

Chapter 1

MY EVEREST

Every day is a journey, and the journey itself is home.

–Matsuo Basho

My Everest is not your Everest. Your Everest is not mine. We all have an Everest. Each of us. Sometimes the peak is literally Mount Everest, but most times it lies deep within us, figuratively occupying a mountainous inner space. It calls us to rise up, to do what we formerly labeled as impossible, and to be who we deeply and desperately want to be. I know that I have found an Everest when my soul furiously pokes me until I listen. Heeding this call to passionate adventure of any sort initiates a journey of intense, immense proportion that changes every molecule of my being. This is the story of my Everest.



JULY 2005

Signal Hill dominates St. John's. Its rugged slopes lift Cabot Tower to a perch of quiet splendour above the city, except when it is windy, which is practically all the time. The relentless wind whistles and howls and cuts with a ragged energy that begs to be harnessed. Tourists, seeking a connection with Guglielmo Marconi and his boundless view of the Atlantic, brave the bluster, hoping to catch a glimpse of a humpback's fountain breath or the icy turquoise of a grounded iceberg.

The CBC cameraman tried three locations before settling on the stairs leading down from the upper parking lot to the North Head trail. Garbed in mountaineering fare from head to boots, I stood across from Debbie Cooper, looking a bit overdressed for an outing on Signal Hill. Debbie, the anchor of the local evening news, explained that she would ask me some questions about my training, my climb of Denali, and what was next for me. My heart raced like the wind when I thought of my answer to the last question. "Will I actually tell her and all of her viewers?" I wondered.

I was freshly back from a thirty-five day climb of Mount McKinley. I refer to this massive mountain by its aboriginal name, Denali, translated as "The High One." Denali overshadows the surrounding peaks and tundra like no other mountain in Alaska. It towers 2,000 metres higher than its neighbors and actually makes its own weather. At 63 degrees latitude, with unceasing regularity, Denali delivers extreme storms and paralyzing cold to

mountaineers. Its southern flanks are festooned with over 1,200 climbers a season, but the northern reaches on which we climbed were naked of all life but our own.

My face, carved in deep relief by Denali's harsh slopes, was weathered and sore. My pants drooped. My tired eyes scanned the vast horizon for the same views as the tourists who were trying to skirt around the huge camera blocking the trail. I could see the questions in their faces: *Who was this woman wearing big plastic boots and carrying a heavy pack talking to a news anchor on this July day? What did she do to gather this media attention?*

I had climbed Denali and stood atop North America at 6,193 metres. I was probably the first woman from Newfoundland to do so. Debbie called me back from the Atlantic and asked if I was ready to begin the interview. She reminded me to look at her and not the camera. As I hadn't given many television interviews I was nervous, but her first question set me at ease and I began to tell the story of climbing Denali.

The urge to climb had arisen like a tentative phoenix from the grievous pain of a significant relationship ending. In order to manage this enormous hurt, I needed something to throw my entire being into, and after a visit to Alaska, Denali poked at me until I knew. This was the challenge that would anchor me through the stormy waves of sorrow and anguish. I designed a physical and mental training program that would consume my life and leave little room for me to descend into the depression that lurked just outside the firelight of my soul.

Both the divorce and Denali would require me to exist in the world in new and fearsome ways. I needed my training to provide opportunities to practise standing on razor-sharp ridges and over deep, seemingly bottomless crevasses. A routine that demanded discipline and focus would give structure to the overwhelming emptiness that now permeated my life. Undertaking such rigorous physical training transformed both my body and mind in the ten months that preceded the Denali expedition.

Signal Hill was the focal point of my preparations. I hiked its trails, ran its roads, and reveled in getting to know it intimately. Given its significance in the climb, Debbie had chosen the perfect location for the interview. She asked, "Was there ever a time on Denali that you feared dying?"

I didn't share my first thought. I actually had feared dying more in the months leading up to the separation than I did on the mountain. On the mountain, however, there were three times when, if things had gone differently, I could easily have died. I answered Debbie's question by describing the descent off Karsten's Ridge.

“The snow conditions were awful. The snow balled up under our crampons giving us almost no traction. I was on a rope team with one of the weaker members of the expedition. He kept slipping and taking minor falls. We hadn’t reached the lines we had fixed on the way up so we were dependent on the rope team’s ability to arrest the fall if one of us slipped badly. The ridge dropped sharply 1,000 metres to either side. The consequences of falling were deadly. We inched our way down slowly, cringing each time a teammate’s footing gave way. When the lead finally reached the fixed protection and we had some margin of safety once again, I breathed beyond the reaches of my upper lungs for the first time in hours.”

Debbie then asked if I could say what the experience of climbing Denali meant to me. I paused to reflect and then replied, “For me, it wasn’t actually about making it to the summit. Rather, it was about choosing the struggle, choosing to overcome, choosing the hard route, and choosing discomfort over comfort. It was about giving up preconceptions and preoccupations, building connections one experience at a time, and seeing the sunrise most every day. It was about knowing the wind direction and the weather both inside and out, about growth both at a glacier’s pace and at torrents that would put most rivers to shame. It was about building determination and perseverance that will serve me for the rest of my life. It wasn’t about reaching 20,320 feet on Denali, but being present in every moment of the adventure of getting there.”

As the interview wound down, I knew the moment of decision would soon be upon me. Would I give voice to the dream that was so hesitantly and cautiously forming inside me? Would I dare bring it out into the light for everyone to see? Was I ready to publicly admit to what I was hoping to pursue? After a few more questions about Denali, Debbie finally asked the question. “What’s next?” she asked innocently, having no idea of the maelstrom she had unleashed within me. I inhaled sharply and answered slowly.

“I want to climb Mount Everest. But the idea of fundraising the \$60,000 to make such a climb possible is daunting and terrifying. Scarier than actually climbing the mountain.”



MARCH 2007

Twenty months later, I stood before Debbie Cooper’s camera once again, this time at MacDonald Drive Junior High School. The school was sponsoring my Everest send-off celebration. I was leaving for the expedition the next day. Six hundred students filed jubilantly into the gymnasium and

lined the bleachers. This was the culmination of my mission to inspire the youth of Newfoundland and Labrador to become more physically active and to follow their dreams.

Little had I known the previous May, when Jacinta McGrath invited me up the Southern Shore to Stella Maris Academy in Trepassey, what would unfold in the ensuing months. Jacinta had been a student of mine in the physical education program at Memorial University of Newfoundland, and now she taught physical education herself. With a connection forged by backpacking together in the Grand Canyon, Jacinta had kept in touch during many of my ensuing adventures. Eleven summers of camp counseling gave me the skills to impart life lessons in an engaged and humourous way. I combined photographs, stories, and music to try to communicate to the students in Jacinta's school, the lessons that Denali had taught me. I spoke to 100 students that day, the first of thirty-two school visits, that would see me reach 10,000 youth before I boarded the plane to Nepal.

In order to metaphorically describe my sense of being poked by fledgling dreams, I hid a small plastic pufferfish in my jacket. I projected a picture of Denali on the screen and related what happened when I first saw it. I had secretly dreamed of climbing Denali for many years. In July 2004, when I saw the peak in its immense totality, I surrendered the dream instantly. The only thoughts in my mind were, "It's impossible. Too cold. Too high. Too hard. I can't." I returned home despondent and seemingly dreamless.

My inner pufferfish is a hardy beast, however, and it would not let me drop the dream so quickly. When I quieted enough to notice, I perceived the persistent prodding of its inflated spines poking me until I promised myself I would climb Denali. At this point in the talk, the hidden toy came to life bulging back and forth from my belly. Instantly the children's attention was rapt, and I brought the spiny critter into view explaining how we all have an inner pufferfish who clues us in when we ignore our dreams. I thrust the pufferfish back and forth towards them warning that if we don't listen to those first nudges, the pufferfish only gets bigger and keeps on urging us to reconsider. I reached for another, much larger pufferfish, and the children erupted in laughter.

At the end of the talk, Jacinta presented me with an unexpected financial contribution towards my Everest expedition as well as good luck cards decorated with construction paper mountains and wishes of "Aim high but be careful." Tears rimmed and threatened to spill as I saw the potential of reaching out and motivating youth in this way. Driving home, passing through the dawning green splendor of Salmonier Line, my "pufferfish" soul jabbed at me once again.

I had learned to listen to the inner voice that gives direction to my life, and I knew, in that moment, that I had a much bigger goal than just ascending the world's highest peak. I realized that I had climbed Denali solely for me, to ease my own suffering. As part of my Buddhist path, I had taken the Bodhisattva Vow a few months earlier. Having vowed to serve others, I sought places to bring this promise into practise. After the trip to Trepassey, I knew I had found a way. I would dedicate my Everest to the children of Newfoundland and Labrador, hoping to inspire them to follow their own dreams and to become more physically active.