

CROWNED BY LIGHTNING

1.

Nepal, 1989:

"We are old men now, sahib," Tenzing murmurs and he smiles. Tin worked her alchemical magic on Tenzing's teeth, Hillary notices. Twin solid gold gleam, where once only the left molar shone.

He feels a stab of disappointment. Tenzing hasn't refused: it isn't the way to refuse outright, but the implication is there. We're both old men. We should squat on the porch, sipping hot buttered tea. Talk about that. Don't try to relive it.

Perhaps he's right, Hillary thinks. Mountaineering is a young man's sport. The high tops are conquered now. All save one.

Tenzing gestures to the houses lower on the slope. They are mud plaster hovels with roofs of corrugated zinc. "My village, my family, they depend on me. Trekkers stop here to visit me. I tell them lies, beautiful lies. They insult me by paying me for my time, but they leave things they no longer need. Boots, teabags, Rolex watches."

"I understand," Hillary says and he really does. Tenzing is their wise old man now, a source of civic pride.

Well, there are worse ways to spend your last years. Hillary pictures the trekkers, the Americans, the Germans, their impossibly smooth faces and windchapped lips, their eyes shining. Listening to this old man.

"You want tea?" Tenzing snaps his fingers without waiting for an answer. A refusal is unthinkable.

A granddaughter brings a battered aluminum teapot and fills two porcelain cups.

Hillary inhales the fragrance. "You have changed, my friend. Lapsang souchong. I remember the brick of pressed tealeaves, globs of rancid butter.

Tenzing shrugs. "It's what rich men like me drink. But no, that is just a drink what the trekkers leave behind. And it's hard to find real yakbutter. We're too close to the valleys."

The high mountains lie far to the north, hidden by the swirling clouds. Hillary remembers his first glimpse of the Himalayas, a flash of sawtoothed peaks floating between the clouds like the smile of some savage Hindu god.

"I know nothing about Iraq," Tenzing says. "They tell me it's a hot land, a land of bones." He gestures with his biddie and the sharp stink of smoldering

