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THE DEAD AND THE UNDEAD

A short story

by

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They'd stayed too long on top of the world. Ben knew that now as the storm moved in. He was almost last in a long line of climbers descending from the Everest summit, and he had found himself in that position by virtue of being the oldest climber on his team, unable to keep up with the younger and stronger members. Somewhere behind him was Anderson, the head of the expedition, bringing up the rear, making sure that no one was left behind. Ben had managed to rappel down the Hillary Step, that famous landmark of rock that hadn't stopped Edmund Hillary as he and Sherpa Tensing Norgay became the first to summit Everest in 1953. Even with hands that felt like blocks of ice, he'd managed to grip the rope and oh, so slowly walk backward down the forty foot cliff of black rock and ice. But that was a long time ago.

Since then, he'd inched along the narrow knife-edge of snow on the Southeast Ridge--a drop-off of not hundreds, but thousands of feet on either side of him. It was slow and careful going for him, seeing as how he was the oldest and all. But, by the time he'd made it to the South Summit, followed by the Balcony--taking some pride in the fact that he was re-visiting the places that he'd climbed up on his way to the top--he'd managed somehow to separate himself from the rest of the climbers. That was when the clouds started to roll up the mountain. And, even though Ben had been afraid plenty of times on this climb, that was when a dark fear crept up Ben's spine. A fear that was as smothering as the storm that swallowed the mountain and all visibility. A fear that settled and twisted in his gut.

Suddenly it wasn't enough to step--breathe, step—breathe and suck the oxygen from the mask. He was no longer following, even from a distance. He was alone in the Death Zone! He was alone somewhere on the South Col, somewhere above 26,000 feet on the world's highest mountain. He was alone in a white snow-blindness where only pressurized jetliners lived.

“AN-DER-SON!” he screamed into the wind. But only the wind answered.

He decided to stop walking and then realized that he'd stopped walking a long time ago. Somewhere to the west, or south-west--he couldn't be sure—was Camp IV. It was just a few tents staked precariously to the side of the mountain, but it was where he needed to go. At Camp IV someone would be in a tent, melting snow on a tiny portable stove so that warm tea would be there for the climbers when they returned. He'd hardly spent any time there on the climb to the summit. It had only been a way-station for a few hours before they'd put their crampons on at the awful hour of midnight to begin their eighteen hour push to the summit and back. Now the way-station seemed like sanctuary.

“ANDERSON!”

Ben sat down in the snow. He was cold. He was blind. And he was full of terror. Somewhere was the unforgiving side of the mountain—the Kangshung Face. That side, the China side, dropped off so severely that if you stepped off it, you would simply disappear into a void as unforgiving as a black hole in outer space.

“Oh, God, Anderson . . . where are you?”

Then, the worst thing that could happen happened. Slowly, and as surely as the sun rises and sets, darkness fell and the temperature dropped to well below zero. If Ben thought he was cold before, gingerly walking on numb feet, he was beyond cold now. His expensive down suit seemed puny against the wind, and soon his oxygen—that oh, so warm and nourishing oxygen--would run out. His teeth began a hypothermic chatter as his entire world slipped into a twilight zone of black, starless night, gray ice and a hurricane force wind.

“Anderson!”

Anderson had followed him down the Hillary Step and even the South Summit. Surely, he would miss him at Camp IV. Someone would be coming soon. He had to believe that. Then he thought of Camp IV again. Never had it seemed so luxurious. At Camp IV was his sleeping bag and, rather than yearn for his home a world away, he simply yearned for what was, he hoped, obtainable: his sleeping bag. At Camp IV he could sleep. He could take off his crampons, those metal spikes on his boots that gave him his purchase on the ice but now just seemed to trip him up, and someone would surely give him a fresh bottle of oxygen and he would pull the sleeping bag up around his frozen ears and frozen face . . . in his tent . . . far away from the wind and the snow

Ben awoke with a start. He thought he'd heard someone call his name. Or maybe it was a dream. Had he been sleeping? It was still night and he'd not moved from his sitting position, his back against a black rock. Oh, God, he prayed, don't let me fall asleep. To fall asleep was to die. He might not have

been the most experienced climber on the team—even though he was the oldest—but he knew one thing for sure: to fall asleep in his situation was to die. That’s what freezing to death was like. First, there was the inability to move the outer extremities—was he there now? Ben tried to raise one leg. It came up from the snow a few inches then, as if it had a mind of its own, it dropped back down. The body was shutting down everything, desperately trying to keep the core alive. Then there would be a rush of warmth and the dying climber would usually tear off a mitten or open their jacket to the elements. After that came the sleep that lasted forever. Ben couldn’t let himself fall asleep. Someone would be coming for him, and they weren’t going to find a frozen corpse. He’d paid \$60,000 for this climb. He’d scrimped and saved and worked two jobs for five years to get here. There was no way he was going to die on this mountain. All he had to do was stay awake long enough for the person he’d paid that \$60,000 to come and get him.

Ben awoke with a start. He was sure he’d heard someone call his name. He scraped the ice off his goggles, trying to see something, anything through the blowing whiteness. But there was no one in the darkness.

“Anderson,” he said.

Where was he? Ben tried to check his watch. How long had he been out in the storm? But he couldn’t make his hand function enough to even push back the sleeve of his jacket to see his watch. And what about his oxygen supply? Had it run out? He couldn’t tell and loosened the mask from his face. He was instantly blasted with the cold air but, without the hindrance of the mask, breathing seemed a little easier. Even in his oxygen-starved mind, he knew he’d run out of the precious life-giver long ago. Then he noticed that his legs weren’t there and panic stabbed at him—a surge of adrenaline that jolted his body awake. His legs moved, cracking the surface of the snow cover, and Ben blew a sigh of relief. He wasn’t dead yet.

That’s when his hypoxic brain took a vacation. He was in the home they’d built for their retirement, warm in front of the fire, reclining in his favorite reclining chair--the one so perfectly molded to his body. Her chair was still there, seven years after her death, for he’d never had the heart to move it. But, he’d stopped talking to it long ago. Now it was a sentinel of what his life used to be. He dropped his hand from the arm of the chair and it came to rest on top of Muggs’ head. Ben rubbed the big dog’s head and scratched behind his ears. Muggs yawned and leaned into the chair. They’d had no children, so good old Muggs was all that was left of his little family.

It was a full year after her death when Ben opened the closet door he'd closed long ago. He began to dig through the spider webs and dust balls searching for, and retrieving, his harness, chalk bag and climbing shoes. He dug some more and pulled out his ice axe and crampons. He knew he needed saving and this was the ticket to his salvation. After a few phone calls to old climbing partners—most of who had retired their climbing gear years ago—he managed to convince Casey that a climbing start-up was exactly the cure for the couch-pouch.

Ben and Casey started up with some warm-up rock climbing in places like the New River Gorge and Seneca Rocks in West Virginia, and then on to the Shawangunk Mountains in New York. It took a while to get the squeaky joints and out of shape muscles going again, but time spent in the gym paid off, and the two of them lost the struggle and reclaimed the fun of the thing. Before long they were in Yosemite and bagging 13,000 and 14,000 footers out west. It was the fact that they'd done so well with it—and at their age!--that gave Ben the idea of climbing Everest. But Casey was having none of it. After all, he had a wife and kids, and he did his best to talk Ben out of his wacky idea. But Ben was determined. He'd experienced his reentry into the world of climbing as a kind of rebirth. He knew it was screwy, but he honestly felt that there was nothing that he couldn't do!

So, here he sat, staring up at the stars on the surface of what might as well have been the moon. The stars! Ben focused his eyes. They were really there, and there were so many of them. It was the same sky he remembered from the climb to the summit—a sky where the stars were giant jewels in multitudes of trillions upon trillions. Ben looked around. The wind had stopped and the stars and moonlight cast a silvery glow on the snow and ice. Why, it was bright enough that he could probably find his way back to the tents! In any case, it was light enough that he would see the edge of the Kangshung Face before he could step off it. He noticed that the snow covered his legs again, was surprised to discover that most of his body, including his shoulders, neck and head, were encased in snow. He tried to move, but couldn't. And it wasn't just the snow that was holding him back. It was like the signals from his brain weren't reaching his legs—or even his arms. Another dart of fear. Was he paralyzed? Fear was now a metallic taste in his mouth.

“AN-DER-SON!”

God, it felt better to scream. He did it again, and again, and again until he became hoarse and the screams would no longer come. That's when he knew that he needed water--only the water bottle was in the pack on his back which, in his condition, may have well been on the other side of the moon. It was probably frozen anyway. And, even if it wasn't, he didn't think that he could use his frozen fingers to

unscrew the cap. So, now, dehydration would set in, and his body would continue the act of consuming itself that it had begun when he'd started this climb days, no, weeks ago. Because surely you counted the trekking—that long, slow walk through the high, terraced country of Nepal—to get to the mountain. He allowed his mind to wander to the exotic and foreign places that he'd passed through on the way to Everest Base Camp. He thought wistfully of Namche Bazaar with its hundreds of buildings clinging precariously to the side of a mountain. This part of Nepal was Sherpa country—a place so cold and high and steep that only the acclimated Sherpa could live there. He remembered the smells of Namche Bazaar—the sweat and yak dung odors that had kept him nauseated the entire time he was there. All he wanted in the world right now was to be in the comfort of Namche Bazaar. Oh, to hear the tinkle of yak bells and the clamor of the bicycle rickshaws under the hotel window. Then, slowly, as if sinking into a yak-hair mattress, Ben drifted off to sleep.

Ben woke up this time as if swimming through a thick fog. Someone was calling his name. He tried to push the recurring and aggravating dream aside. He inwardly cursed the mountain gods for allowing this demon of false rescue to toy with him in his delirious state.

“BEN!”

His eyes popped open. Anderson?

“Anderson?” he said aloud.

“BEN!”

No, it was a female voice. He focused his eyes, searched the darkness. Coming over the crest of a slight hill was the bobbing of a headlamp. A headlamp! With a cracking of ice, he raised his hand to touch his forehead. Why hadn't he put on his headlamp when the darkness swallowed him whole? Had he been so hypoxic that he'd neglected to do the one thing that could have sent a beam of light to potential rescuers? How could he have been so stupid?

“Here . . . HERE!” he screamed.

“I SEE YOU!” the figure screamed in response.

The figure got bigger and the bobbing of the headlamp got closer, and he knew that whoever it was had seen and heard him. For the first time in what seemed like days, Ben was not afraid. Rescue, sweet rescue was coming. And it was coming in the form of a woman!

By the time she arrived the first rays of sunlight brightened the sky and she turned off her headlamp. If Ben had been in his right mind, he would have asked her where she came from, asked her where Anderson was. But all he could think of was that he'd been found, that soon he'd be tucked into his sleeping bag with oxygen warming his blood.

"I—I can't move," he managed to say in a voice so soft only he heard it.

She leaned down and placed her face only inches from his. She had the greenest eyes he'd ever seen on a human being. Green and beautiful. In fact, everything about her was beautiful. Her eyes were enormous, her lips were full, her face young and unlined. She had to have come from one of the expeditions following them. He'd never seen her before.

"You have to move now," she said.

Ben struggled to move his legs and, after a time, he did move them. He must have blanked out, and it must have been a long time, because the sun was higher and the sky brighter. She was still there, smiling at him from a few feet away. With effort, he stood up and took a step and, when he did, it was like his blood finally started to flow again--into his arms, his legs, and even his brain.

"Did Anderson send you?" he asked as he staggered along, following her across the windswept South Col. For the first time, he noticed that she was climbing without oxygen.

She stopped and turned her emerald eyes on him. "Everyone is looking for you."

He wondered briefly who "everyone" was, but his thoughts couldn't advance any further than that. He was just content to follow her as she led him back to the camp. In fact, she had become his total world. He didn't see the bare hard granite that the points of his crampons skittered over. He didn't see the glistening ice and snow on the Lhotse Face or the heights of Everest above him. His only focus was on the red down suit of the woman who was leading him back home, to the states, to his house, his job, his friends and Muggs. Idly, he wondered what her name was.

They walked a few more feet and then she stopped and turned to him. "We are not far now," she said. That's when he noticed an accent. She smiled, like an adult smiling at a child. "My name is Raffaella Amato. And I am Italian," she added.

Ben's oxygen-starved brain couldn't remember an Italian expedition at Base Camp. He paused and tried to think. He couldn't. He couldn't even remember any of the particulars of the many expeditions that made up the temporary city at 20,500 feet. He had been in the Death Zone too long. He knew he was lucky to survive, that few people had ever survived a night of exposure this high on the mountain. Then a thought: he'd become a statistic. That chilling thought made him even more determined to keep

this statistic on the list of the living. With a surge of adrenaline he didn't know he possessed, Ben struggled ahead, keeping Raffaella always in his view. But she was moving fast, getting farther and farther away.

"Don't leave me," he said. Raffaella stopped and turned, then simply pointed up the side of the mountain. And that's when he saw them coming toward him. Three human forms encased in brightly colored down suits, faces covered with goggles and oxygen masks.

"BEN!" Anderson's scream was muffled, but loud enough to be heard. He broke into an ungainly trot for a few steps. The two other forms behind him waved their hands in the air.

Ben raised one arm in the air, then the other. He took a step, and then collapsed onto the snow and ice. For the rest of his life, he never remembered the long walk back to the snow-buried tents at Camp IV. All he could remember was his feeling of relief as they pulled off his crampons, tucked him into his sleeping bag and propped him up against his backpack. One Sherpa gave him hot tea and another strapped an oxygen mask to his face. For a long time all he could do was feel the warmth of the mug cupped in his hands as he breathed in the oxygen.

Anderson watched him from the corner of the tent for a few more minutes, and then moved over to pull the mask from Ben's face. "Drink, now, buddy," was all he said as he pushed the teacup up to Ben's lips. "You're one hellava walking miracle, you know that?"

Ben looked at Anderson's lined and ruddy face and the gray and brown hairs that poked out of his knitted wool cap. "Who's that gal you sent to get me?"

"What gal might that be? We were out all night banging pots and pans during the height of the storm. It was the only way we could think of to guide you back. It was certain death to try and go out there." Anderson looked down, found something of interest on the tent floor to stare at. "After the eighteen hours it took to get to the summit and back, everyone was wiped out. Even the Sherpas couldn't move from their tents. It was all I could do to get two Sherpas out in the storm to help me make noise. I was hoping that you were just outside of the camp—that you would hear us." Finally, he lifted his eyes to look at Ben. "Everyone made it back safely except you. You had all of us freaked out, man."

Ben finished his tea, could feel exhaustion begin the easy process of overtaking him. "I think she's from an Italian expedition."

"The Italians have already started their climb," Anderson said as he took the mug from Ben's hands and replaced the oxygen mask.

Ben lay down and let Anderson zip-up his sleeping bag. The last thing he remembered was hearing voices outside the walls of the tent.

The next morning he began the long and painful march down the Western Cwm. He made it to what had been Camp II when they'd started up the mountain. There were a few tents there and he sought only solace when he crashed to sleep in his sleeping bag. Ben wanted to be alone. He had serious concerns over what was to come in the morning, for what lay ahead was the most daunting part of the climb. It was called the Khumbu Icefall.

Where the Khumbu Glacier dropped down to Base Camp, it was fractured into a maze of moving and groaning ice towers that threatened to collapse without warning, crushing any climber who happened to be in the way. Three hours after daybreak, and after all the other members of the expedition had gone on ahead, Ben was alone with Anderson and a Sherpa named Ang. Exhaustion had claimed much of Ben's strength by the time they'd reached the icefall, but courage comes to different people for different reasons, and, for Ben, courage came from the strong desire to get the hell off that mountain and return home. Tentative step by tentative step, he managed to maneuver his way along the most dangerous path in the world. He crawled across the aluminum ladders that he'd walked across before, and he was thankful that he could crawl across the gaping crevasses and ease himself down seracs the size of an apartment building. He would crawl all the way home if he had to.

When they finally made it into Base Camp, Ben cried with relief. The memory of summiting Everest was now distant, replaced with the fresher one of survival. He knew he could never tell the story of making the summit of the tallest mountain in the world, of reaching

29, 035 feet where jetliners lived, without feeling a tinge of embarrassment that he'd been foolish enough to get separated from the group--and lucky enough to survive by chance and not by any heroic effort on his part. He knew that his body would still be on that mountain, covered with a shroud of snow and ice, if it hadn't been for a woman named Raffaella and Anderson and the Sherpas. He knew that he had not conquered Everest at all, but, instead, had been humbled by the mountain and sent home. He knew all this stuff as he recovered at Base Camp. Then, when he was healthy enough, he began the long trek back to what he now considered civilization: Kathmandu.

The capital of Nepal was choked with motor vehicles that somehow managed to maneuver through narrow streets and alleyways, dodging cycle-rickshaws and wandering cows. From his room at the hotel, deep in the heart of the tourist district, Ben could hear the traffic and the street hustlers. Neon signs blinked alongside ancient temples. Mixed in with the night sounds of car horns and rickshaw bells was

the music from a karaoke bar. It would be full of climbers tonight, and Ben toyed with the idea of joining them. He'd been in his room for too long, staring at the ceiling, nursing his bandaged and aching fingertips and toes. Thanks to the latest technology, Ben would keep all his digits. Buying the best boots and gloves had been the only smart thing that he'd done on this climb.

If it hadn't been for a woman—Ben let his mind wander, allowed himself to remember her emerald eyes, her smile. He'd asked about her at Base Camp, but no one knew who she was. There was an Italian expedition on the mountain, but the climbers were all making their attempt for the summit and his Italian wasn't good enough to converse intelligently with the camp manager. None of their English speaking Sherpas seemed to know anything about her, and nothing unusual about that. Then it was time to leave the mountain, so he gave up on finding her. He wanted to thank her, maybe even to get to know her. She haunted his dreams, her green eyes swimming before him, and he was starting to feel an uncomfortable infatuation growing inside him. It had become like an itch that he couldn't scratch and it made him get up off the bed, put on his clothes and walk down the street to the karaoke bar.

Ben hesitated, and then walked through the door. The dimly lit bar, the heavy smell of cigarette smoke and a cacophony of languages from every corner of the world assaulted his senses. He allowed his eyes to adjust, watching the slight form of an oriental girl as she sang off-key to Michael Jackson's "Billie Jean." He searched for, and found, some of his team-mates huddled in a corner under the only brightly lit lamp in the place. The wall behind them was covered in framed photos of mountain climbers in various poses on the summit of Mount Everest. Ben sat down, ordered a beer and joined in the conversation, faking interest in the debate of paragliding versus hang-gliding. He let his eyes wander along with his mind, until they finally settled on one of the color photos hanging in a cheap, black frame.

"That's her!" he blurted. Everyone looked at him. "That's the girl that led me to Camp IV. That's Raffaella!" And there she was--the object of his obsession. She smiled down at him, her green eyes glinting in the sunlight, her full lips stretched out into a wide smile.

Everyone looked where Ben pointed and self-consciously glanced at each other.

"What?" Ben asked.

Willard, a climber from Pennsylvania, cleared his throat. "I don't think so, mate."

"Oh, yeah," Ben said, smiling. "That's her—I'd recognize that face anywhere. Couldn't mistake it," he insisted.

“Ben.” It was Sherri, one of the few women climbers in their group. “These . . . these photos on the wall are all of climbers who have died on the mountain.”

Ben laughed, but it was not a joyful laugh, “No,” he said. Then: “NO! She’s the one that led me back. I’m telling you, man, she was the one!”

More embarrassed looks passed around the table. No one said anything until Sherri spoke up. “Look on the back of the frame, Ben.”

Ben rose, pushed his chair back with a loud screech, and walked over to the photo. After a long moment he plucked the photo off the wall and turned it over. Printed neatly in ballpoint pen, were a few, simple sentences: “Raffaella Amato, Italy, on the summit of Mt. Everest—2002. Died on return—avalanche. Age 24.”

He felt his stomach twist and tighten, and he couldn’t get enough air into his lungs. He bolted for the door and, once outside, he rested his back against the cool stone of the building. His breathing came fast, and he was shaking. She had been as real as any of his fellow climbers. He’d heard her speak, not in his mind, but with his ears. Her form had been as solid as the rocks on the mountain--he could never think of her as a hallucination.

Ben took a deep breath and then walked back inside the bar and up to the wall with the photos. Without a word and without looking at anyone, he took her photo off the wall and walked out with it tucked under his jacket. For the rest of his life, her photo would hang in his home, and he would remember Raffaella and credit her with his safe return from the realm of the dead—or the undead—and back to the world of the living.

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