



Inspired by  
**Old Kani Near Phurbe,  
Tsum Valley, Nepal**  
by Ralph Oberg

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By Mandy Miller

### **An Homage to Mallory**

Pasang's voice was no longer muffled by the wind which had howled since we left Everest base camp days before. "Georgie, we must go. Our last chance."

I nodded. Climbing season was over, every other team gone along with their dreams of the Summit. Not one soul had made it in 2020, at least not there and back. Usually someone does, often a high net worth dilettante, albeit tethered to a Sherpa's back, the mountaineering equivalent of a sedan chair. Grandfather would have been appalled at what he wrought.

Pasang unzipped the tent and held the flap back, letting in the glow of the full moon, a golden gong punched out of the midnight sky.

"Look, he said," pointing to the pyramid, the top of the world. "All is calm."

I staggered out, body and mind sluggish at 27,390 feet.

He held out a gas canister attached to a mask, the type Grandfather surely used in the Great War. "Maybe you should."

I waved him off, heart tom-toming in my chest.

I pulled on hobnail boots as Grandfather had done exactly ninety-six years before, then rearranged myself in the prickly layers of wool I had worn overnight to ward off the cold. Just as he had. And then the canvas overcoat. Just like his.

I grabbed the binoculars from Pasang and turned them down the Khumbu glacier high above which Grandfather's body lay, frozen in time and place. I brought the stupa, a mere cairn now, into focus. More of an arch than a holy place, but then what should a holy place look like? A lama had blessed Grandfather there with a puja, burning juniper and smearing tsampa flour on his and Irvine's faces for protection. Mother said her father was "driven by action, not superstition." Still, I imagined

the old war horse saying, “Better safe than sorry,” his stiff British upper lip curling into a sly smile. Not that any of it had mattered in the end.

Just to be safe, I had said a silent prayer there too. For Pasang. I didn’t believe in incantations. But Pasang did, and he was the one with no reason to climb this mountain, yet again. But, like Grandfather, Pasang would, because it was there. Chomolungma, Goddess Mother of the World to the Sherpa, the people of the East, was once the holiest of sites, but is now a desecrated monument to ego masquerading as the Sherpa way of life.

I pulled the gold watch from my pocket much as Conrad Anker had pulled it from Grandfather's when he found him still tied to a line in 1999. The crystal is gone, the hands too, but their rusty stencil on the still white face is frozen at 12:50. Whether Grandfather was on his way down from the Summit cannot be known. Hillary has the glory of that first.

“We must turn by that hour,” Pasang said.

Together, we climbed, our bodies dying cell by cell. Having failed on the first attempt, Irvine persuaded Grandfather to use “English gas,” the Sherpa name for bottled oxygen. I, however, had persuaded Pasang to go without, to accomplish what Grandfather had set out to do when he returned. The Somme had left him with the need to suffer for those who had perished.

At the Second Step, we paused, scanning the precarious perch as one might for a lost pet, but Grandfather’s body was gone. A propitious wind had revealed it to the worthy Anker who returned with only the watch and his word as proof. I like to think they shared toast before Anker moved on to live. And Grandfather, into the abyss.

I shifted my gaze to the ribbon of snow trailing off the summit, borne on the jet stream. Where would those flakes come to rest? Upon whose body?

“We have time,” he said. “The light is with us.”

Soon, we stood on the earth’s highest balcony for but a moment. There was no question of a photograph. Photographs are for those for whom the Summit is the destination.

Pasang faced down Chomolungma and bowed to where the stupa would have been but for the shroud of clouds. He pointed at his watch, a rubber affair with a digital display. It read 12:50.

I kneeled and hollowed out a cranny in the snow with my ice axe. I set the watch with no hands into the frigid grave where, I pray, it will remain. Timeless. For Eternity. Like Chomolungma.