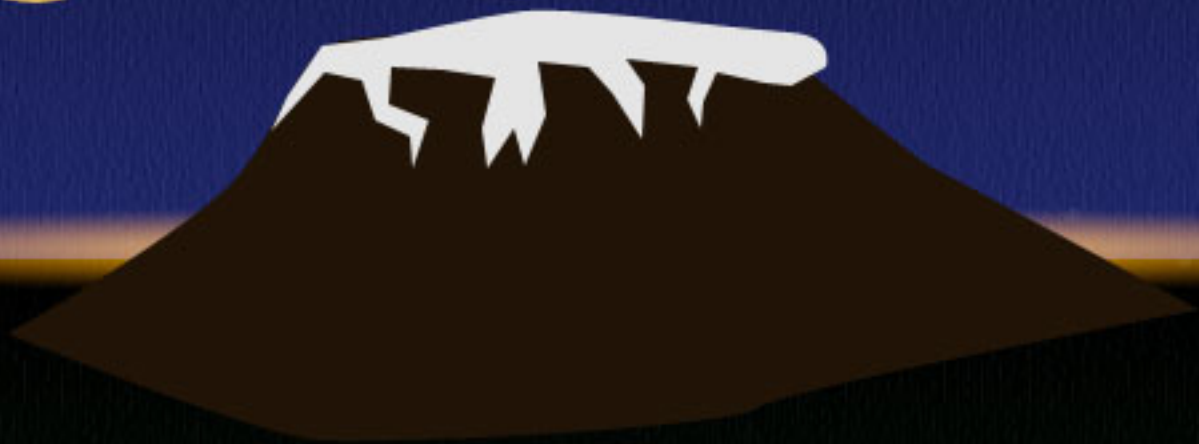


The Bros
of
Kilimanjaro



by
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Out in the cold black radiation that is far, far from you or me, stars live, bigger than any dream and hotter than any lust. They burn and shine with heavy hearts of dense metals. They are fearsome and proud gods of light, but they are not without need. They need us to look at them. Yes, to look at them and to name them and lavish them with attention. Without this attention, they are merely burning up their fuel into eternity and winking out in a cold nothing where there is not even a sound.

As far as they are from us, so they are far from one another. As we wish upon them, they rejoice and burble with jets of happy magnetic fire.

So it was that the Dog Star twinkled, his Pup circling around him, ever loyal. There was, however, a dim patch in his dense, incandescent heart. He was without the grand love that he needed, though he was proud to be among the brightest stars as viewed from Earth. He wanted to not need it. He pretended he didn't need it, but still the empty places sank and sucked at him and he knew that he was forever in want of attention.

Well, not counting the Pup, of course.

He called to the mountain, the great Kilimanjaro, to counsel him, for he knew the mountain to be wise and widely loved.

“Mountain,” he said. “Why are you so loved? They worship you and climb you. Is there something terribly wrong with me?”

The mountain stirred but was slow to respond because he was trying his best to be dormant.

“Dog Star,” Kilimanjaro rumbled slowly. “They will see you. They are coming. It is the high season. Soon from now...” At this the mountain trailed off, and the Dog Star was left to wonder how long he could be in want of in a thing that was perpetually just out of reach.

It was around August 2009 when my friend Mike first approached me about climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro. I had just finished a yearlong quest to complete a full Ironman distance triathlon and then broken up with my girlfriend. I was without direction, and a man without direction can often find himself celebrating too much and achieving too little. I don't like that feeling.

Instead, I try to say yes to anything that sounds like adventure. So, I said yes to Kilimanjaro. We booked the trip, booked our flights, and then did whatever pleased us for ten months while we waited for the trip to start.

But what pleased us?

Well, we are men in our mid thirties. We're buddies. We like drinking, sports, and women, but we are not abusers, fanatics, or cads. We both own our own businesses. Mike does air quality inspection. I do graphic design and web sites. We are friends, in large part because we have many things in common, but one most important above all others. That being that neither of us has a long term girl, and we are both, if I may speak for Mike, somewhat distressed about it.

I like to think that I am dashing and attractive, so I tell people that I am. Mike is good looking enough, and spends a lot of his time lifting things in gyms. He's kind of muscley as a result. I'm a little pudgier, but I race bicycles and run often. So, we have jobs, we're reasonably well read, we're relatively tall, and we each have a little money.

We are both usually seeing someone, but not for long. I have no solid theories on why this should be so, but it is. For some reason, we appear to be ripe for the sampling but sour for the long purchase. We may have ourselves to blame. As I say, I am not sure.

Soon the trip drew close, and we still hadn't gotten our necessary shots. We went to the county health office to get this issue handled, and that is where I unexpectedly had some philosophical insights on the nature of time.

Many philosophers have debated the nature of time. Plato, for instance, thought that time was marked by a celestial clockwork set in motion by a serpent in a top hat. Scientists have also wrestled with the issue, most notably Albert Einstein, who said, famously, "God does not have a watch". While waiting to be immunized I gave the matter some consideration, and I now am attempting to believe that time is like clothes. Sometimes it is too tight, and other times it is too loose, but rarely ever does time fit perfectly thanks to the ever-changing nature of the universe's own waistline.

This is my newest theory of time. I'm hoping it will replace my former, less elegant-sounding theory: Doug The Time Chicken.

Doug The Time Chicken runs perpetually through the Barnyard of Infinity at varying speeds based on how much fun you are having. If you're really having a great time, Doug speeds up to the point of actual flight. Hence the oft-heard phrase, "Doug flies when you're having sex, unless something awkward happens."

I experienced the other extreme of Doug's movement when I entered the Dekalb County Health Department's building in order to get immunized. Doug slowed to a barely-perceptible crawl. He's known to do this in any government building, so I expected it, but was nonetheless disheartened.

Mike and I each took a number, and sat down to wait. Then we waited again. We talked about everything there was to talk about and when the news ran out we just sat and stared.

We were told that someone called the Travel Nurse would be along shortly. I guess it takes a different kind of nurse to administer the shots necessary to travel to Africa than it takes to give kids shots for school. Many kids and their mothers cycled through the little waiting room, got their shots, and left. Mike and I just waited and waited.

I checked on Doug the Time Chicken, and he'd lapsed into a full-on coma: beak wide, tongue lolling.

Just then, the Travel Nurse appeared as if out of thin air. There was some discussion between her and one of the other nurses about how long we'd been waiting, and some pointing at the wall clock. Doug opened a single beady eye and looked around. I made a mental note to tell the Travel Nurse about him if I got the chance.

I did get a chance, as it turned out, when she led me to an examining room, but once I got there I forgot all about temporal poultry. I was confronted with a truly unholy poster that graphically depicted children with varying forms of diseases. The kid with smallpox was particularly terrifying, his mouth frozen forever in a painful wail. No less harrowing was the cervical cancer photo on another poster. Thanks for that, Dekalb County. Those images will haunt my dreams for years to come.

The Travel Nurse led me back to the waiting area, wide-eyed and fearful thanks to the horror show images in the examining room, and then performed a series of mystical entries and exits involving the three doors there. It seemed that she had the ability to enter a room from any door she liked, regardless of which one she had previously exited. I guess that's why she's called the Travel Nurse.

Finally, after several hours of children rolling around the waiting room floor and one who peed on her mother's leg, the nurses consented to give Mike and me our shots. The Travel Nurse objected to my characterization of the affair as a stabbing, but laughed when I sang "Don't be fooled by these shots that I got, I'm still, I'm still Jimmy from the block."

At last, we were deemed immunized and free to go, a mere three hours or so after we'd arrived. We were vaccinated against Typhoid, Yellow Fever, Hepatitis A and B, and I even got a tetanus shot. We were scheduled for a return trip to get yet more Hepatitis shots. I hoped I'd get a chance to develop the Time Chicken theory a bit further but our second visit was mercifully much faster.

After that, we bought all the things we'd need according to a checklist provided to us by our guide, packed it up, and went to the airport, each with one bulging duffel bag and one backpack as the checklist set forth. We wrestled the bags to the check-in counter and waited our turn. A man joined us in line, standing just behind us and our four bags.

"You guys going on a trip?" he asked.

The Dog Star was anxious still, though he knew that the mountain's words were true.

He fretted about himself, but he saw that it was, indeed, the high season. People were coming to the mountain in their planes and heaving heavy sighs at the distance. They had left their loves at home and traveled to see the great mountain, and all they had to do was look up to see him, the Dog Star, waiting there as bright as anything. Surely it was, indeed, just a waiting game, a numbers game.

He supposed he could wait a bit more.

The process of flying to Africa takes so long that it should have its own special word, like “summiting” does for climbing to the top of a mountain. “Arriving” just doesn’t seem to cut it. That said, we arrived and were herded out the back of the plane directly onto the tarmac. I had never walked down a set of steps from a plane like that before, having historically been delivered from plane to terminal by means of an articulated people tube. It was kind of neat, clanging down the steps.

I expected Tanzania to be hot -- like, Africa hot -- but it was cool like a fall night back home. There was a light breeze. A few electric lights dotted the landscape, but otherwise there was just a lot of inky darkness. Occasionally the breeze blew an acrid smell into my nose that I couldn’t immediately place, but it had something of a trash-on-fire bouquet.

We were herded to the terminal by workers waving hands to show us where to go. Once inside, there was a small semicircle of people holding placards with names on them and a long pair of lines forming at a window where Tanzanian visas were being sold. Mike and I both got in line, he in the right one and I in the left.

I picked the wrong line.

Both lines moved slowly, but mine moved at a snails pace because it was being perpetually interrupted by people acting as agents for travelers who were not standing in line. I guess those travelers had arranged somehow beforehand to have these agents speed the process.

The agent would step up to the window with a couple of passports, hand them through with some cash, and then wait for the worker inside to process them. I wished I had an agent. Mike was done getting his visa long before I was.

Finally it was my turn. I paid \$100 USD for my visa. The worker kerchunked my passport with his shiny metal kerchunker, and I turned to see that Mike had found both our bags. This was excellent news. We feared losing all the equipment we'd bought, mostly because we wanted to use it all at least once, having gone through the trouble of buying it all. We grabbed our bags and walked out into the main terminal.

There we were greeted with a much larger semicircle of held placards bearing a myriad of names and the pungent smell of sweaty bodies. We found our man, then waited a while for him to find everyone else, piled into a minivan, and set out for the hotel a few hours away. I nodded off during the drive in what I'm told was a most undignified leaning, lolling, snoring manner.

Soon we were at the hotel's large metal gates. They swung heavily open and we drove inside, then formed a line at the check in desk as some men unloaded the van. After some more waiting and paper signing, we were awarded our keys.

"Now you will get a tomato sandwich," the lady behind the counter said, giving us directions to the dining area where said tomato sandwich could be had. Mike and I looked at each other, and wordlessly agreed to forgo tomato sandwiches for the night.

We also got directions to the gift shop, or "Giftee Shop" as the lady pronounced it. We bought water bottles there, then headed for our room. Once inside, we picked out our beds and prepared to sleep for the first time in Africa, being careful to use bottled water to brush our teeth as we'd been told.

My chief fear was that there would be some reason that I failed to make the summit of the mountain, like a genetic disposition against altitude. I didn't want to drink any of the local water for fear that my insides would war against themselves and keep me from my goal. How could I ever go home if I failed to make the top, especially if it was because of explosive diarrhea? The horror!

These matters were heavy on my mind, but I fell asleep easily, probably thanks to the sleeping pill.

I do not remember any dreams from that night, but Mike reported in the morning that I had been "grunting expressively". He then performed an impression of me that sounded like someone attempting to relate a message about where it hurts to their dentist around a mouthful of cotton wadding.

We went to breakfast in the dining hall, which was a large open-sided structure built inside the compound of the hotel. I fretted about which things I could safely eat and which would make me sick. I avoided eggs, but drank coffee with milk.

Mike is a bird enthusiast, having picked it up as a kid from his family. He's able to make a decent guess at the species of any bird on sight, and was hoping to see enough birds on our trip to pump his total number up over 500 birds seen in his lifetime. At breakfast he spotted an African Pied Wagtail, and made a note about it despite his self-consciousness about being a bird watcher in the first place. He thinks it is a nerdy thing to do, but as someone who regularly dresses himself in garish skin tight Lycra and boards a bicycle, I think it's a fairly cool hobby.

Some other small birds flitted about.

"House sparrows," Mike said, eating a piece of toast. "We have those at home."

"Caw," said an African Pied Wagtail.

Behind Mike, a hotel worker was dipping a bucket into a fountain in a courtyard, then using the fountain water to mop the floors, and further behind her, the mountain rose into the sky, obscured by clouds. I wished we could see the peak, but the clouds made this like trying to see someone's head from inside their sweater.

Soon, breakfast was over and we collected our bags and went to see about finding our guides. I checked us out of the hotel and rented a safety deposit box to hold our cellphones and such while we were on the mountain. Once I was done checking out at the window with the hotel clerk, I was directed ten feet away to a different window with a safety deposit clerk. I paid eight dollars (one dollar a day) and was given a key and pointed up the nearby stairs.

Up there I found a Masai tribesman on a couch that looked out over a balcony, over the hotel compound's walls, and over the countryside beyond. He was wrapped in his traditional colorful wraps, and two empty pill bottles sat on the couch next to him. His earlobes had been long ago pierced and then stretched, and they dangled in loose loops from either ear. He appeared to be wearing pieces of car tires strapped to his feet as shoes.

"Burgers?" he asked.

"I'm looking for the safety deposit boxes," I said.

"Burgers." he repeated, standing up.

I found myself at a loss. As I had only just eaten breakfast I wasn't interested in a burger at present. I walked around the open air hallway looking for something that resembled safety deposit boxes. The Masai man followed me and politely continued his campaign to interest me in burgers by repeating the word at intervals.

Eventually I located two steel doors with a heavy padlock on them and figured I was probably in the right place.

“Burgers,” the Masai man said, satisfied.

He opened the padlock, and I went inside and pushed cell phones and house keys and so forth into my box, then locked it up. The Masai tribesman went back to his couch, seemingly happy to have helped another hapless *mzungu* (the Swahili word for “white person”) find his way.

Downstairs, I found Mike and met a few of our group members. The first was Nicole from Portland. She was tall, lean, of fair skin and hair, and smiled a lot. She seemed quite nice. Next I met Mike from Maine, and then Buga, one of our guides, and Chombo the chief guide. I then met Colin and Christie, a couple from DC.

“You look like Schwarzenegger,” Buga said to me.

“Ah, good. I wasn’t sure I was pulling it off,” I told him. This made Nicole laugh, probably because I look nothing whatsoever like Schwarzenegger except that we both have arms and legs.

Chombo, the chief guide, looked a bit oafish to me, but kind enough. We all loaded our gear into two 4x4 trucks with Mike, Maine Mike, Nicole and myself in one. The other held two college-aged girls and the couple from DC. We drove for a while on black top roads and I got my first look at the Tanzanian countryside in the daylight.

Tanzania is dusty and brown. I am tempted to say this about Africa, but I realize that I’ve only been to one country there so it’s not really fair to characterize the whole continent based on my experiences in Tanzania. Still, I think of my trip as being a trip to Africa more than just Tanzania.

Anyway, Tanzania is dusty and brown. The acrid, burning smell I detected upon my first whiffs of the cool breezes and supposed might be burning trash proved to be, in fact, burning trash. Everywhere there were small smoldering piles of this and that.

Bouncing along in the 4x4, I noticed that the window that my shoulder pounded against on each bump bore a Britney Spears sticker. It was comforting, in a way, to know that Britney had made it this far before me.

Chief guide Chombo sat in the front passenger seat. He was affable, wearing a beige hat bearing the legend “Serengeti will never die”, and holding a small cell phone in one hand. He proved over the course of the trip to rarely be without his cell phone. He introduced the driver, whose name was Khaled, then scolded Khaled for not saying hello sooner.

“He was so busy, he forget to say *jambo*!” Chombo explained with a smile, “*jambo*” being Swahili for “hello”.

We, the *mzungus*, all bantered a bit about what had led us to Kilimanjaro. After some time, we stopped in a small town.

“Anyone need bathroom?” asked Chombo. No one did.

“Good,” he said. “Is better to stay in the car and watch bags.”

With that, he and Khaled clambered out, leaving us looking at one another. Outside the vehicle, a man in Masai garb stood nearby, eyeballing us with unabashed interest. One side of his face hung pendulously down in a dual droop, as though he had a scrotum attached to his left jaw. It gave us something to talk about, though I think we all felt rude for noticing it in the first place.

The town we’d stopped in was just a few buildings situated alongside the road. Chickens ran here and there, and groups of men dotted the landscape, talking idly to one another. If you saw that many people hanging around an American town, you’d think that there was about to be

a meeting or a show or something, but that's just how it is in Tanzania. There are lots of people hanging about, chatting. Perhaps they are talking about what the chickens are up to, or what they can do for the guy with the face that looks like a scrotum is attached to it.

After some time, Chombo and Khaled returned, clambered back into the truck, and we motored on. Another hour of very bumpy driving passed, my shoulder banging against poor Britney, she frozen forever in mid dance step.

I had an idea.

“Chombo,” I called. “Can I drive?”

Chombo's eyes opened wide.

“Are you good?” he asked.

“I'm better than good, baby!”

He considered it, then said “On the way back,” and smiled.

Nicole, Mike, and Maine Mike all laughed and joked with me about it, and chatting made the time pass more easily.

Eventually we arrived at the park's gate where we all signed in. We were each given a boxed lunch, and sat down in the grass to eat. The group was comprised of myself, my friend Mike, Maine Mike, Nicole, Colin and Christie from DC, and Becki and Ali from UC Davis. We all got to know each other as we stood around and ate our boxed lunches. It seemed to me like a good group.

After quite a while of waiting and some awkward familiarization with a pit latrine style bathroom, we were herded back into the cars for some more bouncing along dirt roads, eventually ending up at a dead end. Our gear was handed off the truck, we all slathered ourselves with sunscreen, and we were at last actually hiking up the mountain. We talked amicably

amongst ourselves as we climbed away from the dirt road dead end toward our first night's camp.

Nicole said that Khaled had suggested that he might see her back at the hotel in a few days. I tried the pairing out in my mind and figured it for a long shot, but perhaps Khaled had a wealth of game and was merely waiting for the right moment to turn on the charm. He'd seemed pretty tight-lipped to me.

"I don't think he knows I'm a lesbian," said Nicole.

Poor Khaled.

The soil was dusty dark brown where it could be seen crazing up the hill, a crack in the thick green of the foliage, which was thick and full of birds. Mike either identified the birds or became annoyed with them, depending on how well they presented themselves. Chombo even pointed out a monkey with long white and black hairs. I called to the monkey that we should be friends, but there was no response and it was hidden too well behind some leaves to gauge its reaction.

"Colobus monkey," offered Chombo, then he plodded away again, cellphone ever in hand. We followed, *polepole* ("slowly).

After a relatively easy three to four hours of walking, we reached the first camp. We picked our tents, Nicole and Mike each getting their own, single tent. Gear stowed, we gathered in the dining tent. By the time the food came, though, I was exhausted and excused myself after just a bowl of soup. Some time later, Mike crawled into our tent, bringing some remarks about the quantity and quality of the food I had missed out on. I shared a few rather rude thoughts with him about people who wake their tent-mates for no good reason.

And so passed our first day in the park.

Overhead in the black sky, the Dog Star saw the Earth revolve, saw the mountain come into view on the eastern side of Africa, and saw that no one in the party appeared to be looking upward through the trees for him. He writhed internally with impatience.

He looked ahead to Earth, through the impossible distance, faster even than a ray of his own light, coming to rest as a twinkle in the eye of a noisy bird. Then he, as the bird, called and called for all he was worth, pumping the little bird's chest again and again like a small feathery bellows.

He was proud of the racket, and felt sure that he'd probably been heard. He had, but he was also noticed by the great mountain.

"Away, Dog Star," the mountain chided him "your impatience does not become you."

With that, the mountain gave a great shake of his spirit, and all the animals felt it. They saw the Dog Star cast away, back up into the heavens.

The loud bird in question, for his part, recognized that he was flustered, seemingly for no reason, but the feeling passed and the forest's nighttime business returned to usual.

The next morning we were met outside our tent by two porters with hot water, sugar, and tea bags on a platter. I mixed a mug of hot tea, and as a group we milled around the campsite with our hot mugs. I got a chance to talk to Colin and Christie, the couple from DC, and I liked them both immediately. Over the course of the trip they would prove to be reliable evidence that being married to someone does not mean that your life of fun is over. They were well traveled, well read, and in perpetually excellent spirits.

I guessed Colin to be about six feet tall. He was thickly built, his head topped by a rather reluctant crop of hair which he kept short and hidden by a Cubs baseball cap. Christie was of average height, had blond hair in a ponytail, and was almost always smiling. Her positivity never waned, no matter how dusty or tired we all became.

She'd put on a pair of white canvas shoes instead of her boots and they were already splotted with the brown dust that covered everything. Each footstep produced a puff of dust that floated slowly on the air in hopes of something to filth up.

Before long we all gathered in the mess tent, ate a breakfast of crepes and toast, and set off again, trudging up the brown trail. We followed Chombo, who shuffled along gazing quietly at his cell phone. Apparently he got spotty service on the mountainside, but as we climbed he made more and more phone calls during rest breaks.

Mike asked Chombo what bird was making all the racket the night before, and Chombo identified it as Hartlaub's Turaco. Mike jotted that down. Apparently in the world of bird watching it counts toward your total list of spotted species if you hear a bird's call. Mike says

this keeps people from chasing down very reclusive birds and peopling up their habitats unnecessarily.

During the day on our hikes, porters would charge past us up the trail with large bags on their heads. I thought at first that most of them must be taking some alternate route from camp site to camp site because there was no way that those few men were carrying all our gear, but over time I came to realize that they were just very good at packing gear into those big white bags. Each bag said “Chombo” on it to denote which chief guide it belonged to.

Many porters would say *jambo* as they passed, most often to the California girls, who were friendly and quite happy to say *jambo* back. They were Ali and Becki, both beautiful and twenty-one. If you think of American sweethearts, you will be thinking of them.

Ali had reddish brown hair and was slightly shorter than Becki, whose hair was long and light brown. They were at the tail end of a many week tour of the world together, and were inseparable even when Becki had to take frequent bathroom breaks and Mike and I teased them both about it.

Often toward the end of the day, Chombo would fade back from our party and let some of his junior guides take over. Typically Luca would take over at the front. He tended to walk a lot faster than Chombo did, so I started calling him The Closer. Another junior guide, Buga, preferred to stay near the back and chat with the California girls, or *dada* as he called them. This turned out to be Swahili for “sisters”. Occasionally he would call out to each member of the party in turn, and we were expected to shout back.

“Colin!” he’d yell.

“Yay!”

“Christi-yay!”

“Woo!”

“Mike-a one!”

“Hey!”

“Mike-a two!”

“Woo!”

“Schwarzenegger!”

“Haa!”

“Nee-cole!”

“Yay.”

“Beck!”

“Woo!”

“Ali!”

“Woo!”

Sometimes he'd cap off this series by saying “Hoo hah!” Other times he'd simply shout “We!” and we were required to shout in response “Wah!” He said that it meant something along the lines of “We are going to do it”, although I don't think he meant, you know, *do it*.

Mike was pissed that Maine Mike was Mike 1 and he was left with Mike 2, but Buga's reasons were his own and he did not divulge them. I also still didn't bother trying to point out to Buga that I looked nothing at all like Schwarzenegger, especially since he seemed to derive so much pleasure from calling me by that name. He smiled every time he said it, and who am I to rob a man of that which pleases him?

Later on in that day we walked out of the forest, right up into the clouds. As we climbed, the forest shrank in height, first becoming stubby trees, then bushes, then shorter bushes. We

topped a ridge and I was struck for the first time at how different than my home in Atlanta the scenery was, and how beautiful. I was looking down into a misty valley between two steep hillsides, each covered by bushes with long branches and sparse foliage. The branches were white, which made them look to me like skeletal hands reaching upward into the misty air.

We stopped in the valley for a break, and I ate an energy bar. Its wrapper was puffy like a pillow from the change in altitude and the expanding air inside.

I asked Mike where he was on the bird tally. In his life he'd seen somewhere around 430 birds, and was hoping to see over 70 on our Africa trip, thus getting his number up over 500. Numbers were all well and good, but there was one bird we both hoped to see, the Lammergeier.

I first learned of the Lammergeier in a David Attenborough special I watched on television. It is a huge vulture that eats bones, dropping them from great height to smash them and then swooping down to eat the broken pieces. This behavior places it irrevocably in the realm of the bad-ass, and knowing Mike for a bird lover, I mentioned it to him after I'd seen the show.

“Oh yes, we might actually see one on Kilimanjaro,” he said.

From then on, “Lammergeier!” became a battle cry, and we both hoped to catch sight of one, although I couldn't be counted on to accurately discern it from a flying pig scrotum. It would be up to Mike to identify it.

Break over, we climbed up and away from the valley. Chombo reached into a skeletal bush to delicately touch a flower, saying that it only grew on Kilimanjaro, and that there was a larger version that was the national flower of South Africa. I digested this information as fairly amazing, still struck with the beauty of my surroundings.

“Hey Chombo,” I said. He turned to face me. “Can I be a porter?”

He looked at me and considered it, then said thoughtfully “Let’s get to the top, and then we’ll talk.”

It is on the basis of this conversation that I am calling the whole trip a business expense, and thus, a write-off.

We climbed and climbed, plodding slowly up through the skeleton hand bushes into the mist, the bushes themselves still getting shorter all the while. Soon we walked over another ridge and there was the mountain itself.

It was majestic and ancient and beautiful, with a hat of clouds pulled down low, but not so low that we couldn’t see the white fingers of its glaciers spilling down the sides. We were looking across the Shira plateau, and we could make out some green huts about midway across, which was our destination for the night. Tiny white dots headed for the huts, and I realized they were porters with their heavy bags.

Already in this tale I am running as low on superlatives to accurately express the beauty of the landscape which I beheld as the Dog Star is low on patience to wait to be loved. It was so austere and beautiful that I was reduced to spreading my arms wide and saying, merely “Amazing,” over and over again. I was embarrassed to act like such a dork in front of the girls, who giggled at me, but there was no hiding from it. I was struck and struck again by it, every day, every time I looked anywhere.

Farther in the distance, we could see a plume of dust. Luca the Closer identified it as a car, probably taking someone who had injured himself back to town. I hoped I wouldn’t prove to be one of the people with altitude sensitivity. If I didn’t make the summit I would never forgive myself.

Soon we were done hiking for the day, at the camp called Shira 1. We once again selected our tents and went through our evening rituals, which for me meant a trip to the bathroom.

This presented a bit of a problem, as the bathrooms, or as I called them, the poopshacks, did not contain the appointments to which I was accustomed. Those being, chiefly, a seat. I found it difficult to transact business in a squatting position, which is what is necessary to make use of a poopshack.

A poopshack is a rough board structure just big enough for one person to stand in. There is a hole in the floor of each, sometimes with two boards nailed alongside to indicate where one's feet are to go. You back up to the hole, squat, and do as nature calls you to do.

I tried to transact business in this position, and was highly uncomfortable as well as unsuccessful. This presented a problem because I'd been mowing down energy bars like there was no tomorrow, and those things are faster through my system than gossip through a classroom. Suffice it to say that I was uncomfortable.

As I was wrapping up an unproductive poopshack visit, I saw some writing in blue pen on one of the poopshack's board walls. It was a poem, and it read thus:

*Love is blind
as far as eye can see
deep but meaningless.*

I thought some about that, looking out at the gathering dark on the Shira plateau. Clouds swept up the plateau toward our camp and dissipated and I hurt a little bit for want of someone to think about, my thoughts dissipating seemingly as soon as they formed.

In the morning we were fed and set off again, but not before I noticed some broken bones on the ground near our camp and called Mike over to have a look. I hoped that they were evidence that a Lammergeier had been around, but not being an expert on bones I guess they could have as easily been remnants of our own dinner.

Soon we were at our next camp, Shira 2, and we all rejoiced to see a grand and glorious bathroom built there. I dubbed it the Poop Mahal. It had three doors, the last of which had a real western toilet seat. I was overjoyed and was able to execute some greatly needed transactions.

That handled and my gear stowed away, I walked around the camp a bit. There is a weather station up there, with a plaque noting that the weather equipment was donated by Abercrombie & Kent Philanthropy. Some person had scrawled "KALISA" on the left side of the plaque, and a bird had shit on the right side.

Looking west out from the second Shira camp, I could take in the entirety of the plateau. Directly in front of me, a ridge formed the northern border. The ridge headed away from me and curved to the right on the far side of the plateau. The clouds swept up from the south, moving from right to left, and dissipated in the wide, open plateau. They then formed again, thick and puffy, on the lee side of the northern ridge at my left, giving the ridge the distinct look of the end of the world. I looked and looked at it, having never seen such a thing.

We walked over to another close camp, which had a cave. Nicole from Portland stayed behind, preferring to sleep instead. We'd been warned by a sign at the park's entrance that sleeping in caves was forbidden, but crouching in them on an afternoon seemed to be well within the rules. So, we crouched as a group, then seemed, as a group, to get enough cave and headed back to camp.

It was about this time that cairns -- artfully arranged stacks of rocks -- became a regular feature on the mountain. Many a campsite rock featured a cairn atop it, so Mike and I built one or two of our own.

Soon the sun went down, and a mist settled down on us. Somewhere in the camp, a woman with a laugh that could only be described as a cackle split the night at irregular intervals with it. I found this annoying, but spent an enjoyable evening nevertheless playing cards and telling stories with the group by the light of a single candle thrust into half a potato for a holder.

In the morning, Nicole began to give up. It was in her face, in her self-conscious laugh, and in her every step. She very clearly did not care about going a single step farther, though she had not voiced it outright. She kept going with us as we left the comfort of the Poop Mahal and headed to Barranco camp, but it was clear that she had checked out mentally. When we arrived that night, I told Colin and Mike that I thought we should all try to encourage her. Everyone did their best when she arrived at last in camp, but there's just no propping someone up who has checked out mentally.

That night we were treated again to the piercing call of the Cackling Woman, but I had no problem sleeping. Walking up the mountain was not terribly taxing work, but it certainly made it easy to get to sleep. In fact, I expected to be sleepless and nauseated for most of the trip, due to the altitude, but I was neither, I am happy to say.

The next day's climb was a bit more taxing, as we headed straight up the Barranco wall. Before we started we could see the peak of Kilimanjaro towering over us far above, and the wall just across a deep ravine. Already we could see porters winding their way seemingly straight up the sheer wall with their white bags, the distance making them look like grains of salt slowly rising up the rock face.

It was a day of clambering and scrambling, and I found it to be quite enjoyable. The group's spirits were high except for our one disheartened member, but she didn't complain. I noticed that Maine Mike appeared to still be wearing the same shorts he'd started in days ago despite the ever-dropping temperature, and questioned him about them. I believe it was this discussion that was the genesis of the nickname he was to assume for the remainder of the trip: "Alpha Dog".

As I recall, he made a remark that he was the Alpha Dog, and I said that I'd always thought of him that way, and that was that. Nickname settled.

We engaged in some speculation about whether or not he could summit in shorts, but the best part of saddling him with a nickname was that there was now only one Mike, which saved us from having to say things like "Mike! No, not that Mike!"

So, all hail the Alpha Dog.

In talking to him further, I discovered that Alpha Dog was an experienced hiker and camper, and that he was also a science blogger. He was a quiet guy by nature, with dark hair and a somewhat slender build, but he was revealed to be whip smart on further investigation.

Not for the first or last time, I reflected on how lucky Mike and I were to get the group of companions that we did. They were all easy to like, and even our one dissenter was polite and genial as anyone can be.

At the end of the hike we were greeted in camp by a group of singing porters, who clustered around us as we walked in. They led us to the tents and sang and danced, and we *mzungus* clapped along with smiles. I noticed that Chombo was hissing some curt words to a porter outside the circle of dancers. That porter scurried away and returned shortly with a plate bearing a cake.

Chombo presented the cake to Colin and Christie. It was their 5-year anniversary. We were all amazed that the porters had managed to get a cake up to the camp in the first place, not to mention at least a little impressed that anyone in this day and age had managed to stay married for five years. The cake looked like a dream that had congealed somehow onto a plate, so out of place was it in the rocky gray campsite. I don't think I was the only one eyeing it like a crocodile eyes a fat buffalo calf straying close to the water line.

It was as good an anniversary celebration as I have ever seen. There was even a bottle of wine. Even though I only knew them for a few days, I couldn't think of a nicer couple to see celebrated so.

Mike leaned over to me.

"You know," he said "You and I are too old now to have any hope of seeing the diamond anniversary."

I had no idea what this meant, so I just harumphed a grunt and let that be that.

Large ravens hopped around the camp, each cawing occasionally. They landed on the uphill side of the camp, which pointed up toward the peak, then hopped and cawed their way down through the tents, picking at whatever they thought they could eat. At the lower end, they would soar out over the ravines for a while and land at the top of camp again to repeat their trickledown ravenomics.

As the sun went down, I could see so much of the horizon, thanks to the mountainside tilting downward into a cottonball bed of clouds thousands of feet below me, that it was nearly impossible to believe I was on the same Earth that I had been born on. The red sun managed to find some crack between the disappearing blue depth of faraway clouds and deepening blue heavens, and it slipped through like an egg yolk and was gone.

The stars probably came out then, but I was in my sleeping bag with a full belly and a warm heart, thanks to some cake and a small glass of wine, so I never saw a single one.

The Dog Star flew down to the mountain again, now so frustrated he could barely stand himself. At the altitude the party had attained, there weren't many animals to take possession of, so he chose a raven. He decided that this time he wouldn't muck about at all with making noise in the trees. This time he'd go right to the heart of the matter.

He took flight, heading directly for the nearest tent, and executed a perfect landing on it, but then met disaster. His raven claws were not able to grip the waterproof nylon covering of the tent, and they scrabbled most undignified. He flapped and cawed and tumbled in a feathery tumble until he flapped a few times mightily and soared away to land again on a rock, feeling very much a fool.

This time he gave up in defeat before he was even admonished to do so, so great was his own shame.

Why must it always be so hard?

In the morning, I judged the temperature to finally be cold enough for my stocking cap, so I replaced my Tilley hat, which had been propped on my head thus far. A friend of mine later commented when I got home, on seeing a photograph of me in my Tilley hat, that I looked like “Dad on vacation”. Still, I was sad to see it go but glad for the warmth of my stocking cap.

Mike woke up, saw me in my stocking cap, and suggested that I seek work as an actor in any educational films featuring a character called “Rapey Stranger”. He also then inquired about how much time I spend “down at the docks”.

So much for my choices in fashionable hats, but the stocking cap had to stay due to the temperature.

Outside the tent I was treated to the best view yet of the mountain’s top.

“Mike, you are going to want to get out here and look at this.”

Mike dressed himself and shimmied out of the tent, and we both stared up at the top of the mountain a while. To the left of the peak we could see a natural bridge. Chombo wandered by and offered the words “buttress window” instead of “natural bridge”, but seemed pleased as usual to find us admiring the features of his country.

We were brought our usual morning tea, as well as warm water for washing, and I realized that I had been carrying a bar of soap with me the whole time I’d been lamenting the dirty condition of my hands. I had a good hand wash and felt a lot better, though my fingernails still looked as though they were wearing eyeliner.

We put in another short day of hiking, first over the usual dusty, rocky terrain, but then over big plates of rock that looked and sounded as though we were walking over a pile of dishes. Some even clanged like bells when struck with a trekking pole. During a rest break, Mike chose a small plate to scratch his name into, realizing only after he took a photo how much the rock he'd chosen resembled a human penis.

The crockery landscape gave way to an area that looked like some alien planet, and a mist floated over us at right angles. We hopped over ravines in the pebbly ground, and boulders lay here and there.

Suddenly, out of the mist, the Lammergeier floated directly over our party. Little did we know that it was the Dog Star making yet another bold attempt to be seen. Mike drew up short on the trail and hissed at me, and I looked up just in time to see the bird sail away to our left. It did not reappear.

Mike was just about to leap out of his skin with joy that we'd finally seen the Lammergeier, when Chombo said "That was an Augur Buzzard."

The Dog Star farted furious jets of magnetic fire a billion miles away in intense frustration, and Mike frowned.

"Augur Buzzard." Mike said, clearly disagreeing but deferring to Chombo's 15-year experience as a guide.

We walked on, and Mike wore his frown for the rest of the hike.

Soon we arrived at Barafu camp, the last camp before the summit. It reminded me a lot of a county fair. There were people everywhere, the ground was littered with trash, and the air smelled heavily of fried food. We stood in line at the green huts that are a feature at each of the camps and waited to sign our names to show that our guides hadn't lost anyone.

As we waited, I asked Ali, one of the *dada*, if she'd ever been shoved on a mountaintop. As she processed the question, I gave her a little push.

“Well, now I have, I guess.”

All signed in, we went to our tents. The camp was very foggy and ice pellets, each the size of a grain of rice, were falling from the sky. We were told to sleep most of the afternoon, as we'd be fed dinner as usual, then sleep until Midnight and start our push to the summit. I took the opportunity to visit the facilities, such as they were. Mike took the opportunity to search his bird book.

The facilities at Barafu camp are banks of concrete stalls with wooden doors and holes in the floor. However, they have an interesting feature that had been absent from any previous poopshacks or stalls I'd encountered, which was that there was a wind gusting upward from the hole. This created a smell issue, of course, but that's something you have to expect when you're in any structure built atop a river of shit.

The real problem was that any toilet paper one used on one's self was very reluctant to go down the hole, preferring instead to ride the updraft and land on one's boots or pant leg. It introduced an interesting dodging element to what was already a pretty awkward experience, what with the freezing buttocks and the ravens cawing in the window.

These minor difficulties aside, I felt pretty good, and even got in a nap before dinner. When I woke up, Mike told me that the bird we'd seen was indeed the Lammergeier, and showed me where he'd jotted it in large letters in his notebook. He showed me the photo in his bird book too.

“Chombo...” he said, darkly, with a grim face but part of a smile.

At dinner, we received our usual somewhat vague, Confucius-style Chombo briefing, this time on the summit push.

“Tomorrow... there may be wind. There may be rain.” Each sentence was delineated by a deliberate pause to let his words sink in.

“Bring... sun cream...” he paused again, “and your rain gear.”

Here there was an extra long pause.

“Many people give up because of cold, around four in the morning. This does not make sense. When the sun comes up it will get hot and hot and hot.”

He went on to say that we'd have tea and toast at midnight, and then hot tea halfway up. It was then that Nicole said she wasn't going.

I think I speak for everyone when I say that it was saddening. We all wanted to go up together as a complete team, but no amount of encouragement could change her mind. She had no intention of being any colder than she already was, she said, and she'd rather just stay in Barafu.

We went back to our tents, each to mull over each of his or her own thoughts on the matter.

Before long, it was 11pm and our tent was being shaken. It was time to head for the top. I put on my warmest gear, including my fashion-questionable skullcap, and trudged out to meet the crew. Chombo greeted us. We were all wearing headlamps, their beams sweeping this way and that. We ate some pieces of toast, drank a cup of tea, and headed out of Barafu toward the summit after Chombo mentioned that he hoped we were enjoying our tea because we were late.

I made constant mental checks of my body's status as we climbed in the dark, occasionally taking off my skullcap or opening my two jackets to regulate my temperature. At

first I was hot, but very soon my hands became a bit of an issue despite my three layers of gloves. Every now and again I'd look back over my shoulder as we plodded up the snowy trail, and I could see the lights of Barafu camp sliding away from us into the darkness. Strings of other parties' headlamps were interspersed in the space between. Suckers! Ahead up the trail were also other parties' headlamps. Those bastards!

We plodded and plodded, and after a few hours a split in the group began to form. Chombo stopped.

“How are you doing, *dada*?” he asked.

Everyone looked around.

“*Dada*’ means ‘sisters’.” I said, helpfully.

“Oh. We’re fine.” they said in unison.

“Come walk at the front please,” Chombo decreed. The *dada* shuffled past our line and took up the front two spots. If they were tired or uncomfortable, they never complained. None of our group ever did. That is what a great group it was.

Behind us, the great unfathomable black began to divide itself, and the moon rose up into the sky to make way for the sun, its crescent belly burning orange fire. It was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen for about the hundredth time since I set foot on the mountain. We stopped to rest in the shelter of some rocks, and we could see that it would be daylight before long. The dividing line between the sky and the earth was now itself a thickening line of orange fire in addition to the belly of the moon.

Mike raised his arm and pointed.

“Look,” he said, “the Dog Star.”

We all looked in awe.

The Dog Star burred and was proud beyond proud. “At last, at last, at last” he sang to himself, and the Pup was happy and he was happy at last to be loved.

Soon our break was over, and we started to plod again. Chombo had marked us as being more than half way up at this point. I was glad that the sun would be up soon, as the fingers on my left hand were beginning to check out and I knew I’d want them when I got off the mountain. So, we plodded, the porters urging us on with songs and with loud calls.

Chombo asked us if we wanted them to stop singing and yelling, but no one did. Their singing and encouragement was nice, although the porter version of Bob Marley’s “No Woman No Cry” is missing a few syllables, and, let’s face it, all of the verses, probably due to the language barrier.

When the sun came up we were very near the top, but it seemed the higher we climbed the slower we walked. We could see that we had to be very close, but we were walking so slowly it felt like being in line at the DMV. I became very impatient.

A few times I felt like I was going to pass out, so I started consciously breathing heavier than I thought I should to make sure I stayed conscious. Slowly we plodded, one tiny step after another. Doug the Time Chicken sat down with the air of a government worker on break.

After a period of time that I estimate could have been measured in the movement of tectonic plates, we reached Stella Point, on the rim of the caldera at the top of the mountain. We could see Uhuru peak, the summit, around the rim from our position, not far away at all. We started moving again after a short rest.

I had a pretty significant headache at this point, as well as a prodigious case of the farts. I did what I could to contain the gas, trying to stray away from the party or at least away from our

women before I let 'em rip, but the gas was fierce and ever-present. Hopefully I got away with most of them, but if I didn't, I hereby tender my public apology.

After an hour of covering a distance in miniature steps that any ambulatory person could normally walk in about ten minutes, we finally, finally reached the summit. We each, in turn, kissed the sign, then posed for pictures with it. I also secretly farted on it, though I did so without malice aforethought.

We didn't hang around long, which was fine with me. Between my pounding headache and trouser-area trumpet and bugle corps, I was ready to get back to more sane altitudes.

The descent went much, much more quickly than the climb had. As soon as we headed away from the summit we were taking great strides downward. We removed some of our warm clothes back at Stella Point, and then galloped down the loose gravel mountainside from there on. I slipped on the gravel and fell hard on my left side, but felt no broken bones so we galloped on. A while later I fell again and Luca The Closer offered to carry my day pack. I wanted none of it. I wasn't about to surrender any of my gear over a couple of little falls, and anyway I was out of drinking water so my pack weighed nearly nothing.

Soon we could see the camp below, and we galloped and clambered and were there. Nicole was waiting for us, seemingly relieved that she hadn't had to climb to the summit herself. Mike and I went back to our tent and stripped off all our cold weather gear. My arm was bleeding slightly and I had a knot from the falling, but I swiped it with one of Mike's alcohol swabs and called it good. Soon we ate lunch and then were walking again, out of Barafu camp.

That afternoon was a real bitch. We ended up spending a further four hours descending a very boulder-strewn trail to Mweka camp. Descending is deceptively hard on your legs, as anyone who has hiked down hill for an extended period can attest. In total over the last 24 hours,

we'd done three or four hours up to Barafu, six hours to the summit, two hours galloping back down to Barafu, and another four to Mweka for a total of about 15 out of the last 24 hours. It was a pretty rough day, and I think we all felt a little bit betrayed, for lack of a better word.

At the end, Luca The Closer appeared once more, though we'd started the afternoon's hike following Victor. Predictably, The Closer sped matters up significantly.

"Okay guys," I yelled over my shoulder to the rest of the group "The Closer's here. Get ready to pick up the pace!"

There were groans, but we finished the day's hike without major incident.

We all calmed down at Mweka camp, and enjoyed a final night on the trail together, complete with yet another bottle of wine that Chombo presented to us. He said that he'd been preparing a traditional local meal for us to have the next day, but if we were up to it we could wake up early and head out as soon as we liked.

We were all game to get up early and roll out, hopefully to be in a hotel shower as early as 1pm. So, that's exactly what we did.

The last day of hiking was comprised of even more descending through rain forest along muddy trails that eventually led to a wide muddy road. I figured we had to be close to the end when I started seeing local kids trailside, and sure enough, we eventually walked into a wide parking lot area ringed with buses and vans waiting to take porters and climbers to their hotels.

We signed in, and then were led to a waiting hut where we were asked to write some remarks about our experiences. Some dudes attempted to sell us various knickknacks and tee shirts. One guy even had a handful of big knives in carved wooden sheaths that he kept drawing out in a reverse stabbing motion for us. None of the salesmen seemed to have ever learned the meaning of the English words "No, thank you".

Chombo led us from the soliciting hut to our lunch table where we were served a greatest hits meal. A lot of the food on the mountain was really good, but we definitely had our favorites, and this meal seemed to be comprised of all of these. There were fried pastry pockets of meat, bananas, eggs, and some fried dessert pastries. We all ate and relaxed while Chombo did his best to herd the circling solicitors away from us as we did so.

Finally we were finished eating, and we stood up, ready to get back to civilization. Mike and I had some pretty solid plans to wash ourselves and then check out the hotel's beer supply, not having been in contact with cold beer for well over ten days at this point.

As we filed toward the van, Chombo pulled me aside.

"This is our driver," he said, pointing to a man nearby. "I have spoken to him, and he will let you drive"

"Hell yeah!" I said.

"Okay, he will start and then we will get you,"

I didn't know if Chombo was screwing with me or not, but I wasn't going to say no either way. I wanted to drive a vehicle in Africa, damn it.

I clambered into the van and made my way to the back, sitting between Mike and a porter I hadn't seen before. He looked at me.

"You are Schwarzenegger," he said.

"Yep" I agreed.

"Sup?" he asked.

"Sup."

With that we sat in silence and bounced along together along the bumpy road out of the park. After a while we made it back to a less rutted roadway, and the van stopped.

“Schwarzenegger!” called Chombo.

As one, our group expressed concern and surprise that I was going to be allowed to drive.

“Are you really going to do it?” Christie asked.

“Fuck yeah.” I said.

I got out of the van and the driver slid over on the seat to give me room to get in. I depressed the clutch, put the van in gear, and I was off, right arm out the window, smile on my face, driving a vanload of porters and climbers in East Africa.

I had never driven a right hand drive car before, but as all the pedals are in the same places it isn't too different, though I did engage the wipers once when trying to use the turn signal. These controls were reversed from the ones in my car. On seeing the wipers turn on, cheers and catcalls came forward from the rear of the van, but I was concentrating on my driving too much to pay them any attention.

“Schwarzenegger!” Buga called from the back seat.

Whenever we passed someone in the roadway, I would give them a short honk, then shout “*Jambo!*” out the window at them as though I were at the wheel of a parade float. This behavior was met with wide-eyed surprise. I guess it's not often that one sees a white guy driving in that area of the world. One man who was sitting down on the side of the road to eat shouted a stream of unintelligible Swahili in surprise. I only caught the last word, *mzungu*, but I'm pretty sure it translated directly to “What the hell is that white guy doing driving?!”

We all laughed together, our porters, the party, Chombo, and even the driver who had only just met us. Yes, we laughed, and I drove us carefully between the banana plants, back toward the hotel, a much needed shower, and with luck, a cold beer.

Behind us, the mountain had survived another high season, still doing a pretty good job of being dormant. In the sky the Dog Star and his Pup were happy and content, at least for the moment, and everyone seemed, mostly, to have found what they were looking for.