

The Naked Mountain

by George LaCas

Once upon a time, a young writer decided to leave his home in Iowa City, and seek wisdom in the East.

He had overheard a conversation one day in a cafe: two bookish young women, whispering over their cappuccinos, had spoken of a great swami who could answer any question, great or small. Naturally, the young writer's curiosity was piqued. He kept his ears open, and pretty soon he had the name of the mountain where the swami could be found. The night after he bought the GPS coordinates of the swami's mountaintop shrine (he paid \$300 to a sketchy, pockmarked man for the information on a slip of paper), the young writer packed his book bag and stowed away on a ship. Before he left he flooded his apartment so his cat would have enough water.

It took a long time to get to Kashmir. The young writer, whose name was Geoff, spent most of the time crossing the Atlantic fighting off rats, and reading the only book he'd brought with him: *Modern Theory of Fiction Technique*. He read and he read, and one night he killed, cooked, and ate a rat, after first gutting it with his pocketknife and slinging its guts against a crate. It was a lot better than he thought. He went to sleep with Show Don't Tell repeating in his mind, and before he fell asleep he reminded himself to repeat it often, as a mantra. But when he woke in the morning he found that the other rats, who did not take kindly to the young pale writer eating their cousin, had eaten nearly half of his textbook, starting at the back cover. He would never know how it ended. Geoff stared at the chamfered pages and wept.

By the time the ship rounded the Cape of Good Hope, Geoff was starving to death, eating the laces of his shoes, and having visions. Even as he stared at the angels and devils that danced before him and circled like vultures above him, he noted that, if he were a character in a book, what he was experiencing might be rendered with magical realism, or something like it. He hadn't tried magical

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realism yet. There was no mirror nearby, or dead grandparents, just the angels and devils. The rats, for some reason, were avoiding him.

The next thing he knew, Geoff was on the streets of Mumbai. He squatted next to a smiling, brown-skinned man about his own age. His companion was holding spiced meat on a stick under Geoff's nose.

"Is good, yes? Eat! Is chicken," said his companion.

"What the—where am I?" said Geoff. His book bag was nowhere to be seen, and his *Modern Theory of Fiction Technique* was history. This brown guy, whoever he was, smelled strongly of incense.

"As I tell you over and over," said his companion, who was now himself eating the meat in delicate little bites, "this is Bombay, Bombay India. You ridiculous American."

Geoff tried to focus his eyes on his surroundings. There was a cart at the side of the street where a gang of kids sold bootleg CDs to passersby, and behind him was what sounded like a restaurant. But Geoff couldn't concentrate on the city he was in, because stretched out before him on the street was a vast black shadow. The more he stared at the shadow, the more it looked like the face of a man holding a pencil or pen, and if Geoff squinted just right he could see the pen or pencil moving, as if the shadow was writing. But of course that was impossible.

"Do you have a name?" asked Geoff, which caused his companion to smirk and shake his head.

"Billy, as I am telling you many times," said Billy, throwing the meat-stained stick into the street, where a bicycle rickshaw ran over it.

"I have to get to Nanga Parbat," said Geoff. "I have to ask the swami something."

Billy turned and looked him over. "You're not ready, Geoff," he said, not unkindly.

"But you don't even know what I'm going to ask him," Geoff protested.

"I have a pretty good idea," said Billy.

"Your English is getting better and better, I notice."

"Try to stay in the scene," said Billy, "and not be distracted by the language it's written in, OK?"

Eventually Billy directed Geoff to the Valley of Kashmir, and Geoff tried to find guides to lead him up Nanga Parbat, but since Geoff didn't have any money they just laughed at him. He stood at the base of the mountain and plotted his climb.

Somehow he climbed the mountain, but it wasn't easy. At one point his feet froze solid, and Geoff had to amputate them with his pocketknife, cook them, and eat them. It didn't hurt a bit, but it did take awhile for them to thaw over the small fire he built. After he ate he passed out, and dreamed he was staying after class to talk to Professor Blackwood, who had written *Modern Theory of Fiction Technique* and a novella.

"Professor, I'm writing a novel!" he told the author-professor, who in the dream was over nine feet tall and dressed like Napoleon.

The professor turned to him with infinite weariness, and with incalculable sadness said, "And I'm sure it will be big, Geoff." The way the nine-foot Napoleonic professor flared his eyes wide when he said "big" made Geoff think the professor was laughing at him, and he went home and had sex with a woman-sized rat.

But when Geoff woke up on the mountain the next morning, he saw in the gleaming brilliance of the sunlight that he was very close to the top, and he could even make out the eaves of the teakwood roof of the swami's temple. He wasn't religious, but he felt pretty tingly just then. With a renewed sense of purpose, he stood on his frozen stumps, grabbed onto the rocks with his hands, and climbed the rest of the way up. Before he knew it, he stood before the temple door, which for some reason looked like the door of an office. He raised his frigid knuckles and knocked.

"Yeah, who the fuck is it?" said a voice from within.

"Uh ... it's Geoff, from America, and I've come to ask the swami something."

Silence. Geoff was beginning to wonder if he would have to hobble and slide back down the mountain, when the door buzzed

loudly. An electric lock clacked open. Geoff, even in his extremity, admired the technology. He entered the temple.

Inside, behind a desk, was a fat guy in a dirty white T-shirt. The fat guy was smoking a big green cigar, and piled before him on the desk were stacks and stacks of manuscripts. Geoff could tell that was what they were because he had left several unfinished ones back in his flooded apartment. The fat guy held a magnifying glass in his hand, looking at a page, until finally he scowled at his visitor.

"Sorry to bother you, sir," said Geoff, "but I'm here to see the swami."

"Yeah, I heard you the first time," said the fat guy, "and I'm sorry to disappoint you, Princess, but I am the fucking swami, so what wisdom are you here to receive?"

Geoff stood shocked, unable to answer. He gazed around the office (for it was, without a doubt, an office) at the hundreds of manuscripts, at the bags with unopened letters spilling out of them.

"Well?" said the swami, puffing his green stinky cigar. "I ain't got all day."

Finally Geoff found the strength to speak. "I've come to find the secret of literature," said Geoff in a croak.

The swami stared at him with the same jaded sadness that the Napoleonic professor of his dream had. "Kid, the secret is ... aw hell, you don't want to know," said the swami. "Listen, would you get me a cup of coffee from the other room? I'm not allowed to leave this desk."

"But ... but you're the swami," said Geoff. He could feel his ankles beginning to thaw out.

"Yeah, well, rules are rules. All right, kid. You want wisdom? Get me the fucking coffee, and you'll see the secret in there." The swami picked up his magnifying glass and once again read the manuscript in front of him. "Get yourself one too, and some meat on a stick."

Geoff hopped on his stumps into the next room, which was bare except for a small table with a percolator on it and a couple of chipped mugs. He poured black reeking coffee into both mugs,

looked around for Splenda or sugar and found none, but suddenly he realized he wasn't alone. He turned.

Against one wall, an ancient man sat chained to a typewriter, typing. Geoff noted that the old man had a sleepy, hunt-and-peck style to his typing. He wondered if this was the real swami, and the fat guy out front some kind of receptionist. The old man looked up at Geoff.

"Young man, would you help me with the carriage return?" the old man said.

"Who are you?" Geoff asked him.

"I'm the typist, of course."

But the swami called from the next room. "Not that room, kid, that coffee is shit. The other room, over there." Geoff shrugged his apologies to the ancient typist and left the room. He saw the room he was supposed to go in, and he made for the espresso machine.

"But kid," called the swami, "don't look at the fourth wall!"

Geoff saw that the walls were numbered. Back in Iowa he would have told the swami to go screw, or he would have thought about it, but after the last few weeks of his journey he obeyed. There was a 3 above the espresso machine, and a 2 and a 1 on the adjacent walls. He kept his eyes averted from Wall #4. He made a couple of double espressos and got ready to bring them in to the swami.

But, from the fourth wall, he heard a noise. He looked at the doorway. He could hear the old typist typing. He could hear the swami on the phone, telling someone to quit calling. Geoff realized that no one would know if he looked at the fourth wall.

When he did, he saw a vast field of nothing, or else real thin clouds. It was no wall at all. He stepped toward it ... and through a veil of fog he could see a guy with headphones on sitting in front of a laptop computer, nodding to the music he listened to, typing much faster than the old typist in the other room.

"Uh oh," said Geoff, and he looked away. He grabbed the espresso cups and went into the front room.

"You looked, didn't you," said the swami, squinting into his magnifying glass.

Geoff sighed. "Yes, and swami, I really have to insist you tell me the secret of literature."

The swami looked up. "Kid, I like your moxie. You're gonna go far. See, the thing is, since I'm a holy man who knows more shit than you ever will, I have to answer your question with a koan."

"A koan? You mean like one of those Buddhist riddles?"

"Kind of," said the swami, lighting a fresh cigar. "All right, here goes. Two painters are walking down the street. The old painter is an artist-type painter. You know, paintings. The young painter is a house painter. You with me so far?"

"Yes," said Geoff. His stumps were really beginning to hurt. He wondered if the swami had any aspirin, or maybe opium.

"Right," said the swami. "So the old painter, who's having a bad day, starts moaning to the young painter: Oh, nobody understands my art, my vision, my genius is pearls before swine. Bitch, bitch, bitch. The young painter, the house painter, just smiles and nods."

"OK," said Geoff. He had rather hoped the great swami would offer him more explicit wisdom. This was like opening a fortune cookie only to find dirt inside it.

"So the old painter, the artist, he sees the smile on the house painter's face. What the hell are you so happy about? the artist-painter wants to know. Do *you* know the secret of painting? Thinking, of course, that the young painter don't know dick."

Geoff, mesmerized, watched the glowing end of the green cigar, the ebb and flow of its ember as the swami puffed. Geoff was seeing trails.

"And what did the house painter tell him?" Geoff whispered. He was glad he'd made this trip after all.

"Kid, the house painter told him: Sir, when you're painting houses, interior or exterior, whether you're using brushes or rollers or a paint gun ... you don't never let them see your brushstrokes."

Geoff, standing steady now on his jagged, shredded stumps, closed his eyes and grinned, as enlightenment (and rank cigar smoke) washed over him. Nirvana!

And so it was that the young writer, having received the great swami's wisdom, stumbled back down Nanga Parbat, but by the time he reached the bottom again, he couldn't clearly remember the parable of the two painters. In his mind glowed the vision of the ancient man at his typewriter, hunting and pecking and tapping, who years before had forgotten the heavy chains wrapped around him.

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