impossible to claim. *The Times* was already blaming him for the disaster that had put an abrupt end to the 1922 attempt. It wasn't fair, but for good or ill it was his name that had become synonymous with Everest.

When he met Ruth in Paris on his return, he was certain he was done with the mountain. In the hotel room, he swore to her he would never go back: 'I promise I'm done with it. I don't need it. I need to be with you.' He believed it at the time. Continued to believe it the next year, even after Arthur Hinks, the chairman of the Mount Everest Committee, asked him to consider returning a third time, in 1924, even as other names were put forward and a team began to form without him.

He tried to push Everest out of his mind, but it remained – his first thought on waking, his last at night. She was there as he read the newspaper articles about who from the previous expedition was returning for the new attempt: Colonel Edward 'Teddy' Norton, Dr Howard Somervell. As he imagined that they might summit his mountain.

Then one day Ruth said, 'You're thinking of going back.' It wasn't a question. She looked past him to the rain-pocked window. He could hear the spatter of water against the glass, the gush in the drainpipes. He should have denied it – he shouldn't have said anything – but it was too late for that.

'Perhaps we should at least think about it. They need my experience. No one has been to Everest more often than I have. If they succeed this time and I'm not with them . . . Do you remember everything we dreamed about when they first asked me?'



‘Teddy’s been to the mountain,’ Ruth countered. ‘And Dr Somervell too. You only have one more season than them, George. They’re not your responsibility. You have responsibilities here. There’s your new teaching position at Cambridge. And I don’t think the children could bear you going away again.’

He tried not to remember how John had shied away from him when he came home in ’22. But John had been only a baby then. Now he’d had time with his father, knew him. This time would be different.

‘You said you were done with it. You promised.’ Her voice sounded tight. She breathed in deeply. ‘I know you, George. What you want is for me to give you leave to go.’

‘No,’ he started to protest, but she was right. They both knew it.

Eventually, Ruth agreed they should think about it, and he promised they’d make the decision together. But when Hinks’s final invitation came, George accepted without discussing it with her. He couldn’t help himself. For days after, he waited for the right moment to tell her what he’d done.

He returned from a meeting at the college determined to tell her. She was in the dining room – a perfect silhouette in the evening gloom, her features outlined by the dusk glow of the window behind her. Stepping into the room, he wanted to kiss her, to scoop her up, but something about how still she was, the sad line of her mouth, stopped him.

‘I knew you’d never let anyone else climb it,’ she said, not even looking at him. Her backlit profile was a cameo he wanted to carry with him. ‘As soon as the Committee decided they were going back, I knew you’d be going, despite all the protestations, all the promises. You should have just told me.’

She was right. He hadn’t meant her to find out this way. The

telegram on the table in front of her was luminescent on the dark wood. He knew what it must say – *Glad to have you aboard again.* Damn Hinks.

‘I’m sorry, Ruth,’ he said. ‘But I have to do this. I have to. It’s my mountain. You have to understand.’ She shook her head as if to say she didn’t, she wouldn’t. ‘This will be the last time. It has to be.’

‘You’ve said that before, George. And I believed you. I’m not sure I can this time.’

‘Ruth –’

‘Don’t.’ She stood, and the movement sent the telegram wafting to the floor. When he looked up from where it had landed, she was staring at him, her eyes shrouded by the dim light. Her hands fluttered near her mouth, her throat. ‘You’ll have to find a way to tell the children. Clare will be so disappointed,’ she said as she stepped around him, moving towards the door. *Disappointed.* The word stung. He knew that’s what she felt more than anything. Disappointed, betrayed. He winced, tried to banish the word from his mind.

‘When do you leave?’ She stood in the doorway, her back to him.

‘Ruth, you’ll see. It will all be all right. I’ll do it this time and then I’ll never have to leave again.’

‘When do you leave?’ she asked again.

The months that followed were difficult. Ruth was quiet, withdrawn, her words always politely supportive. He found himself missing her before he’d even left.

The night before his departure, they made love in the unfamiliar hotel room and she clung to him desperately, like the wind on the mountain, bucking against him until he was gasping, drained. They were both different when he was leaving; the imminent separation had changed them, made them bolder.

The next morning, on board the SS *California*, she kissed him goodbye, nodded emphatically, and then turned to walk down the gangplank, her hips swaying under her long skirt. God. How could she not believe him when he said she was beautiful? She'd shake her head and cover her mouth with her hands – even more beautiful for her denial. There was the hot sting of tears in his eyes, a dull ache in his throat. He swallowed and watched her go. He counted in his head. It would be six months, maybe more, before he saw her again.

That was weeks ago. Now, standing on the deck of the *California*, George cast his gaze back across the Indian Ocean to where he imagined the horizon must be, where it had disappeared when the sun set an hour before. There was no way to make things right between them except to do what he'd been promising Ruth for years: succeed and put Everest behind him once and for all. He had tried to explain again, in the letter he'd started earlier, just why he had to go – how it had nothing to do with his love for her – but the right words never ended up on the page. *My Dearest Ruth, I know this has been hard for you, but you must know how very much you mean to me, how much knowing you are waiting for my success and return drives me forward so that every day further away is also a day closer to my returning to you again.*

The ship rolled slightly under him, raising a chorus of metallic clangs and creaks from nearby lifeboats and chains. Ignoring the clamour, he pulled out his diary from the pocket of his dinner jacket. The bold dates at the tops of the pages were barely visible in the gathering darkness. He leaned further over the railing to catch some of the light reflecting off the water. He counted down the days. Two more nights. Then the Indian subcontinent, the baked heat of it, the blaze of

exotic chaos before they disappeared off the map. He wanted it to burn the salt, the smell of fish and algae, from his nostrils. The ocean air was too thick and heavy. It clung to him, clogged up his lungs.

‘Am I interrupting?’

George glanced up. ‘Not at all,’ he said as Sandy Irvine stepped to the railing beside him. George closed his diary, trying to remember what he had written about Sandy in his letter to Ruth. Probably some remark about the boy’s bulk, the sheer size of him. *Our attempt at a superman*, he remembered. He slipped the diary back into his pocket, removed his cigarettes and offered one to Sandy, who shook his head and leaned forward against the rail. Behind them, the dining room was ablaze with light as waiters cleared tables and joked with one another, louder than when there were diners present.

‘Missed you at the shuffleboard contest this afternoon,’ Sandy said.

‘Not really my game.’

‘I won.’

*Of course you did*, George thought as Sandy described the closeness of the match. He suspected physical challenges came easily to the boy. Sandy was the largest member of the entire team – not the tallest, but he seemed stronger than any of the other climbers.

‘Sandy’s the Committee’s attempt to inject some young blood into the expedition,’ Teddy Norton, the expedition leader, had explained months ago when George questioned the boy’s inclusion. ‘To balance out our, shall we say, *experience*.’ Teddy had raised an eyebrow as he said the word.

‘They think brute strength is the way to go, then?’ George had responded. ‘You and I both know it takes more than muscle to get to the summit. And he doesn’t look like much of a climber. He’s too big. With too much weight to carry up an incline.’

‘You imagined someone more like you, I suspect,’ Teddy had teased.

But the best climbers *were* built like him. And Teddy, George thought. Long and thin, with a good reach.

Now, next to Sandy on the deck, George pulled himself up to his full height and ran a hand through his hair, stretched out the muscles in his back. Still, if the boy could continue to sharpen his skills, he might be of some use higher up on the mountain.

‘Have you been practising the knots I showed you?’ he asked now.

‘I know those knots already.’

‘You’ll want the practice, believe me. When your fingers are frozen and your brain is fizzing away and suffocating, you’ll pray your body remembers what it needs to all on its own. Practice.’

‘I have climbed before. In Spitsbergen with Odell. I wasn’t bad at it. Quite good, even.’

Of course he was. ‘Sandy, this won’t be like anything you’ve ever done before. God, we could all die a dozen times before we even get to the mountain – malaria, wild animals, a fall down a cliff face. And then there’s the mountain itself.’ He sounded as if he were back in front of the classroom at Charterhouse, the bored faces of his students glaring up at him.

He inhaled and tried again. ‘There’s just no way to know how you’ll respond. Not at those altitudes. Twenty-nine thousand feet. That’s much higher than even the Camels fly. And those pilots, they’d pass out without their oxygen masks. My brother, Trafford, was a pilot. He loved flying. But he told me he thought he was going to die the first few times he went up. From the vertigo and nausea. That’s what it’s like on Everest all the time. Like the most terrible influenza you’ve ever had. Like something horrible is sitting on your chest, ripping at it. Everything just hurts. Your joints, your bones,

your skin, even. And the only way to end it is to climb the bloody mountain.'

'So.' Sandy turned to stare at him dead in the eye. His were striking, a flat blue. Almost too pale, like light reflecting off stagnant water. 'Tell me again why we're going.' He reached over and punched George lightly on the shoulder, more a push than a punch. Then he smiled and his face opened with it and his eyes weren't flat any more; they deepened, the colour shifting. 'Just joking,' he said. 'I wouldn't be anywhere else.' He turned back to the expanse of water before them.

Behind them, through the open window of the captain's salon, George could hear the clink of glasses, the laughter and chatter of their other team-mates – the expedition leader, Teddy Norton, the team doctor, Howard Somervell, and the naturalist, Noel Odell. The three of them, along with George and Sandy, would make up the climbing team. There were two more men awaiting them in Bombay: Edward Shebbeare and John de Vere Hazard, soldiers attached to the local Gurkha regiments, who knew the Tibetan languages and customs (more so even than Teddy) and would serve as their translators and guides.

Every so often, the pop and flash of John Noel's camera strobed across the deck, punctuating the distant murmur of conversation. George couldn't make out any of the words but he could imagine easily enough what was being said. He was already tired of the same old conversations – provisions, oxygen, strategy. And Teddy's waffling. Somervell's condescension. Odell's insistence that he knew what was best.

'Look at that,' Sandy said, pointing to the black water roiling in the wake. A green phosphorescence bloomed just beneath the surface of the water where the *California* had passed.

‘It’s algae,’ George said, watching the glowing trail stretch out behind the ship.

‘Incredible.’ Sandy’s voice, hushed now, slipped in with the murmur of the engines deep inside the ship. ‘Odell told me about this green glow once, on the way to Spitsbergen. We went out on deck every night, but I never saw anything. So strange. Reminds me of the Northern Lights we saw once we arrived in Greenland.’

‘Mmmm.’ George leaned over the railing to get a closer look. Cool air rose up from the ocean eighty feet below. He’d never seen the Northern Lights, but this colour was too heavy, too viscous, to be thought of as light. It reminded him of the seeping gases in the trenches, in the shell holes of no-man’s-land. It moved the same way, wet and congealing as it rolled and gathered in pockets, thicker, heavier than the medium it travelled in. He remembered how the gas crept towards you, as if it knew where you were. Stalked you. His throat tightened; he could smell the rubber of the gas masks. George straightened up and inhaled deeply into his lungs: salt, oil, the tobacco burning in his hand.

He shook his head free of the memory and took another drag from his cigarette. Sandy would be too young to remember much of the war. ‘How old did you say you were, Sandy?’

Sandy bristled next to him. ‘Twenty-one. I know what you’re thinking, but I’m ready for this. Maybe, as you’ve said, Everest is different, but Spitsbergen wasn’t easy. God, the cold there. The snow would melt inside our boots, down our collars, so it was impossible to stay dry. It was the hardest thing I’ve ever done. But it was incredible – to feel like what I was doing mattered, that people were counting on it. Like this does. Don’t you feel that too? We have to succeed. We have to. Everyone’s counting on us.’

There was a sharp laugh from down the deck. A woman, her

laugh too forced. Clearly her companion wasn't the least bit funny, though she wanted him to think he was. George flicked his cigarette out to sea.

'That's what my mum thinks too,' Sandy went on. 'That I'm too young. She's worried I'm going to get myself killed. "Haven't enough boys already died?" she said. I told her I'd be fine. But she stopped speaking to me before I left. She hugged me goodbye but wouldn't say anything to me.' Sandy grasped at the railing, then shoved himself away, as if willing the ship to hurry up. As if he could will the outcome of the expedition from there. 'But when we succeed,' Sandy continued, 'when we climb Everest, then she'll understand why it had to be done.'

George glanced over at Sandy. The boy really believed they couldn't fail.

'They grow out of it,' George said. 'Mothers.' He stuffed his hands in his pockets. 'Mine doesn't worry much any more. "But I do wonder about you," she says, and I like the idea of her wondering.' His father, though. He would have preferred Sandy's mother's silence to his own father's over-loud opinions.

The two men grew quiet as a couple leaning close together, voices low and intimate, walked past them. Sandy watched them and didn't speak again until the sound of their footsteps had faded. 'I suppose one gets used to it eventually; being so far away?'

How to answer that? Clearly Sandy was looking for some kind of reassurance, but George wasn't sure he could give it. 'No, you don't,' he said finally. 'Or at least I never have.' Even now he felt torn. Part of him hated being separated from Ruth and the children. And another part hated himself for being so damn sentimental. It was weak. Still, there was the luxury of freedom this far from home. He felt different away from Ruth, away from everyday life, and he was never quite sure which person he was, which he wanted to be.



Somewhere down the deck a door opened and closed, releasing strains of music. Beside him, Sandy picked up the tune, humming a moment before trailing off, as if he hadn't noticed he was doing it.

Ruth did that, hummed fragments of songs or tunes she made up without realizing. She laughed when he pointed it out to her. 'I wasn't humming,' she'd tease. 'You're hearing things.' Dear God, but he missed her.

'Still, I'm glad to be here.' Sandy seemed to rush his words, as if his concern over his family might have been misunderstood. 'I mean, I'm glad you picked me for the expedition.'

'It wasn't really my decision,' he said, and felt Sandy retreat somewhat beside him. He hadn't meant it like that. 'Odell's a good man. Proved himself before on big mountains, and he's a first-rate naturalist too. He's brought home at least a dozen new species of plants. This time it seems he's hoping for fossils. His recommendation would have been taken very seriously. Obviously it was.' He went on. 'Odell wants to prove that Everest was once at the bottom of the ocean. Imagine that.' George stared out over the rolling water moving away and away. Tried to imagine the depth of it. As deep as Everest was high. 'Ridiculous, really.'

'What does it matter?'

'Exactly.'

'All that matters is that it's there.'

He looked sidelong at Sandy, who smiled, teasing him with his own flippant quotation. 'I haven't heard that one before,' George said.

'Couldn't resist.' Sandy stared up at the night sky, the shapes of foreign constellations. The damp air settled on him, and the faintest dusting of salt water coated his lapels. Backlit by the night sky, Sandy made a handsome shadow. A fresh burst of talk came from behind

them, followed by staccato laughter. It sounded like Somervell. Sandy turned towards the sound now. 'Shall we rejoin them?'

'You go ahead. I have some letters I'd like to get written. Besides, it'll just be the same old conversations.'

'If you're sure.' Before he moved away, Sandy peered over the railing again. 'It's gone.' There was disappointment in his voice.

For a moment, George wasn't sure what Sandy meant, then he noticed a fresh darkness in the water, deeper than it had been a few minutes ago. The algae had disappeared, the green behind them had faded away; all that was left was the black boil of the ocean.

'I'll let you know what you missed.' Sandy paused a moment, as if expecting something, before walking towards the salon.

George knew that Sandy had been watching him, measuring him. What did he see? An old man? Thirty-seven wasn't so old. He was strong, in good shape. *A perfect specimen for the expedition*, his medical report had read. Sure, the others were fit. They had to be. None of them was a slouch. Though Odell was much too weedy. There wasn't much there for the mountain to rip off him. But Sandy . . . Sandy looked stronger than any of them.

George turned back to face the ocean and watched the waves, peak after peak, as far as he could see.



THE PORT AT BOMBAY was overwhelming. George had tried to describe the chaos of it to him, but still it was more than Sandy could have expected.

It didn't help that he'd slept only fitfully as they waited for landfall. Between his nerves and the wash of sounds that came from the city, he'd woken up again and again. *It's almost like Christmas morning*, he'd written to Marjory in the middle of the night, using his torch, until