

The Second Descent by Richard Paul Russo

Richard Paul Russo has published half a dozen stories in our pages over the past twenty years, including “Watching Lear Dream” (July 1999) and “Tropical Nights at the Natatorium” (Sept. 2003). His novels include *Subterranean Gallery*, *Ship of Fools*, and three hardboiled SF novels, *Destroying Angel*, *Carlucci’s Edge*, and *Carlucci’s Heart*. He’s currently working on a sequel to *Ship of Fools*, but he found time to write this dark and phantasmagoric new story.

* * * *

A cold dense fog lay heavy on the mountain that morning. Rafael stood in the snow outside his tent and searched for the summit, which was only three or four hundred meters above them, but he could see nothing through the diffuse gray fog that hissed and crystallized into particles of ice, a kind of snowy mistfall.

Morning rituals would soon be underway: lighting the stove, melting snow for water, eating nutrition bars, taking down and packing the tents and sleeping bags and other equipment. For now, though, Rafael relished the few moments of quiet before the others awakened.

They had numbered seven, but were now only four—three were lost the day the summit had been reached. Fortunately, the priest was one of the four survivors, for it was quite possible he would again be needed.

Rafael turned toward the mist-shrouded east and regarded the two barely visible, roughly heaped mounds of snow, the three makeshift crosses. Mina had never been found, but they couldn’t search any longer. Too much altitude, and no more oxygen. They needed to start down the mountain today.

Within the hour, the second descent would begin.

* * * *

Rafael remembers almost nothing of the first descent. Hazy images and vague feelings. Several deaths. Iliana says she remembers every detail ... and wishes she could forget every single one. She refuses to talk about it. Rafael thinks she may be lying, that she doesn’t remember any more than he does.

* * * *

He doesn't understand why they're engaged in a *second* descent, or how it's even possible. As far as he knows, they only climbed the mountain once. He thinks that if he *could* remember the first descent, he would understand everything.

As they started down, Rafael glanced back at what they were leaving behind: used oxygen bottles, shredded plastic of various colors, broken tent skeletons, a tattered prayer wheel and other detritus, much of it from previous summit attempts; two bodies and three crosses. Not the first bodies to be left behind on this mountain, nor would they be the last.

The morning was uneventful. The sun broke through the mist and they strapped on their polarized goggles. They roped up to cross the Bernoulli Ice Field, a smooth and gently curved expanse that steepened and fell away on either side. A steady and deliberate pace, not technically difficult, but tedious. They completed the crossing by early afternoon, then stopped for a meal and rest before starting down the jagged stretch of crumbling rock and ice that would occupy the rest of their day and eventually bring them to a sheltered plateau.

Hardly anyone spoke as they ate. Rafael sat next to Iliana, who soon got up and sat by herself twenty meters from the others. Yusuf took her place and said, "It is not personal with her." A ragged wound on the lean Egyptian's cheek was dark around the edges, and had shown no sign of healing over the past week.

"I know," Rafael answered, although he didn't. For him, everything was personal, while for Yusuf nothing ever seemed to be. He looked into Yusuf's shining brown eyes and imagined he saw distances greater than either of them had ever traveled, and a thousand dead souls still on their final journeys. Rafael turned away.

* * * *

Rafael isn't completely certain he reached the summit. He doesn't know if his uncertainty and confusion are a result of oxygen deprivation or of something else. He knows that some did not even make the attempt, and for those who did make the final push, everyone was on their own—each awakened as he or she could, each melted snow and drank and ate or not as they chose, each left at whatever time they could manage.

Near the top, every step seemed impossibly difficult, and often

minutes passed between each one. While still climbing he saw Yusuf stumble past him on his way back down, a lopsided grin of success frozen onto his face.

Rafael stopped climbing at some point, and after a few minutes of standing and swaying on top of the world, nearly falling toward the distant curving horizon of stunning white ice and clouds and blue sky and black rock, he started back down. But he still isn't certain it was the summit, isn't certain that it was anything more than the highest point he was capable of climbing.

On his own staggering return to high camp he passed Mina, who was still working her way up around the col, and he remembers thinking there wasn't much light left, and she was too far from the summit. He'd been incapable of saying or doing anything other than continuing down. He left her behind and never saw her again.

* * * *

Two nights later, Rafael stood with Iliana and Father Dominic on an icy ledge and searched for the lights of Kuma-Shan on the mountain below them. The night was cold and clear, but there were no signs of the city: no flickering orange of the torch-lit towers, no shining reflections of the palace's adamantine dome, no arcing trails of air vehicles.

"We should be able to see it by now," the priest said.

Iliana snorted. "What does it matter? We'll never enter the city, we'll never even reach the gates."

The priest shrugged. He dug around in his parka and came up with a cigarette and lighter. He lit the cigarette and coughed, and Iliana just shook her head.

"Did we see it on the first descent?" Rafael asked. He can't remember, can't remember if they *should* have seen it.

Father Dominic continued smoking, giving no indication he'd heard the question. Iliana looked at Rafael, her gaze steady, eyes lit by the stars and the glow of the priest's cigarette. "You know better than to ask that," she told him.

No I don't, Rafael thought, but he didn't say it.

* * * *

Rafael has a wife and a six-year-old daughter back home, though he isn't always certain of that. Their names are Kiyoko and Leila, but their faces are vague in his memory, he has difficulty recalling their images in much detail. He hasn't seen them in months, hasn't had any contact with them in all that time. At times he wonders if they're still waiting for him, and at other times he feels certain that they will wait the rest of their lives, even if he never returns.

* * * *

"Who were you talking to up on the ridge?" Iliana asked. A frown of concern tightened her forehead.

"Yusuf," Rafael answered, confused. "Who else could it have been?"

The frown changed to a hard and steady gaze. "Yusuf is dead."

Her words made no sense to him. "Dead?"

"Dead. You don't remember? He died on the first descent. Dropped into a crevasse when we weren't roped up. All we were able to recover was his ice axe."

Rafael sat on the edge of a black boulder. Her words rang true, and a brief, sharp image rose before him, a narrow jagged opening and blue ice turning darker until it finally became black.

"You're using his ice axe now," Iliana added. "You lost yours."

Rafael looked down at the ice axe hanging from his belt and gripped it with his gloved hand. There was nothing unusual in its feel; he'd expected some strange warmth, or an electric shock, or perhaps Yusuf appearing before him once more. He looked up at Iliana.

"But you *were* talking to Yusuf," she said.

"Yes."

She nodded. "Let's go. We need to reach Camp Seven and the cache before dark."

* * * *

The next night they looked down on the lights of Kuma-Shan, knowing that none of them would ever walk through any of the city's arched and torch-lit gates, never walk along the streets of painted stone with open metal vehicles hovering in the air along with the pulsing dragon lamps and the sparkling crimson message streamers. The smells of grilling spiced meats and mulled wine and tendriling incense wafted within those walls, denied to them as was the warmth of hearth fires and heated beds and the company of men and women who seemed to come from other times—the future and the past—as well as from other places. The city itself appeared to have materialized from some other reality.

Perhaps none of that was true, perhaps the stories told on the mountain were fabrications or fevered imaginings or simply the confused perceptions of those miraculous few who had somehow gained entrance and survived their evictions. Yet what little they could see from their vantage point—the colored lights moving through the air in beautiful complex patterns, the water spray at the tops of enormous fountains, the candle-lit windows—gave every indication that the stories were accurate, that Kuma-Shan was everything it was fabled to be.

Iliana turned away from the lights and trudged toward the tents, leaving Rafael and the priest alone.

“Can't we *try* to enter?” Rafael asked.

“We can try,” answered the priest, “and we *will* try.” He glanced at the glowing tip of his cigarette. “But we won't succeed. We won't get within hailing distance of the gates.”

“Why not?”

“Ask Yusuf—he knows.”

“Iliana says Yusuf is dead.”

Father Dominic nodded. “So he is. Which is why he knows.”

* * * *

In that other life, the one he leads when he is not on this mountain or some other, Rafael is a labor lawyer. He represents unions negotiating contracts or making strike decisions, workers with grievances. The satisfaction he derives from his work—from aiding those who too often

have been exploited when they did not have the support of unions or attorneys or even their fellow workers—more than makes up for the substantially lower income he earns. As a corporate attorney, he could easily make two or three times as much money.

When at the end of a long day he comes home to the small house in the working class neighborhood, waves to his neighbors, climbs the porch and enters his home, then kisses and hugs his wife and daughter, he realizes he has all he needs and more, and appreciates how fortunate he truly is.

* * * *

A snowstorm raged for two days, confining them to their tents with its howling winds and ice that nearly buried them. Rafael still shared the tent with Yusuf, but didn't speak to him now. When the storm finally ceased and the climbers dug their way out of the tents, the early morning sun shone brilliantly across the fresh snow with blinding silver and blue incandescence. Squinting against the glare, they found that Kuma-Shan now stood *above* them on the mountain.

The city took on a different appearance in the daylight, but was no less inviting. The sun reflected off stained glass, bright multicolored banners snapped in the breeze, and the gleaming metal of satellite dishes rotated in slow, changing patterns atop the stone towers.

Kuma-Shan appeared to be no more than a half day's climb around a jagged serac and along a wide series of ledges. They all agreed to put the descent on hold and make for the city.

Everything went smoothly until they traversed one section of a ledge where the overhanging rock hid the city from view. When they emerged into the open and looked at Kuma-Shan, the city was farther away from them than it had been in the morning when they'd started.

They tried once more. They resumed their climb, doing everything they could to keep the city in sight, getting steadily closer to its gates, but at midafternoon they were forced once again to scramble across a stretch of loose rock beneath a dark outcropping that blocked their view of the city. When they saw Kuma-Shan again, it was, if anything, even farther up the mountain from them than ever.

They didn't even need to discuss the matter. By mutual silent agreement, the three climbers turned around and headed back down the

mountain.

* * * *

Rafael sits in a green plastic chair and watches his family in the backyard garden. A clear day, late spring, sun high and hot. In baggy shorts and hiking boots and a gray sweatshirt with the sleeves cut off, Kiyoko stands with a claw tool in her right hand, contemplating the bed she has just finished weeding. Columbines in sprays of blue and white, yellow and white, and purple and white frame her. The sun casts her shadow across the ragged stone wall.

On the small patch of grass, Leila squats beside a large potted cala, focused intently on a shiny blue-black beetle scuttling across the dirt. Cyrus—sixty-five pounds of golden lab and pit bull—lies at Rafael's feet, across his feet and against his shins as though holding him in place; the dog's eyes are closed and he sighs loudly, an almost human sound. Rafael raises a cold bottle of beer to his mouth and drinks deeply, sets it on the stump beside him. He is as content as he has ever been.

* * * *

That night, in the tent, Rafael asked Yusuf, "Why is it that we can't ever reach Kuma-Shan?"

Rafael could just make out Yusuf's eyes in the moonlight that filtered through the nylon dome. Eyes that stared at him with a surprising intensity.

"Why do you ask *me*?" Yusuf said.

"Father Dominic said I should."

"The priest." A slight shake of the head. "Why does he think I would know?"

"Because..." Rafael began. He stopped. Was it possible that Yusuf didn't know he was dead? What would happen if Rafael told him?

"I don't know," Rafael finally said. "He seemed to think you knew more about it than anyone else."

"Why?" Yusuf asked again, his gaze even more intense.

Rafael couldn't answer.

* * * *

“How can you keep going up into those damn mountains?” Kiyoko asks.

This isn't the first time she's asked that question, but Rafael senses a pointed anguish in her voice, a certain desperate pleading. He is leaving the next morning, and they lie side by side in bed, the window open, the unusually warm air humid and oppressive.

“Risking your life,” she adds. “Risking *our* lives. You're not alone anymore, you haven't been for years. What about me? What about Leila?”

Sitting on bare rock warmed by the sun and looking down on all the snow and ice and jagged rock that stretches out below them, Rafael can still hear Kiyoko's words so clearly, the anger and pain and incomprehension. He can still see the tears, and his heart aches for her, for Leila, and for himself.

All those reasons he's given her over the years ... he realizes now that they are nothing but excuses, and weak excuses at that. Excuses that hide some unidentified discontent that is in fact nothing more than a deep-seated selfishness.

He hopes this realization hasn't come too late.

* * * *

A vast network of jagged unbridgeable crevasses blocked their way. They'd heard an avalanche during the night and the force had shattered the ice bridges that would have provided a way across this portion of the glacier.

“It had looked so promising yesterday,” said Father Dominic.

“Like your God,” Iliana told him.

“God is an easy target for unbelievers,” the priest replied. “For believers as well, actually.” He turned to her, unperturbed. “It isn't helpful.”

“Fair enough.” Iliana looked out across the maze of crevasses. “What *would* be helpful? Besides a helicopter?”

Rafael examined the terrain to their right, to their left, but there seemed little difference in either direction, and little change. Going around was going to be long and arduous and there was no way to tell which way would be better. He looked up toward the summit, but it was once again hidden by clouds and drifting frozen fogs.

“Maybe we could find a way through,” he suggested, although he recognized the absurdity of the words as soon as he spoke them.

Neither of the others replied. The three climbers stood together in the sun studying the glacier, the wide cracks and dark lines of shadow. Almost certainly a maze with no exit. Below the glacier the mountainside presented several potential routes, if they could reach them, then the mountain disappeared in low cloud and haze. Rafael had no idea anymore how far it was to the base camp, or even how much hiking awaited beyond it.

“West,” Iliana finally decided.

Putting the shrouded summit to one side, and the glacier and shrouded lower slopes to the other, they set off toward the west.

* * * *

For the first time in months, Rafael thinks of his father. His father died when he was only fifty-one and Rafael twenty-three. A long and painful death from kidney and liver failure, ravaged lungs, swollen joints, and the cumulative effect of half a dozen other secondary physiological and metabolic malfunctions.

His father had been a veteran of the Vietnam War, serving two tours in the steaming jungles of Southeast Asia. He never talked about those experiences of his own volition, not even when Rafael, as a teenager, asked him several times to tell him what those years had been like. Rafael stopped asking, deciding it wasn't fair to his father. Even when his father lay dying in the V.A. hospital and the doctors admitted that most of his ailments were service-related—frequent contact with Agent Orange being the primary factor—he would not talk about that war.

Rafael's relationship with his mother is and always has been cool and distant, which seems to be what she wants, or needs. He was, however, close to his father, though they really didn't talk much; when they did, it was mostly about sports—football, baseball, college basketball. Rafael has rich and vivid memories of long hot summer afternoons, sitting in the backyard with his father on dirty white plastic deck chairs, drinking cold domestic beer

and listening to baseball games on the radio.

He still misses his father.

* * * *

They hiked and climbed and crawled and pulled and dragged each other along for nearly three days until they reached a long gently sloping rock cleft that cut through the glacier, effectively bypassing the crevasses.

Once they'd traversed the glacier, the descent became familiar again, though he'd thought this portion of the route had actually been much higher up on the mountain. But when they came to the nearly vertical face just below the Bamboo Col, they discovered that the tens of meters of fixed rope they'd set on the ascent now hung in shreds, split and frayed and swinging listlessly in the cold breeze or lying scattered in pieces on the snow and rock at the bottom of the face. Sabotage was suggested, or some freak and violent storm, but when they inspected the ropes they found that the fibers appeared worn and rotted, as if the ropes had been hanging on this mountainside for decades.

The fixed ropes would have provided a much easier descent of the rocky face—the three of them could have abseiled down the steep drop in less than an hour. Now that wasn't possible, and they didn't have enough extra rope to fix new lines. With night approaching, they made camp and rested for the next day.

In the morning, Father Dominic took the lead, and Rafael was once again astonished at the priest's technical abilities. He found a path they could all negotiate, and they made it to the bottom of the face with more than an hour of daylight remaining to them. They stood together and watched in wonder as the sun dropped behind the horizon and set the ice and the clouds and the sky on fire.

He remembers ... he remembers....

Kiyoko asleep on the couch with Dante—their new tiny puff-ball of dark gray kitten no bigger than Rafael's hand—snuggled up under her chin....

The rich scent of wood smoke and pine needles....

Weeping as he stands alone in the frigid black night when he is seventeen, suffocating a newborn pup born minutes earlier with its

intestines outside its body....

The rush of emotion fountaining in his belly and chest the first time he kisses Kiyoko, holding her as her two cats watch with suspicion....

Trout fishing with his father, hiking along a rocky mountain stream, breath icy in the early gray morning....

A gull hovering almost stationary about the waves, dipping slightly in the breeze....

The smell of sweat on skin on skin.... Leila's days-old fingers gripping his thumb ... the overhead rumble of trucks crossing the bridge spanning a dry creek bed ... the baking heat of summer on the slope of a dune ... the two freckles on Kiyoko's cheek just below her left eye....

He remembers....

* * * *

When he woke that morning, Yusuf wasn't in the tent. Rafael squirmed out of his sleeping bag and crawled out into the gray, cloudy morning.

Yusuf stood a few meters away with his pack on his shoulders, looking up toward the summit.

"What are you doing?" Rafael asked.

"I'm looking for the city," Yusuf replied. "Kuma-Shan."

Rafael could see nothing above them but cloud and ice and rock. "Do you see it?"

Yusuf shook his head, then turned to gaze down the mountain. "I'm leaving now," he said.

"Where are you going?"

"Down. To the base of the mountain."

"That's where we're all going," Rafael said.

Yusuf shook his head. "I'll be getting there a lot sooner than you will."

With that he started down the mountain, walking straight downhill without regard to the terrain, yet never losing his footing. As he went, each stride, while in appearance normal in length, took him increasing distances down the mountainside so that before long each step traversed twenty meters and more.

Down he went, never looking back, his form becoming smaller and smaller, and when he reached the low clouds and fog, they drifted away, slowly but steadily revealing the mountain's lower slopes.

To Rafael's dismay, those slopes went on and on and on.... Yusuf was barely distinguishable now, a moving red spot against a vast expanse of crystalline white mottled with streaks and patches of motionless dark colors. Soon, all the clouds and mist had scattered, and Rafael could see no end to the mountain, only a gradually increasing vagueness as his vision became incapable of distinguishing anything at such great distances.

For some time now, Rafael's great fear had been that, when they completed their second descent of the mountain, they would awaken the next morning to find themselves once again just below the summit, preparing for a third descent. That fear was now gone, replaced by one darker and more terrifying—that the second descent would never end.

A numb exhaustion overwhelmed him, and with weak legs he made his way to a narrow slab of rock and sat, gazing down on that endless expanse.

* * * *

When Leila is five years old, she contracts bacterial meningitis, and for three days lies close to death in the ICU, with the physicians unable to tell Rafael and Kiyoko if their daughter will survive. Rafael and Kiyoko virtually live in the hospital, sleep and eat there, and wander the corridors one at a time like lost somnambulists.

In the evening of the third day, Rafael goes out onto the hospital's rooftop garden and sits on a bench, looking up at the stars. For two days a terrible dread has grown in him, so debilitating that he can barely function. He rarely speaks, thinking is slow and muddy, and even the simplest of movements seems beyond him, for nearly every possible future he contemplates is filled with that dread, and it cannot be dispelled.

The stars glimmer weakly against the muted dark sky so pale in comparison to the bright obsidian night sky above the world's highest

mountains. Rafael lets himself fully imagine the different possible outcomes for Leila, and what each would mean for all of them. He imagines first what it would be like if Leila dies, how his grief might take hold of him, tear open a wound in his heart that would never heal, how Kiyoko's grief might manifest, and how their mutual grief and emptiness might impact their own relationship—even there he can imagine several possibilities, almost none of them good.

His jaw aches from clenching, his stomach cramps, and he wipes tears from his face with a trembling hand. Several minutes pass before his breathing is slow and even.

Then he imagines what their lives would be like if Leila survives, but with severe and permanent brain damage....

...or lifelong disabilities....

...or chronic pain....

...or....

He grips the bench to hold himself upright, wrung out, exhausted, and dizzy, as if he sits in a small rowboat out at sea.

Eventually, he lets himself revel in the possibility of a full recovery, the relief and joy and gratitude that brings, along with a greater appreciation for their lives.

Finally, he imagines once again how his life might be if Leila dies, and this time the pain is muted, the dread fainter.

When he has finished with all of these imaginings and re-imaginings, he realizes that the dread has faded from each possible outcome. He isn't at peace with all of those futures, but he feels that he has come to terms with them in an important way, and that he will be able to go on with his life no matter what happens.

Several days later, when Leila has in fact fully recovered and they bring her home, he tries to explain to Kiyoko what happened on that rooftop, and explain his thinking and the state of mind he reached. She doesn't understand, however, and no matter how he words it, or what approach he takes, it always seems to her that he is saying it would have been okay if Leila had died, and that any outcome is just as good as any other.

He tries two or three more times in the next few days, but he cannot get her to understand what he thinks *he* understands. He stops trying, and they never speak of it again.

* * * *

When Iliana and Father Dominic emerged from their tent and saw Rafael sitting on the rock staring down at the lower slopes of the mountain once again shrouded in low clouds, neither of them said a word. He turned to look at them, and they returned his gaze, but still they didn't speak. Perhaps there was something in his eyes, or the way he held himself.

They packed up the tent, shouldered their packs, checked their boots and gloves and other equipment, then with one last glance at him and a pair of nods, they turned and started down the mountain.

Rafael could not blame them. Why should they speak to him, or expect him to join them? Why would they want to continue with someone who had so clearly given up, why would they want to risk being influenced or infected with his own sense of futility?

As he watches Iliana and the priest move away from him, a thought drifts through his mind, almost insubstantial, yet incandescent, and he grasps at it. A catch of panic halts his breath for a moment as he fears losing this glimmer of insight. He brings it slowly and carefully into focus and considers it for a time, catching fragments of understanding until he finally reaches a growing if incomplete comprehension.

For the first time in days or weeks, Rafael feels a calm within himself. He recognizes that it is impossible to ever know for certain if this new fear of his is true—that the second descent will never end. The one thing he might possibly learn is that it is false ... and the only way he can learn that is to go on. He decides he will not fear or give up to something that he can never, ever know.

Rafael pushes off the rock, breaks down his tent and packs it away, then follows the others as they resume their descent.