

ANNALS OF ADVENTURE

THE MANIC MOUNTAIN

Ueli Steck and the clash on Everest.

BY NICK PAUMGARTEN

Ujeli Steck's closest brush with death, or at least the time he thought it likeliest that he was about to die, came not when he plummeted seven hundred feet down the south face of Annapurna, or spidered up the Eiger's fearsome North Face alone and without ropes in under three hours, or slipped on wet granite while free-climbing the Golden Gate route of El Capitan with his wife, on their honeymoon, but, rather, while he was hugging his knees in a tent on Mt. Everest, hiding from a crowd of Sherpas who were angry that his climbing partner had called one of them a "motherfucker," in Nepali. They were threatening to kill him. He had no escape. He had planned everything so scrupulously. The intended route up the mountain was sublime, the conditions perfect. He had spent years honing his body and his mind while tending to his projects and the opportunities that arose out of them. As a climber, he knew that the mountains can foil the best-laid plans, that in an instant a routine ascent can turn into a catalogue of horrors. But it would be ridiculous to die like this. The expedition had hardly begun.

Steck had made his first trip to Everest in May, 2011, at the age of thirty-four. He'd built a reputation as one of the world's premier alpinists—"the Swiss Machine," some called him, to his dismay—by ascending, in record time, alone and without ropes, Europe's notorious north faces and then by taking on bold Himalayan routes, with style and speed. Everest hardly fit the pattern. In recent years, accomplished mountaineers in search of elegant, difficult, and original climbs had tended to steer clear of its crowds, expense, and relative drudgery. Still, Everest is Everest. Steck felt the pull.

That spring, five hundred feet from the summit, he turned back, concerned that frostbite might claim his toes. He was also uncharacteristically spent, after climbing two other eight-thousand-metre peaks in previous weeks. (The goal of three in one trip was new.) But an idea had taken hold: a route that, if accomplished from beginning to end, would represent a milestone of modern mountaineering, a glorious plume. He began scheming and training for it. He returned a year later, to attain the summit via the standard route—a step toward the goal. He reached the top in the company of the lead group of Sherpas, the local people,

many of whom work as porters and guides for the commercial expeditions on Everest. This was on the first day that the weather cleared for a summit push. The next day, the crowds went up—hundreds of aspirants, most of them clients of commercial companies, and their Sherpas—and, amid the traffic jam approaching the summit, four climbers died, of exposure and cerebral edema.

This year, Steck arrived in Nepal at the beginning of April. He intended to spend as long as six weeks prior to his summit push acclimatizing to Everest's high altitude, going on forays up the mountain from base camp, which is 17,600 feet above sea level. (The summit is 29,028 feet.) He'd kept his plans secret. He has long disdained revealing the details of expeditions in advance. He doesn't indulge in what he calls "tasty talking"—boasting of feats he has not yet accomplished. Also, a climber must generally be discreet about a bold route, to prevent other climbers from going there first. He was not displeased when climbing blogs reported, incorrectly, that he was going up the South Face. He had something else in mind.

His partners were Simone Moro, a forty-five-year-old Italian who'd been climbing in the Himalayas for more than twenty years (he'd summited Everest four times), and Jonathan Griffith, an English climber and photographer who lives in Chamonix. By the end of the month, they were established at Camp 2, at 21,300 feet, beyond the top of the Khumbu Icefall, a tumbling portion of the Khumbu Glacier mined with crevasses and seracs.

At 8 A.M. on April 27th, they set out for Camp 3 (24,000 feet), where they planned to spend a night, to acclimatize. To get there, they had to scale the Lhotse Face, a towering slope of sheer ice and wind-battered snow. The Lhotse Face is the main ramp up to a saddle called the South Col and then on to the standard Southeast Ridge route, the one that Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay ascended sixty years ago and which is now tramped by hundreds of amateur climbers a year. Every season, the commercial operators put in fixed ropes along the route up the face and the ridge—a kind of bannister to the top, which any client can clip on to and pull himself along using a clamping device called a jumar. Last week, an eighty-year-old Japanese man reached the summit.

April 27th was the day that a team of Sherpas were installing the fixed rope. It is an essential and difficult job, involving heavy gear and extreme working conditions on an ice cliff riddled with crevasses. The day before, the Sherpas, with help from three Western guides, had nearly completed the job but came to an untraversable crevasse, which had forced them to take the whole rope system down and return in frustration the next day to start over along a different path.

Earlier in the month, there had been a meeting at base camp among the expedition leaders at which it was agreed that while the Sherpas were fixing the Lhotse Face no one else would climb there. Steck and Moro, a small professional team and not part of the commercial-trip ecosystem, had not been at the meeting.

Later that morning, Steck, Moro, and Griffith reached the base of the face. A few Sherpas and an American guide asked them not to climb. "The Sherpas asked nicely," Dawa Steven Sherpa, an expedition leader who had two Sherpas on the fixing team, told me. "Sherpas are really afraid of the Lhotse Face. They really get nervous." But the Westerners felt that they could continue without interfering with the fixing crew. They climbed a hundred and fifty feet to the left of the fixed ropes. They themselves had no ropes. They were climbing "alpine style"—that is, without any fixed protection, porters, or supplemental oxygen. Each had crampons over his boots and an ice axe in one hand. Unencumbered, they moved fast. Two Sherpas, annoyed, used their ice axes to knock chunks of ice down at them, until a Western guide, hearing of this over the radio, told them to stop. After an hour, Steck and the others reached the level of Camp 3, where they would have to traverse the face to get to their tent, which meant they needed to cross over the fixed line. They chose a spot where four Sherpas were at the belay, below the lead fixer, and moved slowly past them, taking care, Steck says, not to touch the ropes with their crampons or to kick chunks of ice onto the Sherpas working below. After Steck crossed the line, the leader of the fixing crew, Mingma Tenzing Sherpa, who was working fifty or so feet up the face, began yelling at Steck and banging on the ice with his axe. Mingma, a young man from the village of Phortse, then rappelled down toward Steck. Anticipating a collision, Steck raised



"I wonder if we might benefit from socializing more with those who don't harbor anti-government views."

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his arms to cushion the blow and prevent himself from being knocked off the face. According to Steck, Mingma rappelled into him, then began yelling at him for having touched him. He accused Steck and his team of kicking ice chunks loose and injuring a member of his crew. Steck argued then, as he would later, that they hadn't dislodged any ice, and that they'd been climbing well out of the way. He offered to help the crew finish fixing the ropes. This seemed to anger Mingma even more. It was then that Simone Moro came along and, seeing Mingma swinging his ice axe, began yelling at him, calling him *machikne*, which translates as "motherfucker." The insult is graver in Nepali. Mingma instructed his crew to stop working. The Sherpas descended the face, leaving behind their equipment and an unfinished job. Steck and Moro, in a possibly misguided attempt at good will, stayed behind and finished fixing the lines themselves. The three Europeans then decided not to spend the night at Camp 3, but to head back down to Camp 2 and try to resolve the dispute.

It isn't unheard of for climbers to get into testy exchanges at high altitudes, where big egos meet thin air. One can rea-

sonably argue over what happened on the Lhotse Face, and who deserves a greater share of the blame, even within a context of cultural, historical, and economic grievance. Many of the facts at hand—falling ice, who touched whom and in what order, the nature or validity of the prohibition against climbing that day—are in dispute, and yet may be of middling significance in light of what happened next.

When the European climbers got back to their tents, at the upper edge of Camp 2, they were greeted by an American named Melissa Arnot, who'd been sharing their camp and who was attempting a fifth conquest of the summit, more than any other woman. She warned them that the Sherpas were very angry about the incident on the Lhotse Face and that the mood in camp was volatile. She left, but after a few moments she ran back to their tent to say that a large group of Sherpas had set out from the main part of camp. She said, "I think you should run." Instead, they emerged from the tent in the hope of talking to the Sherpas. They then saw a mass of dozens of Sherpas appear on an overlooking ridge, many of them with their faces covered, some holding rocks.

Steck surmised that he was in trouble.

As the Sherpas converged on the tent, a New Zealander named Marty Schmidt ran up and tried to knock a rock out of a Sherpa's hand. He was pushed and kicked, hit on the head with a rock, and punched in the eye. He, too, threw a punch. (The other climbers, outnumbered, chose to act submissively.) A Sherpa who had been on the fixing crew, and who was now at the head of the throng, rushed up and punched Steck in the face. Someone hit him with a rock; another threw an ice axe and crampons. Arnot got between the Sherpas and Steck, who scurried into another, smaller tent, his face bleeding. A rock bigger than a brick came through the top of the tent, and Steck crawled out. By now, Griffith and Moro had retreated a ways, and Steck went to join them. "I think this expedition is over," he said.

A group of Sherpas broke away from the pack and attacked Griffith, the photographer, kicking and punching him on the ground. A moment later, a Western guide ran up and scattered them, and Moro and Griffith ran away, but Steck went back into the tent with Schmidt. They were both bleeding. The crowd of Sherpas was outside. Melissa Arnot and the Western guide, along with a couple of Sherpas, their hands linked, blocked the way to the tent and tried to settle them down, while Steck and Schmidt cowered inside. After a while, the Sherpas demanded that Moro, who had grievously insulted their leader, appear before them, so someone fetched Moro and hustled him into the tent. Arnot told him to kneel and apologize to the Sherpas for his offensive words on the Lhotse Face, and got the Sherpas to promise that if he did so they would not attack him. Moro came out of the tent, and while he was on his knees a few Sherpas began punching and kicking him. Moro says that one swung at him with a penknife, but the blade caught the waist belt of a backpack. Moro's protectors dragged him back into the tent. Amid the chaos, the Sherpas declared that Moro and Steck did not have a permit for the Lhotse Face. Eventually, word came from base camp that they did, and the Sherpas began to retreat. Someone told Steck and Moro, through the walls of the tent, that if they weren't gone in an hour they'd all be killed.

The three Europeans packed a few things, disassembled their tent, stashed

some belongings under piles of rocks, donned down parkas and helmets as armor against thrown stones, and fled. They avoided the established route, down through the heart of Camp 2, for fear of being attacked again. They could see Sherpas lining the trail. Instead, they crawled out onto the glacier, to stay out of sight, and began picking their way through the crevasses—an improvised route, undertaken without ropes, through a maze of trapdoors. No one would dare follow. After a while, they rejoined the main roped trail through the icefall, keeping an eye on the path behind them, ready to pull up ladders and cut fixed lines if there were Sherpas in pursuit. They reached base camp just before dark. None of them slept that night.

By the next day, news of a brawl had gone around the world. Conflicting accounts gave rise to a crossfire of recrimination. One opinion, widely held, especially among people far away, was that Sherpas, revered throughout the climbing world for their skill and forbearance, would not have resorted to such violence unless they'd been provoked.

In Switzerland, and in much of Europe, where alpine exploits equate roughly to playoff heroics here, Ueli Steck is a superstar. The news of the "Krieg am Everest" had the tabloid wattage (adjusting for Swissness) of A-Rod's affair with Madonna. Steck is a professional climber. "I'm still really impressed how this system works, to be able to make a living from climbing and not be a dirtbag for your life," he told me, before leaving for Everest. For decades, climbing was a pastime for gentlemen and vagabonds. But in recent years people have found a way to subsist at it, by guiding, or working for apparel companies, or, as in Steck's case, thriving on sponsorships and speeches and slide shows—what Steck calls "business." "To make business, you need stories," he said, by which he means amazing feats. To create stories, you need to come up with projects—bigger and bigger ones with each passing year—and then you need to succeed at them.

I first met Steck last November. He'd come to New York to run the marathon. His training regimen for each expedition is extremely meticulous, but it allows for larks, and since he runs for hours a day in the mountains, he thought he'd give the

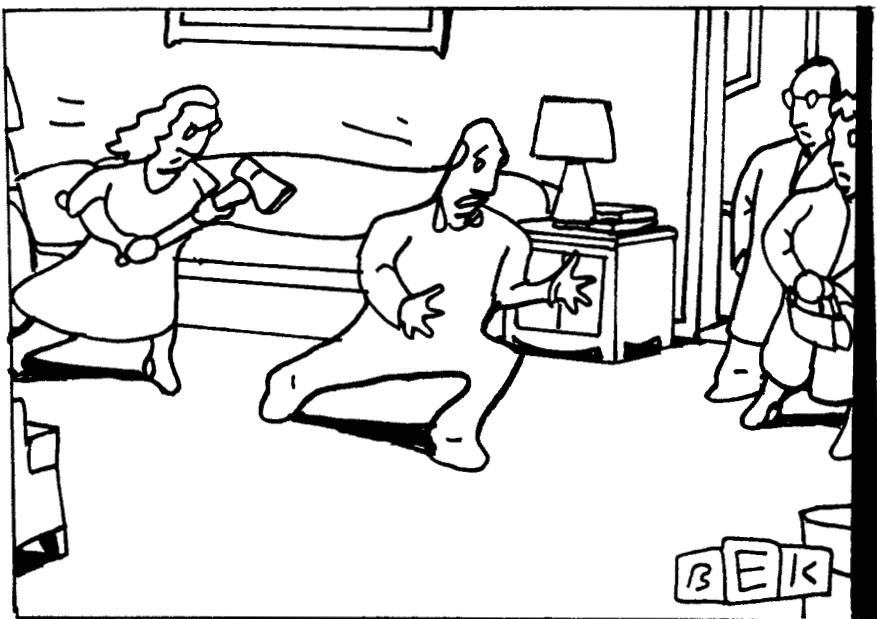
flats of the five boroughs a go. Like so many participants, he arrived in New York soon after Hurricane Sandy but before the race was cancelled, at the last minute, by Mayor Bloomberg. Once it was called off, he had no reason to stay. "I would never go to a city just to go to a city," he told me. Anyway, he wanted to get back to Interlaken to spend time with his wife. In the previous two months, he'd been home only a few days, amid a whirlwind of travel around Europe and North America to give talks and to shoot promotions and advertisements for his various sponsors. Half the life of a professional climber is retelling old stories to finance the creation of new ones. Steck gives as many as a hundred slide shows a year, often to corporations, who pay him well.

He was as secretive about his winter plans as he was about his intentions on Everest, but in March he agreed to see me in Switzerland, a few days before he left for Nepal. He lives in the village of Ringgenberg, next to Interlaken, which is the gateway to the valleys leading up to the Jungfrau massif, the cluster of glaciated high peaks that includes the infamous Eiger. The day I arrived, he'd been planning to spend the night in a hut on the Jungfrau's flank, to acclimatize to a higher altitude, prior to his flight to Kathmandu. But the weather was lousy, so instead he went for a jog. He ran up and down a mountain near Interlaken three times—eighteen miles, and eight thou-

sand vertical feet, in three hours and forty minutes. ("I enjoy it," he said. "I feel my legs, I see the nature.") Then, to cool down, he went to the gym and lifted weights for two hours. He explained, when I met him for coffee the next morning, that this was taking it easy: he was conserving energy for Nepal.

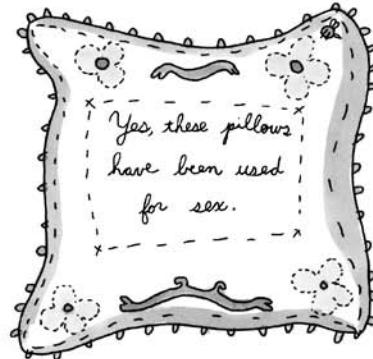
When you first see Steck, it is hard to believe that he can run any distance at all: he is almost comically bowlegged. He teeters on the outsides of his feet. He is lean and compact, with long muscular arms and fingers. He keeps his hair short and his face clean-shaven, and has intense blue eyes that seem to bulge and brighten when he discusses a project. He speaks with a reedy, heliated voice that suits his Swiss-German twang.

It was a day for business. Steck was wearing Levi's and a lightweight blue down jacket with his sponsors' names on it: Leki, Scarpa, Mountain Hardwear, Power Bar. He had a meeting in Bern, an hour away, with executives from another sponsor, Richner, a Swiss bathroom-fixtures merchant. We drove there in his white Audi A4 wagon, with "www.ueli-steck.ch" emblazoned on both sides. (Audi, a sponsor, gives him a car every year.) He was careful to obey speed limits and to stop at crosswalks. "If I do one little thing wrong, people will make a big deal," he said. "This is Switzerland." His great fear was running over a toddler. He was anxious about his reputation—it was



"It's part of our process."

SOME THINGS ARE BETTER LEFT UNEMBROIDERED



Kanin

the distillate of all those faces and summits, his true currency—and this wasn't a country that tolerated ostentation or entitlement in its mountain athletes, he said. Though he gave liberally of himself as a pitchman, he never let reporters meet his wife or talk to his parents or see his house. He wouldn't even let me attend the bathroom-fixtures meeting. But afterward he showed me around old Bern. His wife, who works for Bern's electric company, had an apartment nearby. He'd met her at an ice-climbing competition. A year later, they climbed the Eiger together and spent a night sleeping on a ledge at what is called the Death Bivouac, because of climbers who died there.

After lunch, Steck drove to the city's outskirts, to a warehouse that contained a vast climbing gym called Magnet: a Costco of climbing, with undulating pitches of varying steepness, each section a different hue, with hundreds of handholds affixed, stuck there like gobs of bubble gum, in dozens of bright colors, each denoting a particular line. Schoolkids, teens, seniors, and pros turtled in muscle: they scrambled up the walls and hung from the ceiling, belayed by companions on the ground. Steck changed into a Mountain Hardwear T-shirt and shorts and went over to a turret off to the side, a kind of pyramid stuck upside down into the ground, for bouldering—that is, scrambling without being roped.

He began to maneuver around on it. A few patrons whispered and glanced in his direction—this was the equivalent of Tiger Woods showing up at the municipal driving range—but for the most part everyone left him alone. He followed a progression of blue handholds, then orange, then pink, hopping down to the mat each time, brushing the talc from his hands on his shorts and peering up at the wall, his head tilted as though the wall were a language he was trying to remember. “I can climb vertical ice—I don’t even need to train for it,” he said. “This is more for fun. This isn’t training—just moving a little bit. I don’t waste energy on climbing training. But I’m too fat now for hard rock climbing. I used to be eight kilos lighter. The weight gives me more stamina. It’s less cold.” After a while, he removed his T-shirt. With a woman named Julie, the wife of a friend, on belay, he began climbing a big wall. He moved Spider-Man fast, clipping in every three feet or so, until he was hanging from the ceiling. There were strange muscles in his back. Each contortion set off a different arrangement of them.

Over lunch, he revealed his Everest plan. “The Hornbein Couloir,” he whispered, eyes shining. This was a steep cleft in the rock of the North Face, on the Tibetan side. It was first climbed by an American pair fifty years ago, but Steck wanted to do it alpine style, an extremely

rare feat in itself. Most years, the Hornbein holds either too much snow or too little. After ascending via the Hornbein, he planned to go down the Southeast Ridge, across the South Col, and up Lhotse, the fourth-highest mountain in the world—the Lhotse Traverse. If all went well, it would require that he and Moro spend more than three days above eight thousand metres, in the so-called death zone. No one had ever done anything like this. He had sold the exclusive Swiss rights to the story to a magazine published by Migros, the Swiss supermarket chain, for more than the trip would cost him.

Steck, a coppersmith’s son, was reared in Emmental, hilly cow country, which by Swiss mountain-man standards makes him something of a flatlander. He and his two older brothers were hockey nuts; one went on to play professionally. When Ueli was twelve, a friend’s father took him rock climbing, and that was it for hockey. He began scaling walls in climbing gyms. Before long, he’d made the Swiss junior national sport-climbing team, but he grew restless and wanted to try his moves on the real mountains near home, chief among them the North Face of the Eiger, known as the Nordwand, the great test piece of the Alps—Europe’s Everest. I drove up from Interlaken one afternoon to have a look, and seeing it for

the first time, from the road leading up to Grindelwald, I found myself growling back at it. It was the bigger bear: a nasty shaded rampart of limestone and ice, nearly six thousand vertical feet from bottom to top, bedevilled by avalanches, falling rocks, sketchy verglas (thin ice), and sudden storms that can pin a climber for days. The obsessive and often deadly attempts in the nineteen-thirties to be the first up, observed from a nearby hotel, still make for some of mountaineering's best-known tales. The first successful climb, in 1938, took four days.

Steck was eighteen when he made his first ascent of the Nordwand. It took him and a friend two days. When he was twenty-eight, he soloed the 1938 route in ten hours. Two years later, he did it in three hours and fifty-four minutes, breaking the record by forty-six minutes. Still, he felt he could go faster. He dedicated the next year to the task, adopting a precise (and top-secret) daily regimen to fine-tune his stamina and strength. It was a novel idea, to bring the advanced science of sport training to the imprecise art of climbing. No climber had ever done this. It hadn't seemed necessary—until Steck introduced the question of speed.

In 2008, he climbed the Nordwand in two hours and forty-seven minutes—less time than it takes to watch "Cloud Atlas." The style was pure, too: he waited until a storm had left fresh ice and covered old tracks, and he used no ropes or protection of any kind—just crampons and ice axes, in a technique called dry-tooling. Later, he repeated the climb for a film crew, doing pitches over and over, waiting for the setup of each shot, and the footage of him dry-tooling verglas, and running up near-vertical snowfields, where one mistake could mean a mile-long plunge, brought him international renown. Just watching on a computer screen induces vertigo, yet he says it doesn't scare him. "I'm never afraid," he said. "I wouldn't do it if I was afraid of it. I'm not an adrenaline junkie. I'm really Swiss, calculating."

On the premier mountains of the world, there is little new left to do. To achieve a notable first ascent, you'd have to climb the mountains of the moon. So it can be hard these days for a climber to distinguish himself. One can do stylish routes up obscure or remote peaks, or do several peaks in one sequence (a so-called enchainment), or else go alone and un-

roped up classic routes in record time. Speed became Steck's shtick. The next winter, he followed up with record ascents of the north faces of the Grandes Jorasses (he broke the speed record by four and a half hours) and the Matterhorn (the whole thing in less than two hours).

To some, all this seemed a little gimmicky or robotic. The combination of speed, which seemed an affront to the mountains' majesty, and the methodical training regimen leached alpinism of some of its romance and poetry, its shaggy rebel charm. "For this I got a lot of, how you say, flak," Steck said. "People said, 'Climbing is not a sport. A climber's not an athlete. It's about adventure, being in the mountains, going out with friends.'"

The question of purity is an old one in climbing. In the nineteen-thirties, the stodgy members of the British Alpine Club, accustomed to tramping around on Swiss glaciers with local peasants as guides, used to dismiss the young itinerant Nordwand aspirants as daredevils and glory hounds. (And lest we idealize these rebels, keep in mind that many of them were climbing for the glory, and with the backing, of the Reich, perhaps with a different idea of purity in mind.) Over time, honor and admiration has migrated toward those who ascend using fewer ropes, carrying less on their backs, stopping less often, using less in the way of human support—lighter, faster, cleaner, more self-reliant. In that respect, not many can top Steck. Still, the professional climbing game can be a mercenary one, requiring fealty to sponsors and some self-glorification, which can undercut the elegance of the feats themselves.

"The purist thing doesn't exist," Steck said. "You have to find a way to live. You're not living from eating the dirt. But you have to keep it as climbing." Steck pays for his trips himself. He is sponsored, but the expeditions are not. He doesn't want to have to factor the sponsors' interests into the calculus of risk assessment. "If someone else pays, they decide what you have to do." By the time he's on the mountain, Steck is climbing for himself and himself alone.

A climber's reputation rests not just on first ascents or flashy routes but on how he conducts himself when things go to pieces. Steck may be renowned as much for his abandoned expeditions as for

the flawless ones. In May, 2007, he attempted to put a new route up the south face of Annapurna, a perilous ice and rock face on the world's most lethal peak. On his first try, he got seven hundred feet up, and a falling rock hit him on the head, knocked him out, and off the face. He fell all the way to the bottom and regained consciousness. He was barely hurt.

Two weeks later, he met with Simon Anthamatten, an élite alpinist from Zermatt, and they agreed to give Annapurna a try. "I grew up in the guide tradition," Anthamatten told me. "You don't go alone in the mountains." The following spring, they went to Nepal. For an acclimatization climb, they achieved a first ascent of the north face of Tengkampoche, via a very technical route, which earned them a Piolet d'Or, the world's top climbing prize. Then they went back to Annapurna. They tried twice to get up the south face but were turned back each time by weather. There were two other expeditions on the mountain: a group of Russians, who had butchered a yak to eat, and whom the Swiss thought it best to avoid, and a mixed group consisting of a Russian, a Romanian, and a Basque named Iñaki Ochoa de Olza, who were attempting the east ridge. One day, as Anthamatten and Steck returned to their base camp, exhausted after a third abortive attempt, they received a call on their satellite phone from Ochoa de Olza's girlfriend at base camp, who was in touch with the Romanian climber via radio. There was a medical problem. Ochoa de Olza, stranded at twenty-four thousand feet, was suffering, and the Russian had gone missing. They'd lost their medicine.

It was 9 P.M. Steck and Anthamatten had been climbing all day, and had left their high-altitude gear at the base of their route up the south face. They didn't even know the way on the east ridge. Base camp sent two Sherpas up to help them, but one was drunk and the other exhausted after a twenty-mile hike up from his village. So Steck and Anthamatten turned on their headlamps and set out into the night alone, in their light climbing gear. They reached Camp 2, almost twenty thousand feet above sea level, at 8 A.M. By now it was snowing hard, and they couldn't make out the other climbers' tracks. They came upon an avalanche-prone slope, and decided to wait until morning to cross it. The Romanian

called frequently, through Ochoa de Olza's girlfriend, reporting that Ochoa de Olza's condition was getting worse. When they reached Camp 3, at noon the next day, the weather was deteriorating. The Russian had returned. He'd been on the summit and spent the night just below it. Steck and Anthamatten sent the Russian down, after Steck had swapped boots with him, and Steck proceeded up alone. In between Camp 3 and Camp 4, Steck and the Romanian met up. Steck gave him medicine and the last of his food and sent him to meet Anthamatten, who helped him down. Steck proceeded to Camp 4, at twenty-four thousand feet, and came upon Ochoa de Olza, unconscious in a tent. Another night passed. Steck remained with Ochoa de Olza, who by the next morning was in the throes of death—unconscious, vomiting, coughing up blood. Pulmonary edema. At noon, he stopped breathing. After a while, Steck determined that he was dead. He spent the rest of the afternoon in the tent with the corpse and then decided, as night fell and the storm raged, to put the body outside. A weather report came from base camp that the next morning would be his best chance of getting off the mountain alive. Steck lay awake through the night. He was sure he heard something outside, like a man moaning. He began to wonder if Ochoa de Olza was alive. He stepped outside to see. Still dead. In the morning, Steck left the body behind, headed down, and at Camp 3 stumbled upon three rescuers, with whom he descended to base.

He and Anthamatten were hailed as heroes for abandoning their climb and risking their lives to save others. They were awarded a Prix Courage. Steck downplayed the rescue, because Ochoa de Olza had died in the end. And they'd failed to achieve what they'd come to do. "I'm done with Annapurna," he said afterward. "It gives me a funny feeling."

Eventually, he changed his mind. He had been planning to go back this fall, to have another go at the south face. But then came the *Krieg am Everest*.

Scandal is a mainstay of climbing lore, as fundamental as courage and death. Controversies swirl around every mountain, and almost every mountaineer, like so many ravens. The first great first ascent, of the Matterhorn, in 1865, by an

ALMOST FEBRUARY

Timbuktu is no longer a faraway place from childhood.
Nor is Mongolia, where people steal dinosaur bones from the ground.
It's not possible to stay intact forever.
It is possible to carry exotic species in your luggage,
to hide a skull under your cap, to imagine sweaty high-school
football players in Kansas when looking down from an airplane.
It's possible to place a copper weather vane of a rooster on the roof,
to wait a long time for it to turn green.

On eBay, they are auctioning the old coats of Cher.
Authenticity guaranteed. I almost bought a coat without sleeves for \$50.
The ad said Cher probably had intentions to alter it.
We have more choices than we think is something I read.
A neurology student named Claire told me *There are many Claires*.
One replaces oneself, cellularly. How many Claires?
The older they got in the documentary,
the more lies they told, because they had more people to protect.

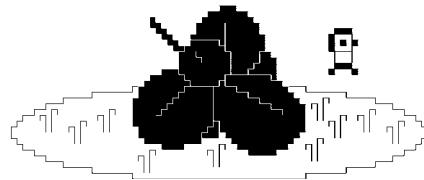
Englishman named Edward Whymper, led to the death, on the descent, of four of his companions. Their rope snapped, and they fell four thousand feet. Afterward, Whymper and his guide, a local Zermatter named Peter Taugwalder, were accused of having cut the rope that connected them to the others in order to save themselves. An inquiry exonerated them—the case prompted Queen Victoria to consider a ban on mountain climbing—but a whiff of dishonor, along with the timeless problem of there being no witnesses in mountain accidents except, usually, the survivors, has forever shadowed the accomplishment. Whymper

the wealthy owners of luxury hotels.

Now Steck has a controversy of his own. Five days after he and his companions fled Camp 2 on Everest, he was back in Switzerland. For three days, he didn't go out. He saw no friends and stayed away from town. On Tuesday, May 7th, he picked me up in Interlaken in his Audi, the name on the side now like a scarlet letter. It was his first time out in the car since he'd been back. He felt people looking at him. The Swiss media had mounted a siege, albeit a polite one. *Blick*, Switzerland's version of the *Post*, ran an interview with an old Swiss mountaineer. The headline: "STECKS EGO-TRIP WAR EINE PROVOKATION."

Many accounts were sympathetic, but in others, and on many adventure blogs, Steck, Moro, and Griffith were being depicted as Gore-Tex imperialists, rich, arrogant European invaders of a sacred Sherpa ritual and violators of cross-cultural decorum. "For Simone, in Italy, this has not been such a problem," Steck said. "But here in Switzerland, if they can find something like this about you, they kick your ass." Many eminent climbers had spoken up in his defense, including Reinhold Messner and Chris Bonington. Still, he found himself in the unfamiliar position of being, in some quarters, the bad guy.

"I'm not really home yet," he said. "It's just too much for me. I'm totally messed up. People wanted to kill me.



later suggested that Taugwalder might have intentionally chosen a flimsy rope, a slander that stuck to the family for decades. The Wallisers, the local Swiss valley dwellers, were the Sherpas of the so-called golden age of alpinism, when wellborn Englishmen competed to knock off the high peaks of Europe. The Swiss did the work and rarely got the credit. These days, of course, the Swiss are the ones going abroad in search of glory, and Taugwalder's descendants are

A guy I don't like at work brought his baby in and the baby was perfect, with spiky hair, I wanted to hold him but the guy didn't like me either. There should be a center in town where people can hold infants. The hospital stayed open in Timbuktu, but the doctors had to minister to so much horror—they had to reattach people to their hands.

You cannot be anyone else, though you buy a new jacket, or Cher's old one. My grandmother wanted to be buried with everything she owned, just in case. Just in case, I save old coffees in the refrigerator. I love strangers, whom I recognize as people I knew in grade school—with all their winter accoutrements and little objects for living. My pencil case was always full of cracker crumbs. Nobody recognized me as the Buddha.

—Anna McDonald

For me, life was over. I was sitting in the tent and I didn't see any escape. They said, 'Get that guy out here. First, we kill him and then we look for the other two.' Maybe I'm too sensitive, but I can't get over this."

"People have this understanding of the nice, good Sherpas, blah blah blah," he said. "They say, 'It was just Westerners in the wrong place. They were arrogant to be there. The Sherpas are there to do their work.' Well, I respect their work, but they should respect my work." Steck and his team had paid tens of thousands of dollars for the requisite permits, and believed that they had a right to climb on the Lhotse Face, and that the requirements of the commercial climbing operations shouldn't take precedence over those of the professional ones. If anything, their expedition, one of two professional bids that season, may have merited some deference. Their mission, from a certain vantage, was an exalted one.

For the Sherpas, and for many Westerners who have worked alongside them over the years, getting hundreds of paying clients up to the summit, Steck, Moro, and Griffith had no business being on the Lhotse Face. The Yak Route, as it's sometimes called, wasn't part of their climb, and the Sherpas' work there is vital to most of the mountain's constituents: clients, guides, porters, and the ecosystem that has sprouted up around them, from the villages on the way to base camp to the

gear companies and media outlets that treat the Everest climbing season as their Super Bowl.

At any rate, the argument with the fixing team was one that Steck was willing to take some blame for. "What happened on the Lhotse Face—we can discuss this, what was wrong, what was right. No problem. But what happened at Camp 2, this was unacceptable. Even if we made a big mistake, it's no reason to kill three people."

Steck seemed changed from when I'd seen him in March. He was subdued, speaking almost in a whisper, with an air of bafflement. Since the Camp 2 incident, he'd had a persistent headache. He was hardly sleeping, and when he did he had nightmares, which he'd never had in the past. "I'm fucked, eh?" he said. "Now I have to fix myself. I will seek professional help."

He was surprised that several Western climbers who were friendly to him at base camp after the incident later wrote secondhand accounts on the Internet that were not only critical of him but full of what he and Moro have called false allegations and fabricated quotes.

Mike Hamill, of International Mountain Guides, the company that the fixing-crew chief worked for, wrote afterward, "The instigators were Simone and Ueli. Will these two be held accountable for inciting violence and for their cultural arrogance, or will there be a double-stan-

dard?" Garrett Madison, a guide with the commercial outfitter Alpine Ascents International, referred to an "unwritten rule" that climbers should stay off the face during the fixing day (whether this should apply to professional climbers, and not just commercial clients, for whom the ropes are intended, is arguable) and depicted the brawl as a regrettable shoving match rather than an attack by a mob. He, too, placed the blame for the incident on Moro and Steck. He asserted that after the confrontation on the Lhotse Face, Moro called down to Camp 2 on the radio, saying that he was ready for a "f---ing fight." Simone Moro responded, when Madison posted his account, "It makes me crying to read that false, false, false and pure invented fact. I NEVER, NEVER, NEVER, NEVER, did that radio call and provocation. (I have a lot of witness who can confirm.) Madison INVENTED those words to try to change the facts and give me responsibilities for the tension."

Hamill and Madison also repeated the crew chief's charge that Steck had kicked ice down onto the fixing team. Steck told me, "This I know: there was not a single piece of ice falling on a Sherpa." According to Moro and Griffith, a Sherpa who had been bleeding said later that he had not been hurt by falling ice; he had slipped and hit his face. Madison's account was called "the Sherpas' viewpoint"—he had talked to many of the Sherpas involved—but to some it read more like the viewpoint of someone with an interest both in placating restive employees and in reassuring future clients. "He just protects his business," Steck said.

Eric Simonson, the co-owner of I.M.G., said last week that he shared Hamill's and Madison's point of view. "The commercial companies will put themselves solidly behind the Sherpas," he said.

Two days after the incident, Sherpa leaders arranged a kind of peace meeting at base camp. The Western climbers and a handful of Sherpas signed a handwritten treaty stating that they'd forgiven each other and agreeing to work together in the future and abstain from violence. Its vagueness implies an equivalence between the Europeans' imprudence on the Lhotse Face and the attack in Camp 2—between name-calling, on one side, and sticks and stones, on the other. More

than anything, it reflected a mutual desire, among the Sherpas and the commercial guide companies, to make the whole mess go away. Steck, Moro, and Griffith signed it, and though they did not necessarily want their attackers jailed (no one has been charged), they were pleased that several of them had been suspended from working on the mountain this season. At the base-camp meeting, Steck told me, "I saw that guy who punched me in the face, the chief from the fixing crew. I looked him in the eye and said, 'You have stolen my dream. Please don't do that to another person.'"

Not long afterward, when Steck was back in Switzerland, Moro, who is a helicopter pilot, flew his helicopter up to the Lhotse Face, to recover the body of a Sherpa who'd fallen to his death. The Sherpa who loaded the body onto the helicopter was Mingma Tenzing, the rope-fixing chief. "When he saw me, he looked at me, then looked down," Moro said.

Steck had thought his relationship with the Sherpas was a good one. Many with whom he'd summited the previous year had approached him at base camp, earlier in the expedition, to say how much they'd enjoyed climbing with him. "Some people treat the Sherpas really bad, like slaves," Steck said. "I don't want to be the face for this. I never

treated a Sherpa bad in my life." After the Camp 2 incident, Denis Urobko, a Russian professional climber attempting a new route up the Southwest Face, posted his thoughts, in which he referred to some of the Sherpas as "cattle" and "pigs." "Inexperienced and self-assured, Sherpa think it's in their right to dictate the rules and God have mercy if someone decides you sent him a 'bad glance.'" Steck, whose team had been working with Urobko and his partner, Alexey Bolotov, told me that it was a great relief that Urobko hadn't been at Camp 2 the day of the attack. "It would have been a disaster," he said. "Denis was in the Kazakh Army. He's not a guy who would say, 'Thank you, hit me again.'"

Steck and Moro have blamed Mingma Tenzing's initial pique on his exhaustion and frustration after working for two days in such extreme weather and his embarrassment over the fact that they were climbing so quickly, without Sherpa help. "He's a leader, he's losing face," Steck said. "It's the worst thing that can happen in Asian culture."

"The fixing team is the best of the best, the Sherpa A-team," Simonson said. "These are proud men. They see themselves as every bit as good as anyone out there. Clearly, they felt disrespected and got really worked up over it. You go to a

man's house and disrespect them, and, well—this is their house."

Steck and Moro, by climbing alpine style, may appear to be self-sufficient, but they use the fixed ropes and ladders in the icefall, and they rely on porters to help establish their comfortable, well-appointed camps on the lower parts of the mountain. While they make videos for their sponsors of themselves hiking up to base camp in trail shoes and carrying only day packs, somewhere outside the frame Sherpas are lugging their batteries and cheese. This occasionally irks the Sherpas, whose indispensability is integral to their economic well-being.

Steck, like many others, has tried to view the incident in the light of the wider predicament of Everest: overcrowding, money, and, as a result, uneasy relations between Sherpas and Westerners, as well as between professionals and commercial operators. He considers himself to have been an accidental catalyst.

This year, on the Nepal side, there were almost four hundred foreigners with climbing permits, and more than four hundred Sherpas. An infamous photograph last year of a seemingly endless conga line of climbers trudging up the Lhotse Face via the fixed line conveyed the extent to which the mountain had become a circus. Last week, the wait to climb the Hillary Step, the last difficult pitch before the final summit ridge, was more than two hours.

Everest has evolved into a seasonal society dominated by the interests of the commercial guiding companies, which for the most part are owned and operated by foreigners. Clients pay as much as a hundred and ten thousand dollars apiece to be led up Everest. The companies in turn contract with the Sherpas, as porters, cooks, and mountain guides. A large portion of the clients' fees goes to bureaucrats in Kathmandu rather than to the Sherpas. They observe the foreigners with their luxury accommodations at base camp, their satellite phones and computers, and they know enough to wonder whether they're being gulled. If it's their house, how come they're not the ones who get to run it? The younger generation, in particular, may be less inured than their forbears to the paternalism inherent in the relationship with the *mikarus*, or "white eyes." Walter Bonatti, the great



"The first time is always a little awkward."

Italian alpinist, suggested that the early conquest of the Himalayas was a kind of colonialism; if so, this may be the era of postcolonial blowback.

Melissa Arnot, whom Steck credits with saving his life, called in from base camp last week. A few days before, she and Tshering Dorje Sherpa, with whom she is climbing this season, had made it to twenty-seven thousand feet before high winds turned them back. (No one summited that day.) Arnot's goal this spring had been to summit twice; she was planning to head back up after a few days of recuperating at base camp. (Three days later, she made it.)

Arnot had been staying with Steck, Moro, and Griffith at Camp 2. The day they went up the Lhotse Face, she went down to the I.M.G. camp and listened in as tempers flared over the radio. She is certain that Simone never challenged anyone to "fucking fight." "Nothing Jon, Ueli, or Simone has said has been inaccurate," she said. "It's all really sad. They were treated like criminals for doing nothing. The apology that's owed is one for the violence. They were forced to leave, ostracized, and their reputations were battered. The commercial expeditions owe them an apology."

She went on, "These other accounts are embarrassing, claiming that Simone and Ueli and Jon are racist and classist. It's a bold and arrogant statement to make about people you don't even know."

She said that one Sherpa who had been a friend now refused to look at her. Still, she added, "I don't think this is a rift between Westerner and Sherpa, or part of an underlying racial and cultural divide. This is a fight between boys on the slope."

A few days later, I spoke on the phone with Dawa Steven Sherpa, the expedition leader for Asian Trekking, which is owned by his family and is one of just a few Nepali guiding companies. He is twenty-nine. His father is Sherpa, his mother is Belgian. He had helped arrange the base-camp meeting after the incident at Camp 2.

Dawa was in base camp on the day of the melee, but was in constant contact that day via radio with his two Sherpas on the fixing team. They, too, say they heard Moro say "fucking fight," but Dawa allows that their English isn't perfect.

"Simone was out of order," Dawa said. "He's a friend of mine, but he's a very fiery character. This had been building between Simone and the Sherpas for a while."

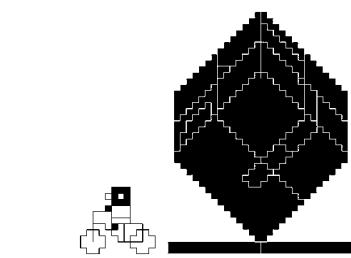
He went on, "It's embarrassing to all sides. Now my clients are getting messages from their friends back home, saying, 'I hope you're not fighting with your Sherpa.' It's very sad. For fifty years, the Sherpas have done so much for people. One small thing between a few egomani-

and his wife moved in in January. It is spacious, by Swiss standards, with three stories and an underground garage, but it's simple and spare, a modern interpretation of a chalet, with lots of light woodwork and, on the walls, large-format photographs of famous peaks.

In his office, on the ground floor, next to a giant map of Everest, a calendar sketched out his year. The summer was empty; he'd expected to be recovering from Nepal. On a day in early September, he'd written, in tiny print, "Annapurna," with a line going down through the rest of the month.

In March, he'd talked a lot about Bonatti, whom he admired perhaps above all others. Bonatti, on a winter morning in 1965, walked up to the base of the Matterhorn's North Face and climbed it by himself, a harrowing direct route that took him five days. Steck repeated the route seven years ago in twenty-five hours and spoke with wonder about the experience of placing his hands and feet where Bonatti had. A pitcher playing today can never know what it was like to strike out Ted Williams, but Steck could imagine himself in Bonatti's boots—the opponent was the same. After the climb, Bonatti, thirty-five at the time, abruptly retired from professional climbing, and became a journalist. He lived to the age of eighty-one. In some respects, Steck admires this more than anything.

Steck knows that to live a long time you need to quit. Before Everest, he'd figured he had two more years in him of pushing the limits. Now he wondered whether he had less. He would always climb mountains; it was a part of his personality, and his marriage. But the professional part of it, the Swiss Machine, had gone a little sour. A week after Steck got home, Alexey Bolotov, the partner of Denis Urobko, was killed in a fall. A rope broke. They found his body on the Khumbu Glacier. He was fifty and had quit his job to devote himself to climbing. There's a part of Steck that wonders if the incident at Camp 2 wasn't in some respects a blessing. "Maybe there might have been a big accident," he said. "There are a lot of things in climbing that you can't control." ♦



acs, and now all the Sherpa are hurt. We feel betrayed and abandoned. The idea that Sherpas don't like Westerners? That's all bullshit."

In the background, he occasionally joined a radio conversation in Nepali with some Sherpas who were breaking camp higher on the mountain. Every now and then, a helicopter landed nearby. He didn't much want to talk about the details of the incident at Camp 2. "That was unacceptable. I can't comment any further," he said. But, he added, "I can completely understand how traumatized Ueli must've felt." About Mingma Tenzing, the head of the fixing crew, he said, "He's the most quiet guy. A shy guy, doesn't ever ask for the credit. I was in shock to hear he was the forefront of this. I wasn't so surprised that Simone was involved. There's always something happening with him. Mingma is deeply embarrassed. He's very sorry. He knows he let down his family. But it's too late."

Mingma wasn't speaking to the press. "The Sherpas are not very good at talking," Dawa said. "We're workers. We don't want to talk. The best way to repair our reputation is to work."

Steck's house is at the end of a narrow street lined with quaint Swiss homes and flower gardens, up on a slope, overlooking the village, the lake, and a broad set of cliffs that block the view of the Eiger. He built the house himself, with a crew (he is a carpenter, by trade), and he