

WHEN THE MOUNTAIN CALLS...

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READING ROUTE

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Introduction

There are mountains that allow themselves to be climbed, even conquered. But Cotopaxi belongs to another category: it is not subdued, it is visited with respect; it is not defeated, it is listened to carefully, and if one has enough humility to understand its language of ice and wind, it sometimes allows us to reach its summit.

My path to Cotopaxi (Cuello de Luna / Moon's Neck) did not begin on its slopes, but on those of the majestic Chimborazo. There, on my first and failed summit attempt on a snow-capped peak, I understood the true nature of high mountain climbing. I remember it clearly: the treacherous texture of black ice beneath my crampons, the void that seemed to suck me in from the endless precipices, and a visceral, pure fear that is born from the understanding of one's own fragility. My guide Ivo Veloz — now in the eternity of the summits — insisted that I continue; however, in that instant, I was only capable of expressing a heartbreaking truth: "I don't feel safe. I feel like I'm going to fall and drag all of you with me into the abyss."

That decision, the one of turning my back on the summit for the first time, left me completely devastated and ashamed. I felt I had failed. However, the mountain, in its cruel and benevolent wisdom, had not defeated me; it was teaching me the most important lesson: true courage is not in ignoring fear, but in listening to it. On the descent, roped not to glory, but to another climber who was coming down with altitude sickness and frostbite — his name was Francisco Salinas — I found something more valuable than a summit: I found the best of friends. Pancho "Jack" Salinas would be the friend with whom I would later share laughter and tears, the arduous effort and the summit on the highest volcanoes of Ecuador.

“We do not conquer the mountain, but ourselves”

Sir Edmund Hillary

Chapter 1: The Shadow of Chimborazo and the Call of Cotopaxi

My first defeat was not on the mountain, but in my mind. Chimborazo, with its 6,268 meters, had revealed an uncomfortable truth to me: it is not enough to have a prepared body if the mind refuses to follow. My failure on the Ecuadorian colossus was not due to altitude sickness or physical fatigue; it was the void, that abysmal and infinite exposure, that broke my will. I discovered that there is no storm more ferocious than the one one creates within oneself.

Years later, upon returning to the same spot on Chimborazo that had seemed to me a vertical and insurmountable ramp into nothingness, I was surprised to see it as almost flat. The lesson was clear: the mind is the most treacherous and transformable landscape of all.

This is a topic I will address later.

I continue. Immediately after my failed attempt on Chimborazo, I needed a victory, a vindication. My gaze settled on a target less ambitious in altitude, but just as imposing: Cotopaxi, the second-highest volcano in Ecuador, at 5,897 meters. This time, my preparation would be different. I would not only train my legs and lungs, but discipline my fears.

For this ascent, I adopted a different mindset. I told myself, almost jokingly, but with a foundation of absolute truth: "Summit or death." That phrase, which sounded so drastic, became my talisman. By eliminating the option of giving up, I erased all the paralyzing questions: Will I be able to? Will I make the others turn back? Will my body betray me? What if...? Now my only purpose was to advance, to simply arrive — I was going to reach the summit, even if I had to do it alone.

Incredibly, that mental posture completely transformed the experience. My first summit on Cotopaxi became, to this day, the easiest I have ever achieved. Not only because we followed the most direct route on the north face, passing by the base of Yanasacha, but because my mind was free. Instead of obsessing over the summit, I enjoyed every step. My world was reduced to the beauty of the glacier: the deep crevasses like blue scars, the incredible ice caves, the delicate bridges that defied gravity over the deep fissures, the penitentes aligned like a legion of crystal soldiers.

In the half-light we advanced, I immersed in the beauty that the mountain revealed to me. Time was transformed into an imperceptible yet present variable, a pure experience for which no words or photographs exist.

The sound of each step in the snow led us toward the inhospitable, toward what had never before been seen or experienced; it sank very deep, immediately developing the understanding of how small we are in an infinite universe, and at the same time, that we are an essential part of it.

The summit attempt began at 11:30 pm on January 13, 2013, from the José Ribas refuge, with my rope teammates — Cristian, Daniel, Lili — and our expert guide, Telmo Tenemaza, who now dwells on the eternal summit. We managed such a good pace of ascent that we reached the summit too soon; I truly did not feel the climb. We stepped onto the summit at around 5:30 am, which unexpectedly gifted us the most sublime spectacle I had ever experienced: watching the sunrise from that privileged position.

The sun emerged from below us, bathing a sea of clouds in tones of orange, red, and gold, with the smoking crater of the volcano as a silent witness.



At the summit, a silent complicity united us more than any embrace could. The joy was so pure it almost hurt. We took photos, rested, and absorbed every second of that shared victory, letting ourselves be amazed by the stunning views in every direction.

The descent was a revelation. In the morning light, the glacier showed us its true face. I could not believe where we had ascended in the darkness. Deep crevasses that we had navigated without seeing their magnitude now revealed themselves as imposing abysses. Every ice formation, every ridge, and every passage acquired a new dimension of beauty and danger.

I was astonished by the magnitude of the volcano and the feat we had accomplished.



I admired the amber color that the sun caught in the fractures of the ice, and a sky so clear it seemed an infinite dome.

Before even reaching the José Ribas refuge, with legs tired but spirit euphoric, an idea was already circling in my head: What will be my next summit? What I did not know then was that the answer was already waiting for me. It would not be a new mountain, but the same one I had just conquered. Cotopaxi, with its double personality, was already calling me again — this time to challenge me to know its other face: the mysterious South Summit.

“The mountain is not against you; it is in your mind.

Overcome your fears and it will open its paths to you.

.” Reinhold Messner

Chapter 2: Cotopaxi, South Face, and an Unexpected Character

Several months after my first summit, March 17, 2013, presented itself as the threshold of a new adventure. By that date, the Sangay Club had organized a summit attempt on Cotopaxi via its lesser-known face, the south face.

My backpack, loaded with enthusiasm and gear, also carried the uncertainty of the unknown. What I did not know then was that this expedition would hold in store for me an encounter that would completely transform my perception of the mountain and its inhabitants.



Our journey began at the south face refuge, which we reached after a trip that was an adventure in itself. The route opened its way through a succession of haciendas, each one marked by gates that seemed like guardians of an ancient territory, interrupting the free passage from the highway that had brought us from Cuenca. After navigating these obstacles,

the refuge rose before us: a picturesque and rustic place, a sanctuary of wood and nostalgia. Its walls, covered with sepia and modern photographs, silently narrated the stories of all the souls who, like us, had set their eyes on the imposing silhouette of the volcano. The welcome was warm, and between cups of coffee and the final check of the gear, the atmosphere filled with that contained energy that precedes a great challenge.



After a brief rest, we set off toward the high mountain refuge, the base camp from where, past midnight, we would begin the final assault on the summit. The journey to that second point was an early test of will. Endless stretches of sand swallowed our boots beneath a thick mist that darkened the path. The only sound was our breathing and the crunch of loose volcanic rock beneath our feet, occasionally interrupted by the ghostly passage of muleteers and their horses — shadows laden with provisions that emerged and vanished into the fog.

On our right side, the imposing mass of the Morurco hill stood like a mute sentinel. Just when fatigue began to insinuate itself as one more doubt in the mind, the mist suddenly tore open. And there it was. Cotopaxi, in all its dazzling and colossal magnitude, revealed itself before us. The vision was at once sublime and daunting. Its immensity was so incredible that, for a moment, the air escaped my lungs. We had not yet reached the second refuge, and we already felt the weight of the challenge in our exhausted muscles. An insidious question arose: after this effort, would I have the strength necessary for what was still to come?



The arrival at the high mountain refuge was not a comfort, but an impact. The precariousness of the place struck with the force of the icy wind that blew without mercy. It was nothing more than a skeleton of bent poles, wrapped in worn and patched tarps, precariously anchored with a mosaic of stones. Inside, the earth was the only floor. There were no luxuries, not even the most basic comforts; it was a clamorous reminder of our vulnerability in the jaws of the mountain.

We settled in as best we could on thin insulating pads, trying to steal a few hours of sleep that refused to come.

Rest was an abstract concept; we were merely bodies in a state of waiting, trying to conserve warmth and energy, listening to the whisper of the wind that lashed the canvas.

It seemed an eternity to me until a sharp sound — the violent flapping of the tent canvas — tore me from that state of drowsiness in which I struggled. It was not deep sleep that reigned at five thousand meters, but a fragile wakefulness, populated by whispers of the wind and of anxiety itself. It was approximately eleven at night when the silhouette of one of the guides was outlined at the entrance, announcing in a grave voice that it was time to prepare.

At approximately 11:40 pm, the movement began. No one had slept, but we had all rested just enough.

The ritual was methodical and quick. Inserting feet into boots, still cold, and tightening the laces with fingers that were beginning to go numb. We headed toward the dining tent, a refuge of dim light and vapor where the air smelled of hot tea and anticipation. The guides, wrapped in their technical layers, checked the harnesses and crampons one last time with professional calm.

The pre-climb ritual unfolded in an adjoining tent that served as an improvised kitchen. The steam from the tea mingled with the cold air, and a few simple cookies became a delicacy that tasted of purpose.

And it was in that moment of expectant stillness, surrounded by the half-light and the absolute silence of the altitude, sheltered in the kitchen tent, when he appeared.

He moved among our boots with a disconcerting familiarity, as if his name were also on the list of expedition members. He was a medium-sized dog, his coat ambiguous from dust and ice, with eyes that shone with a serene intelligence. The guides smiled. "There's Chispita," they said. "He never misses one."

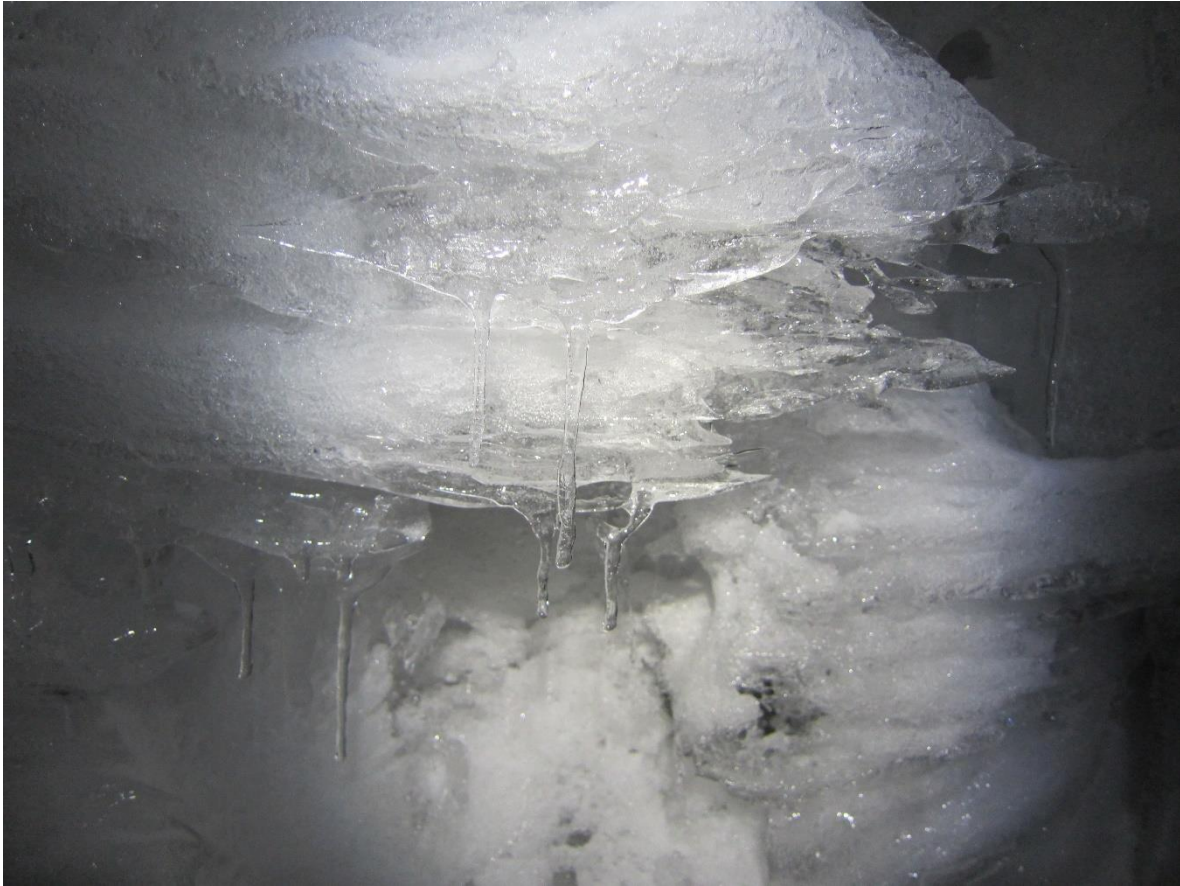
And so I realized I was in the presence of a living legend. Chispita, an Andean mountaineering dog, a free spirit of the mountain who, they told me, had more summits on the south face of Cotopaxi to his credit than most mortals. That unexpected character, with his dozens of ascents, walked among us not as a pet, but as one more veteran, a rope teammate who had chosen to join our summit attempt.

Looking at him, sitting with dignity at the entrance of the tent, observing our preparations with infinite patience, my entire perception of the journey changed. The mountain was no longer just a challenge of rock and ice; it was also the home of mysteries, of silent stories, and of unexpected allies. With Chispita as our unforeseen herald, we strapped on our crampons and launched ourselves into the blackness of the night, bound for the summit. The adventure, suddenly, had a new and furry meaning.

We shared sausages and some snacks with him; he accepted them with the dignity of a veteran who appreciates, but does not need, the tribute.

Following the guide's instructions, we stepped out into the cutting cold of midnight. The darkness was absolute, broken only by the narrow circles of light from our headlamps. We checked the gear one last time: carabiners, ropes, ice axes. Every gesture was sober, charged with meaning. The hike began with a crunch of volcanic gravel beneath our boots. We advanced through endless sand fields and over a sea of black stone that had flowed like lava centuries ago, toward the glacier that shone in the distance like a ghostly promise.

Chispita accompanied us, trotting alongside the caravan, his slender and dusty figure moving with an ease that made us feel small. We reached the edge of the ice, the true beginning of the ascent. There he stopped. I was left with a pang of sorrow when I saw that he was not following us; in my naivety, I had believed that this furry companion would accompany us on the entire journey. With a final wag of his tail, he turned and disappeared into the darkness from which he had emerged.



Our progression transformed into an exhausting ballet on the ice, where every movement required absolute concentration. When the slope became treacherous, the crampons became indispensable.

The slope had turned treacherous, exceeding 45 degrees in some sections, and the ice was hard as steel. The world was reduced to the small cone of light from the headlamp, to the next footprint to step into, to the gasping rhythm of one's own breathing. The night became

into an endless succession of obstacles: navigating crevasses that opened like dark mouths, crossing an ice bridge that seemed about to break, crawling up slopes where a false step had an inconceivable price. We were two rope teams, seven souls determined on a minuscule advance against the immensity of the mountain.

The silence was profound, broken only by the creaking of the ice and the wind, a reminder that we were the only living beings at that merciless altitude.



Dawn broke, bathing the world in pink and golden tones, but the summit seemed as distant as ever. Fatigue was a leaden weight in every muscle, and doubt, one more shadow in the mind. It was in that moment of discouragement, with strength beginning to falter, when the improbable happened.



A figure appeared in the distance, moving at an impossible speed. It was Chispita. He overtook us at full sprint, like a lightning bolt on the ice, as if our painful eight-hour progression had been a simple stroll for him. One of the guides, somewhere between astonishment and admiration, shouted to us over the wind: "He waits in the tent and comes up with the first light!" The feat was insane: what had taken us an entire night of titanic effort, he had done in just over an hour.

His appearance was a shot of pure adrenaline, a gift from the very spirit of the mountain. Seeing him, knowing we were accompanied by that living legend, injected a renewed energy into our steps. We were no longer only seven; we were eight. With a new determination, we continued ascending, now with more enthusiasm, with the invisible company of our four-legged friend who, without a doubt, was already waiting at the summit.

The south summit did not surrender until 8:45 in the morning. We reached it exhausted, our bodies in tatters, but with hearts bursting with a pure and primal happiness.

The sky was completely clear, and the view was spectacular: the crater of Cotopaxi opened before us, an abyss of dreams and legends, flanked by the north summit, some forty meters higher, which stood like the older sister — impassive and majestic.



We embraced, congratulated one another, took photos that would never do justice to the emotion of the moment. The exhaustion was immense; however, happiness eclipsed everything. At the top of the world, inhabited by an absolute disbelief, we knew we had not achieved it alone. We had done it accompanied by the mountain itself, which had revealed itself to us in the form of an Andean mountaineering dog named Chispita — the eternal guardian of the snows of Cotopaxi.

However, the summit is only half the journey. The euphoria soon gave way to urgency. The descent presented itself as slow and delayed, and a shadow of worry began to cloud our jubilation: we were very late. We knew that the rest of the expedition, those who had stayed at the high mountain camp, would be waiting for us impatiently to begin the long return to the first refuge.

We began the descent exhausted, with our energy reserves completely empty. Every step on the ice was a battle against fatigue. The mountain, now under the inclement sun, showed a new and treacherous face. A recent hailstorm had frozen, forming a thin and crystalline layer over the powder snow — a treacherous glass that we shattered with every footstep, causing slips and falls without consequences, thank God, making the descent feel eternal and maddening.



The tension grew as we remembered the mishap of the ascent: one of the girls from the other rope team had lost her ice axe, vital equipment, leaving them technically diminished. At a critical moment, they had tumbled several meters down an icy slope, stopping by pure fortune just before the edge of a crevasse that opened like a dark scar. The mountain was reminding us, with a whisper of danger, that its indulgence had limits.

Finally, after what seemed an eternity, we sighted the skeleton of poles and tarps of the high mountain refuge. But upon arriving, a desolate silence received us. The camp was abandoned. Everyone had left, surely tired of waiting for our delay. A mixture of disappointment and anxiety took hold of us; now we had to face the endless sand field alone, all the way to the first refuge.



That final hike was one of the most grueling tests, not only physically but psychologically. Each dune of volcanic sand seemed to swallow our boots, stealing

the last vestiges of strength. The haste to arrive was mingled with the fear that the bus had left us to our fate in that desolate immensity. The mind, exhausted, played with the worst scenarios.

When we finally sighted the main refuge, our hearts sank: the parking lot was empty. There was no one. The sensation of abandonment was absolute. However, in an act of invaluable solidarity, the owner of the refuge, a man whose face was weathered by cold and altitude, was waiting for us. With a calm that contradicted our desperation, he had us climb into his old, battered pickup truck, which seemed to protest with every pothole in the road. We crossed back through the haciendas, navigating the same gates that a day earlier had seemed like guardians of a forgotten kingdom.

And then, on a curve of the dusty road, we saw it: the bus, waiting for us like a beacon of redemption. A collective sigh of relief flooded over us. There they were, the rest of our companions, who received us with a mixture of reproach and joy. Climbing aboard, exhausted and covered in dust and melted ice, the seat embraced us like an old friend. The engine roared, and at last, we headed home, back to our beloved Cuenca, with the mountain and its furry legend forever etched into our memory.

"Sometimes, the best guides don't carry an ice axe, but four legs and a brave heart."

Anonymous

Chapter 3: Danielle, a Life Interrupted in the Cordillera

The early morning of June 3, 2013, comes to my mind with the texture of dreams made real. Cotopaxi, imposing beneath a blanket of stars, offered itself in its most serene state. There was not a single gust of wind to break the silence; the sky, clear and infinite, was a vault of jet-black adorned with millions of stars. Beneath our feet, the crunching snow was perfect for the ascent. Having overcome a crevasse using a horizontal ladder, our group advanced slowly but steadily, absorbed in the hypnotic rhythm of the march. We were at around 5,400 meters, and the goal seemed within reach.

That primordial peace was shattered by the silhouette of another guide who, with a rope team of two Canadian girls, overtook us at an energetic pace that we then attributed to haste or experience. It was a fleeting encounter, a crossing of shadows in the bluish half-light of the early morning. Minutes later, a sharp roar — a thunder of rock and ice — tore through the tranquility. A dense white cloud rose behind a cornice, and within seconds, screams replaced the silence.

The sound of horror travels differently at that altitude — sharper, more heartrending. The guides ahead began shouting for help. The pieces of the drama assembled in our minds with cold crudeness: the guide who had overtaken us had miraculously managed to anchor himself to the ice, but the young woman accompanying him, Danielle, had received the direct impact of a block of ice "the size of a car" and lay unconscious. The mountain, in the exercise of its absolute neutrality, at that very moment opened a new crevasse that physically isolated from the scene the climbers who had gone up before the accident, turning us into powerless spectators of a tragedy unfolding just meters away.

Shortly afterward, the initial rescue of the other rope teammate passed by our side. The image of that young woman, crying and cursing her fate in English as she was helped down, was burned into me forever. We tried to communicate the emergency by radio, but all we got was the static hiss of technological indifference. I did not hesitate: I began to descend running toward the José Ribas refuge, a race against time that took me more than an hour with my heart and mind exploding into a thousand pieces.

The desperation I found at the refuge was perhaps the hardest blow. There were no stretchers, no medical personnel, no telephone, not the slightest cell signal to alert the outside world. Modernity and its safeties vanished at the feet of the colossus. The wait became eternal, a limbo of anguish, until the raw reality reached us by radio: Danielle Kendall, the 22-year-old university athlete, had died. The rescue mission was transformed, with somber coldness, into a body recovery operation.

The national park closed its gates. We witnessed, devastated, a succession of failed attempts by the authorities. The forensic personnel, afflicted by altitude sickness, could not even reach the refuge and had to be rescued themselves. The firefighters of Latacunga faced a similar fate. The mountain reaffirmed itself as a territory that only its most expert connoisseurs could challenge. It was the ASEGUIM guides, some twenty brave souls, who finally, toward five in the afternoon, recovered Danielle's body.

The final descent was a ghostly walk. The worry of communicating with our families, to tell them we were safe, was mingled with the nightmare of what we had witnessed. The lack of signal isolated us even further, encapsulating us in a bubble of shock and grief. The mountain had taught us, in the most brutal way possible, that its sublime beauty is only the other face of an indomitable and lethal indifference

The mountain does not forgive. It is a set phrase, a commonplace among Andean climbers that is repeated with the solemnity of a mantra around a cup of hot chocolate. I heard it dozens of times before that June 3. I pronounced it with respect, believing I understood its meaning. But it was not until the roar broke the early morning on Cotopaxi that those four words acquired a real weight, a tangible and terrifying meaning.

The mountain is not evil. That is a human projection, an attempt to give intention to what simply is. The mountain is indifferent. It is a pure geological force, immutable and majestic in its neutrality. That early morning, with a beautiful clear sky and perfect snow, it was not angry; it simply was. The block of ice that broke loose did not do so out of whim, but by the implacable laws of physics. And in its path it encountered the enthusiastic life of Danielle Kendall.

To witness an accident like that is not only to see a tragic event; it is to attend a brutal reminder of fragility. It is the instant in which the thin line separating adventure from tragedy, life from death, reveals itself with heartbreaking clarity. We climbed with confidence, with the silent arrogance of one who trusts in his equipment and his physical condition. In minutes, that confidence evaporated, replaced by an absolute vulnerability. The screams that broke the silence were not only for help; they were the sound of that illusion of control shattering against rock and ice.

Helplessness is perhaps the sensation that lingers longest. To remain on the other side of the crevasse, isolated, was too literal a metaphor for our inability to change the course of events. Watching the other teammate pass by, cursing and crying, was like watching pain parade in its purest and rawest state. And the desperate race toward the refuge, with lungs burning at 5,000 meters, only culminated in another lesson: our disconnection. The lack of stretchers, of doctors, of signal, returned us to an ancestral harshness. Modernity is a house of cards before the elemental force of nature.

The rescue, or rather the recovery, became a slow and painful ritual. Watching the official rescue teams fail, the forensic experts with altitude sickness, was an almost surreal episode that accentuated the singular harshness of that environment. The mountain, once again, imposed its terms. It was the guides, the true connoisseurs of its ridges and its moods, who finally accomplished the task. That made me reflect on the true value of local knowledge, of humility before the brute force of institutional logistics.

Nevertheless, the deepest reflection came later, with the newspaper clipping in my hands. "Danielle Kendall, 22 years old, chemical engineer, athlete." She ceased to be "the tourist" and became a person with a future, with passions, with achievements. Her life, so full of potential, was interrupted in an instant by the cold indifference of the mountain. It was not a punishment. It was a catastrophic intersection of two realities: that of a young woman in the prime of her life and that of an ancient world that follows its own rules, alien to our projects.

I learned that respect for the mountain is not only carrying the right equipment or training enough. It is accepting that, however prepared we may be, we are temporary guests in a kingdom that does not belong to us. That the sublime beauty of a mountain range at dawn is the same force that can prove implacable. Climbing after that was never the same again. Every step I take with a sharper awareness — not of danger, but of privilege. The privilege of feeling the cold on my face, of reaching a summit and coming back down. Because true success on the mountain is not only in the summit, but in the return. In the possibility of telling the story.

The echo of that silence, the one that followed the roar, still resonates in me. Not as a paralyzing trauma, but as the most humble and necessary reminder: we are fragile, and it is in that fragility where the value of every step resides, of every breath, of every life that, against all odds, continues its course.



QUITO >

Ciudadana canadiense fallece mientras escalaba el volcán Cotopaxi

03 DE JUNIO DE 2013

La madrugada de hoy una turista norteamericana falleció en el Parque Nacional Cotopaxi tras ser golpeada por un bloque de hielo "del tamaño de un auto," según el reporte oficial.

La turista, Danielle Kendall, de 22 años, era una atleta universitaria en su país de origen.

Ella se encontraba de visita por el país realizando un tour de tres días de ascenso a la montaña junto con otros dos canadienses, quienes se encuentran todavía en la ciudad de Quito.

El Ministerio del Ambiente emitió el informe indicando que el percance ocurrió a aproximadamente a las 03h30 de la madrugada de hoy, a unos 5.400 metros de altura sobre el nivel del mar.

Un vocero de esta cartera explicó que la turista murió de inmediato, pero que policías del GIR, miembros del Cuerpo de Bomberos de Latacunga, Guardaparques del Parque Nacional Cotopaxi y guías ASEGUIM colaboraron en el rescate del cuerpo de Danielle, para luego trasladarlo al Refugio José Ribas (a 4.800 msnm).

Personal del centro informó que un estimado de 20 guías se movilizaron para participar en la búsqueda del cuerpo de la turista.

Un comunicado de la Universidad de Calgary, donde Danielle obtuvo su licenciatura en ingeniería química con especialidad en ingeniería petroquímica, detalló que Kendall había ganado varias medallas como miembro del equipo universitario de atletismo.

That experience forever redefined my concept of success on the mountain. The summit became a desire, a prize that the mountain may or may not grant.

The true victory, the only one that counts, is sealed in the moment when, tired but unharmed, the door of home closes behind us. Safety became the foundation of every plan, the compass that guides every decision.

Because in the wild, the greatest feat is not conquering the altitude, but honoring the incredible privilege of returning.

"On the mountain, death is not a failure, but a reminder that life is fragile and precious." Gaston Rébuffat

That experience on Cotopaxi did not extinguish my passion for the mountains; on the contrary, it transformed it. It gave it a deeper and more methodical purpose. It changed reckless ambition into conscious respect. In the months that followed, the impact of what I had lived led me to immerse myself in maps and books, studying with devotion every fold of the Ecuadorian cordillera. I began to see the volcanoes not as trophies to be conquered, but as giants of history and stone to be approached with knowledge and humility.

That is how I traced a new objective, not as a checklist, but as a path of personal learning: to encounter each one of these colossi, not to "defeat" them, but to understand their secrets and, above all, to honor the promise of returning. This is the list of those giants that watch over my country, the summits that since then have populated my dreams and have given a new meaning to every step I take at altitude.

The 10 Highest Summits of Ecuador

#	Name of Volcano/Mountain	Altitude (masl)	Province	Status
1	Chimborazo	6268	Chimborazo	Inactive
2	Cotopaxi	5897	Cotopaxi	Active
3	Cayambe	5790	Pichincha	Active
4	Antisana	5704	Napo	Active
5	El Altar	5319	Chimborazo	Inactive
6	Iliniza Norte	5126	Cotopaxi	Inactive
7	Tungurahua	5023	Tungurahua	Active
8	Carihuairazo	5020	Tungurahua	Inactive
9	Sincholagua	4899	Cotopaxi	Inactive
10	Guagua Pichincha	4784	Pichincha	Active

masl: meters above sea level.

Note: Sangay (5,230 masl) is higher than some on this list, but its extremely remote and dangerous access makes it less frequented.

Source: Geophysical Institute of the National Polytechnic School.

This list would become my personal map. Not a race, but a pilgrimage. Each name represents a lesson to be learned, a landscape to be internalized and, above all, a safe return to be planned. The mountain is no longer an adversary, but a severe teacher. And I, a student willing to listen, with a backpack loaded with prudence and my eyes set on the horizon, but with my heart always anchored to the promise of returning home.

The Cold Geometry of Fear

One never knows how one will react when fear bites. One theorizes: "I will do this, I will do that." But the moment of truth, immersed in the unexpected avalanche of emotions, is acted; it is not thought. The act of going out to seek help, leaving my rope teammates to their fate, was a mistaken instinct that in that second I believed to be the only lifeline for the injured girl. Nevertheless, one must have carved in fire and planned in advance: if this happens, we will do that. A thousand possible tragedies germinate on the mountain, and one cannot be prepared for all of them. Common sense and practice must weave a web of reflexes to react in the least erroneous way. One must not feel with a racing heart, but analyze with a frozen head. And that is the hardest part of all, I believe. That is why we must always be conversing, digging into the "what would have happened if..." reviewing what should and should not be done. Because the uncomfortable truth is that no one knows, not even ourselves, how we will act when the world crumbles at more than five thousand meters of altitude. The only preparation is to doubt our own courage, and to plan even for cowardice.

"The mountain is neither fair nor unfair. It is simply dangerous."

(Reinhold Messner, Mountaineer)

Chapter 4: Feeling Summit Fever

On March 15, 2014, another call from the mountain, and the adventure began like so many others, with my backpack on my shoulder and my gaze set on the summits. My cousin Jhonatan and I, along with Pablo, a friend of his — an athlete with an indomitable spirit, though unaccustomed to the rigors of high mountain climbing — set out from Cuenca with a single objective: to conquer the summit of the majestic Cotopaxi. Our experienced friend Telmo Tenemaza would accompany us as our guide, whom we picked up in Riobamba.

The journey passed without setbacks until the Tambopaxi lodge, our base of operations. That luxurious construction, with its enormous windows and elegant decorations, was a different universe from our usual refuges. Comfort was a double-edged sword; such a cozy place made the challenge awaiting us seem even more distant and surreal. We spent the hours before the ascent contemplating the immensity of the volcano, wrapped in the warmth of a wrought-iron fireplace and sharing anecdotes that, without our knowing it, would soon become one more episode in our story.

When night fell, silence and comfort overcame us. Were it not for the alarms, sleep would have dragged us until dawn, far from our appointment with the mountain.

The White Blanket and the First Doubt

The 4x4 vehicle struggled for more than an hour to reach the parking lot, where a blanket of snow half a meter deep received us with a sinister silence. It was 11:50 p.m. when we began the ascent. With every step, the snow seemed to swallow us whole, and what under normal conditions is a thirty-minute journey to the José Ribas refuge became an exhausting hour-long battle.

The snow, which at one point reached our waists, stole the strength we knew was crucial for the summit. Reaching the refuge, reduced to a skeleton under renovation, was not a triumph, but a reminder of our vulnerability.

We continued ascending with strong winds and a powder snow that would not cease. About an hour passed, but we had not advanced enough; our pace was slow and draining due to the depth of the snow and the gusts of wind that at times became unbearable. At moments one could see, very far away and receding rapidly, the flickering headlamps of the rope teams that had gone up before us.

It was then that Pablo showed the first signs. His gaze clouded over — the characteristic dizziness of oxygen deprivation. Telmo, with the calm of one who knows the mountain, offered him the option of returning to the vehicle. "If you can, I can too," Pablo responded with a confidence that moved us, but that deep down planted a seed of unease.

We resumed the march, but the mountain changed its attitude. The wind unleashed itself with fury, whipping us with a blizzard of ice crystals that struck our faces like needles. My eyelashes froze, blurring the world into a white curtain. I clung to Telmo's silhouette, wondering how he was capable of orienting himself in that chaos.

That was when I noticed Pablo's wandering march, zigzagging like a drunken man. I shouted to him, but the wind carried my words away. I stopped, the rope went taut, and Telmo turned around. On an icy slope, we checked on Pablo: his eyes were closed, on the verge of unconsciousness. We had ascended barely 300 meters from the refuge, and the storm enveloped us completely.



The Impossible Decision

"What do you want to do?" Telmo asked. Pablo could not descend alone. The logic was clear: everyone turns back. However, the summit called to us with an almost hypnotic song.

In an act of reckless hope, we conceived a desperate plan. Pablo, anchored to a snow stake, would wait while Telmo guided Jhonatan and me to reach a rope team that could be faintly glimpsed higher up. Then, Telmo would return for Pablo to bring him down to the vehicle.

After tracing out the plan, an uncomfortable silence enveloped us. I suppose each one, inwardly, was calculating the consequences of that hard decision.

We all accepted. What followed was a race against the clock in which every step was agony. Running at that altitude, with the snow imprisoning us, was the most brutal effort of my life. But after twenty infinite minutes, we reached the group. The phrase "summit or death" ceased to be a motto and became a tangible possibility.

The silence suddenly turned dense and white when Telmo's figure vanished behind the veil of snow. He had set off at a run, descending the slope with a ferocious urgency, transformed into the only hope of getting Pablo to the vehicle and to safety.

We pressed on, my cousin and I, abandoned to our fate in that final race toward the summit. Without a guide to mark the path, each rope team became a new obstacle to overcome with our last breath. We advanced skimming the edge of virgin snow, a treacherous territory where every step, every transition between ropes, was paid for with scorching tension and a fatigue that sank its claws into the bones. I lost all sense of time — perhaps minutes, perhaps hours — until at last the slope relented and we emerged onto a narrow, sharp ridge. It was the final stretch, the passageway that promised to lead us to the summit. There, dawn found us, filtering through slowly, not with a burst of light, but with a pale and dripping clarity that tinted the world a leaden gray.

Minutes later, the sky then took pity on us. The clouds opened, the snowfall ceased, and crawling, with our heads hammered by altitude sickness and desperation, we reached the summit. There was no euphoria, only exhausted relief. The landscape was incredible; however, we could not savor it. The unease over Pablo and Telmo poisoned our triumph.

The descent was a mental ordeal. Every step was a question mark. Will they be safe? Remorse and fear were heavier companions than any backpack.



The Reunion and the Price

Hours later, we reached the vehicle with our souls in suspense. Then, the doors of the vehicle opened and Telmo and Pablo stepped out, smiling. The embrace we shared contained all the relief in the world. The recklessness had not charged us the bill... or so I believed.

It was in the shower at Tambopaxi, with the hot water striking my foot, when I felt the true cost of the summit. The skin on my little toes had disappeared, scraped down to raw flesh by the desperate race. The pain, sharp and unequivocal, was the physical reminder of our audacity.

As we packed for the return, a deeper and more humbling understanding took hold of us. Looking at Jhonatan and then at my bandaged feet, we understood firsthand what "summit fever" was: a state of reckless obsession in which the objective — a simple geographical point — clouds all judgment and becomes more valuable than life itself, than the safety of a companion, than reason. We had grown beyond our capabilities and, for an instant, had weighed the empty glory of a summit against the value of a life.

Cotopaxi, in its infinite wisdom, had not punished us with a tragedy, but had granted us the most merciful of lessons: it showed us the abyss we had leaned over, so that we would never approach it again.

We prepared the return in silence, with a deep respect engraved on our souls. We gave thanks to Cotopaxi, not for allowing us to conquer it, but for being benevolent and permitting us to leave its slopes alive, having learned the most valuable lesson of the mountain: its majesty does not forgive arrogance, but sometimes, it grants a second chance to those who are willing to learn.

"The obsession with the summit can blind even the wisest; the true victory is in the return." Ed Viesturs

Chapter 5: Snow Crystals at the Middle of the World

Several months later, the phone vibrated with the news we had been anxiously awaiting. On the other end of the line, Pancho Salinas and the magic words: high mountain guide Germán Jara Landivar was ready to accompany us. Franklin, Germán's brother, would join our group from Quito, and the proposal was tempting: to conquer the Cayambe snow-capped volcano, the volcanic giant crossed by the equatorial line. Without losing a second, I contacted my cousin Jhonatan, whose "yes" was immediate and enthusiastic. We were three again, with our sights set on the summit.

The organization was different from our usual feats. The distance from Cuenca to Cayambe made the journey by car unthinkable — that recurring madness to Cotopaxi where, after driving all night, we would summit and then set off on the exhausting return drive. This time, we opted for comfort: plane tickets. Germán would wait for us at the Tababela airport with his 4x4 to take us directly to the refuge. We prepared everything with the calm of one who knows that his backpacks, always ready for adventure, only need a destination.

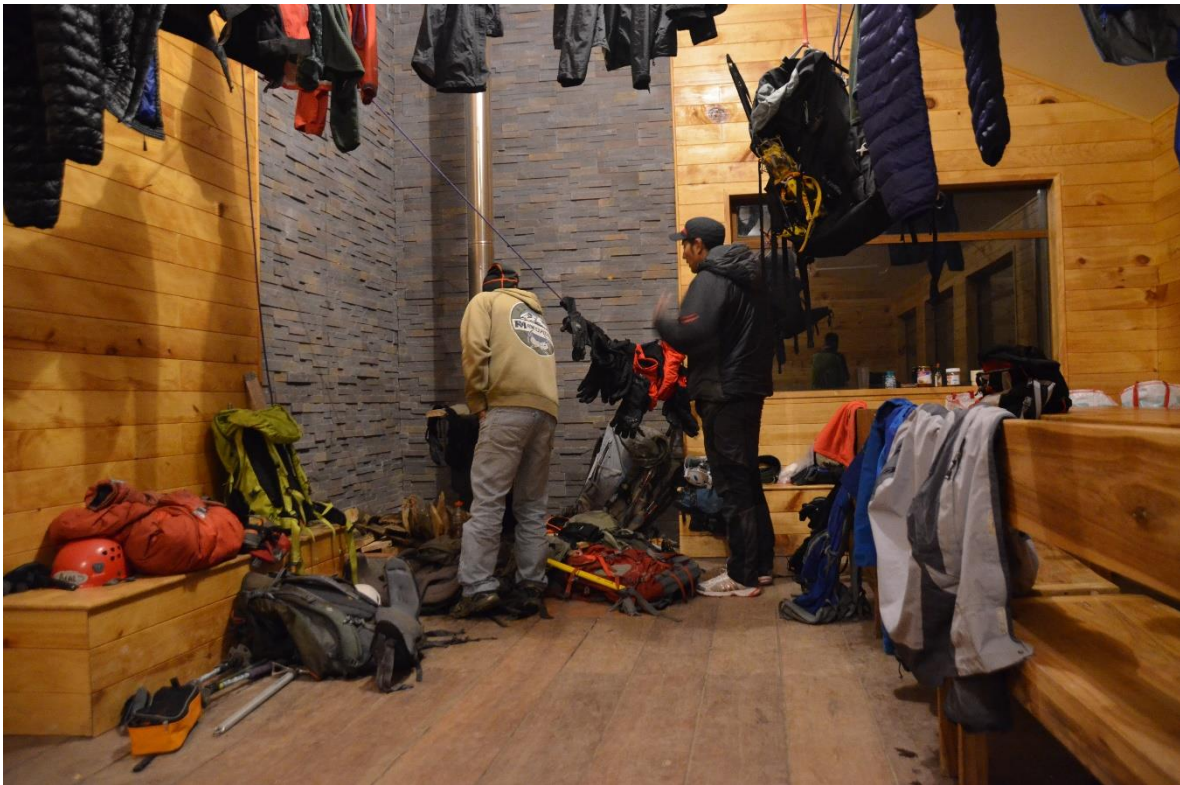
Anticipation marked the dawn of Sunday, February 8, 2015. At the Cuenca airport, with our tickets in hand, crampons and ice axes perfectly packed, we boarded. In barely thirty minutes of flight, we landed in Tababela. There, as promised, was Germán. The sensation was novel and luxurious — arriving almost at our destination without the heaviness of entire nights at the wheel. For the first time, we were just tourists contemplating the landscape unfolding from Quito toward the north.

Leaving the highway to head toward the refuge on a stone road, our journey was interrupted by an unusual discovery: a traveling restaurant mounted on a motorcycle. A woman and her husband were the owners; in the large basket of their vehicle, they transported everything

necessary: corn on the cob, cheese, and llama meat. We did not hesitate and stopped. That food, simple but comforting, turned out to be an oasis in the desolate landscape surrounding us — an encounter as unusual as it was welcome.

After an hour on the highway and another on rugged roads, we reached the Ruales Oleas Berge Refuge, at 4,700 meters of altitude. It was a comfortable place, recently restored. Upon entering, something caught my attention: a pile of clothing and gear hanging in front of the fireplace, drying. How could it have gotten wet if the weather was good? The answer would

come with the early morning.



Dinner and the camaraderie around the fire were filled with anecdotes, laughter, and that absolute certainty that the summit would be ours. We recorded videos, took photos, confident. The plan was to set out at 11:00 pm. But the mountain had its own designs. When we woke, the rain was pounding the refuge with unusual fury. We waited anxiously; however, every time we looked outside, the downpour intensified. It surprised me; in high mountain I had seen hail or snow, but never rain with such intensity.

At 1:30 in the morning, with the relentless rain, we made the decision: we would ascend. The water, lashed by ferocious winds, seemed to rain upward, seeping through the sleeves of our rain jackets. I put away my gloves, saving them for the summit; I only had three light pairs and some mittens. Perseverance was our banner.

Upon passing Picos Jarrín, the snow was no longer solid, but a kind of sleet. Germán warned of the danger and suggested turning back. We refused flatly. We convinced him to advance a little further, promising to turn around if the situation became untenable, though deep down we would never accept turning back without a fight.



Shortly before dawn, the rain ceased. We had advanced enough that, around eight in the morning, we were rewarded with a spectacular view of Picos Jarrín. The sky was clearing, revealing a glimpse of the summit and the rocks on the left side of the summit crevasse. There were no ice bridges, so we had to go around it. About thirty minutes before the summit, it began to snow, but nothing stopped us. We skirted the crevasse that separates the summit from the ramp and, at last, we stepped onto the top.

We took a breather, congratulated one another, and due to the bad weather we had to begin the descent almost immediately. It was over a freshly fallen white blanket that completely erased our ascent footprints. Germán's expertise was our compass.

We were the only ones on the mountain; the other rope teams, discouraged by the rain, had given up almost at the start. Perseverance had gifted us not only the summit, but the indelible memory of seeing, through a crevasse, an underground river that ran through the entrails of the glacier — a crystalline and roaring liquid hidden from the view of the rest of humanity.



On the final ramp, already without crampons, I separated from the group. I wanted to get closer to the glacier, to contemplate up close that mint color that hypnotized me. In a moment of carelessness, I stepped on moraine — a treacherous mixture of black earth and ice — and went flying. The fall was harmless, flat on my back. As I sat up, an absolute silence invaded me. There was no wind, no voices. Only me, the landscape, and an overwhelming peace.

It was then, sitting there, that I felt a tiny drop on my face. It was beginning to snow. I could see the snow crystals, with their perfect geometric shapes, falling with a surreal slowness. I extended my hand, protected by the glove, and waited. One of those small frozen miracles landed on my palm. Beautiful and fragile, it melted almost instantly from the warmth of my body. It was a disquieting experience — a mixture of exhaustion, jubilation, and gratitude. I thought of my camera, but I understood that some moments are too pure to be captured; they are only lived.

On the way back to the refuge we gathered our gear, and Germán drove us back to Tababela. The return to civilization was chaotic: the backpacks, once orderly, now let crampons poke out, and I carried the ice axe in my hand, disorganized and exhausted. We had to wrap it hastily in plastic so that they would let me board the flight back to Cuenca. We arrived home with our hearts still on the mountain and our minds already planning the next adventure.

"In every snow crystal, the mountain whispers secrets that only the heart understands."

John Muir

Chapter 6: The Confusion on Iliniza Sur

Confidence is a lantern that sometimes lights the wrong paths. Some time later, after having crowned the summit of Iliniza Norte on several occasions, my cousin Jhonatan and I believed ourselves prepared to challenge the giant of rock and ice: Iliniza Sur, the second most technical summit in Ecuador, surpassed only by the feared Obispo on El Altar.

Convinced of our skill, we contacted our friend and lifelong guide, Telmo Tenemaza, a guide seasoned in the mountains of Cotopaxi and Chimborazo. A brief phone conversation was enough to seal the pact: he would take us to the long-awaited summit.

The adventure began with the long journey from Cuenca. We picked up Telmo in Riobamba and set course for Chaupi, that small village perched on the slopes of the colossus, where we left the vehicle.



Destiny willed that our chosen date coincided with a holiday. The muleteers, with better judgment than ours, were celebrating. There would be no mules to lighten our load. So, carrying all the gear on our backs, we began the exhausting approach through sand fields and tussock grasslands, under an inclement sun and landscapes that, though familiar from our forays to the North, this time seemed to observe us with greater severity. The final climb to the Nuevos Horizontes refuge, at more than 4,700 meters above sea level, was a vertical agony that tested our determination from the very first moment.

But the effort had its immediate reward. The refuge would receive us with a dreamlike landscape: both summits, North and South, dressed in immaculate white, and at our backs, the majestic silhouette of Cotopaxi, which seemed to float over a sea of clouds. It was an image so striking that it would remain tattooed in our memory.



To reach the refuge, it was endless hours carrying all the gear through our own effort.

I remember my sleeping bag from that time: bulky and heavy.

My plan was to send one of the two backpacks with the pack animals, but bad luck willed that I had to carry both of them.

The sleeping bag, poorly balanced, swayed with every step on the loose sand, turning the progression into an exhausting and maddening seesaw. Each swing turned the advance into a constant struggle against weight and slope.

Upon arriving at the Nuevos Horizontes refuge, "Gato" Flores, the refuge administrator, welcomed us. Exhausted, we settled into the bunks, and on a brief walk at dusk, we came across Andean foxes with curious gazes. Night fell with a starry sky and a biting cold. After a comforting dinner, we surrendered to sleep, hoping that dawn would bring us the summit.



At 5:00 in the morning on Sunday, August 31, 2014, we began our preparations. We were a rope team of three: Telmo, Jhonatan, and I. With the first light, we began walking along the col that separates the two summits. It was then that confusion planted doubt in our expedition. Telmo, with a firm step, began to turn to the right, in the direction of Iliniza Norte.

"Telmo, are we okay? I thought the South was to the left," I said, with a premonition chilling my blood.

"The North is this way," he replied.

"But we're going to the South. We've already been to the North several times."

Telmo stopped dead. A heavy silence settled between us. "I understood that you wanted to go to the North," he confessed. "For the South you need a 60-meter rope, and I only brought a 25-meter one. It's a technical route... and I've never been to the South summit."

His words left us paralyzed. A knot of frustration and fear took hold of us. We had traveled all that way, loaded with so much weight, and our guide was leading us to another summit. The dismay was brief, replaced by a stubborn determination. "Let's try," we said.

We returned to the refuge with our hope placed in Gato. Fortunately, he had a long rope that he lent us willingly, not before releasing a warning that chilled our blood: a month earlier, two climbers had died after slipping and plunging into the void in their attempt to conquer the South.

With the new rope and the warning resonating in our ears, we set off again, this time to the left. Telmo found a precarious passage in the stone wall that led us to an ice ledge. Having overcome that first obstacle, we believed the worst had passed. But the mountain had another surprise in store.



We were ascending an endless and steep ramp, with the rope stretched in 40-meter lengths, giving security to Telmo, who was opening the route. Suddenly, he disappeared from our sight. The rope went violently taut. Our hearts stopped: he had fallen into a hidden crevasse. We pulled with all our strength and, a few seconds later, he emerged, shaken by the fall.

"¡Está peligroso! No vale la pena seguir", gritó, con el rostro descompuesto.

We looked at each other, doubt assaulting us again. But the summit was so close... Telmo, recovering from the scare and with our shouts encouraging him, tried a variation through the rock, and it worked.

That was the last challenge. After overcoming a small final ramp, there we were: on the summit of Iliniza Sur. Euphoria flooded us. We were the only three climbers that day on the summit of Iliniza Sur.



The sky, completely clear, gifted us a panoramic view of the volcanoes of Ecuador. And then, my gaze fixed on one in the distance that seemed to exhale smoke. "That's Tungurahua," Telmo confirmed. "It's erupting."

It was a chilling spectacle, a gift from destiny: witnessing the fury of the earth from the conquered peace of the summit.



I did not know then that the twists of destiny would lead me, on a future expedition, to the summit of that same erupting volcano. Tungurahua would call me, and I would answer to contemplate its fury up close, to experience firsthand its indomitable force.

Turning back to the south, the entire world seemed at peace, in a state of perfect equilibrium, just as it always should have been. From our vantage point of rock and ice, we admired the ephemeral sculptures that the master wind had carved on the summit: capricious ice formations that shone beneath the clear sky. Our gaze swept the adjacent peaks, searching for souls in the immensity.

Ahead, totally clear and majestic, stood Iliniza Norte. I scrutinized its slopes with the hope of spotting other climbers, a silhouette that might share that sublime moment.

But I could not manage to see anyone. A revelation overwhelmed us: at that precise instant, we were the only human beings between the two summits, owners of a monumental silence and solitary witnesses to the grandiose beauty of the world.

On the summit of Iliniza Sur, my cousin Jhonatan was recording the imposing North summit with his camera. We congratulated each other for having reached that privileged place, for the correct decision that allowed us to crown the summit successfully. The three of us, invaded by a serene happiness, contemplated the majesty of the mountain in its maximum splendor. The icy wind caressed our faces without haste, as if wanting to join our triumph. At our feet, the clouds unfolded like an infinite ocean of cotton. In that instant of glory, the effort of the ascent was transformed into pure gratitude.



On the south summit, each one found his own way of capturing that moment.



We took photographs, sealing the moment for eternity, and immersed ourselves in the immensity surrounding us. The descent to the refuge was quick, but the road back to the parking lot, carrying all the gear again, felt eternal. Finally, a pickup truck was waiting to take us back to Chaupi, where we embarked on the journey back to Cuenca, not only with exhaustion in our bones, but with the most valuable lesson the mountain can give: humility is the most important piece of luggage in any backpack.

**"Humility is the best luggage on the mountain;
without it, any summit becomes dangerous."**

Walter Bonatti

Chapter 7: Antisana and the Meteor Shower

As so many other times, the adventure did not come from nothing. It never does. There is always a comment, a dazzling photograph, a tale of a feat, or a fortuitous accident that, like a magnet, draws the gaze toward this or that mountain. That is how everything begins: a tiny drop of curiosity that, rolling, grows larger. It is like when a snowball falls down an icy slope; it becomes unstoppable, it grows in the fall, and what began as a whisper ends up being a roar in the heart. That is how great adventures begin. And this one — the one that would take us to the back of Antisana beneath a meteor shower and an ice storm — would be no exception.

Jhonatan and I, faithful to our custom, lived with our eyes fixed on the summits. We followed ascents, accidents and, above all, the photos that the fortunate managed to capture on the summits of the volcanoes. It was in that constant nosing around that Antisana, a giant we had not yet challenged, nailed its name into our imagination.

I researched and discovered that Antisana is a colossus of 5,758 meters, a stratovolcano covered by a mantle of glaciers that are the water-bearing heart of the region. It rises in the Cordillera Oriental of Ecuador, a core of rock and ice guarded by the National Park that bears its name, a kingdom of páramos and biodiversity. Its complex silhouette, with peaks that narrate different geological eras, was a challenge that called to us.

The decision was made. Our friend Pancho, with his experience, helped us select the guide for this adventure: Pablo Chiquiza. The call to Quito sealed the deal. Pablo would be our sherpa on this new journey. We set the date, but luck did not accompany Pancho; his work responsibilities prevented him from joining. He wished us the best of luck with the promise that, next time, the three of us would be on the summit.

The chosen date, Thursday, July 30, 2015, had a celestial seasoning: it coincided with the peak of the Delta Aquariids and Alpha Capricornids meteor showers. A double cosmic feature. Up to twenty shooting stars per hour were promised, with the possibility of seeing spectacular fireballs crossing the firmament. The night of the 29th to the 30th, far from light pollution, would be the perfect setting. The mere idea of witnessing that stellar ballet while ascending had me in a state of feverish excitement. I longed for the day to arrive.

The training was rigorous. A whole month jogging along the trails of El Cajas at night, doing 7 km routes between La Toreadora and Tres Cruces, or from Rancho Hermanos Prado, skirting the slopes of Cerro Negro and Cerro Amarillo. We put our bodies and our will to the test. We counted, as always, on the invaluable help and hospitality of the Prado family, especially Don Roque and his sons, Jorge and Fabián, to whom we are deeply grateful.

They not only provide us with shelter, but also share with us the ancestral knowledge they treasure of these mountains.

And finally, the day arrived.

We left Cuenca bound for Quito on a long journey that culminated in the meeting with Pablo. After the final preparations and the plan assembled, we rested in the capital. The next morning, we rented a 4x4 vehicle, indispensable for venturing into the domains of Antisana.

We rented rooms in a nearby hotel. There we set about resting, laden with the haste and uncertainty of what awaited us the following day.



The route from Quito toward Antisana was a journey through changing landscapes: picturesque small towns, vast grasslands, and several checkpoints, until they finally authorized our entry into the national park, signing a sheet that made us responsible for our own adventure. We drove to our base camp: a place known as Los Crespos. There, among other climbers who would also attempt the summit, we pitched our tents and rested, waiting for zero hour.

At 11:00 p.m. the alarm sounds. The silence of the night is broken by our movements. We prepared the gear with mechanical movements and began the ascent. The first stretch, relatively flat, took us to a weather station. Everything around us was covered by an immaculate white mantle. Next to the station stood what seemed a perfect pyramid of ice and snow, a gigantic ramp that, from our perspective, went straight to the summit. The vision was imposing, and a thought crossed my mind: "This is going to be hard."

But the night was a prodigy. Completely clear, the sky was a black tapestry dotted with infinite stars. Not a breeze was blowing. Everything was calm. A naive optimism invaded me: "The summit is a piece of cake," I thought.



About an hour after beginning the ascent, I looked up. And then, the magic happened. The meteor shower began to strike the atmosphere. They were not one or two; it was a frenzied spectacle. Meteors crossing in all directions and imaginable angles, sometimes separated by seconds, sometimes by minutes. It was of such overwhelming beauty that it was impossible for me to look away. I remember advancing with my head tilted back, my eyes fixed on the firmament, contemplating that unusual phenomenon while my feet, by inertia, followed Jhonatan's footprints.

The joy, however, was ephemeral. Within minutes, the absolute calm transformed into a white hell. An ice storm, with hurricane-force winds, unleashed itself upon us. The force was such that it forced us to throw ourselves to the ground to avoid being dragged away.

The change was so radical and violent that I had never experienced it on any volcano. Pablo shouted to us over the roar: "It's the windy season, it's normal!" His words calmed us a little, but the reality was palpable: the cold was beginning to freeze my gloves, and the rope that united us had become rigid as a steel bar.

Before the summit, Antisana showed us another of its traps: a crevasse whose ice bridge had broken, revealing deep abysses. The mountain looked like a Swiss cheese, and we, jumping carefully from one ice islet to another, dodging the holes that seemed to have no bottom. The fear of a fall into the void was a constant shadow.

The wind became so ferocious that, barely ten meters from the summit, we stopped. It was madness to attempt it; the current could tear us away and hurl us into the abyss. We waited crouched, our gear — helmets, headlamps, clothing — covered by a thick and rigid layer of ice that restricted every movement. I was freezing.

Finally, in a brief calm, we reached the summit. There was no time for celebrations. The cold was a lethal enemy. I managed to take a brief video, blurry and almost useless, where only a white blur was visible and the terrifying sound of the wind, before my camera's battery, defeated by the ice, died completely. We began the descent immediately, exhausted and numb. Antisana had received us with all its harshness.



The return journey was a test of pure endurance. At 6:30 a.m., already with the faint light of dawn, we found a place for a brief rest.

Exhaustion and extreme cold clouded my vision. I suppose the constant impact of ice crystals on my eyes had caused that effect. I saw blurry, which made me stumble and fall several times during the descent.

I advanced exhausted, my senses clouded by fatigue, though a faint relief ran through me at knowing we were beginning the descent. As I walked with an unsteady step, I could not stop reflecting on the extreme fickleness of the mountain.



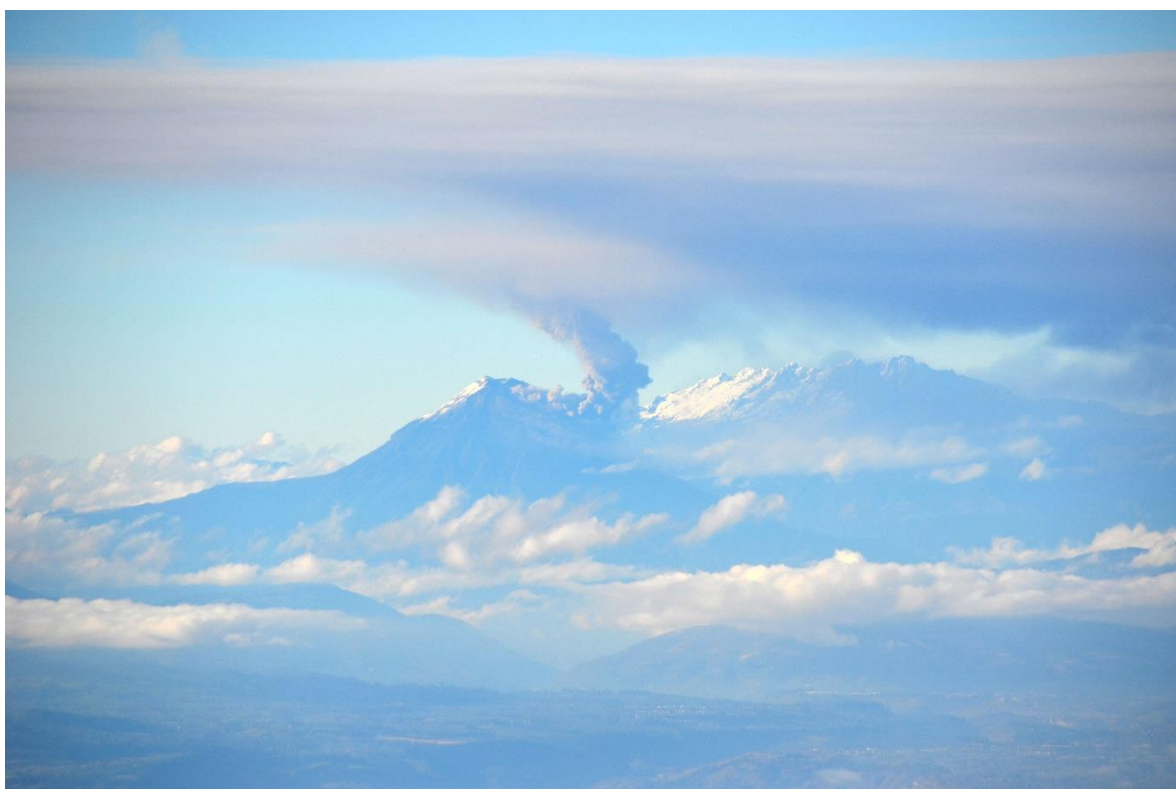
Hours later, already at the base of the mountain, we turned to look at the summit one last time. We remarked, with a mixture of respect and relief, how badly the giant had treated us. We packed up the camp and set off on the journey back to Quito, and from there, to Cuenca. We carried in our bodies the exhaustion of the battle, but in our memory, forever, the double spectacle: the sublime dance of the stars and the indomitable fury of the wind.

"Beneath the mantle of the stars, we are as small as we are significant."

Maurice Herzog

Chapter 8: Tungurahua, the Volcano of Fire and Stones

A long time passed since my last adventure in the mountains, until the routine was broken by the familiar vibration of the phone. On the other end, the characteristic enthusiastic voice of Pancho Salinas, a lifelong adventure companion, proposed a new challenge: to ascend the Tungurahua volcano, setting out from the picturesque town of Baños de Agua Santa. The irony of destiny struck me immediately. Years earlier, from the summit of Iliniza Sur, 50 km away from the Tungurahua volcano, I had been a spectator of one of its furious eruptions that I managed to capture in some photographs. Now, the volcano was inviting me to know it up close. There was no need to think twice. A "let's go, Doc" was the only possible response.



The coincidence of being on the summit of Iliniza Sur at the precise moment of the Tungurahua eruption, and moreover with it being completely clear between the two snow-capped peaks, was an unexpected gift, crowned by the foresight of having brought a 200mm lens to the summit to be able to capture this unique image.

I share with you the report from the Geophysical Institute of the National Polytechnic School about this event:



Saturday, August 30, 2014, 21:51. SPECIAL REPORT ON THE TUNGURAHUA VOLCANO - No. 21. Descent of pyroclastic flows this afternoon, August 30, 2014.

I remember my backpack, an old faithful companion, was always in a state of pre-alert. The preparation ritual was quick: a methodical review of the gear, making sure everything was in its place. Upon researching the details of the route, one figure surprised me: more than 2,000 meters of elevation gain. Although Tungurahua is not among the highest colossi of the Andes (5,023 masl), its particular geography, rising from the depths of the valley, promised a long and exhausting ascent.

Days after the call, the meeting point was the Parque de la Madre in Cuenca. There, among backpacks and effusive greetings, the group took shape. We boarded a bus that, after a very calm nighttime journey, left us on the cobblestone streets of Baños very early in the morning. The town was a hive of tourists and adventurers.

We dedicated the day to exploring its natural wonders: we marveled at the raw power of the Pailón del Diablo, crossed hanging bridges that swayed over green abysses, and felt the icy mist of the waterfalls on our faces.

From strategic viewpoints, we watched hypnotized by the force of the river's current, a white torrent of foam that crashed with fury against the rocks; from that great height we observed the tiny tourists strolling, defying danger among the balconies and stairways.



After traversing the beautiful landscapes of Baños de Agua Santa, we were ready to begin our challenge: to climb the Tungurahua Volcano. The vehicle access ended where the true adventure began. Some 4x4 pickup trucks took us along a rustic gravel road, to the point where civilization surrendered before the mountain. From there, our legs would be our only engine. The ascent of Tungurahua is traditionally divided into two stages to contend with the exhausting elevation gain, though some daredevils attempt the assault in a single, grueling day.

The first stretch was an immersion into an almost prehistoric world. The trail serpented through natural tunnels formed by vegetation so dense that it filtered the sunlight, creating an atmosphere of a humid and green dream. The ground was a tapestry of mud, roots, and slippery stones. The atmosphere, heavy and hot, alternated with banks of cold mist that enveloped everything in a sudden silence, only to then give way to an inclement sun that reminded us of the effort. It was a fairy-tale landscape, but one that exacted a physical toll.



After hours of slow but steady marching, we reached the "Garganta de Fuego" refuge. The name could not have been more fitting. Beside it, the ruins of the old refuge lay as a mute testimony to the destructive power of the volcano: sheets of eternit shattered by the impact of incandescent rocks during past eruptions. It was a chilling reminder that we were in the jaws of a giant that was only slumbering.

The new refuge was a spartan oasis. That night, after organizing the gear for the final assault, we peeked out the door. The view was impressive: in the distance, the lights of Baños flickered like a necklace of diamonds in the darkness of the valley. We ate something hot, a comforting soup that tasted like glory, and surrendered to a restless sleep, with our minds always set on the summit.

The Awakening and the Shadow of Danger

Our guide, Ñato de las Cumbres, a mountain man seasoned by wind and cold, woke us early in the morning. We dressed in several layers, checked the crampons and ice axes one last time, and left the refuge. The morning was calm, wrapped in a thick and silent mist. The wind was not blowing. Someone shouted "Let's go, guys," marking the start of the ascent.

The change in the environment was drastic and sudden. Barely a few meters from the refuge, the green and humid world disappeared completely, transforming into a lunar and desolate landscape of loose volcanic rock and ash. The advance became slower and more technical, with every step carefully calculated to avoid slipping. In the distance, we made out other climbers progressing up the slope, perhaps about 200 meters ahead of us.

That was when the silence broke in the most violent way.

First there were confused shouts, then sharp whistles that pierced the mist. I did not understand what was happening until the word, charged with urgency, arrived clearly: "Rocks! Watch out!" One of the rope teams ahead had accidentally destabilized a section of the slope, unleashing a rain of projectiles that came bouncing down toward us erratically,

impossible to predict. They were seconds of pure confusion. Instinctively, I crouched and covered my head with my arms and the ice axe, contracting my body in a useless attempt to make myself smaller.

A heartrending scream alerted me. A fist-sized rock had struck with a dull blow the leg of a companion, who fell instantly. An instant later, I felt a violent impact on my own left leg. It was not immediate pain, but a brute force, as if an invisible cable had yanked me with tremendous power, making me lose my balance completely. The world spun and I fell clumsily onto the volcanic rock and ice. Looking up, dazed, I managed to see the guilty stone, the size of a soccer ball, speeding away downhill.

The sensation was surreal, like being inside a dream in slow motion. Reality seemed distorted. Pancho, who had miraculously dodged the rock that struck me, approached shouting: "Get up, more can fall!" His voice pulled me out of my stupor. With an effort, I got to my feet.

To my surprise, I could put weight on my leg. But something was not right. I felt no pain. In fact, I felt nothing. From the knee down, my left leg was a foreign limb, heavy and insensate. Adrenaline, I told myself, trying to calm down, was a powerful anesthetic. As long as I could walk, there was hope.

The Decision

We checked the damage. We had ascended about 400 meters of elevation gain from the refuge. We had approximately 600 meters left, the hardest ones, to reach the summit. The crossroads was clear and heartbreaking. The sensible option was to turn around, descend, and

attend to the injuries. But there I was, standing, looking toward the summit that could be sensed in the mist. I could move. The lack of pain was a deceptive but powerful argument. "It's just a hit, a bruise," I convinced myself. I made the decision, perhaps the most reckless of my life: "Let's keep going."

A long time passed, and the emotion arrived of appreciating the magnitude of the crater.



Reaching the edge of the crater was a balm for the spirit. The sky completely clear. The landscape was lonely and beautiful at the same time: a sea of black and sharp rocks dotted with patches of snow, and in the background, settled upon the clouds, the imposing Chimborazo. A deep peace, mixed with euphoria, invaded me.

The volcano smoked softly, reminding us of its latency. I remember the moment very clearly; we took photographs, embraced our companions. It had been worth it, I thought.

But we had to reach the true summit of Tungurahua, which is a point higher than the edge of the crater. With renewed determination, we set off on the last 30 minutes of ascent, until we reached the metal cross covered in ice that crowned the roof of the volcano.

An icy wind whipped us with force, but nothing could cloud our happiness. As usual, we congratulated each other and captured the moment in our minds. We remained about 35 minutes on the summit, owners of a view that only a few ever get to contemplate.



The Price of the Descent



The euphoria of the summit began to fade during the descent. At almost 200 meters from the refuge, the anesthesia of adrenaline began to give way. A dull, deep pain, like a powerful heartbeat, began to manifest in my leg. Upon reaching the refuge, exhausted but relieved, I tried to remove my boot. It was useless. The swelling already had it imprisoned. Pancho and another companion had to help me, pulling with great force and care. When it came out, the foot was swollen, but nothing that, at first, seemed alarming to me. I even took a photo, still with a certain disbelief.

That was when I witnessed a terrifying transformation. Within seconds, my calf began to swell grotesquely, as if a balloon were inflating beneath the skin. The tension was so extreme that the skin became shiny and hard as stone. Panic, cold and sharp, took hold of me. It was no longer a simple bruise.

Catastrophic thoughts unleashed themselves: a thrombosis, a burst artery... "I'm going to lose my leg," I thought. "We're not going to make it in time." Desperation was a knot in my throat.

The solution was a pack horse, a calm and resilient beast. They stripped it of its equipment to mount me on it. The saddle was old, the tree was broken, and the stirrups were just improvised ropes. I could only use the right one. The descent became an endless torture. Every insecure step of the animal, every slip in the mud, provoked a jolt of pain so sharp that I could not help but scream. I had no choice but to rest my injured leg on the empty stirrup, holding on with all my strength to the pommel of the saddle, praying for the torment to end. Those hours became an eternity of agony.

The Road Home

After what was an eternity, we reached the parking lot where a pickup truck was waiting to take us to Baños. It was Sunday. There were no clinics open, no doctors available. Pancho, with a haste I will be grateful for all my life, got bags of ice that we placed on my monstrosly swollen leg. The journey back to Cuenca was long and somber. The pain pills only slightly dulled the discomfort, and my mind would not stop generating terrifying scenarios.

Along the way, I called my cousin Jhonatan, a surgeon by profession. I described the symptoms the accident had caused with a voice that tried to be calm. He gave me clear instructions and told me he would wait for me at the hospital to operate if necessary. With his characteristic humor, he added: "See what happens to you for not taking me." That joke, in the midst of the chaos, was a small lifeline.

We arrived in Cuenca at 3 in the morning. The fatigue was so overwhelming that, upon reaching home, I collapsed onto the bed and sank into a deep sleep, overcome by exhaustion and stress.

The Wound and the Scar

I woke up at 6:00 AM. The leg was still the same: a painful and immobile post. I drove to the hospital with my left foot operating the pedals clumsily. Jhonatan was waiting for me. The diagnosis was quick and precise: the impact had ruptured an artery, and the blood, unable to escape to the outside, had accumulated and coagulated inside the muscle, creating a hematoma that pressed on everything around it. He operated on me immediately, releasing the pressure and extracting the clots that threatened the tissue, removing more than 500cc of coagulated blood from the leg.

That same afternoon, already at home, with my leg bandaged, under the effect of sedatives and with reduced mobility, I picked up my camera. I began to review the photographs from the trip. There was the proof: the summit, the crater, the smiles of my companions, the majestic landscape. The fear and the pain began to blur, transforming into the memory of an extreme adventure.

And then, looking at those images that captured so much effort and beauty, a smile drew itself on my face and I asked myself the only question that a true lover of the mountain can ask after such an experience:



Where will my next summit be?

"Falling is not a failure. Failure comes when you stay where you have fallen."

Sócrates

Chapter 9: Back to Chimborazo

Chimborazo, the Taita, a colossus of 6,268 meters that dominates the heart of Ecuador. An extinct volcano, the highest point in the country and the closest to the sun on the entire planet. This mountain was not just an objective; it was the beginning of everything. My life as a mountaineer, with all its lights and its shadows, began there, on the slope of this giant, with a first failed attempt that, far from defeating me, gave me the strength to embrace a new world.

The sport of high mountain climbing opened my eyes. It allowed me to meet extraordinary people, to appreciate nature with an intensity I never imagined, and to experience sensations that, otherwise, would have been denied to me. As in life, there are good things and bad things. The important thing is to learn to let go of the bad ones and to hold tightly to the good ones. I remember cherished friends who have already departed to their highest summit in the sky, from where, I am certain, they watch over us and celebrate each one of our achievements. Guides who, over time, became brothers of adventures and of life itself.



This volcano was always my initial goal, but I understood that it would not receive me on its summit until I was truly prepared. Until I was humble enough to

listen to it and wise enough to return only when the weather and the mountain itself determined it. I am grateful that this sport drove me to dedicate myself more to traversing these trails, finding a peace and a strength I did not know. I firmly believe that every person should practice a sport, know nature, respect animals, and value health more than money. Happiness is found in small things, not in the material, and in launching oneself from time to time into the unknown: whether to experience a sunrise on the summit of an active volcano or simply to walk through a natural place, intact and beautiful.

The Lesson of Humility: The Second Attempt

For my second assault on the summit, my friend and guide, Fausto Tenemaza, accompanied us along with Christian and his cousin. We decided on an alternative route, setting out from the first refuge to attack El Castillo directly, a rocky formation next to the glacier, to avoid a rockfall on the usual route.

We advanced through an exposed place, an inclined passage that revealed an infinite precipice on our right side. In some sections, one had to crouch to progress. With our crampons seeking traction and a white abyss below, we felt we had been transported to another world, to a parallel and ethereal reality.

The progression was good until, some 200 meters higher, the ice began to change. It became rigid, forming treacherous plates that creaked beneath our feet. We listened as the sheet of ice broke higher up, releasing pieces that rolled among us and plunged into the void. Fausto, with the calm and experience that characterize him, indicated the raw reality: it was too dangerous. The plates could fracture at any moment, unleashing an avalanche. Although our ego yearned to continue, the mountain spoke clearly. With humility, we turned around. I thank Fausto for his honesty; he showed us that true strength sometimes resides in knowing how to retreat.

The Third Time's the Charm

"The third time's the charm," Pancho told me upon learning of my second failed attempt. I accepted without hesitation. We trained with a fierce determination: we climbed Cerro Amarillo, Cerro Negro, Fasayñan, and Tres Lagunas in particular several times; we visited Maylas; we practiced Cayac on the Santa Bárbara River. Climbing, hiking, and adventures became our daily routine.

For the third attempt, nerves and anxiety mingled with an unshakeable determination. This time we would be accompanied by Ñato and Fausto Tenemaza as guides, along with my cousin Jhonatan, Pancho Salinas, and his friend from Quito who joined the group at the last moment.

There was no excuse that would suffice: I was prepared to conquer the summit of Chimborazo. However, there always remains that rebellious thought that refuses to disappear and circles in the head without respite: what if...? But then I remembered the words Daniel gave me before my first ascent of Cotopaxi: "Just enjoy it, don't be afraid. We are here to live nature. If you don't make it, you come down without a problem. You'll try another day." That simple truth calmed my doubts.

November 21, 2015, was the appointed date. A day earlier, Pancho called: he was quite sick with the flu. But everything was already ready. When we picked him up, we saw him downcast and without energy; a quick visit to the hospital so that Jhonatan could administer a serum that brought him back to life, almost by magic. With the gear loaded and spirits renewed, we set off toward the base of our objective.

Pancho's vehicle, transformed into an ark of adventurers, navigated serpentine highways loaded with hopes. Inside, the collective heart of those who seek answers in the heights beat. Inside, crowded together among ropes, crampons, and ice axes, we breathed that mixture of anticipation and respect that precedes every great challenge. The backpacks, loaded not only with high mountain gear but with dreams and fears, piled up like silent witnesses of what was to come.



Our destination rose imposingly on the horizon: the Chimborazo volcano, ancestral guardian of the central Ecuadorian Andes. Located in the province that bears its name, approximately 150 kilometers south of Quito and near Riobamba, this colossus is part of the Chimborazo Faunal Production Reserve, a natural sanctuary where the air thins and the landscapes take your breath away.

As we advanced, I could not stop marveling at a unique particularity of this mountain: although Everest is the highest summit above sea level, Chimborazo holds the privilege of being the closest point to the Sun from the center of the Earth, due to the equatorial bulge of our planet. This scientific curiosity mingled in my mind with the ancestral legends that surround the volcano.

The giant awaited us with its five main summits, each with its own personality and challenge. The highest, the Whymper summit, rose to 6,268 meters above sea level, named in honor of the British mountaineer Edward Whymper, who made the first recorded ascent in 1880. Very close by, the Veintimilla summit rose to 6,214 masl, while the Politécnica, the Nicolás Martínez, and the North summit (the latter renamed Iván Vallejo in honor of the distinguished Ecuadorian climber) completed the imposing profile of the colossus.

As we observed that horizon of summits bearing the names of pioneers and heroes, I understood that each ascent would also be a journey through the living memory of mountaineering. We were not just excursionists; we were links in a chain of passion and respect for the giant. The vehicle, more than a means of transport, was transformed into a mobile threshold between the ordinary world and that realm of ice and legend that we would soon tread.

Each name represented a story, an effort, a life dedicated to the mountain. As Pancho's car brought us inexorably closer to our destination, I felt that it was not only transporting equipment, but that we were bearers of a mountaineering tradition that united generations of adventurers drawn by the irresistible call of the mountain.



After a journey without setbacks, we met up with Ñato at the main entrance. Together we began the ascent to the refuge, where upon arriving, we left record of our passage by signing the visitors' book.

We rested and at 10:40 at night, we began the march. This time, we took the rockfall route straight to the saddle. We passed the ridge that had once defeated me, but this time we did it without setbacks.

That night, the mountain offered us its most benign conditions. A stable and clear climate allied itself with a layer of firm snow and compact ice, transforming what used to be an arduous challenge into an almost joyous progression full of confidence.



The ice and snow proved ideal for the ascent to be fast and safe. It was cold, but we had no setback whatsoever with the weather or the rest of the expedition members.

After hours of battling on the ice and the ridge, we reached the Veintimilla summit. The effort had taken its toll: Pancho, exhausted from the flu, and Jhonatan, with the beginnings of frostbite in his hands, decided to wait for us there with Fausto. We left our backpacks and, with Ñato and Pancho's friend from Quito, advanced toward the highest summit, the Whymper.

The landscape transformed into a strange labyrinth of penitentes, those ice blades formed by the sun that rose like a white guard. Amid this otherworldly scenario, almost at 6:00 in the morning, we made it. We stepped onto the summit.

Although the sky was cloudy, a sensation of jubilation and absolute achievement flooded us. The Taita, at last, had allowed me to arrive.



We recorded the moment with a video and began the descent. Upon returning to the Veintimilla summit, our friends were no longer there; the cold had forced them to begin the descent. The descent felt light, filled with a deep peace. The sky began to clear, as if the mountain were giving us its final blessing. We caught up with our companions and, together, we reached the refuge, this time not with the bitterness of defeat, but with the indescribable joy of having fulfilled, at last, our most longed-for challenge.

"Returning to the mountain that defeated you is honoring your own evolution."

Junko Tabei

GLOSSARY: For the Reader Who Carries a Mountaineer Within

When one faces a mountain story, one encounters words that are more than simple terms; they are keys that open the door to a world of technique, risk, and singular beauty. Words like *cordada*, *grieta*, or *crampón* may sound like technical jargon to someone who has never set foot on a glacier, but understanding their meaning is essential to grasp the true dimension of what is lived at more than five thousand meters of altitude.

I have decided to include this glossary for a simple reason: the mountain belongs to everyone. Its call resonates in the heart of many, whether or not they are expert climbers. I want anyone who reads these pages, whether an experienced adventurer or someone discovering this world from their armchair, to be able to immerse themselves completely in the narrative without getting lost in the terminology.

Each term defined here is a piece of the gear I carry in my backpack, a concept that has saved lives or that describes a latent danger. Learning this language is not just gaining knowledge; it is about understanding the soul of the mountain. It is my way of extending a hand to the reader and saying: "Come, walk by my side and understand. The adventure is deeper when one knows why every step, every knot, and every decision counts."

May this small dictionary be your first climbing gear.

Glossary of High Mountain Terms

Acclimatization: Physiological process by which the body gradually adapts to altitude and the lesser availability of oxygen. It is fundamental to prevent altitude sickness and must be planned several days in advance of an ascent.

Anchor: A fixed point of security in the rock or ice using an ice axe or an ice screw, to which the rope is attached to secure a climber in case of a fall.

Belaying: Technique and system by which a climber controls the rope to protect their rope partner, able to stop a fall.

Crampons: System of metal spikes that attach to boots to provide traction and security on ice and hard snow. They are essential for progressing across a glacier.

Ridge: Narrow and sharp edge that joins two summits or slopes of a mountain. It is usually the final ascent route toward the summit.

Cornice: Mass of snow projected by the wind beyond a ridge or an edge, forming an unstable and extremely dangerous overhang that can collapse.

Rope Team: Group of climbers (normally 2 to 4 people) who are joined by the same rope to secure one another during the climb. It is the basic unit of safety on glacial terrain.

Headlamp: A flashlight worn on the head, leaving the hands free to use ice axes or crampons. It is indispensable for ascents that begin at dawn.

Crevasse (or Glacial Crevasse): Deep fracture in a glacier, often hidden by a weak snow bridge. It is one of the most serious dangers in high mountain climbing. Crossing them requires specific technique and equipment.

Altitude Sickness (Soroche): Set of symptoms (headache, nausea, fatigue, dizziness) that appear due to the body's lack of adaptation to altitude. It can be mild or evolve into cerebral or pulmonary edema, potentially life-threatening.

Ice Axe: Fundamental tool of the climber, similar to a long pick. It is used as a point of support, to self-arrest a fall, to carve steps, or as an anchor.

Rappel (or Rapel): Controlled technique for descending a vertical or very steep wall using a rope and a braking device.

Refuge / Bivouac:

Refuge: Basic construction located on the mountain for the rest and shelter of mountaineers.

Bivouac: Spending the night in the open air or in an emergency tent, with minimal equipment. A situation that can be planned or forced.

Serac: Block or column of ice of great size, often unstable, that forms on glaciers. Its unpredictable collapse, like the one in the story, is one of the greatest objective dangers on the mountain.

Traverse: Ascent or descent carried out horizontally or diagonally across a slope, rather than in a straight line up or down.

Normal Route: Most accessible and commonly used route to ascend a mountain. It is usually not the most technical, but it is the one of least difficulty.

Walkie-Talkie: Portable communication radio. On the mountain, where there is no cell signal, it is often the only means of contact between groups or with base camp. Its failure, as recounted in the book, can completely isolate climbers.

Summit Fever: The overwhelming compulsion to reach the top of a mountain, regardless of concern for one's own safety or that of others, is a phenomenon called summit fever.

"To know the words of the mountain is to learn the language of respect."

Anónimo

TIPS FOR THE BEGINNING MOUNTAINEER

This chart of our highest summits is only the starting point. Each volcano demands deep research before any attempt: weather conditions, glacier state, technical difficulty, and required permits. Information saves lives — your adventure begins by navigating specialized forums and consulting certified guides, not at the base of the mountain.



PREPARATION AND SAFETY

Never go out alone → The mountain forgives little; company saves lives

Hire certified guides → Their experience is your best life insurance

Report your route and schedule → Always leave word of where you are going and when you will return

Check the weather → Conditions change in minutes in high mountain

Carry navigation equipment → Map, compass, GPS, and know how to use them



ESSENTIAL EQUIPMENT

Proper footwear → Mountaineering boots with good grip and ankle protection

Layered clothing → Technical layers, insulation, and protection against wind/rain

Emergency equipment → First aid kit, thermal blanket, whistle, headlamp with extra batteries

Food and hydration → Energy food and enough water (more than the estimated calculation)

Sun protection → Sunglasses, sunscreen, cap — the sun at altitude is treacherous

RESPECT FOR NATURE

Leave no trace → What you bring with you, returns with you

Pick up trash → Even what is not yours — let us be guardians of the summits

Respect the wildlife → Observe without altering, photograph without interfering

Walk on trails → Avoid eroding new areas

Respect the flora → Do not pull up plants, do not mark trees

MOUNTAINEERING ETHICS

Help when you can → On the mountain we are a community

Share experiences → Learn from others, teach those who are starting

Join a club → Collective experience is the best school

Respect the silence → Enjoy the sounds of nature

Be humble → The mountain is always greater than us

PHYSICAL AND MENTAL PREPARATION

Train progressively → Do not underestimate any mountain

Know your limits → Turning back in time is also wisdom

Acclimatize properly → Altitude sickness does not forgive recklessness

Learn basic techniques → Knots, rappel, crampon technique, self-rescue

Stay calm → Panic is your worst enemy in critical situations

THE RIGHT ATTITUDE

Research before going → Know the route, difficulty, and particularities

Listen to the locals → Their knowledge of the terrain is invaluable

Start with the simple → Master hills before volcanoes

Learn from failure → A failed attempt is a lesson, not a defeat

Enjoy the journey → The summit is only one part of the experience

**The mountain is not conquered, it is understood. It is not defeated, one learns from it.
The true mountaineer does not seek to dominate the heights, but to find their place
within them.**

For Those Who Stayed on the Summit

There is a footprint on the mountain that the wind does not erase. A footprint not made of mud or stone, but of perseverance, companionship, and a deep love for the heights.

Today we remember those mountaineering friends who departed before us. We do not remember them with sadness, but with the deep admiration of one who has witnessed a life lived with intensity. They did not leave; they simply reached a summit from which they watch over us.

Their legacy is not a map, but an inner compass. They taught us that dedication in high mountain climbing is a reflection of dedication in life: one firm step after another, without giving up, leaning on one's rope partner and knowing that the reward is not only the summit, but the transformation that occurs during the ascent.

They instilled in us the desire to appreciate the silence of a sunrise on the mountain, the brutal beauty of a granite wall, and the humility that a storm brings at mid-slope. They taught us to push ourselves to the limit, to look at a seemingly unreachable dream and, with tenacity and effort, turn it into the rock beneath our feet.

That is why, every time we adjust our backpacks and look upward, they are with us. Their spirit is the impulse that carries us one step beyond our exhaustion, the courage to face the unexpected crevasse, and the serenity to enjoy the descent.

May their example continue to be our fire. Let us keep ascending, not only for ourselves, but for them. Because as long as their memory lives in our rope teams and in our conquests, they will never cease to be on the mountain.

Rest in peace, dear companions. Your summit is eternal.



My great friend Pancho "Jack" Salinas on the summit of Iliniza Norte.

To my friends and rope teammates, I remind you that I will never forget you: Ivo Veloz, Telmo Tenemaza, Klever Gualavisi, Pancho "Jack" Salinas, Miguel Campoverde.

**"Those who stayed on the mountain have not died;
they live in every sunrise that illuminates the summits." Sir Edmund Hillary**



Bolívar Carrión is a Systems Engineer by profession, but it is on the summits where he finds his true essence. A passionate mountaineer, photographer, and adventurer, he has turned his love for volcanoes and extreme sports into a philosophy of life.

In *When the Mountain Calls...*, Bolívar invites us to accompany him on an intimate and transformative journey through the most emblematic peaks of Ecuador. From the shadow of Chimborazo to the smoking crater of Tungurahua, each ascent is more than a physical feat: it is a lesson in humility, a confrontation with fear, and a reminder of our fragility.

A profoundly human work that interweaves adventure, reflection, and a deep respect for nature. A testimony for all those who, from the mountain or from the silence, hear that call that challenges us to be better.