

CLIENT

} *by Karl Taro Greenfeld*

At this altitude, in numbing night cold followed by too brief reprieve of mid-morning sun and then rapid unfurling of clouds, engulfing the valley like sheet pulled over corpse, I grew bored and impatient, shortness of breath making me irritable. We were bivouacked at base camp, awaiting the return of Norihiko, the first blind man to climb Everest. He had summited yesterday and descended to Three by nightfall, or so we had made out in scratchy transmissions we picked up.

Base camp was wretched purgatory, tents billowing in omnipresent wind, refuse piled in terraced mounds, empty Styrofoam noodle cups making popping noises as wind bounced them along the stony earth, and a dozen steps in any direction were ziggurats of frozen shit, as thousands of climbers who passed through every year left feces in their wake. (Everyone at base camp seemed stricken with diarrhea, the Kumbu crud, we called it, brought on by filthy drinking water and packaged food.) The Sherpa merchants came through daily, their little shops packed into wooden frames retrofitted on steel tube infrastructures of discarded climbing packs, cigarettes for \$20 a pack, Johnny Walker Red for \$60 a bottle, hashish for \$100 a gram. But it didn't take much to get high at 5,007 meters.

An Italian expedition had set off for the summit that morning, leaving its own base camp team. Skinny and fit climbers, they were rugged looking and thorough as they took inventory, counted oxygen bottles and checked regulators, but give them a few days and they would be as bedraggled as the rest of us and bored; bored at this service for the greater glory of someone else, someone who, if all went well, would soon be standing on the highest point on earth.

The best campsites, those that got the most sun and with the clearest satellite signals, were all taken by the Sherpas who maintained a presence here year-round: short, stout, hearty-looking Asian men who could be hired by the day, or by the hour. The finest Sherpas were reserved years in advance by better-organized expeditions. I didn't know how we had found our Sherpas. The technical aspects of the ascent were someone else's responsibility. I was

the publicist, the man hired by Norihiko's team back in Tokyo to manage the storm of press that would attend the first summiting of Everest by a blind man.

I had flown from Tokyo to Bangkok to Kathmandu and joined them for the Jeep ride to Gorak Shep, the trek to Lukla, and then the strenuous hike to base camp. The ascent team had been accompanied by the usual support staff, a radio man, cooks, quartermaster, along with a TV Asahi crew, several print reporters, and a Fuji Television reporter who somehow both filmed and appeared in his own segments. A video crew had summited with Norihiko, but that footage was going to be used for a documentary film Norihiko was planning to produce. When he came back down, the journalists would want to shoot him and interview him and then accompany him back to Kathmandu where it was presumed there would be a hero's welcome for the blind man who climbed Everest.

My firm handles media relations for a half-dozen athletes — Olympic snowboarders, skiers, our best female marathon runner — I also do local media for foreign athletes when they come to Japan — Canadian skiers and Australian surfers. Norihiko's team came to me in part because of my experience with extreme athletes but mostly, I believe, because my rates are reasonable. His father, Mr. Ozaki, came to my Yoyogi office and presented me with his business card and described to me his son, what he had accomplished and what he was now setting out to do. I had heard of Norihiko. He appeared from time to time on various television programs — Japanese abroad who do anything marginally interesting tend to be featured — and when Norihiko climbed Mount Elbrus in the Caucasus, it won him some attention. Now, his father told me, they had secured the sponsorship of a sports drink company, a camera manufacturer, and a sporting goods company, which would pay for this expedition. The sports drink company would also pay my retainer. But Mr. Ozaki made it very clear I would be working for his son, Norihiko.

I don't know why I assumed that because Norihiko was blind he would be meek. When I met him in a restaurant in Akasaka, he spoke more loudly than anyone in the restaurant and demanded, at one point, to feel my face to see if I had "trustworthy features." I wasn't sure if this was something all sightless people did, so I went along with it, an awkward twenty seconds of Norihiko patting my facial skin, even pushing a finger into my nostrils, before he sat back down and reached for his tea.

"You have an honest nose."

He laid out his vision: to become world famous. To become a global hero for the sightless. They have nobody, he told me, nobody to look up to, so to speak.

“Stevie Wonder?” I said. “Ray Charles?”

Norihiko had never heard of them.

I looked at Mr. Ozaki, who was seated beside him. He was studying the menu.

“This expedition will show that the sightless can do anything the sighted can do.” Norihiko told me. “And you will help us to deliver our message.”

Yet here I was, freezing, sitting on a stool playing Tamagotchi in a six-man tent set up on an angled patch of Himalayan dirt. On clear days we achieved only sporadic communication with the rest of the world; when it was cloudy, as it was almost all the time, we were cut off. I looked around for Yoshiko, a slender female climber in her mid-twenties who had joined the expedition to gain experience in the hopes of someday summiting Everest herself. Her job as quartermaster was to keep track of the oxygen canisters and fresh water canteens, to make sure that empty canisters were separated from the next day’s go supply, and that canteens were loaded with isotope water. We had taken to sharing our meals together and going on occasional hikes around base camp. She was a thoughtful woman and seemed sturdy, a manner uncommon among the Japanese women I knew in Tokyo. She had short hair, pallorous skin with pinkish cheeks, thick lips. She was taciturn, yet unfailingly friendly. I had plenty of time on my hands, so when I wasn’t flirting with her, I would daydream a future for us: Yoshiko and I dating, moving in together, having a family. I would be willing to take up mountaineering, if she so wished.

In the early afternoon, we would kick a soccer ball around the rocky scarp, joined by a few Sherpas for a quick two-on-two or three-on-three. I would be gasping after fifteen minutes because of the elevation. When the Italians had been in camp, the games had swelled, but now we were down to just Yoshiko and me so we passed the time just kicking the ball back and forth, and juggling it from right to left foot and back again. After a few minutes, Yoshiko told me she wanted to see if there were any radio messages from Norihiko and excused herself. I watched her go, her many-pocketed trekker pants making her waistline seem low and her legs shorter than they actually were. I had occupied myself during the dull wait carefully studying her.

I paid some Nepalese boys \$25 for a lukewarm bath which I had to curtail when I heard shouts at the approach of our team descending the mountain. I scrambled out of the tub, patted myself dry and pulled on my gear, rushing out of the tent in time to see Norihiko hoisting a trophy of some kind. The video crew had rushed ahead and was filming Norihiko as he approached, and the TV Asahi team had managed to set up as well. The TV Asahi team, apparently, had brought along a golden cup to commemorate the event, and as Norihiko

held it up and shouted his answers to the interviewer, I pushed through to stand at his side and tried to get a sense of how tired he was. He was badly bruised around the eyes, and the tip of his nose seemed to be frostbitten, there was blood running from one ear and a gash along his chin. He was leaning against the steel poles he used for balance.

He was hoarse, but energetic, “The Khumbu Icefall, that was where...I didn’t think I would make it. I fell, got this cut, the bleeding wouldn’t stop...I was on my knees.” That would have been the first of ten traverses through the icefall that he’d had to make, I knew, as the team must port equipment up to Camp One through that treacherous glacier. “But I wasn’t going to give up. I was never going to give up, you hear me!” Then he told how he climbed by following the sound of a bell hung from the pack of the climber ahead of him.

He was almost crying now, and shouting into the microphone. “We sightless CAN DO ANYTHING.”

I could tell he was fatigued, and perhaps suffering from mild hypoxia, so I steered him back toward our encampment. “More later. Let him rest.”

“I DID IT! YOU HEAR ME?” He was shouting as I led him away, handing the trophy back to the TV Asahi team.

In his tent, Yoshiko helped Norihiko slip out of his boots, heavy climbing pants, and polypropylene leggings. He smelled vaguely fecal, and I would have left them alone if I hadn’t already observed Norihiko’s behavior when they were together. He would grab Yoshiko around her waist, refusing to let go, squeezing and fondling her despite her tacit refusal. He acted as if because he couldn’t see, then nobody could see him committing these violations.

So I stayed in the tent and made conversation with Norihiko, asking him about the expedition, the Southeast Ridge, the Hillary Step, trying to distract him from Yoshiko, who was working quickly, pulling off his leggings and now piling heating pads around his legs.

“The Southeast Ridge,” Norihiko said, “Nepal 2,000 meters down on one side. Tibet 4,000 down on the other.”

He didn’t elaborate any further and now that Yoshiko had finished wrapping his legs, Norihiko was starting to slip out of his jacket and coat, and Yoshiko handed him a respirator and an oxygen canister. He winced as the respirator went over his nose before he lay back, taking deep breaths. He said something that was muffled by the mask.

He pulled it off.

“I don’t want them talking to the rest of the expedition,” he said. “The TV people should talk to me, only to me.”

I disagreed. I thought the rest of the team might provide more color. After all, they could actually see. But I wasn't going to argue this now.

We arranged for a helicopter to take Norihiko, his father, the documentary crew, and myself all back to Kathmandu where a reception was scheduled at the Japanese embassy and a press conference was to be held at the Yak & Yeti. The international media had picked up the story, and I had been receiving e-mail requests from the foreign press as well as Japanese reporters, a fact that pleased Norihiko a great deal. As we chopped through the thin air, all of us wearing mufflers over our ears and bracing ourselves against the wind and turbulence, I watched Norihiko and tried to see him as others, as the media, would see him. He was a sympathetic figure, this short but well-built young man, with thick legs and protuberant rear — he had the low center of gravity that good mountain climbers must have — the exertion of the last week had left him thinner than usual, and the bruises and cuts on his face, the patches of darkened skin, it all made him appear hardworking, humble, a model of perseverance, what we called *gamman*: effort, forbearance in the face of long odds.

He'd actually had sight as a boy, until age six when due to retinoschisis, a splitting of his neurosensory nerves, it had steadily and irreversibly deteriorated until he lost his vision at age eleven. At first, his father had told me, he refused to learn Braille or use a cane. But eventually, he succumbed to this inevitability, and his father, an avid hiker and amateur mountaineer himself, continued to take him to the mountains of West Honshu and Nagano where the two of them devised the bell system so that Norihiko could follow his father. The boy had always been a good athlete, excelling at baseball, swimming, and wrestling before losing his sight and continuing with competitive wrestling through high school, despite his obvious disadvantage.

He was a great story, yet the only obstacle to telling it was Norihiko himself. Now just two summits, Antarctica's Vinson and South America's Aconcagua, from completing the Seven Summits — climbing the highest mountain in each of seven continents — his ego was making him a difficult and petulant client. Perhaps because he was blind, the pity that he elicited, the special consideration, he seldom was refused, rejected, told he was misbehaving. He had a refined sense of entitlement and he was entitled, I guess, for who knew the challenges he had overcome, becoming, or soon to become, a world famous athlete at twenty-three. His father had already informed me he would be in a sports drink commercial upon returning to Tokyo; the Crown Prince wanted to meet him. So who was I to correct him or tell him to stop fondling the female climbers?

We were supposed to land at Turihil, a military base in Kathmandu — an option available only to VIPs — and I was surprised when we put down at Tribhuvan, the international airport. The pilot bobbed his head in a circular motion when Mr. Ozaki shouted to ask why we were putting down here. We climbed down from the helicopter, and I was confused by the sight of uniformed soldiers in berets, holding Kalashnikovs, waiting for us as we bent and jogged under the prop-wash.

We had anticipated a hero's welcome — Kathmandu is famously celebratory of Everest climbers, that being one of the leading local industries — and the first blind climber should have been an instant celebrity. The Japanese Ambassador to Nepal was supposed to meet us when we touched down. Norihiko had already been on the front page of *Dawn* and *Kathmandu Age*, and I knew that dozens of international reporters were in town awaiting us. Would they have known to come to Tribhuvan instead of Turihil? I ran ahead into the brown brick terminal. The room was dark.

Instead of a welcoming throng there was a pair of empty wooden benches. Instead of the ambassador there was a deputy cultural attaché dispatched from the embassy to welcome us. What had gone wrong? This was my most spectacular failure to date as a public relations man and would call for my immediate resignation. I looked at the business card of the deputy cultural attaché. Mr. Watanabe bowed. I asked what happened to the ambassador? The reporters? The hero's welcome?

“You haven't heard?”

“What?”

He reported that there had been a murder, several actually, the King and Queen of Nepal had been killed by the Crown Prince, who had then taken his own life.

I hadn't even known that Nepal had a king.

Students and liberal sympathizers had taken to the streets, Watanabe explained, fighting pitched battles against the military and the police, who were loyal to the autocratic and conservative new regent. The regent had declared martial law.

“There are rumors, that it was a coup. That the regent murdered the family. That the military did it. That this was all the work of the Indians.”

I nodded, but barely followed this speculation. It didn't interest me.

“So the ambassador won't be coming?” I asked.

“He sent me instead.” Watanabe bowed.

The documentary cameraman had rushed in and set up his camera. The producer held up a bright white light that popped when he turned it on.

I turned to see Norihiko walk into the room alongside his father. His father was looking around, visibly disappointed.

“There has been a coup,” I told them.

“Not a coup,” Watanabe interjected, “A regicide. The coup is a rumor.”

Norihiko shook his head. “What does that have to do with me? With Everest?”

“Nothing,” I told him, “But, well, they have declared martial law.”

“What’s that?” Norihiko asked.

“It’s, um,” I wasn’t actually sure what martial law was. “It’s a law where you can’t go outside.”

Norihiko’s father glared at me, as if this were all my fault.

“We have to get you to your guest house,” Watanabe said. “We have embassy vehicles.”

Norihiko and his father were so disappointed with me they refused to speak. Watanabe, seated behind them in the Land Cruiser, made bland comments about how he had grown up in Central Honshu, on the plains, and that it had been very flat and that he couldn’t imagine climbing such a high mountain as Everest.

“We don’t have many mountains in the Kanto region!”

Norihiko nodded. “Are the reporters waiting at the guest house?”

I leaned forward and said, “I don’t think so.”

“Why?”

“Because the country is in turmoil.”

Norihiko shook his head. “I don’t hear turmoil.”

We drove through narrow streets with three- and four-story brown stucco and mud tenements on either side. There were thickets of wiring affixed to the outside of the buildings and dense black cables drooped from pole to pole illuminating, at every other apex, a dim white light. We didn’t see a soul. Kathmandu’s roads were usually a throng of pedestrians, bicyclists, and rolling pushcart vendors of lottery tickets, fruit, chewing gum, and skewered meat. The streets were empty.

“Martial law,” I said.

Norihiko shook his head. “I summited Everest — ”

“Well, it was a team — ”

“The first sightless person in history!”

“I’m sorry, but the king — ”

“Who cares about the king!”

Watanabe suddenly bowed and made a gesture urging calm. “Please, please, those sentiments are dangerous right now.”

As if to illustrate his point, our convoy was now slowing down. Two dozen soldiers and a few policemen were gathered at the tailgate of an army truck. An officer in a red cap had stepped out from the crowd and was waving us to a halt.

Our driver rolled down his window, and a hurried and loud conversation in Nepali ensued. The driver then unlocked our doors and they were opened, the Nepali officer shining a flashlight into the interior. I could see the rest of the soldiers behind him also gazing at us. They looked frightened.

“Did you tell them who I am?” Norihiko was asking.

Nobody responded while we waited for the Nepali officer to conclude we were indeed foreigners and not Nepali nationals violating the curfew.

At the Kathmandu Guest House, a white and yellow stucco hotel in the Thamel district whose two wings flanked a surprisingly florid little garden, Mr. Ozaki led his son to their rooms while I handled our check-in and Watanabe conversed in Nepali with the staff. The airport was closed, I was informed, as were the roads in and out of the city. Norihiko’s sponsors, the representatives from the sports drink company, had not arrived from Japan.

I wondered how the rest of the team — how Yoshiko — would make it to Kathmandu.

I was relieved to find the kitchen still open, and then went to Norihiko’s suite, where I found him seated on an embroidered chair before a green drapery that covered one entire wall. After the perpetual frigidity of base camp, the stuffy heat of the room was almost intoxicating. The producer and cameraman from the documentary crew had set up next to the dining table, and had bathed Norihiko in yellow light. His gashes and bruises were somehow washed out by the light so that he didn’t look so bad. I wondered if there was a window behind the curtain or if this was something they had set up for the shot.

When Norihiko was seated, as he was now, he tended to slide down in his chair, making his hips and calves seem gigantic, almost out of proportion to his slight chest and flat stomach. He was picking his ear.

“Do you want to order some dinner?” I asked.

“What about the reception?”

I sighed. I bowed despite Norihiko not being able to see my gesture. “I’m afraid the reception has been rescheduled.”

“For when?”

“I’m not sure,” I told him. “Perhaps when martial law is lifted.” I had disciplined myself never to look at the camera, but I was now acutely aware of how my answers might seem: a toady trying to toady his way out of failing even as a toady.

There was a knock and then the jiggling of the knob as Mr. Ozaki let himself into the suite. Upon seeing me he nodded. “So what’s the plan?”

“You mean to get out of here? The airport is —”

“No, the media plan.”

Media plan? There was no media plan. We had been soundly defeated by a far larger news event. How could we compete with a murdered king and queen? I couldn’t say this, so I took a deep breath through my teeth and nodded. “It’s difficult, isn’t it?”

I knew instantly I had said the wrong word.

“Difficult?” Norihiko exclaimed. “Difficult is climbing Mount Everest when YOU CAN’T SEE.”

“Of course, of course,” I agreed. “This isn’t difficult like that is difficult. This is —”

“Not difficult?” Norihiko suggested.

“No, it’s complicated. We have a very big event that has happened, and reporters, even those who came because of you, have been diverted.”

Mr. Ozaki nodded. “Let’s order some dinner.”

Norihiko seemed momentarily distracted by the prospect of a freshly prepared meal, and I excused myself and went back down to the lobby to see about getting the rest of the team — Yoshiko — out of base camp and into Kathmandu.

My phone couldn’t pick up any signal, and we had left the sat phones back with the rest of the gear. I asked the hotel if they had an international landline, and they pointed to a pair of wooden booths at the end of the end of a line of red velvet chairs with wooden arms. Stepping into those phone booths was like stepping into a time capsule. I got the feeling nobody had used them in years, and this seemed confirmed by the graffiti etched into the walnut: “Vertical Ascent ’94,” “1992 Summiteers for Jesus,” “Nippon-Nepali Friendship Climb,” “April-May ’89.” I found the sat phone number in my phone and used the rotary dial to get an international line and then the Iridium pre-fix and then our number.

After a dozen beeps, Yoshiko answered. I had been hoping she would be the one to pick up.

“Where are you?” I asked.

They had come down to Gorak Shep on foot. They were going to have to trek down one more hill station to try to catch Land Cruisers back to Kathmandu. But the Sherpas were anxious. Because of all the rumors, they were reluctant to venture down to the more densely populated Pahad valleys.

“How is Norihiko?” She asked. “He must be so happy!”

I told her that he was disappointed, that the regicide had overshadowed his achievement. “I feel responsible.”

She murmured in assent.

“There was nothing I could do,” I insisted. “And Norihiko and his father are blaming me.”

She didn’t respond to that, instead telling me the team was holding up pretty well. They felt isolated and a little anxious. There was talk that there would be a civil war, that India was going to invade, and the only news they were receiving were the scraps they could pick up on the sat phone.

I told her what I knew.

“Take care of Norihiko,” she urged. “Think of what he accomplished.”

How could I forget?

“I miss you,” I blurted out.

“Oh,” she giggled. “I miss you too. It seems like a long time ago already, doesn’t it?”

“What? Base camp?”

“Yes, all of that, playing soccer with the Sherpas. Taking walks together.”

“We’ll be together soon,” I said.

After I hung up, I went through my phone, searching for the mobile numbers of some reporters I knew were in town. I dialed several but couldn’t get through. I tried their international editors back in Tokyo and reached an editor I knew from *Aera*, the *Asahi* weekly, who immediately asked me what I knew about the regicide.

“I know what you know,” I said, “But I am here with Norihiko, the blind climber.”

“Did he make it?”

“Yes, and he’s here, in Kathmandu. He’s available.”

“Thank god for your climber,” the editor said. “Otherwise we wouldn’t have anyone in Kathmandu to cover this royal murder.”

“So, can you tell your reporter to come?”

“He’s busy. He has to file on the murders. Maybe after he files.”

I told him I couldn’t guarantee that Norihiko would still be available.

“I’ll take that chance,” the editor said.

It had surprised me that the casino at Yak & Yeti was open despite the turmoil. Nepalese were not allowed to gamble, so perhaps the hotels had decided they might as well continue to take money from foreigners trapped in the capital. I had run into Norihiko and his father as they were on their

way out. They had eaten several hamburgers each — they were ravenous since descending the mountain — and Norihiko insisted they hit the casino.

The Yak & Yeti casino seemed somehow improvised, as if the casino were merely today's function and tomorrow there would be a wedding or dentists' convention held in the same space. The tables were set up in three rows down the middle, and beyond a velvet rope and stanchions was a sad little buffet of samosas, fried chicken, curry, salad, and naan where the documentary producer and cameraman waited. They were not allowed to film inside the casino.

Norihiko was an avid gambler, a trait that would have been more easily managed had he enjoyed the same games of chance as his father. But his father was strictly a roulette player while Norihiko insisted on blackjack. I had to sit with him at the table, relate to him his cards, what the dealer was showing and even what the other players had, before he made his decisions to stand or stake a card.

"You have a king and an eight. Dealer is showing a six. The other players have a ten and a five and a two and a six."

I don't know why he needed this information, since his decisions were completely irrational.

"I want to feel the dealer's face," Norihiko said.

"What?"

"To feel his face. To see if he is honest. Ask him."

In English, I explained the request to the dealer who maintained his smile but pretended not to understand.

I repeated it.

The dealer shook his head.

"He is not comfortable with that."

Norihiko grimaced.

"Fine. I'll take a card."

"Wait, I said you have a king and an —"

"I want one."

The dealer, an Indian man with long hair tied in a ponytail, shrugged and dealt his bust card.

"YOUSTUPIDMORON." Norihiko would shout in Japanese as the dealer dealt himself a face card and busted.

He was a spectacularly awful player, and quickly lost the fifty thousand yen he had cashed. He had already had three scotch and waters and ordered another before turning to me.

"How much money do you have?"

I had a few hundred US dollars on me.

“Change it. I’ll give it back.”

At these casinos, you had to change money at the teller. It took seven minutes for Norihiko to lose the chips I had brought back.

“Maybe blackjack isn’t your game.” I said.

“Do you have an ATM card?”

I nodded. Of course he couldn’t see me. “I do.”

“Get some cash. My luck is changing.”

I thought about what Yoshiko had said. Was this taking care of Norihiko?

I took out another 35,000 Nepalese rupees and cashed that.

Norihiko bet it all on one hand and lost.

“Maybe you should slow down,” I suggested.

He pursed his lips and shook his head.

His father walked over. “How are you doing?”

Norihiko didn’t respond.

“He’s losing.”

“How much?” Mr. Ozaki asked.

I felt it was inappropriate for me to have been keeping track.

“Nothing, a few thousand yen,” Norihiko said. “Lend me some more.”

Mr. Ozaki looked at me and shrugged his approval.

“I already —”

I sighed and went back to the ATM again, withdrawing another 35,000 rupees.

When Norihiko had lost this, he again demanded another loan.

“You work for me,” he said.

I said that technically, I worked for the sports drink company. “And you are an awful gambler.”

“You try gambling when you can’t see.”

“No, that’s not it. It’s that you keep making bad decisions.”

“You don’t know what it’s like,” he said, “You have no idea what it is like to not be able to see.”

I went back to the ATM and withdrew another 35,000.

There was a steady wind that night, a growling howl. I would have preferred the usual shouts and drunken calls of a busy urban evening. Instead the citizens were hunkered down, a population seething? Festering? Slowly coming to their anger? There was the hush, broken only by the occasional truck driving up the nearby street, the sound like a tide washing up, washing up.

The next morning, Mr. Watanabe from the embassy appeared in the dining room where I was having coffee with tinned milk, poached eggs, and fluffy

white bread. He relayed the ambassador's regrets at not receiving Norihiko-san at the airport. He would make time this afternoon for a short meeting and tea at the embassy. They would present Norihiko with an Imperial Friendship Cross, the highest civilian medal that a Japanese diplomat could bestow. The embassy would put out a press release, and could I inform my contacts?

I told him that I thought that would be fine, but I wanted to check with Norihiko first.

I called Norihiko on the house phone and told him that they would give him a medal, and I played up slightly its importance, saying that this was the first time it had ever been awarded to an athlete or blind person. The ambassador must have had his hands full, sending cables back to Tokyo, conducting briefings, I said. For him to take time out to meet with Norihiko and give him a medal was a great honor.

I had no idea what the ambassador was actually doing. Why did Japan even have an embassy in Kathmandu? Evacuating dead climbers and bailing out Japanese kids jailed for smoking dope, I imagined. Japan and Nepal didn't exactly share deep cultural or financial connections.

Norihiko said, okay, he would go. "Is it a large medal?" he asked. "Grand?"

I said that I believed it was.

"Good." He seemed satisfied.

The rest of the morning I spent in my room, discreetly trying to avoid Norihiko and his father, lest I get dragged back out to the casino, or accused of not generating enough interest in their story.

When I went out to see about some lunch, I saw a pile of duffels, steel cases, and oxygen canister racks in the lobby.

"Japanese?" I asked the man behind the front desk.

"Yes."

"Many Japanese?"

"Yes."

I ran down the red carpeted hallway to Norihiko's room where I burst in and found Norihiko seated in his chair, a half-dozen reporters gathered around him. He regaled them with his account of the Khumbu Icefall, of his leaping crevasses and climbing vertical faces, the frost, the hypoxia as they approached the Hillary Step. He was a wonderful raconteur, in his element here. He was in the bright glow of a half-dozen camera lights. Seated beside him, half in shadow, was Yoshiko. Somehow, the team had made it to Kathmandu.

And the Japanese press had refocused on its original mission.

I bowed at Yoshiko but she seemed preoccupied listening to Norihiko. She was nodding slightly, and holding a glass of water with a straw in it that she lifted to Norihiko's lips. He dipped his head slightly to drink. She knew exactly where to hold the water so that he could reach it with little effort.

Mr. Ozaki was standing to the rear of the room, and when I walked over to him he nodded at me, as if somehow this press conference was my doing. I bowed as if accepting his compliment, and I thought, Why shouldn't I take credit? I had been unfairly blamed for the difficulties.

After I ushered the reporters out of the room, offering more access in the next few days to a few magazine writers for bigger features in the coming months, I returned to find Yoshiko helping Norihiko remove his sweater. He could have done this himself, I realized, but he seemed to enjoy Yoshiko's assistance. I had planned to discuss the media plan with Norihiko, and of course to speak to Yoshiko, to ask her if perhaps she wanted to join me for dinner or a drink, but as I watched the two of them — she was now removing his hiking boots and socks — I didn't feel like these were appropriate conversations.

Finally, she left the room to gather some of the equipment that had come in with the team's convoy. I followed her to a vast pile of duffel bags and packs in the little room off the lobby, amid the red velvet chairs and near the landline phone I had used to call her a few days ago.

I asked how she was doing, how the trip had been.

"Slow, too many roadblocks." She was digging through the duffels until she found her own.

"Well, you made it."

I wanted to hug her, to make clear to her that we should be celebrating.

"Yes." She picked up her bag and slung it over her shoulder.

"Do you want to get a drink?" I asked.

She shook her head. "I'm fine."

"How about later?"

"Busy."

She headed back down the hall. She stopped when she realized I was following her, looked back at me, and then opened the door to Norihiko's room.

I stood in the doorway, beginning to understand.

She helped Norihiko up and guided him by the arm into the bathroom, where I could hear her draw a bath.

She asked if he liked the water very hot.

She closed the door and I could not hear his answer.

We set off in mid-afternoon, in a pair of embassy vehicles. Along Thamel Road, crowds of Nepali youth with shaved heads were milling around, looking agitated. I didn't know why they were shaving their heads or whose side they were on, but they were impatient and angry.

"They are mourning," Mr. Watanabe explained. "Very sad about their king. They are saying that it was the influence of the foreigners. That the crown prince had been corrupted by foreign influences."

"So they are angry at foreigners?" I asked.

"Yes, very angry." Mr. Watanabe nodded.

As we approached the intersection at Lainchaur, the crowds grew denser, hundreds and then many hundreds of young, shorn men, marching toward the statue of a bull in the intersection and the gated old Royal Palace grounds. There was a steady murmur as they walked, a collective growl of disappointment.

As we drove past, they turned, attempting to gaze through our tinted windows. One bottle was thrown, bouncing harmlessly off the tail-gate.

We sped into the intersection and turned left, uniformed police pulling aside a metal barricade to let us through. We were in a diplomatic quarter of some kind, the British Embassy and Indian Embassy, among a row of colonial-era, white stone buildings, squatted behind hedges and fat-leafed Sal trees. The Japanese Embassy was less imposing than the English or Indian compounds, and our Land Cruisers drove up a one-lane circular drive, and stopped beneath a stone portico. We climbed out, and were greeted by the deeply bowing protocol secretary and three Japanese newspaper photographers and two television news crews here to shoot Norihiko. The protocol secretary ushered us into the mezzanine, and then told us the meeting etiquette. We would be seated in the Chrysanthemum Lounge and there would be joined after a few minutes by Ambassador Toyama. We would visit with him for about twenty minutes, during which the photographers were welcome to continue to take photos. After that, for ten minutes, print and television reporters would be ushered in for the medal presentation, and to ask a few more questions of the ambassador and Norihiko. The angry mob and their discontented buzz were now forgotten.

Norihiko seemed pleased by this hubbub and paused to give a brief interview to a Fujisankei television reporter.

"What kept you going?"

"The children, the children who can't see. I did it for them." He nodded.

He seemed so humble, so self-effacing. Who wouldn't be inspired by his story?

We took seats in the lounge on rectangular chairs with bowed wooden arms. Norihiko and the ambassador were to make up one corner with Mr. Ozaki next to Norihiko. The rest of us were pulled back, the camera crews, including the documentary crew, in a vast, dark scrum on one side of the room and Norihiko and his father, seated quietly by themselves in a bright cone of light on the other side. For the first few minutes of our wait, we were in a state of high anticipation, expecting the ambassador imminently. After about five minutes, the protocol secretary withdrew, and when he returned, he was accompanied by a squat man in a blue suit.

Norihiko and his father quickly stood up and bowed deeply.

The protocol secretary introduced us to Ambassador Toyama. He said the Ambassador could only stay a few minutes: the protests had turned into riots, and those shaven-headed lads we had seen were now clashing with army and police in front of the Royal Palace. The reporters and TV crews were filing out.

Ambassador Toyama bowed.

The three men sat down, and posed for our documentary crew for an uncomfortable few minutes.

The ambassador asked what part of Japan Norihiko was from, where he had gone to school, and if he had ever been to Ecuador. The ambassador's previous posting had been in Quito.

"Mountainous country," the ambassador nodded. "Perhaps for your next expedition?"

Meanwhile, the protocol secretary handed to the ambassador a flat, velvet box. The ambassador stood up and then waited an uncomfortably long time, forgetting that Norihiko couldn't see him.

"Please rise."

The medal was a red, silver, and white cross, almost gothic in shape, hanging from a blue ribbon. It seemed out of place festooned on Norihiko's chest, the ornate bauble just a few centimeters from his ASICS logo.

The ambassador bowed slightly. "On behalf of the Japanese community of Nepal, and the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, I present you with this honor for your efforts and service promoting friendship between Japan and Nepal. Thank you for coming, and I must pass along to you our advisory that Japanese nationals depart Nepal as soon as possible."

The embassy cars that had dropped us off were off on another errand. The protocol secretary urged us to wait while he called for taxis. Norihiko, however, was impatient. It wasn't much more than a kilometer, he pointed out.

“We can walk,” Norihiko reasoned.

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea,” I said.

“I walked up Mt. Everest, I can walk across Kathmandu.”

He set off down the driveway in the wrong direction, toward a black gate and embassy parking lot. He prided himself in not using a stick, and he would have walked straight into the gate if I hadn’t run out and taken him by the shoulder.

“It’s this way,” I said, urging him around.

He adjusted and began strolling down the driveway, holding onto my arm.

The journalists and camera crew, satisfied they had their shot and nervous at venturing out into a riot, lingered behind us. Mr. Ozaki and the documentary crew had joined us as we retraced our route past the embassies and the security men standing behind barricades. The uniformed soldiers seemed surprised that we were walking away from the secure area, but as I looked ahead, I didn’t sense any grave danger. We kept to the sidewalks alongside a mossy wall as we rounded a bend, the high altitude Kathmandu air typically smoggy from charcoal fires and petrol exhaust.

Up ahead, we could hear cheering, as if we were outside of a soccer stadium.

“You made me go to the embassy for this?” Norihiko said, holding up his medal. “It’s tiny.”

Perhaps it felt small? It looked impressive enough.

I stopped, allowing Mr. Ozaki and the camera crew to pass us. I could see a column of Nepalese policemen with helmets, shields, and cudgels had formed up ahead of the barricades.

“They gave you a medal. What else did you want?”

“A bigger medal. A reception.”

“We’re in the middle of a national emergency. They can’t drop everything to throw you a party.”

He didn’t respond, but began walking again, somehow knowing to skirt where I was standing.

“Do your job,” he said. “I did mine.”

He was the most difficult client I had ever had. And I had successfully put thoughts of Yoshiko out of my mind until now, but that image of her closing the door so they could be alone now recurred. This was the first time I felt like crying since I was a boy. “Norihiko, that’s it. I quit.”

“You can’t quit.”

“Why not?”

“Because I can’t see. How will I get back to the hotel?”

He had a point. Mr. Ozaki and the camera crew had gone ahead and were out of sight, and Norihiko had noticed moments before I did that the chanting and cheering of the mob was coming closer, and he seemed to detect the whistle of an incoming bottle before I could hear it. It exploded on the pavement a few meters from us.

I looked around. We were in a sort of no-man's-land between the police and riotous mob. About thirty meters separated both sides, and we were standing beneath the arcing trajectory of stones hurled at the police.

"Come with me," I said, grabbing Norihiko by the shoulder and pulling him toward the ranks of rioting youths. I made the calculation it was better to be on the side launching the projectiles than the side receiving them. We had just broken through the angry ranks, our obviously foreign appearance — and Norihiko's bright, gaudy, actually quite grand-looking medal — making us, for the moment, a distraction rather than the enemy. Youths in grey, button-up shirts turned sideways so we could pass through.

But as soon as we were through, shots were fired. There was a crush from behind as the rioters began a retreat, knocking me down. Sturdy Norihiko with his lower center of gravity and general athleticism stayed upright, but was being carried away from me in the tide of the retreating youths.

He was calling for me. "Daisuke? Daisuke?"

The crowd was panicking as young men began running from the police. A pitched battle was breaking out around us. The police were charging; the mob was frightened. Norihiko had lost his bearings; he was jostled, suddenly looking helpless.

"Daisuke, help me!"

I managed to stand back up and pushed between quilted jackets to get closer to him. I was so close, I could have reached out and grabbed his shoulder. I could have said his name and he would have known which way to go.

I could have saved him.

He was reaching out with his right hand, as if searching for me. I didn't say a word.