

from *Into Thin Air*

By Jon Krakauer

In April 1996, to report on the growing interest in Everest, write and climber Jon Krakauer signed on as a client of an Everest expedition. His assignment was to investigate the guided trips that promised that any reasonable fit person could make it to the top of the world. As he horrifyingly discovered, climbing in the Himalayas is just as dangerous today as it was in Hillary and Norgay's day.

Straddling the top of the world, one foot in China and the other in Nepal, I cleared the ice away from my oxygen mask, hunched a shoulder against the wind, and stared absently down at the vastness of Tibet. I understood on some dim detached level that the sweep of earth beneath my feet was a spectacular sight. I'd been fantasizing about this moment, and the release of emotion that would accompany it, for many months. But not that I was finally here, actually standing on the summit of Mount Everest, I just couldn't summon the energy to care.

It was early in the afternoon of May 10, 1996; I hadn't slept in fifty-seven hours. The only food I'd been able to force down over the preceding days was a bowl of ramen soup and a handful of peanut M&M's. Weeks of violent coughing has left me with two separated ribs that made ordinary breathing an excruciating trial. At 29,028 feet up in the troposphere, so little oxygen was reaching my brain that my mental capacity was that of a slow child. Under the circumstances, I was incapable of feeling mucho of anything except cold and tired.

...I snapped four quick photos of Harris and Boukreevⁱ striking summit poses, then turned and headed down. My watch read 1:17 p.m. All told, I spent less than five minutes on the roof of the world.

A moment later, I paused to take another photo, this one looking down the Southeast Ridge, the route we had ascended. Training my lens on a pair of climbers approaching the summit, I noticed something that until that moment had escaped my attention. To the south, where the sky had been perfectly clear just an hour earlier, a blanket of clouds now hid Pumori, Ama Dablam, and the other lesser peaks surrounding Everest.

Later—after six bodies had been located, after a search for two others had been abandoned, after surgeons had amputated the gangrenous right hand of my teammate Beck Weathers—people would ask why, if the weather had begun to deteriorate, had climbers on the upper mountain not heeded the signs? Why did veteran Himalayan guides keep moving upward, ushering a gaggle of relatively inexperienced amateurs—each of whom had paid as much as \$65,000 to be taken safely up Everest—into an apparent death trap?

Nobody can speak for the leaders of the two guided groups involved, because both men are dead. But I can attest that nothing I saw early on the afternoon of May 10 suggested that a murderous storm was bearing down.

ⁱ Andrew Harris and Anatoli Boukreev were guides on the Everest expedition that Krakauer was on. Harris died in the storm.