



THE VOID'S EDGE

He falls.

He screams.

I see it out of the corner of my eye,
him disappearing into the crevasse.

I don't have time to process it.

The yank is savage.

The rope twists around my thumb
and crushes it.

STORY: TAMARA LUNGER
WRITTEN BY: MARTA MANZONI
PHOTOGRAPHY BY: MATTEO PAVANA
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‘Come on, not Everest,’ Simone says. I don’t even suggest K2; I know he doesn’t want to, not after his wife dreamt that he would die on an expedition to the second highest mountain on Earth. ‘Manaslu?’ he counters. I say no. Simone has another idea: ‘Let’s link up Gasherbrum I with Gasherbrum II.’

I let this sink in. The Gasherbrum peaks. I’ve never been, and I always like to explore new places. It would be the first winter link-up of two 8,000ers in history. Gasherbrum I and II have already been linked during the summer, in 1984, an incredible feat by two giants of Himalayan mountaineering: Reinhold Messner and Hans Kammerlander. To me, taking on this adventure with Simone would be like a way of paying homage to Messner, our Italian King of the 8,000ers. It’s decided. In December 2019, we take off from Italy, heading for Islamabad.

I’m excited. For the first time I’m due to leave Islamabad by plane, instead of reaching Skardu by the small bus I’ve used on prior expeditions. The flight gets cancelled. We re-book the plane for the next day. Flight cancelled. As it happens, I like the journey by van a lot: it’s a unique experience that makes me feel alive. They tell me that in some villages along the KKH (Karakoram Highway) it’s frowned upon to look out the window, but I can’t resist, and I peek, filling my eyes with memories. The scent of travel: a door to dreams.

The highway is alive. Workers are trying to widen the road with jackhammers. I get off to offer them some earplugs. They refuse, but offer to trade places with me in making the holes. We wait two hours for them to blow up a bit of earth. We pass the place where Bin Laden was killed. Chicken-sellers go up and down tirelessly, showing their goods to travellers and bathing the birds so they won’t die of heat and thirst. The trucks are works of art: the doors, made of wood, are carved and decorated with high reliefs in a thousand colours, and each is different from the next. Unique pieces. We buy naan and chapati from some street vendors. I devour them. Truly a delicacy!

We cross villages; someone I know greets me, calling me by name. There’s a man on a pedestal, with a knife between his feet, the blade facing upwards: he takes the meat and cuts it from above. I believe I won’t eat meat today. I need to pee but I’m familiar with toilets here; nature is much better. A phrase from T.S. Eliot comes to mind: ‘Only those who risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go’. We continue to skirt the river, plunging into increasingly narrow and steep canyons. After two days on the minibus, and now almost in Skardu, the environment opens up, and I finally take my first look at the mountains.

In Skardu, we redo the bags and pack everything we need. Each bag weighs 20kg: the maximum weight that a porter carries during the winter season. Accompanied by a military officer, we take a jeep and for seven hours we bounce up and down on the battered dirt roads, passing many landslides. We encounter several military checkpoints where guards repeatedly check our passports. From Askole begins the trek to approach Base Camp: about 100km. We walk for seven days, and every morning we dismantle the whole camp – the kitchen tent, the pots, everything – before putting everything back in the backpacks and walking on.

This trek is a part of the journey that I love. Porters I know from previous expeditions always greet me warmly. It doesn’t matter if the porter doesn’t know English; bright eyes and a shared laugh are enough to convey affection. We arrive at Base Camp after more than 10 days of adventure, just in time for New Year, and I take the home-made cookies that my grandmother gave me for Christmas out of my backpack: we’re ready to celebrate!

I listen to the mountain and it doesn’t say anything to me. There is no feeling between us. *Oh my god! What does that mean?* I’m worried, but I don’t want to rush to any conclusions. I want to give myself some time. But, even in the days that follow, the connection just doesn’t spark.

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It doesn't say anything to me.

There is no feeling between us.

Oh my god!
What does that mean?



On January 1st Simone and I begin our patrol of the glacier, looking for a way to Camp 1. To make the most of the few hours of light, we start walking with the sun, so it's warmer. Every day we go up and down, up and down the glacier. Many areas are impassable, so we ask the military for a metal ladder to help us cross the voids, and we carry it with us so that we can overcome the same critical passages on our way back in the afternoon. I think we must look like chimney sweeps.

We use the track made by the military to go to their high camp, so at least on this stretch we don't sink into the snow. But the track leads us into an icy labyrinth of seracs. Every moment we have to be careful where we put our feet and pay close attention to the route. There are many technical sections with steep ice. Often, our route peters out and forces us to stop and turn around, and as we try another path through the serac maze I realise that this already feels like a struggle – and we have only advanced 150m. I stop and listen to the mountain, to the signals it sends me. Camp 1 feels unreachable.

At a certain point we meet a flat section, but I'm not fooled by appearances. I know how it works on these glaciers: at first glance it looks like an intact surface, when in reality it hides chasms every few metres. I feel like I'm walking on eggshells. I'm tense, but I have to be focused – we can't go wrong here. Carefully, we probe each step with sticks. Snow covers the crevasses, making them invisible. We change routes so many times. There is no obvious way forward.

Suddenly I feel an emptiness beneath me and everything collapses under my feet. I'm about to fall! Instinctively I throw myself to the opposite side, saving my life, and we pick ourselves up and keep plodding forward. Soon we arrive at a point where the glacier's surface is striated by countless deep crevasses, like large canyons, and Simone and I exchange a glance – how will we continue? 'The landscape has totally changed since 2011,' he tells me. That was when he made the first winter ascent of Gasherbrum II with Denis Urubko and Cory Richards. Back then, Simone took four days

to get to Camp 1. We still haven't seen it in 18 days: a direct testimony of climate change.

Our footprints, always solid and clearly visible, are our salvation; like the pebbles in the tale of Tom Thumb, they allow us to find our way home every day. Slowly we get higher and higher. On January 18th we reach 5,500m. In 18 days we have only covered 500m in altitude, but, finally, we're close to the plateau. I am breaking trail. We wear snowshoes, spreading our weight over a larger surface area of snow; this means that we sink less, and are less likely to fall into crevasses. Ahead, I see a critical step.

'Belay me, Simone,' I ask him, and I feel him pay out the rope. I pass three crevasses. I'm on a serac above Simone. The 20m of rope between us is almost out, so I tell him to wait and start manoeuvres to belay him. I'm making the buttonhole for the half-boatman knot when Simone takes the first step – and the patch of snow he's standing on collapses under his feet.

He falls. He screams. I see it out of the corner of my eye, him sliding into the crevasse, but I don't have time to process it. The yank is savage. The rope twists around my thumb and crushes it, but I have to act – and rapidly. He pulls my hand and I fly forward, like Superwoman, pulled towards the edge of the precipice. I can't stop. I have an ice axe but it seems impossible to plant; it's all happening too fast. I pray. Please stop, stop! I try to slow down a bit with the snowshoes, but it's no use. Finally, I stop myself by jamming my left hand into the snow, right on the edge of the chasm.

I need to set an anchor. I stick my ice axe into the snow. I have to manoeuvre using only my right hand and mouth. My thumb is supporting the weight of Simone's 70kg, plus the 20kg of his backpack. I scream. My hand hurts so fucking bad. They will certainly amputate it. 'Cut the rope if you're safe!' I yell to him, but the crevasse is not straight and he's about 20m down. We can barely hear each other. I want to get close to him but I'm afraid of falling too. If you fall then it really is all over, I think; I have to hold on. But I'm going to lose my hand. ▶▶



As I begin to heal, I realise that I still have a long way to go to truly love myself

‘I put in an ice screw!’ Simone shouts to me. I’m still very tense. My thoughts are a blurred fog through the shock and adrenaline and pain. I focus on the basics. *I’ll lose my hand! I’ll lose my hand! I’ll lose my hand!* is the mantra that I keep screaming with my whole being. Simone takes a sling, loops it onto the ice screw, and slips his foot into it like a stirrup. The tension lessens when he unloads his weight from the rope – and at last I can free my hand. I look at my thumb. It’s red, torn, and swollen. I no longer feel anything. This hand is useless, but now I have to belay Simone. I put a screw in and set a better anchor. He is going to have to climb out by himself, I think – there is no point in trying to make a hoist with one hand crushed.

As second climber, Simone only has one ice axe, but he will need two to climb back out. Using a trekking pole to extend my reach, I slide one of my own axes carefully down the snow slope towards him and gesture that he should use his pole to catch it. The axe skitters over the ice and picks up speed, but he manages to hook it with his pole’s wrist loop and pull it towards himself. After securing the axe he takes off his snowshoes, grunting with the strain in his awkward position wedged against the ice, and puts on crampons. Fortunately, he doesn’t seem to have broken anything. With great effort, after two hours, he manages to get out, climbing up with both axes and crampons, while I help him by pulling with the rope, trying to resist the waves of pain from my hand. When he reaches me, I ask him for a hug.

It’s late. We have to fly back to Base Camp before dark. I carry the ladder over my head, and keep Simone on a leash, like a dog. We deserve a photo, I think, but the light has almost failed when we arrive. The cook prepares a mixture of oil and turmeric for my hand before wrapping it. I no longer feel my fingers. I don’t want to go home, but I realise that there is no point in continuing with the expedition – the risk of frostbite is too high. The following day they come and pick us up by helicopter.

Two months after my return home I regain sensitivity to my hand. The nerves had been crushed. I’m in a black hole. I don’t understand what all this means; in two out of three winter expeditions on the 8,000ers I almost didn’t make it back. Does that mean I have to stop?

I go to my guru. A friend is there, and she tells me, ‘Tamara, you’re done. You tend to approach these things as if you were a man. If you can’t listen, follow, and respect your feminine energy, you have little left to live for.’ I know that she is right; this is something I have worked on a lot over the last few years, and I have already improved. But I felt more like a man when I was on the mountain, fulfilling what I think of as male roles. Breaking trail, making decisions, bullishly pushing on. Saving Simone’s life, even. Simone, on the other hand, was more aware of himself – and more willing to turn back in order to avoid unnecessary risk. How can I embrace my femininity without feeling inferior? We women can achieve the same goals as men, but we have different qualities, and I must learn to respect them. As I begin to heal, I realise that I still have a long way to go to truly love myself.

@tamaralunger // @_marta_manzoni // @theverticaleye