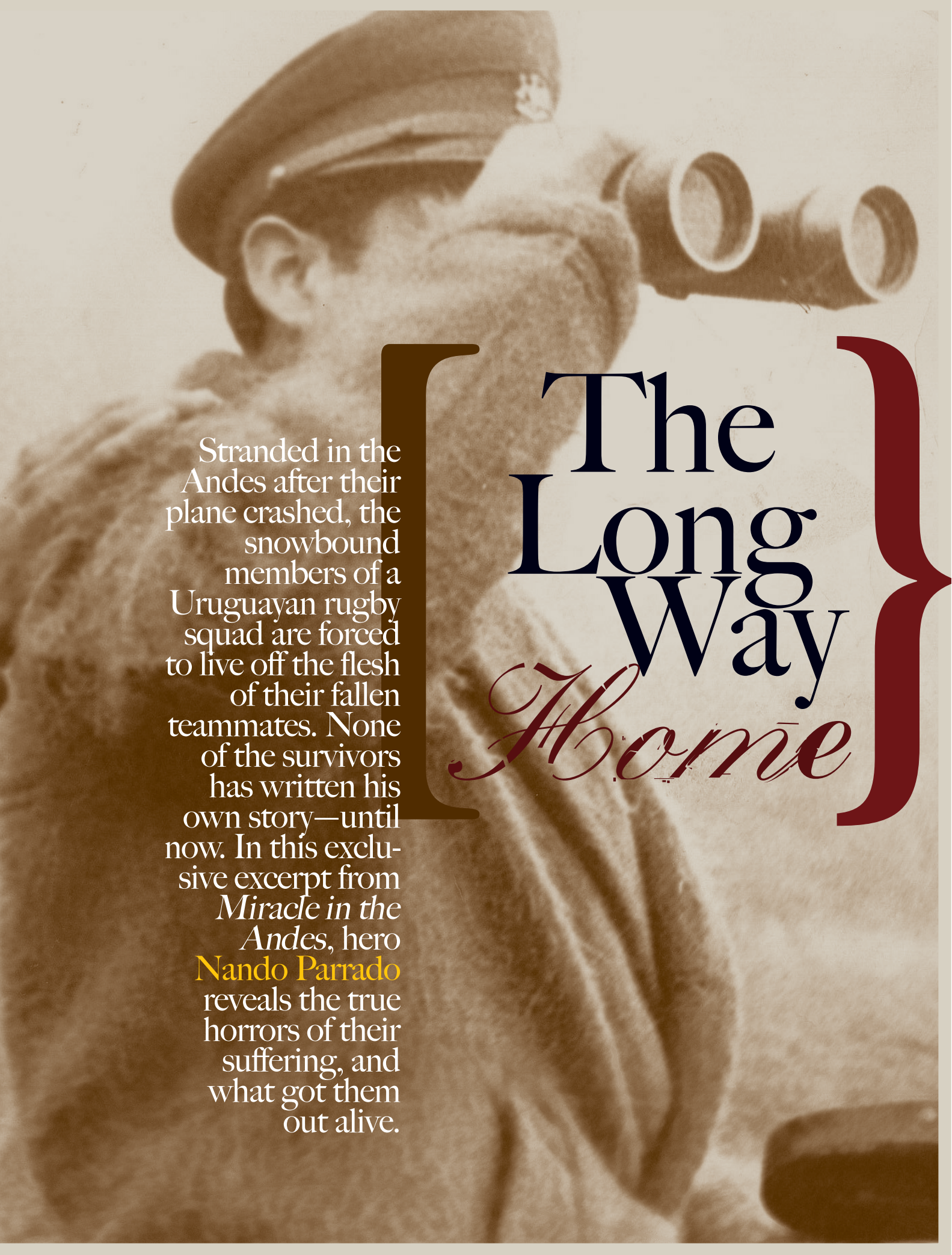
Outside

AT LAST: Nando Parrado and a member of the TK mounted police scan for rescue helicopters in Chile's remote Las Maitenes region, December 22, 1972.



The Long Way *Home*

Stranded in the Andes after their plane crashed, the snowbound members of a Uruguayan rugby squad are forced to live off the flesh of their fallen teammates. None of the survivors has written his own story—until now. In this exclusive excerpt from *Miracle in the Andes*, hero Nando Parrado reveals the true horrors of their suffering, and what got them out alive.

In the first hours there was fear or sadness, no thought just a *black and perfect*

Then light appeared, a thin gray smear of daylight, and I rose to it like a diver swimming to the surface. Consciousness seeped through my brain in a slow bleed; I heard voices and sensed motion all around, but I could see only dark silhouettes and pools of light and shadow. Then, vaguely, I sensed that one of the shadows was hovering over me.

"Nando, *podés oírme*? Can you hear me? Are you OK?"

As I stared dumbly, the shadow gathered itself into a human face. I saw a ragged tangle of dark hair above deep brown eyes. There was kindness in the eyes—this was someone who knew me—but also something else, a wildness, a sense of desperation held in check.

"Come on, Nando, wake up!"

Why am I so cold? Why does my head hurt so badly? I tried to speak these thoughts, but my lips could not form the words. Carefully I reached up to touch the crown of my head. Clots of dried blood were matted in my hair; I felt rough ridges of broken bone beneath the congealed blood, and when I pressed down lightly I felt a spongy sense of give. My stomach heaved as I realized that I was pressing shattered pieces of my skull against the surface of my brain.

"Is he awake? Can he hear you?"

"Say something, Nando!"

"Don't give up, Nando. We are here with you. Wake up!"

All I could manage was a hoarse whisper. Then someone spoke slowly in my ear.

"Nando, el avión se estrelló! Caimos en las montañas."

We crashed, he said. The airplane crashed. We fell into the mountains.

"Do you understand me, Nando?"

FOR MORE THAN TWO DAYS I'd languished in a coma, and I was waking to a nightmare. On Friday the 13th of October, 1972, our plane had smashed into a ridge in the Argentinian Andes and fallen onto a barren glacier. The airliner, a twin-engine Fairchild turboprop, had been chartered by my rugby team, the Old Christians of Montevideo, Uruguay, to take us to an exhibition match in Santiago, Chile. There were 45 of us on board, including the crew, the team's supporters, and my fellow Old Christians, most of whom I'd played rugby with since we were boys at Catholic school. Now only 28 remained. My two best friends, Guido Magri and Francisco "Panchito" Abal, were dead. Worse, my mother, Eugenia, and my 19-year-old sister, Susy, had been traveling with us; now, as I lay parched and injured, I learned that my mother had not survived and that Susy was near death.

When I look back, I cannot say why the losses did not destroy me. Grief and panic exploded in my heart with such violence that I feared I would go mad. But then a thought formed, in a voice so lucid and detached it could have been someone whispering in my ear. The voice said, *Do not cry. Tears waste salt. You will need the salt to survive.*

I was astounded at the calmness of this thought, and the cold-bloodedness of the voice that spoke it. Not cry for my mother? I am stranded in the Andes, freezing; my sister may be dying; my skull is in pieces! I should not cry?

Do not cry.

In the first days, I rarely left my sister's side, rubbing her frozen feet, talking to her, giving her sips of snow I melted in my hands. I was never sure if she was aware of my presence.

"Don't worry," I would tell her, "they will find us. They will bring us home."

How badly I needed my father's strength, his wisdom. Seler Parrado was a deeply practical man who had sacrificed much to build a chain of hardware stores out of nothing, to give his family the life of security and leisure I so casually took for granted. I knew he would not allow himself the luxury of false hope. To survive a crash in the Andes? In winter? Impossible. I saw him clearly now, tossing in his bed back in Montevideo, staggered by his unimaginable loss, and my heart broke for him.

"I am alive," I whispered to him. "I am alive."

Late in the afternoon of the eighth day, I was lying with my arms around Susy when suddenly I felt her change. The worried look faded from her face. The tension eased from her body. Then her breathing stopped, and she was still.

"Susy?" I cried. "Oh God, Susy, please, no!"

I scrambled to my knees and began to give her mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. I wasn't even sure how, but I was desperate, and I worked at it until I fell exhausted to the floor. Others tried, too, but it was no use—she was gone. I held her all night, and in the morning I buried her, beside my mother, in the snow.

Never had I felt so terribly alone. I was 22 years old. My mother was dead. My sister was dead. My best friends had been sucked from the plane in flight, or were buried outside. Most of us were untested young men between the ages of 19 and 21, lost in the wilderness, hungry, injured, and freezing. With stinging clarity I felt the brute power of the mountains, saw the complete absence of warmth or mercy or softness in the landscape, and for the first time, knew with certainty that I would die.

But then I thought of my father again and, as I stared out at those ragged peaks, I felt my love for him tugging like a lifeline, drawing me toward those merciless slopes. I made a silent vow: *I will come home. I promise you, I will not die here!*

FROM MY VERY FIRST HOURS in the mountains, I felt, deep in my bones, the immediacy of the danger that surrounded us. Nothing in this primeval place welcomed human life. The cold tormented us. The thin air starved our lungs. The unfiltered sun blinded us and blistered our lips and skin, and the snow was so deep that we could not venture far without sinking to our hips.

The initial impact had sheared the wings and tail from the Fairchild, and its battered fuselage plowed into a snow-packed

nothing, no or memory, silence.

BAND OF BROTHERS: The Old Christians, TKYEAR. Included are Parrado, standing seventh from right, and Roberto Canessa, squatting second from right.

glacier flowing down the eastern slope of a massive, ice-crusted peak. Miraculously, the plane did not cartwheel or spiral; instead its angle of descent matched almost exactly the slope onto which we were falling, and it came to rest with its crumpled nose pointing slightly down the slope. East was the only direction in which we could see for any distance; to the north, south, and west, the view was blocked by towering summits, ringing the crash site like the walls of a monstrous amphitheater. We knew we were high in the Andes—later we'd learn that the crash site was at 11,500 feet—and the slopes above us rose so steeply that I had to tilt my head back to see their tops.

Still, we hoped we had an inkling of where we were in that vast range: All we knew were the words our copilot had moaned as he lay dying: *We passed Curicó, we passed Curicó.* Curicó was a small city 100 miles south of Santiago—that meant we must be somewhere in the western foothills of the Andes. Surely, we reasoned, the tall ridges to our west were the last high peaks before the mountains dwindled down to the green pastures of Chile. This became my mantra: *To the west is Chile.*

But first we had to stay alive. If not for our team captain, Marcelo Pérez, we wouldn't have lasted a night. Marcelo was a wing forward—very fast, very brave, and a leader we would trust with our lives. After the crash, as the stupefied survivors staggered about in disbelief, Marcelo had organized the uninjured into a search party to free the dozens of passengers still trapped in the heaps of tangled seats in the plane. Roberto Canessa and Gustavo Zerbino, two players who were also in medical school, did their best to tend to the injuries, some of which were grisly. A six-inch steel tube had impaled the stomach of a quiet, stoic player named Enrique Platero. When Gustavo yanked the tube from his friend's gut, several inches of intestine came out, but Enrique immediately got to work helping to free others.

As darkness fell, Marcelo turned the Fairchild into a makeshift shelter, stacking loose seats and luggage in the gaping hole left by the tail, then packing the gaps with snow. The living were packed into a cramped space on the litter-strewn floor measuring no more than eight by ten feet. Marcelo's wall kept us from freezing, but in the coming nights we suffered terribly from the cold. We had cigarette lighters, and could easily have lit a fire, but there was little combustible material. We burned all our money—almost $7,500 went up in smoke—and found enough scrap wood to fuel two or three small fires, but the brief luxury of warmth only made the cold seem worse. Nighttime temperatures plunged to 30 below, and we huddled together, the injured crying out when the jostling of bodies caused them pain. Often, I would lie with my head close to the face of whoever slept next to me to steal a little breath, a little warmth, from him.

We were untested young men, most no older than 20, *lost in the wilderness, hungry, injured and freezing*. I knew with certainty that I would die.

But for the most part, we remained a team. We clung to the hope that rescuers would find us, and that all we had to do was hang on. "Breathe once more," we would tell the younger ones, and the ones who were losing heart. "Live for one more breath. As long as you are breathing, you are fighting to survive."

BY THE END OF THE FIRST WEEK, with no sign of rescue, we began to solve our most pressing problems. Roberto devised ingenious hammocks for the most injured and improvised flimsy blankets from the plane's thin nylon seat covers. Thirst was not an issue, thanks to Adolfo "Fito" Strauch, a quiet, serious former player who had improvised snow-melting basins from square aluminum sheets he found lining the bottoms of the seats. But we were beginning to starve. One of the first things Marcelo had done was gather everything edible from people's suitcases or the cabin itself. There wasn't much—a few chocolate bars and

TK

other snacks, some wine and a few bottles of liquor—and on the second day, he began to ration food. Each meal was nothing more than a small square of chocolate or a dab of jam, washed down with a sip of wine. It wasn't enough to satisfy anyone's hunger, but as a ritual, it gave us strength.

One morning, I found myself standing outside the fuselage, cradling a single chocolate-covered peanut in my palm. This was the final morsel of food I would be given, and with a sad, almost miserly desperation, I was determined to make it last. I slowly sucked the chocolate off the peanut, then slipped it into the pocket of my slacks. The next day I carefully separated the peanut halves, slipping one half back into my pocket and placing the other in my mouth. I sucked gently on it for hours, allowing myself only a tiny piece now and then. I did the same on the third day, and when I'd finally nibbled the peanut down to nothing, there was no food left at all.

We became obsessed by the search for food, but what drove us was nothing like ordinary appetite. When the brain senses the onset of starvation—when it realizes that the body has begun to break down its own flesh for fuel—it sets off an adrenaline surge of alarm as powerful as the impulse that compels a hunted animal to flee an attacking predator. Again and again we scoured the fuselage. We tried to eat strips of leather torn from pieces of luggage, though we knew that the chemicals they'd been treated with would do more harm than good. We ripped open seat cushions hoping to find straw, but found only inedible upholstery foam. My mind would never rest. Maybe there was a plant growing somewhere, or some insects under a rock. Had we checked all the pockets of the dead? Sometimes I would rise from a long silence to shout, "There is nothing in this fucking place to eat!"

There are some lines, I suppose, that the mind is very slow to cross. Of *course* there was food on the mountain—there was meat, plenty of it, and all in easy reach. It was as near as the bodies of the dead lying outside the fuselage under a thin layer of frost. It puzzles me that, despite my compulsive drive, I ignored for so long the obvious presence of the only edible objects within a hundred miles. But when my mind did finally cross that line, it did so with an impulse so primitive it shocked me.

It was late afternoon, more than a week after the crash, and we were lying in the fuselage, preparing for night. My gaze fell on the slowly healing leg wound of a young man lying near me. The center of the wound was moist and raw, and there was a crust of dried blood at the edges. I could not stop looking at that crust, and as I smelled the faint scent of blood in the air, I felt my appetite rising. Then I looked up and met the gaze of other players who had also been staring at the wound. In shame, we glanced away, but for me something had happened that I couldn't deny: I had looked at human flesh and instinctively recognized it as food. I was horrified by what I was thinking, but once that door was open, it couldn't be closed. One night I confided in Carlos Páez, one of the team's supporters and a friend I trusted.

"Carlitos," I whispered, "are you awake?"

"Yes," he muttered. "Who can sleep in this freezer?"

"Are you hungry?"

"Puta carajo," he snapped. "What do you think?"

"We are going to starve here," I said. "I don't think the rescuers will find us in time."

"You don't know that," Carlitos answered.

"I know it and you know it," I replied, "but I will not die here. I will make it home."

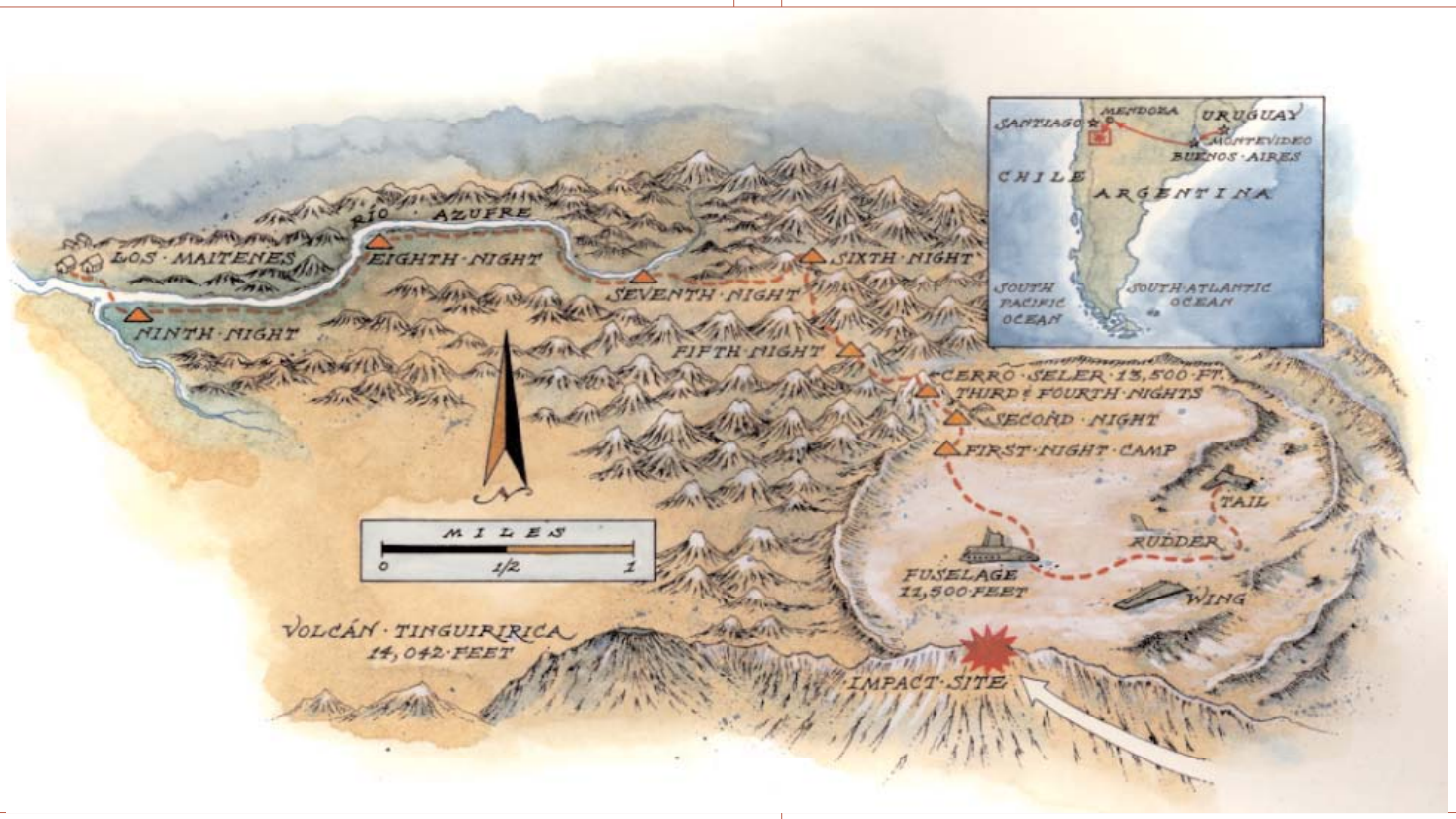
"But what can you do?" he said. "There is no food here."

"There is food," I answered. "You know what I mean."

Carlitos shifted in the darkness.

"Fuck, Nando," he whispered.

"There is plenty of food here," I said. "Our friends don't need their bodies anymore."



MAP BY MIKE REAGAN

ABANDONED: On clear days, the survivors warmed themselves outside the fuselage. Pictured in early December are, from left, Alvaro Mangino, Carlitos Páez, Daniel Fernández, Coche Inciarte, and Pancho Delgado.

GAMMA

"We are starving," Roberto said simply. "*Unless we eat some protein soon we will die*, and the only protein here is in the bodies of our friends."

Carlitos sat silently for a moment before speaking. "God help us," he said softly. "I have been thinking the very same thing."

IN THE FOLLOWING DAYS, Carlitos shared our conversation with some of the others. A few of the most practical, including the medical students, Roberto and Gustavo, as well as Fito, believed it was our only chance. A few days later, we gathered everyone inside the fuselage.

"We are starving," Roberto said simply. "Our bodies are consuming themselves. Unless we eat some protein soon, we will die, and the only protein here is in the bodies of our friends."

There was a heavy silence. Finally, someone spoke up. "What are you saying? That we eat the dead?"

"We don't know how long we will be trapped here," Roberto continued. "If we do not eat, we will die. It's that simple. If you want to see your families again, this is what you must do."

"But what will this do to our souls?" someone cried. "Could God forgive such a thing?"

"If you don't eat, you are choosing to die," Roberto answered. "Would God forgive that?"

The discussion continued all afternoon. Many survivors refused to eat human flesh, but no one tried to talk the rest of us out of it. We had reached a consensus. Now the awful logistics had to be faced. "How will this be done?" someone asked. "Who is brave enough to cut the flesh from a friend?" The fuselage was dark now. I could see only silhouettes, but after a long silence I recognized Roberto's voice.

"I will do it," he said.

Gustavo, whose guts and determination I had always admired, rose to his feet and said quietly, "I will help."

"But who will we cut first?" asked Fito. "How do we choose?"

We all glanced at Roberto.

"Gustavo and I will take care of that," he replied.

Fito got up. "I'll go with you," he said.

For a moment no one moved, then we reached forward, joined hands, and pledged that if any of us died here, the rest could use his body for food. Roberto found some shards of

glass, then he led his assistants out to the graves. I heard them speaking softly as they worked. When they came back, they had small pieces of flesh in their hands.

Gustavo offered me a piece and I took it. It was grayish white, as hard as wood and very cold. I reminded myself that this was no longer part of a human being, that the soul had already left this body. Still, I found myself slow to lift the meat to my lips. I avoided meeting anyone's gaze, but out of the corners of my eyes I saw the others around me. Some were sitting with the meat in their hands, summoning the strength to eat. Others were working their jaws grimly.

Finally, I slipped the flesh into my mouth. It had no taste. I chewed, once or twice, then forced myself to swallow. I felt no guilt. I understood the magnitude of the taboo we had just broken, but if I felt any strong emotion, it was resentment that fate had forced us to choose between this horror and the horror of certain death.

That night, for the first time since we'd crashed, I felt a small flicker of hope. There were no illusions now. We all knew our fight for survival would be uglier and more harrowing than we had imagined, but we had made a declaration to the mountain that we would not surrender. In a small, sad way, I had taken my first step back toward my father.

FALSE HOPES: In mid-November, Parrado and three others—from top, Roy Harley, Roberto Canessa, and Antonio Vizintín—discovered the plane's tail section that held the radio batteries, but the set still couldn't be made to work.

GROUP OF SURVIVORS/CORBIS

EARLY THE NEXT MORNING, our 11th day on the mountain, I stood outside the fuselage, watching Roy Harley, a tall, gangly wing forward who was the closest we had to an electronics expert, fiddle with a battered transistor radio he'd found in the wreckage. The batteries of the Fairchild's radio were lost along with the tail, but with the transistor, we could at least receive some news from the outside world. This morning, like all the others, the signal faded in and out, and Roy was about to turn the set off when we heard, through the buzzing and popping, the tinny voice of an announcer. After ten days of fruitless searching, he said, Chilean authorities had called off efforts to find the lost Uruguayan charter flight that disappeared over the Andes on October 13.

There was stunned silence. Then Roy began to sob.

"What?" cried Marcelo. "What did he say?"

"Suspendieron la búsqueda!" Roy shouted. "They have canceled the search! They are abandoning us!" Marcelo stared at Roy with a look of irritation, as if he had spoken gibberish, but then Marcelo dropped to his knees and let out an anguished howl that echoed through the cordillera.

My head was swimming. Even though I had always known, deep down, that rescuers would never find us, a part of me lived on that thin hope. Now, if we were to survive, we would survive by our own efforts. The silence of the mountains mocked me, but I knew that sooner or later I would have to climb.

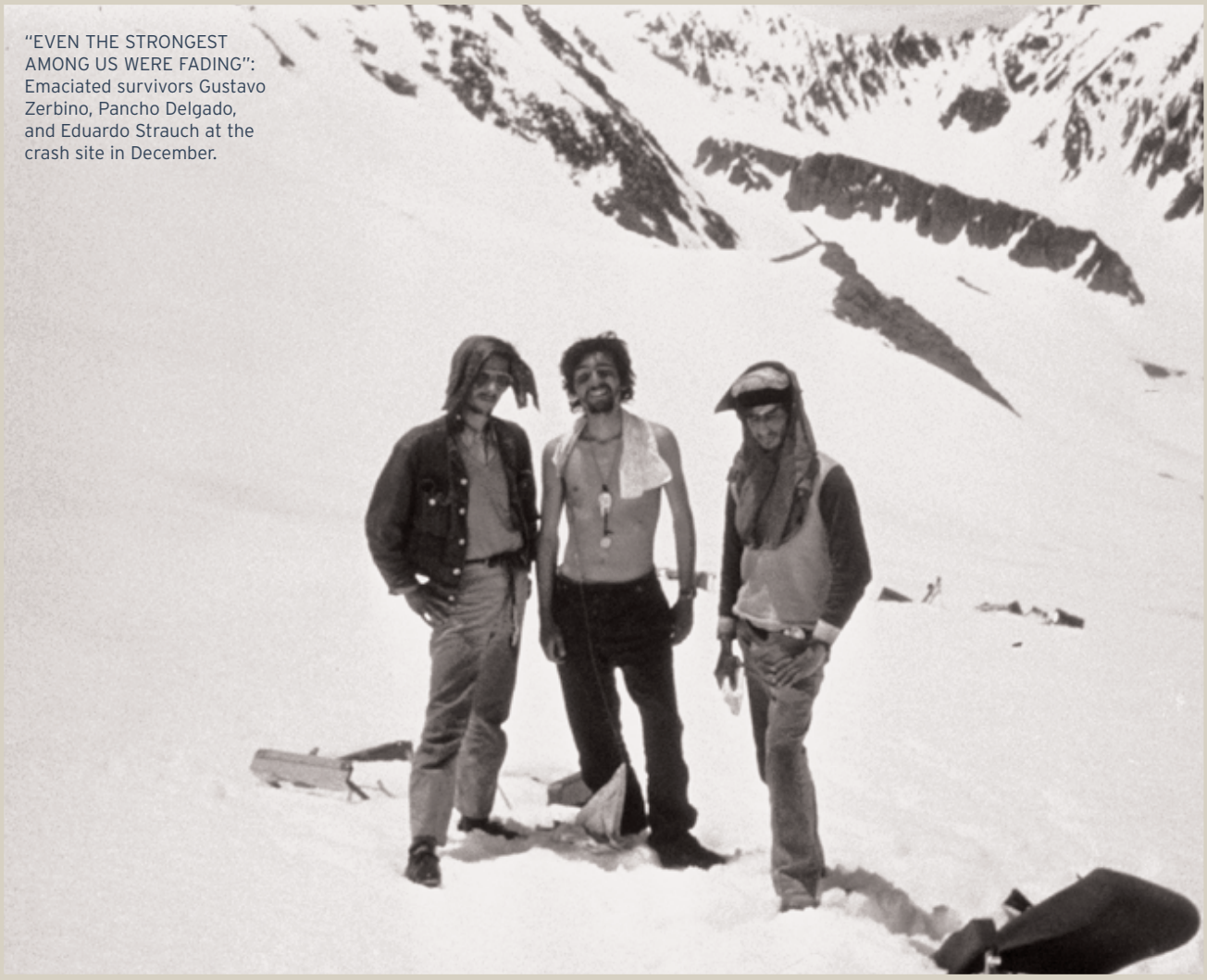
As the days passed, my greatest fear was that we would grow so weak that escape would become impossible—that we would use up all the bodies, leaving us no choice but to languish at the crash site, waiting to see which of our friends would die and become our food. The thought made me frantic to leave immediately. I knew that I had no chance in those mountains, but what did it matter? I was a dead man already. I would find the courage to do it. But I couldn't go alone. And so I studied the others, imagining which of these ragged, starving, frightened young men I would want by my side.

With Marcelo in despair, my thoughts turned to Roberto—the brilliant, egotistical medical student, strong, clever, and interested in no one's rules but his own. If anyone could stand up to the Andes through sheer stubbornness alone, Roberto was the one.

"We must do it, Roberto, you and I," I said. "We have the best chance of anyone here."

"You're crazy, Nando," he snapped, his voice rising. "Look at these mountains. Do you have any idea how high they are?"

I gazed at the highest peak. "Maybe two or three times the Pan de Azúcar," I said,



"EVEN THE STRONGEST AMONG US WERE FADING": Emaciated survivors Gustavo Zerbino, Pancho Delgado, and Eduardo Strauch at the crash site in December.

GROUP OF SURVIVORS/CORBIS

My greatest fear was that we would grow so weak that escape would be impossible—that *we would use up all the bodies and languish at the crash site* waiting to see who would die first.

referring to the tallest "mountain" in Uruguay.

Roberto snorted. "Don't be an idiot!" he screeched. "There's no snow on the Pan de Azúcar! It is only 1,500 feet high! This mountain is ten times higher, at least!"

"But what choice do we have?" I answered. "Please, come with me."

Roberto studied me as if he'd never seen me before. Then he nodded toward the fuselage. "Let's go inside," he said. "The wind is picking up, and I am fucking cold."

BY THE LAST WEEK IN OCTOBER, I was beginning to feel a small sense of control over my fate. The group had decided to mount an escape attempt, and as we prepared in earnest, our spirits rose. No one else had died since our eighth day on the mountain, when I'd lost Susy. Fito and his steady, level-headed cousins, Eduardo Strauch and Daniel Fernández, who were also friends of the team, had devised an efficient system of cutting and drying the meat, and all of us were eating enough now to hold starvation at bay. Out of respect for me, the others had promised not to touch the bodies of my mother and Susy, but even so, there was enough meat to last for weeks if we rationed carefully. Many of us were comforted by these thoughts as we filed into the fuselage on the evening of October 29.

As always it was pitch black. I dozed for perhaps half an hour and then woke, frightened and disoriented, as a huge and heavy force thumped against my chest. I felt an icy wetness pressing against my face, and a crushing weight bore down on me so hard that it forced the air from my lungs.

After a moment of confusion, I realized what had happened—an avalanche had rolled down the mountain and filled the fuselage with snow. There was silence, then I heard a slow, wet creak as the loose snow settled under its own weight. It felt as if my body were encased in concrete; I managed a few shallow breaths, but then snow packed into my mouth and nostrils

"BREATHE ONCE MORE": Parrado drinks melted snow inside the tail section in mid-November.

GROUP OF SURVIVORS/CORBIS

and I began to suffocate. Oddly, my thoughts grew calm and lucid. "This is my death," I told myself. "Now I will see what lies on the other side."

Then a hand clawed the snow from my face and I was yanked back into the world of the living. I spat the snow from my mouth and gulped cold air.

I heard Carlitos's voice. "Who is it?" he shouted.

"Me," I sputtered. "It's Nando."

Then he left me. I heard chaos above me, voices shouting and sobbing.

"Dig for the faces!" someone yelled. "Give them air!"

"Help me here!"

"Has anyone seen Marcelo?"

"How many do we have? Who is missing?"

"Someone count!"

A few moments later they dug me out, and I was able to lift myself up from the snow. The dark fuselage was lit eerily by the flames of a cigarette lighter. I saw some of my friends lying motionless. Others were rising like zombies.

Our losses were heavy. Marcelo was dead. So were Enrique and six others. The Fairchild was completely covered. How much snow lay above us? I wondered. Two feet? Twenty? Were we buried alive?

After the avalanche eight were dead. And the Fairchild was covered. *How much snow lay above us? Two feet? Twenty?* Were we buried alive?

It's hard to describe the despair that fell upon us in the grim days following the avalanche. With an aluminum cargo pole, we were able to poke a breathing hole through what turned out to be several feet of snow, but we labored for hours to burrow a passage out of the snow-choked plane, only to discover a blizzard raging outside. Trapped by the weather, we could not sleep, warm ourselves, or dry our soaking clothes. The snow inside the fuselage was so deep that we couldn't stand, and we had to sit with our chins against our chests. Fito's water-making machines were outside, useless to us, and we had to gnaw chunks of the filthy snow on which we were crawling and sleeping. With no access to the bodies outside, we rapidly began to weaken.

We were all well aware that the eight avalanche victims lay within easy reach, but we were slow to face the prospect of cutting them. Until now, a small crew of three or four had cut the meat outside the fuselage, and the rest of us never knew from whose body the flesh had been taken. How could we eat

flesh cut from these newly dead bodies right before our eyes?

Silently, we agreed we'd rather starve. But by October 31, our third day trapped, we couldn't hold out any longer. Someone found a piece of glass, swept the snow from one of the bodies, and began to cut. It was a horror, watching him slice into a friend, listening to the soft sounds of the glass ripping at the skin and muscle below. When a piece was handed to me, I was revolted. It was soft and greasy, streaked with blood and bits of wet gristle. I gagged hard when I placed it in my mouth.

I would walk through that God-forsaken country with love in my heart. *I would walk until I had walked all the life out of me*, and when I fell, I would die that much closer to home.

There was something sordid and rank in our suffering now, a sense of corruption that soured my heart. As I shivered in the clammy snow, racked with despair, it was hard to believe in anything before the crash.

IT TOOK EIGHT DAYS TO CLEAR the fuselage, chipping away at the rock-hard snow with broken pieces of plastic. By now we were all convinced that our only chance was to walk out. Three failed attempts had convinced many that escape over the high peaks to the west was impossible, so in mid-November we tried going east. It quickly became clear that the valley did not, as we had hoped, bend around to the west, but we hadn't gone far when we discovered the plane's tail section, filled with an unexpected booty

PLEASE TURN TO PAGE 12

ALIVE! The 14 remaining survivors greet the Andean Rescue Corps helicopter that would save them, December 22, 1972.

EL PAIS DE URUGUAY, COLECCIÓN CARUSO

ALIVE CONTINUED FROM PAGE 11

of chocolate, several moldy sandwiches, and, most important, the Fairchild's radio batteries. But our jubilation was short-lived: After a week of tinkering, the radio remained lifeless. Meanwhile, we lost two more: Arturo Nogueira, one of the team's supporters, died from gangrenous wounds in his broken legs, and Rafael Echavarran, who had suffered terribly from his own leg injuries, passed away soon after. Even the strongest among us were fading. I could see hollow resignation in my friends' eyes. I wondered if they could see the same in mine.

Most alarmingly, our food was running low. We were splitting skulls now to get at the brains inside, and eating things we couldn't stomach before: lungs, marrow, parts of the hands and feet. To the ordinary mind, our actions may seem incomprehensible, but the instinct to survive runs very deep, and when death is so near, a human being can get used to anything.

In the first week of December, as the weather improved, we began to prepare for a final westward climb. Fito and his cousins cut meat and stored it in the snow, while the others sewed pieces of insulation from the tail section into a sleeping bag that we hoped would keep me and my fellow climbers warm at night. Roberto, after much resistance, had agreed to go, as had Antonio "Tintin" Vizintín, a front-line forward with the strength and temperament of a bull. For days we gathered equipment: the nylon seat covers we used as blankets, snowshoes that Fito fashioned out of the seat cushions, a bottle to melt water in the sun, and knapsacks Roberto made by tying off the legs of trousers and threading nylon straps through the pantlegs.

Tintin and I were eager to set off, but Roberto seemed to find one excuse to delay after another—snapping that the sleeping bag needed better stitching, or he needed more time to gather his strength. But he was cruelly jolted from his mulishness on the afternoon of December 11, when Numa Turcatti, a friend of the team whose courage had won everyone's respect, died from infected sores on his legs.

On the morning of December 12, our 61st day in the Andes, I rose quietly. I'd dressed the night before: Next to my skin I wore a cotton polo shirt and a pair of women's slacks, then three pairs of jeans and three sweaters. I wore four pairs of socks, covered with plastic supermarket bags to keep them dry. Now I

gathered the aluminum pole I would use as a walking stick, a women's lipstick to protect my blistered lips, and bands of cloth to wrap around my hands. I stuffed my feet into my battered rugby shoes, pulled a wool cap over my head, and topped it with the hood and shoulders I'd cut from the antelope coat Susy had worn. Everything I did had the feel of ceremony, of consequence.

NONE OF US HAD MUCH to say as we followed the glacier up to the mountain's lower slopes. We thought we knew what risks we were facing. Still, our ignorance was staggering. Our bodies were ravaged and we had no mountaineering skills whatsoever: Instead of making our way up a gentle saddle to the south, for instance, we set off straight up the mountain's steepest slopes.

The snow was firm, and the cleats of my rugby shoes bit well into the frozen crust. But soon the surface began to weaken and we were forced to wade uphill through heavy drifts. My snowshoes quickly became so soaked that I felt as if I were climbing with manhole covers bolted to my shoes.

By midmorning we had worked our way to a dizzying altitude. But after five or six hours of hard climbing, the summit seemed no closer. My spirits sagged as I gauged the vast distance to the top. But as my body begged for surrender, some deep instinct forced me into a madman's pace. *Step-push, step-push.* Nothing else mattered. I was a locomotive lumbering up the slope. I was lunacy in slow motion. Soon I had pulled far ahead of Roberto and Tintin, who had to shout to make me stop. I waited for them at an outcrop. We ate some meat and melted snow. We all knew the kind of trouble we were in.

"Do you still think we can make it by nightfall?" Roberto asked. He was looking at the summit.

I shrugged. "We should look for a place to camp. If we don't find shelter, we will freeze before morning."

Roberto rose and lifted his backpack. "What did we do to deserve this?" he muttered. Then we started to climb.

It was late afternoon now, and the temperature began to fall. By twilight I was starting to panic, and I scaled a tall outcrop to get a better view. But as I pulled myself up, a rock the size of a cannonball broke free.

"Watch out! Watch out below!" I shouted. I looked down to see Roberto, eyes widened as he waited for the impact. The rock missed his head by inches. "You son of a bitch! You son of a bitch!" he shouted. "Are you trying to kill me? Watch what the fuck you are doing!" Then he leaned forward, and his shoulders started to heave. Hearing his sobs, I felt a stab of hopelessness, then I was overtaken by a sudden, inarticulate rage.

"Fuck this! Fuck this!" I muttered. "I have had enough! I have had enough!"

Finally I found a shallow depression in the snow beneath a large boulder, and we spread out the fragile sleeping bag, sewn together crudely with copper wire.

"Did you pee?" asked Roberto. "We can't be getting in and out of this bag all night."

It reassured me that Roberto was his old grumbling self again.

"I peed," I answered. "Did you pee? I don't want you peeing in this bag."

Roberto huffed. "If anyone pees in the bag it will be you. And be careful with those big feet."

I tried to get comfortable, but I was far too frightened and cold to relax.

"Roberto," I said, "you're the medical student. How does one die of exhaustion? Is it painful? Do you just drift off?"

"What does it matter how you die?" he said. "You'll be dead."

THAT NIGHT THE TEMPERATURE dropped so low that our snow-melting bottle shattered. In the morning we placed our frozen shoes in the sun until they thawed. Then we began to climb. The sun was bright. It was our second day of perfect weather.

With every hundred yards, the incline tilted closer to vertical. One slip, one moment of inattention would send me headlong down the slope. The tug of the void was constant. My life had collapsed to a simple game—climb well and live, or falter and die. The calm voice in my head had become my own.

Put the left foot there. Now, reach up for the crack in that boulder. Is it sturdy? Good. Lift yourself. Trust your balance. Watch the ice!

I had never felt so focused, so fiercely alive. For those astonishing moments, my suffering was over, my life had become pure flow. How we continued, I cannot say. But all day we struggled toward one false summit after another, only to see the mountain soaring up again toward the clouds. We pitched camp well before sunset, and in the morning decided that Tintin and I would try for the summit while Roberto waited with the packs. After hours of slow progress, we found ourselves at the base of a cliff towering hundreds of feet above us. Its face was almost dead vertical, but it was coated with hard-packed snow.

"How can we climb this?" asked Tintin.

I studied the wall. My mind was sluggish, but soon I remembered the aluminum walking stick strapped to my back.

"We need a stairway," I said. Using the stick's tip, I began to carve crude steps into the snow. Climbing these like the rungs of a ladder, we continued up. *Dig, climb. Dig, climb.*

Hours passed. Sometime in late morning I spotted blue sky above a ridgeline. After so many false summits, I kept my hopes in check, but this time the slope fell away and I found myself standing on the summit, a gloomy hump of rock and wind-scoured snow.

I don't remember if I felt any joy in that moment. If I did, it vanished as soon as I glanced around. The horizon was crowded in every direction with snow-covered mountains, each as steep and forbidding as the one I'd just

climbed. I understood immediately that the Fairchild's copilot had been badly mistaken. We had not passed Curicó. We were nowhere near the western limits of the Andes. Our plane had fallen somewhere in the middle of the range.

In that moment, all my dreams, assumptions, and expectations evaporated into the thin Andean air. I had always thought life was the natural thing, and death was simply the end of living. Now, in this lifeless place, I saw with terrible clarity that death was the constant, and life was only a short, fragile dream. I felt a sharp and sudden longing for my mother and sister, and for my father, whom I was sure now I would never see again. But despite the hopelessness of my situation, the memory of him filled me with joy. It staggered me—the mountains could not crush my ability to love. In that moment, I discovered a simple, astounding secret: Death has an opposite, but it is not mere living. It is not courage or faith or human will. The opposite of death is love. How had I missed that? How does anyone miss that? My fears lifted, and I knew that I would not let death control me. I would walk through that godforsaken country with love and hope in my heart. I would walk until I'd walked all the life out of me, and when I fell, I would die that much closer to home.

Soon I head Tintin's voice from below.

"Do you see any green, Nando? Do you see any green?"

I called back. "Tell Roberto to come up and see for himself."

It took three hours for Roberto to climb up. He looked around, shaking his head. "Well, we are finished," he said flatly.

"Look down," I said. "There is a valley. Do you see it?"

The valley wound through the snowy peaks ahead of us, then split into two forks as it neared a pair of smaller mountains in the distance. "That must be 50 miles," Roberto said. "In our condition, how can we make such a trek?"

"Chile is there," I said, "it's just farther than we thought."

It looked hopeless, but we formed a plan. Tintin would go back to the crash site, leaving us his meat, while Roberto and I carried on. That evening, the Andes blazed with the most spectacular sunset I'd ever seen. The sun turned the mountains to gleaming gold, and the sky was lit with swirls of scarlet and lavender.

"Roberto," I said, "can you imagine how beautiful this would be if we were not dead men?" I felt his hand wrap around mine. I knew he was as frightened as I was, but I drew strength from our closeness. We were bonded now like brothers. We made each other better men.

In the morning, we stood on the summit. "We may be walking to our deaths," I said, "but I would rather walk to meet my death than wait for it to come to me."

Roberto nodded. "You and I are friends, Nando," he said. "We have been through so much. Now let's go die together."

We eased ourselves over the western lip, and began to make our way down.

On December 20, 1972, their ninth day of trekking, Nando Parrado and Roberto Canessa stumbled upon a shepherd's camp in the Chilean region of Los Maitenes. Two days later, Parrado led helicopters to the 14 remaining survivors.

Parrado's first full account of his story will appear in *Miracle in the Andes*, from which this article is adapted. The book,

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