

NOLAN PETERSON

Scars

*Then will he strip his sleeve and show his scars,
And say "These wounds I had on Crispin's day."*

The final night before the climb on Island Peak, I was in the dining room of the lodge in Chukhung, Nepal, eating a plate of Tibetan momos and enjoying an Everest beer. While talking to a Canadian climber about Afghanistan, I heard an American voice call out across the room: "Holy shit, dude, were you in the U.S. military?"

Through the haze of burning yak dung fueling the stove in the middle of the room, I saw a young, bearded man. He had on a black beanie and his short sleeves revealed arms covered in tattoos. And there were scars beneath the ink. I'd seen arms like those before on brothers in Afghanistan and Iraq. Before he said another word, I knew he was an American soldier, and I knew he was special ops.

His name was Kevin Law. Sitting next to him was his father. They were here to climb Island Peak with Adventure Consultants – the climbing company of ill-fated Everest guide Rob Hall (Hall was the New Zealand guide who famously telephoned his wife before his death on Everest to choose a name for their unborn daughter). I politely excused myself from the conversation with the Canadian and joined Kevin and his father at their table, where they introduced themselves.

I told them that I had been in the U.S. military, and had also served in Iraq and Afghanistan. A light flicked on in Kevin's eyes, and conversation burst out of him like he had been filled to the breaking point for years with the words, waiting to tell his story to someone who might understand.

Kevin had served multiple tours in Iraq and Afghanistan as an Army Ranger and was in the worst kind of fighting in both places. He told me about a friend who was decapitated by an IED just yards outside the gates of a base in Afghanistan. "I had been talking to him just five minutes before that," Kevin said. "His body was completely fucked up, you couldn't tell it was him." And he told me about putting a tourniquet on the bloody stump of a friend's leg that had blown off in battle.

Kevin was in a tough time in his life. The Army had recently medically discharged him against his will, due to injuries he suffered from an IED blast. While being evacuated from combat following the IED, his mother committed suicide. And just months later, while recovering from his wounds back in the U.S., his wife divorced him, taking his daughter with her. So he was here in Nepal to start over and reconnect with his father after spending his years as a young man fighting for his country.

In *Eiger Dreams*, Jon Krakauer says, "Mountains make poor receptacles for dreams." I suppose he was right, since I never found any answers in the mountains to the questions in my life. But sometimes there just isn't anywhere else to go when everything falls apart. The mountains may not solve any problems, but the ones they create are simple and free from the complicated tragedies of the lives we leave behind. For Kevin the mountains were the only place where the world still made sense.

Kevin's dad said good night and went to get some much-needed rest before the big day. We were going to climb a 20,305' mountain the next night. Kevin and I kept drinking beer and sharing stories. I told him my old call-sign, and he spit out his beer—"Are you fucking kidding me?" he yelled.

He was in a firefight in Afghanistan, a bad one, when a plane with my call sign had directed the air support that saved the lives of him and his men. He remembered hearing the call, just before death rained down on the Taliban insurgents assaulting his men.

It was probably one of my old squadron mates on the mission, since we all use the same call sign in combat. But it could have been me. He bought me another beer as a way of saying thanks – something he wanted to do for a long time, he told me. My experience with war had been nothing like Kevin's. I mostly spent it in the relative security of a cockpit, with the ugliness of combat reduced to amorphous

infrared images on my displays. But after a youth spent deploying and serving my country, I think I was there for the same reason as Kevin. I wanted to divorce myself as completely and cleanly from the life I had been living, with the hope that this experience could atone for what I thought I had lost, and inspire me to live in a way that was worthy of a second chance that not all of my friends would get.

So here we were. Two men, who unknowingly depended on each other in combat, meeting for the first time on the eve of climbing a remote Himalayan peak.

Together at the end of the earth, we were trying to make sense out of the senselessness of war and the unrecoverable currency of youths spent fighting for our country.

We drank Everest beer long into the night, and told stories like we were old friends. There was an instant connection based on our military experiences and the attraction we felt to the mountains. Soon we were the last two in the dining room, and the slightly exasperated lodge owner told us that it was time for bed. Kevin would be setting out in the morning with his group a few hours after I was scheduled to leave, and we would not see each other again before the climb. I said good-bye, and we exchanged contact information, and that was it.

I saw Kevin two days later as I was descending from the summit; he was still on the way up with his father, and they both looked tired. But they were determined to keep going. We stopped for a minute to shake hands, and I gave a brief account of my experience. Then we parted ways. I haven't seen Kevin since, and I've lost touch with him over the years. But meeting him on the eve of the climb was something I will never forget. The things I had so badly wanted to leave behind ended up being my greatest comfort.

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