Our Family Climb of Kilimanjaro

Julie Smith, November 4, 2026, www.whatwouldjuliedo.blog

Why Kili?

Like many climbers, we've had our sights on Kilimanjaro for many years. When I say "we", I mean my husband, Hilary, and I. We've been climbing mountains for more than 20 years, starting with the Colorado 14ers, then moving to other goals, like Colorado county high points, Colorado centennials, United States high points, and a few international and continental high points. Like every climb, Kilimanjaro will take us to a place we've never been before, the country of Tanzania, in Africa. Not only have we never been to Tanzania, we've never even set foot anywhere on the continent of Africa. Since we're going all the way over there, we decided we'll also do some safaris and spend time in Zanzibar, an Island off the east coast of Tanzania, where our oldest son, Skyler, spent a cross-cultural semester doing projects as part of his degree in conservation biology.

It turns out that both of our sons, Skyler and Cameron, have windows in their lives that allow them to join our climb. We raised them trekking, backpacking, camping and climbing, so it was pretty easy for them to say, "why not?". As millennials, they are nearing the middle of their working careers, and are able to call some shots about when and how to spend vacation time. It's been many years since we've spent more than a couple days together as a family, so this promises to be a truly special and memorable experience.

About The Mountain

Kilimanjaro, the highest mountain on the continent of Africa, is located in Tanzania, a large country in east Africa, situated just below the equator. The mountain is at the northern end of the country, very close to the equator. It is not part of a range, but rather a stand-alone volcano, standing so tall that it can be seen from a hundred miles away on a clear day. Because of its extreme elevation and size, about 800 square miles in area and 19,300 feet high, it creates its own weather and hosts six different climate zones. Also, there are about a half dozen routes to climb the mountain, which is visited by as many as 50,000 climbers and tourists annually, around half of whom summit.

To climb this mountain, you have to use a local guide service, so this will be our first ever climb with a guide. Normally we plan our own climbs and just go, so this will be different for us. I'm really looking forward to it, though, because it means that we won't have to carry very much gear on our backs, and we'll eat much better food than we normally eat on a climb. Normally we take hydrated meals to save weight, and while they get us through the climb nutritionally, they can be pretty tedious to eat day in and day out.

Sketch of map, routes, elevation gain, ecological zones, distance, time, regulations must have local guide, etc.

Planning the Climb

Since we know fellow climbers in Golden who are dialed into a local guiding service for climbs of Kilimanjaro, we've decided to work with them, as opposed to random searches on the internet. Not that the guides on the internet aren't just fine, I'm sure they are; there are many awesome local guiding services for Kilimanjaro, and by definition if they're guiding, they have to be licensed. It's just that since we have a connection we decided to go with it; after all, why give our money to people we don't know when we have friends who do the same thing?

The planning for the actual climb itself is easy for us because of the guide service; they'll take care of not only the navigation, but also all the food, which is a huge part of planning for any climb, and arguably most of the weight. We've also chosen to pay a little extra to let the guide service provide the tents and sleeping bags. Because Kili is a walk-up, we don't have to worry about all the snow-travel, rope travel and general glacier gear, which adds to weight and complexity for most big climbs. While Kili does have snow at the top, it's relatively soft and easy to walk on. We just have to make sure we have the right clothes for lower elevation (really hot) and high elevation (at the top it's freezing and can get really windy). Also it can be rainy. In this part of the world, the rains, when they come, can be epic with buckets falling for hours and days, unlike in Colorado, where an afternoon thunderstorm might last an hour at most. By doing it this way, we won't be burdened with excess climbing gear to drag around as we explore Tanzania after our climb.

We'll also take our water filters and a 1-oz dropper bottle of Clorox. This is to avoid bottled water, which is considered an absolute necessity in Africa, where little to no water is potable. We are zero-waste people, and aren't about to consume several plastic bottles of water every day for a month. Typical municipal drinking water plants in the U.S. basically remove solids through filtration processes, and disinfect with chlorine, often using Clorox, which is how we treat our water to make it safe when camping, climbing and travelling. Climbers typically rely on water filters, so we can drink water from any source, no matter how sketchy. The filter is the first point of treatment, and the Clorox is the final disinfection step, just 4 drops per liter and let it sit for 30 minutes. We'll add 6 drops, just to be sure, since it's Africa, which is known for really scary water. I know people who don't carry a filter, in order to save weight, and rely only on the Clorox, which is also fine, but more Clorox is required since any solids, no matter how fine, will take up the Clorox before it can kill the pathogens in the water. Skyler swears by his steri pen, which works great too, but does require batteries, so you need to make sure those are good and that you have extras. Also, the water has to be clear for the pen to work, since it relies on ultraviolet light to kill the microbes.

In addition to the right gear, we'll take gifts for the Africans, since they don't have the means or access that we do. This includes some used high altitude gear from a climbing friend, and lots of lotion

bars and soap from Aspire, my personal care business. The Aspire products are in bulk without packaging, which avoids the containers that probably wouldn't be recycled in Africa.

We find ourselves in a whole new world when it came to the legalities of going to Africa in terms of the paperwork and such. There's a bit more to it than heading down to Mexico or Argentina. We dig into requirements for visas, immunization records and vaccines, and are pleasantly surprised to find that we don't really need any of this if we're coming from the U.S. We did find that it's a good idea to bring plenty of U.S. dollars to tip the local support teams, including guides, porters and cooks, as well as drivers.

On this very special trip, I've decided to stay off-line as much as possible, to be in the moment, so I'm leaving my laptop at home and taking only my phone, for any absolutely necessary emails that need a response before we return. After all, we're experiencing this adventure with our sons, and haven't travelled with them for many years. Instead of the laptop, I'm taking a notebook that Skyler gave me for Christmas for journalling about the climb and the trip, and a few books that have been sitting on my shelf waiting to be read for far too long. We're finally ready to hit the road on 12/24/19, the day before Christmas.

Getting There

After staying up until midnight tying loose ends last night, we're up at 5:00 AM to head to DIA with all our gear. We take the Golden Shuttle, picking up one additional passenger as we pass through Lakewood. The travel is smooth, with a short layover in Minneapolis, and enough time to grab breakfast in Amsterdam before the final long leg of the journey, 4,288 miles to Kilimanjaro Airport (JRO), Tanzania, at 8:30 PM on Christmas day. We manage to keep our luggage to one duffel each, in addition to our carry-ons. This includes our climbing clothes, a little equipment, like trekking poles and day packs, and our travel clothes for exploring Tanzania as tourists after the climb. The customs line is endless as always, filled with climbers and their gear, and seems to take forever, but it's fun to people-watch and see all the Osprey packs from our own Colorado (that's what we use) and Deuters from Germany, one with a yellow flower on it like my own. We finally manage to reach the desk and get through with no problem, other than the fingerprints, where my missing index finger on the left hand raises a few eyebrows. We see a northern European family get hung up over visas.

Once we got out of the U.S., the airlines and airports were actually pretty good about minimizing single-use containers and trash to landfill. The two airlines we travelled on, Delta and AMS, diligently separated the single-use plastic bottles from everything else. I tried to reuse my wine glass and the stewardess said they couldn't do that (backwards in itself) but assured me that they recycle everything. I still had my doubts, but the airport In Amsterdam had trash to energy collection, where they incinerate everything, so I left everything that I'd been collecting from eating on the planes and in the airports to that point, and deposited it there, glad to know I wouldn't have to clean it all up, drag it along during our entire trip, and take it home to recycle in a TerraCycle box. We were surprised but glad to learn that plastic bags are illegal in Tanzania, so we were told to leave plastic bags on the plane. It's good to see

that other countries are doing something about diverting trash from landfill, or eliminating it completely, since the U.S. isn't doing very much.

Our ultimate destination was Moshi, TZ, where our launching point, the Springlands Hotel, was located. The guide service we used, Zara, is a woman-owned company that has been in business for over 30 years. The business is dedicated to providing employment opportunities for locals, with a strong emphasis on employing women. Our kind of people, for sure. They aren't limited to Kili climbs; they have a huge variety of services for adventurous visitors to Tanzania, including a large array of safaris, and they provide full packages that include transportation and places to stay overnight. We found the fees to be extremely reasonable as well. Our plan was to do the climb first, then do a safari. These two adventures would take about two weeks, after which we would be on our own.

After the climb and safari, we would head to the east coast of Tanzania, experience a couple of days in the capital city of Dar Es Salaam, and then take a ferry to the island of Zanzibar, where we would spend the remaining two weeks of our trip. Skyler lived there with two different families doing field work as part of his degree in conservation biology from Colorado State University (CSU), that he completed and accepted his diploma just a few days before we left Denver, on 12/21/19. We can't wait to meet his African "family" and see his projects.

Once we get through customs in the Kilimanjaro International Airport, we're greeted by a smiling young woman with a sign that says "Zara", who ushers us to a van for the 1-hour drive to Moshi and the Springlands Hotel. The driver speaks English, and Skyler uses the opportunity to get his Swahili back into his head. We chat the entire drive and it's fun to see the nightlife in TZ along the sides of the road as we go. Since it's Christmas night, all the hot spots are busy and full of people celebrating through the night, with lots of festive Christmas lights and decorations. When we reach the motel, it's around 11:30 at night. They get us checked in, and then usher us to a small garden bar area for a quick midnight snack and cold beer. Just ideal! What sweet people, and on Christmas when they should be home with their families, though their families have probably long been asleep by now.

The Springlands Hotel is a beautiful place, with central courtyards, lush gardens and even a pool, surrounded by simple and comfortable rooms, fully accommodated with full bathrooms and requisite mosquito netting for the beds; after all, we're in equatorial Africa. These days, I take the mosquito threat quite seriously, having just lost a long-time work friend from Coors to west Nile virus that he picked up from a mosquito bite in his back yard. And he lived in Wheatridge, just on the other side of South Table Mountain from us. A little close to home.

At Springlands, they serve three meals a day in a central outdoor dining area, with excellent food, including all manner of fresh local produce. In Tanzania, they grow pretty much every imaginable fruit and vegetable, so everything is basically local. I love this, because I know that my food generally has a lower carbon footprint here than in the U.S., where a lot of our food, particularly in winter, is hucked to us from far, far away. Like much of Africa, Tanzania is mainly a dry country due to a substantial Muslim population, but in places where they have tourists, like the Springlands, liquor is available, and they have some wonderful beers brewed within the country that we can enjoy, like Tusker and Kilimanjaro Premium Lager. The place is full of climbers and other adventurers from innumerable countries speaking

every imaginable language, excited about their upcoming once-in-a-lifetime adventures, and it feels festive with all the excitement in the air.

Our first morning is a bit of a whirlwind, beginning with an amazing breakfast in the central courtyard, with hot coffee, followed immediately by a quick meeting with a young lady, who briefs us on our timing and verifies our schedule. She then introduces us to our head guide, Frank, who tells us to be ready to leave in an hour. So, right *now*? Not feeling like an hour is enough to sort through what will go up the mountain with us, and what is staying in the hotel storage, I fly into a panicked rush to get back to the room and get everything organized, bailing from the meeting and telling the boys to just brief me later, as they roll their eyes at their type A mother and wife.

It's a lot to get through, but it only ends up taking a half hour. I guess we can be really fast when we want to be. My concern when I rush, however, is forgetting something critical, so now I'm carrying that annoying burden. We get all our gear separated, with a hiccup when Cameron has trouble finding proof of insurance on his phone, but finally manages to pull it up. Skyler completely forgot his sunglasses, an absolute necessity, so we stop at a roadside market, where he gets ambushed instantly as he stepps out of the car, surrounded by desperate venders selling an endless array of stuff he doesn't need and never will. I step out with him just to stretch my legs, and immediately return to the relative security of the van, where they continue to pummel me through the window. Just unreal, but I already knew this about Africa. Tanzania, like most African countries, is poor, so an American can expect to get ambushed and harassed constantly to spend, spend, spend. We definitely have a global reputation as insanely compulsive consumers, and I imagine they probably manage to sell a lot of junk this way. Skyler manages to find a stand that has sunglasses, and the vendor tries to gouge the daylights out of him, another thing common when Americans try to buy something, and he's lucky to beat down the price from $30 to $20 for a pair of sunglasses that would have cost $10 in the U.S. A constant reminder of how ethics go out the window when people are fighting for limited resources in an overpopulated country.

<u>And Let The Climb Begin!</u>

Finally, we are headed down the road to the gates of Kilimanjaro National Park. There are many entrances to this enormous park, and ours is the Umbwe Gate entrance, on the south side of the park, which accesses the Umbwe route that we'll take. It's a long, thin road through the country, through fields of banana trees, coffee, corn and native produce that we don't recognize. We see houses, some big, mostly small, some abandoned and falling apart, something like driving through southeastern Colorado, where ranchers have abandoned land, homes, barns and left their farming equipment laying around in pieces in the front of their property, like tokens or mementos of a past and better era. Only maybe not quite as bad as Colorado. After all, in this poor country, there's not quite as much money to buy and waste stuff, like in the U.S. I'm guessing most farmers in this part of the world have never owned a truck, and fossil fuel powered farming equipment is probably scarce as well. This would explain in part why the carbon footprint per capita in TZ is just 0.18 tonnes/capita, compared to the U.S., where



we spew an obscene 14 tonnes/capita. If we all lived and consumed like they do in Tanzania, global warming would come to a screeching halt for sure.

At any rate, it's fun to see people living their lives, men, women and children walking, riding bikes, sometimes scooters or three-wheeled golf carts along the road, looking at the white faces in the Zara van, one of any that pass by here on the way to the trailhead. There are small local stores with people congregated in front, catching up and sharing gossip, sort of how I imagine the U.S. must have been several generations ago, before we got so caught up in our synthetic, isolated lives and the internet that we barely know our neighbors, much less have time to talk to them and be actual neighbors. The Tanzanians appear to have neighborliness down a whole lot better than we do. It's very lush here, with the jungle taking over any land or building that is not occupied or maintained. Just a beautiful place. Clouds are hanging low over Kilimanjaro, so we never see the mountain as we drive in.

In Tanzania, they drive on the left, so it's a little disconcerting to see Frank nodding off in the front seat, on the left side where he's riding shotgun. In the U.S., this is where the driver would be. It does take a little getting used to, even as passengers, especially with the oncoming traffic. It feels something like we're playing chicken, until the oncoming car passes without incident on the right. At first, I find it hard not to cower by leaning away in an uncontrolled reflex.

At last, we reach the Umbwe Gate at the park entrance, where a ranger and a crew of porters are waiting. We sign in with the ranger and Frank takes care of the final details for our climb. This is a less-travelled route by far, with fewer climbers, owing to its steepness and challenge compared to the more travelled routes. For at least the first three days of climbing, we'll have this route mainly to ourselves, until we join other climbers in a larger camp about 8,000 feet up. The Umbwe is a small entrance, with a couple storage buildings, a pavilion to get gear organized, and toilets. We wait in a covered patio for the ranger to get us sorted out. Frank introduces us to Godfrey, his assistant, who will be leading the way up the trail through the jungle. Godfrey presents us with box lunches to eat on the trail. Skyler hears some monkeys in the trees, and he and Cameron head in the direction of the calls to see if they can get some pictures. They're excited to identify them, because they're really elusive. I wonder around and look upwards until my neck starts to ache, looking for whatever birds and monkeys I can manage to spot.



After hitting the last flush toilets we'll see for a while, we finally begin our upward march, with Godfrey in the lead. We carry light day packs, leaving anything we won't need until tonight with the

porters. This is, for us, the closest we'll likely come to glamping in our lives. Zara supplies the tents, foam pads and all the food. We also rented sleeping bags, just so we wouldn't have to drag them around with us on our travels after the climb.



In Tanzania, it's mandatory to use a guide service with local guides and porters when climbing Kili, so we have no choice in the matter. And, though it seems excessive to us to be guided, since we always embrace the challenge, pride and joy of finding our own way unguided on mountains, this time we can feel pride in giving back directly to our support team when we hire the service, and then tip in the end, which feels good and right to us. Our team consists of a head guide, an assistant guide, a cook, and 11 porters. Yes, 11 porters. Just for our little group of 4, and our two guides. It seems like a lot, but the porters have to carry all their own gear, plus ours, as well as the food, tents and everything else needed to support the four of us, but also the support team itself, as we climb and camp our way up the mountain.

We march up the path as Godfrey reminds us of the rule, "Pole, Pole", which means "slow and steady", one foot in front of the other, in Swahili. Basically, we're supposed to follow the guide, not run ahead of him. This is largely due to a justified concern that climbers may gain altitude too fast, resulting in problems like high altitude pulmonary edema (HAPE) or, even worse, high altitude cerebral edema (HACE), that could end the climb. If this happens to anyone on the team, they have to descend immediately, since these conditions are potentially fatal if left unchecked. By moving up the mountain at an even, methodical and, yes, relatively slow pace, our bodies have time to acclimatize and avoid these conditions.

Godfrey is learning that his new group of clients from Colorado don't quite get the "pole, pole" thing right away. We do our best to slow down a bit, just to be polite, but soon resume normal hiking speed, as Godfrey takes up the rear. The first day of hiking is about 6 hours, 6 miles and 3,900 feet of elevation gain through the dense jungle that surrounds the base of the mountain. In our climb, we will pass through four different and distinct ecological zones from the base of the mountain to the top, at 19,341 feet, a total elevation gain of 13,400 feet. The jungle is thick with vegetation, sounds of birds and wildlife and humidity. I lose myself as I walk up the path, lost in the beauty of the lush rainforest. Oh, what a wonderful, magical place. This is technically the second ecological zone on Kili, the first being the cultivated foot slopes below 6,000 feet that we drove through to reach the entrance to the park. The rainforest that we're hiking up through now is the most biologically diverse region of the mountain, full of an incredible array of terrestrial and avian wildlife and plant life filling every possible niche in this bountiful forest.

After about an hour, the jungle rapidly darkens as the sky suddenly fills with clouds. Thick, gray clouds billow overhead, obscuring the sky completely, and it feels like dusk, but it's only mid-afternoon. Then we hear thunder, followed by a few drops of rain. We're in the jungle, and we know what's probably coming next. In Colorado, a couple drops may or may not be followed by heavy rain, but here, we're probably about to get dumped on. We wait for Godfrey to catch up, and, seeing him whip out a large umbrella, we're sure this is going to be bad. As we pull on our raingear, the deluge hits, and we're soaked before we're fully protected. In a panic, I cram my foot into my hiking boot, and my wet sock rips out the inner lining from the heel of the nearly-new boot. Already I've ruined one piece of critical equipment before we even get through the jungle. Way to go Mom! Oh well, it's only a boot. I only need it to walk in the entire way. I somehow manage to smooth it a little so I can get my foot in, lace it as best I can, and we continue up the path, the rain falling in sheets.

I hate hiking in rain, and I remind myself it's the jungle, it's beautiful, and it's not even cold. Just wet. How bad can it be? It's just water. After all, this beautiful vegetation wouldn't be here without lots and lots of water. Like, Duh. Of course it's gonna rain. It won't rain forever. But it does. It rains in buckets for another hour before we finally decide it's not stopping any time soon, so we go ahead and break for lunch and eat in the rain, leaning over to keep as much rain as possible from sogging up our food. We try sitting under trees, but there is no protection to be had. The branches and fine leaves allow all the water to reach the ground. And us. We realize our rain gear is not holding up very well, our clothes are soaked as the rain passes right through our rain coats and pants. And the rain covers for our packs. And my boots are completely soaked. Saturated. And I thought they were waterproofed. I'd be wrong on that. We're definitely not in Colorado any more. At home, this kind of deluge might happen once a year, for maybe 15 minutes at most. Not for three solid hours. Which, in the end, is how long it rains. It finally lets up, slowing to a drizzle for the last couple hours, which is fairly tolerable hiking weather compared to the deluge.

As we go, the porters run up the trail past us, each holding a large umbrella, carrying all the gear to set up camp, our gear and theirs, and, as we approach camp, we can hear the sound of metal stakes being pounded, as they set up our camp. The rain stops, and water is reduced to drippage from the trees. When we arrive, the tents are set up, and each sleeping tent has two foam pads lining the floor, two sleeping bags, and our duffels, with our inflatable pads and other stuff. We are delighted to find that a food tent, tall enough to stand in, with a table, four chairs, is set up nicely for with hot chocolate and snacks. It's cute, just the perfect size for the four of us. Our sleeping tents are bigger than the ones we normally carry, large and roomy, big enough in theory for 3 or 4 people, but we are issued two tents, one for Hilary and I, and another for Skyler and Cameron. There's plenty of space to lay out our soaking clothes to dry. As muddy and wet as it is outside, the tents are clean and dry, and the only water inside them is what's dripping from our packs and clothes.

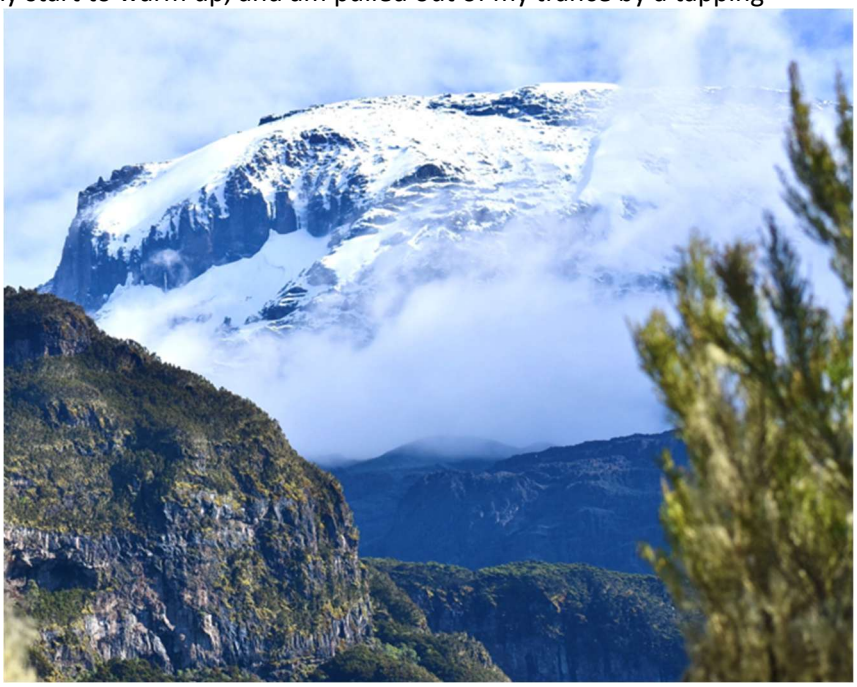
As we unpack, our worst fears are realized. Everything is soaking wet. Our clothes. Our shoes. The book I brought to read at night. Evidently the pack cover on my Dueter worked fine, but the heavy rain found its way between the back of my rain jacket and the back of my pack, which wasn't covered, and wicked in from there. The only stuff we have that's still dry is what the porters carried, our duffels. So our first big learning is that umbrellas are a whole lot more effective in this kind of rain than rain

clothes. Our pants are about as soaked as they would be if we hadn't bothered with the rain pants at all. Clearly a different strategy is needed to cope with the rain, though it won't do us much good for this particular excursion. We'll just have to live with what we brought.

We blow up our air mattresses and lay out our sleeping bags. Then I focus on pulling the wet clothes out of my pack and laying them out on top of my sleeping bag. I pull out my book, and copy of Rachael Maddow's "Blowout", that I recently bought, figuring I could have time to read it on our trip, when I'm free of the everyday chores of life at home. The cover is pretty soaked, but, thankfully, a couple pages in, it's somewhat dry. I fluff the pages, and stick it in the net pocket on the inside wall of the tent to keep it from getting any additional water on it.

After all the wet stuff is piled everywhere, I slip into my sleeping bag, still wearing my soaking wet clothes, including shirt, pants and socks, thinking that it shouldn't take too long for my body heat to build up within the sleeping bag, warming my clothes so they would dry. After all, even in the coldest of weather, one can put their wet clothes inside their sleeping bag with them, when they go to sleep for the night, and the clothes will be dry when they wake up. Our bodies are furnaces, aren't they? I'd be wrong. At least this time. The problem might be the extent of the wetness. That trick has always worked just fine for damp clothes, but these clothes are wringing wet, and after about 10 minutes I'm shivering uncontrollably, and the clothes are still soaking wet. And, the inside of my sleeping bag is now soaked as well. I'm starting to wonder if I'm going to get hypothermic.

I wiggle out of my bag, remove all my wet clothes, including my socks, and put on every piece of dry clothing that I left in the duffel, that was carried up by the porters with the umbrellas. My wool long underwear goes on first, followed by wool socks, thick fleece pants and shirt, and down sweater and winter coat. I even pull on my woot hat, that I brought for use high on the mountain where it will be freezing, and not so much down here in the rainforest, where it's no less than 50 ºF. I slip back into my sleeping bag and close my eyes. I finally start to warm up, and am pulled out of my trance by a tapping on the tent, followed by a voice. "There's hot water in the food tent". Hilary, who's in his bag, wiggles out and puts on his muddy boots. He stoops out of the tent and heads to the food tent, where Skyler and Cameron are already indulging in hot chocolate.



I pull on my cold, soaking wet boots and force myself out of the tent. As soon as I stand up, I realize I have to pee. The rain has stopped for a bit, though the sky remains gray and threatening. I can see toilets up the hill, which is

actually a pleasant surprise, since I wasn't absolutely certain there would be facilities up here. A lot of big mountains don't have facilities, and it can be pretty gross. The small building has two stalls, one with a conventional toilet seat, and the other with a small, 1 x 1 foot square hole in the floor. A squat toilet like they have in China. The entire floor of the facility is covered with white tiles, freshly cleaned and mopped, the mop and bucket sitting off to the side. Choosing the seated toilet, I look around and see that there's no toilet paper, typical of remote mountain facilities, so I reach in my pocket and pull out a napkin from the plane that I didn't need, and use that. Feeling much better, I head to the food tent to join my family. The clouds are parting, and from the camp we can see a nice view of the snow-covered peak.



The tiny food tent is just tall enough to stand in, and is set up with a small table and four folding chairs. It's warm and comfortable with our combined body heat, and the door flap is held with Velcro to keep it shut. The guys get me situated with hot water and a little can of chocolate powder, that I can make some hot chocolate with. Soon, I'm warmed up and cozy enough to take off my coat and hat. Ahhhh. It feels so good to finally be warm! We hang out and laugh about the rain, a lot more than we're used to, the first unexpected challenge in our adventure.

I'm worried about my feet, because even as I warm up, my feet are still cold and clammy in my soaking wet boots, and I have no idea how I'm going to dry them before morning in the chilly, wet jungle air. My once-fresh, dry socks are now soaked from the wet boots, and I can't find my third pair, which I wouldn't want to use in my boots anyway, because they'd get wet too. Then I'd have three pairs of wet socks. Yuck.

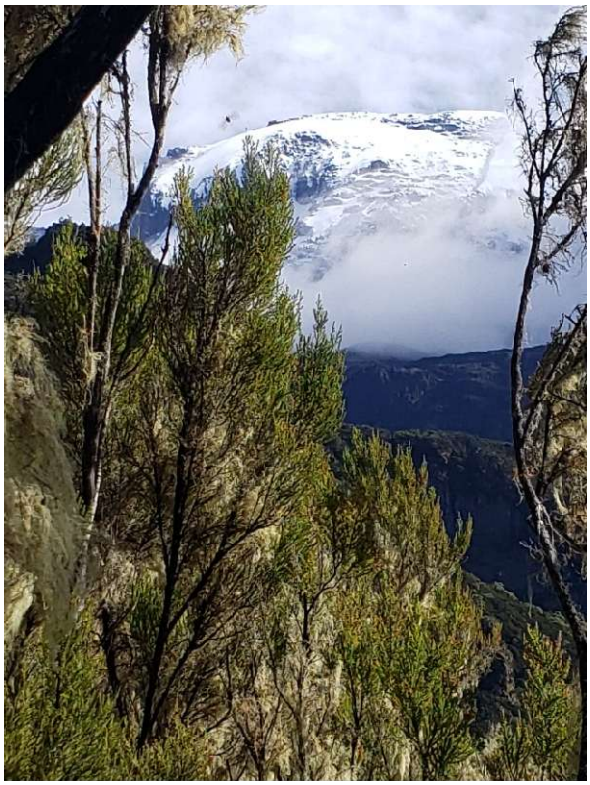
Soon, a smiling face pokes into our tent, and introduces himself as "Elvis", who will be serving us dinner. He is carrying a covered pot, which he introduces as hot cucumber soup, our first course. He leaves it, along with bowls, and we dish it up. It tastes like the absolutely finest soup I've ever had, warming in my tummy, and I'm ready to peel off more layers in no time. The soup is soon followed by the main course, a spectacular array of well-seasoned vegetables, meat and fiber, much more than we could ever eat. So, we now know how this is going to go. The Zara team certainly knows how to keep us nourished for our climb, that's for sure! After we've crammed as much as we can into our bodies, we are presented with a tray of local fruit, bananas and mangos, for dessert. We finish with some hot tea, and

head back to our tents to sleep. At home, I like to read for a bit before I go to sleep, and I pull out Blowout, a detailed expose of the dark side of the oil industry, of which I used to be a part. It's depressing to read about the most polluting, deceptive, corrupted industry on the planet, but definitely eye-opening and motivating. I'll definitely divest of any remaining fossil fuel stocks lurking within my retirement funds when I return home. I've been meaning to do this for some time, but Rachel's book has definitely lit a fire under me!

After a really good night's sleep in the warm sleeping bags in the tents, we rise early, hoping that an early start will beat at least some of the rain. My socks and pants are still a little wet after an entire night in the sleeping bag, so that method doesn't appear to work very well here. I'm guessing it's because of the higher humidity, leaving a little less capacity for the air to take on moisture from wet clothes. I finally pull on my wet pants over my long underwear that I slept in and my fleece pants over that, leaving the wet pants sandwiched in between. I put the wet socks on my feet, grimacing at the icky wet chill of them, and force on my boots, sticking my fingers inside the heals to keep the ripped linings from tearing even more. Enduring the bracing cold of my feet, I put on my wool hat, which helps a little, and a few layers over my mid-section, then head out for my morning business, then the food tent. After coffee and breakfast, I feel a lot more comfortable, so I pull off the extra layers before we head up the trail; I would overheat in no time if I wore all that while hiking. My pants are now dry, and even my feet have warmed up a little, though the socks and boots remain wet. I'm hoping that the shoes and socks will dry during the day as we hike. As we take off, the sun is shining in partly cloudy skies, and it's fairly warm out.



Today will take us another 3.6 miles and 3,650 feet closer to the summit, a slightly shorter climb than yesterday. We don't get far before the rainforest transitions to a new ecosystem, the heath and moorland zone. It's spectacular, a forest of giant groundsels, Skyler tells us, with trees covered in a pale green lichen, nothing like I've ever seen before. There's also lobelia deckenii, a bizarre kind of plant that looks like a combination between a large cactus and agave. The entire forest is more open with fewer trees, and it's easier to see the incredible variety of foliage that we've never seen before. We're in awe as we climb, stopping constantly to take pictures of this unique and entrancing flora. We peer down into a steep valley, trying to see a waterfall that we can hear from the trail, and are rewarded with a forest of baobab trees, a unique looking tree with a thick, bulbous trunk topped by a slightly comical shock of broad, flat green fronds, looking like they belong in a Dr. Seuss book. The climbing is rocky in places, ruggedly beautiful. We have about four hours of climbing today, and the views of the flats in the distance get more dramatic and the trees continue to thin as we climb. The last section is the Barranco valley, a fairly wide open expanse that's low in vegetation.



Yesterday I noticed a lot of plastic trash on the trail, which was disappointing to see from climbers who should know better. Seriously. It was raining so hard that I couldn't begin to deal with it, but this morning it's not raining, and I can't walk by it. I start picking it up as we walk, and stuffing it in my pockets. Then Godfrey and Frankie notice what I'm doing, and start picking it up too. They tell me that there are crews that come up and maintain the trails and pick up the plastic, which makes me feel better, and I realize it would probably be a whole lot worse if not for that. Still, I have to wonder who is just dumping their trash as they hike up this beautiful, amazing trail? Who would have the complete lack of respect, the complete absence of responsibility, the complete absence of conscience, to toss plastic trash over their shoulders in such a pristine place? To travel all the way to another country to climb a unique and beautiful mountain, and then trash it? It completely boggles my mind. They can bring all their little plastic wrapped snack bars up here, then they can't muster the responsibility to pack out the plastic wrapper. I know most of the climbers are from the Americas, Europe and Asia. And they're wealthy enough to afford to do this climb. They should know better. There is no excuse among climbers to fail to pack out our trash. We need to grow up, get a clue, and at the very least take care of our own waste. If we're climbers, we should care enough about our environment and the wildlife we are poisoning and murdering by not bothering. The whole thing just frustrates me and it disgusts me that anybody could come to this amazing mountain and just dump their trash.

We get to know Godfrey a little better, chatting as we walk. He's been an assistant guide with Zara for five years, and has climbed Kili about 50 times, usually three or four times a month. They don't do any climbs during the rainy season, which is April, but they climb the rest of the year. He attends college in Moshi, and is working on a wildlife management degree, hoping to manage in a national park. He's learning Chinese so he can guide Chinese clients, and we practiced our Chinese on each other. For me, it's been awhile, so my Chinese is pretty sketchy. He has a wife and two kids in Moshi, a 4-year-old boy and a 7-year-old girl. His wife has an administrative job in town for the park service. Frankie has a wife and teenage son in Moshi.

After a couple hours, I notice that my boots are beginning to dry, finally. It starts with a small dry spot over the toes, expanding to cover about a fourth of the tops of each boot. Then, it starts to rain, and we scramble to put on our rain gear and get our pack covers on, while Godfrey simply whips out his umbrella and waits patiently for us to get ourselves together in the rain. We trudge up the trail in the

rain, as the porters again run up past us with their umbrellas, just like yesterday, and we are grateful to know that at least our dry tents will be set up and waiting for us when we arrive, soaking wet.

The rain is hard and steady for about an hour, then it lets up, decreasing to a fine drizzle of cold sleet. At last, we catch a glimpse of camp, about a half mile across a nice, alpine slope. We pass a helicopter pad on the way, and at least reach our tents. Elvis greets us, all smiles as always, grabbing our packs, ripping off the wet covers and tossing the relatively dry packs into the tent, holding open the flap for us, then zipping up behind us. We made it in just a little over three hours, faster than the expected four hours, probably motivated by the rain. This camp is much bigger than the first camp, as the Umbwe route that we've been climbing on joins here with the more travelled south circuit path at Barranco camp.

We dive into our sleeping bags after removing our wet clothes, and shiver while we doze, until Elvis taps our tent and tells us that the hot water is ready. We force ourselves out of our tents and join the boys in the food tent for hot chocolate. The tent feels amazingly warm, given the chill in the air, and we realize it's the solar gain from the weak sun through the sides of the tent. It feels so good. Elvis brings us some popcorn to snack on, and then I sneak off to our tent to organize and dry my stuff, and maybe read a little more of Blowout.

The book is beginning to read like a Russian spy novel and I know I've heard about a lot of this simply by watching Rachel's show, something about having all this information in one place, in a book, organized into chapters, makes for a compelling review, and I'm simultaneously fascinated and disgusted by how much corruption there really is in Russia, and how horrible and greedy and truly nasty Putin really is. I tend to be naïve, and I truly can't understand how anyone can be that greedy, and unconscionable, to want so much money and power, while destroying their own country and countrymen, and our earth, just for themselves. I mean, why? What's he going to do with all those riches anyway? I mean, how much does any one person really need? I seriously can't get my head around what's been going on here, and it truly shocks and frustrates me that it is going on at all. All the trouble he's stirring up in our country and others, to gain a monopoly on oil. At cost of human rights, our democracy and the environment we all share. He's really like a modern-day Hitler, and the U.S. government is letting him get away with it. All for oil. The thing we need to get away from if we want to save our planet. And, as always, I find myself thinking what I, as an individual, can do to say no to this obscene criminal and all he stands for.

Eventually, the boys call out from the food tent, where they've been playing cards, to let me know that dinner is on the way. I force myself out of my sleeping bag, pull on my still-damp socks, stuff my feet into my soaking wet boots, and head to the food tent for more amazing food and hot tea. We all stuff ourselves to full capacity at every meal, something we never do at home, because we need to be as fortified as possible as we climb, and particularly on summit day. It will get harder to eat as we climb to higher elevations, since elevation messes with our appetites, and we are realizing that our food service team knows exactly what we need to get up this mountain. The right mix of vegetables, carbs, protein and fiber are provided, and it's up to us to consume it if we want to succeed.

It's obvious that our team wants us to succeed. It's their job, it's what they do, it's what they live for, and we will either improve or reduce their client statistics. Our team takes great pride in what they do, and they are climbing right along with us, every day, only they're carrying far more gear and heavier loads, and moving much faster, to get to camp ahead of us, to get our tents set up and all our stuff and their own organized. I am constantly amazed at what our support team does, and I know how hard they work, because every climb we've ever done before this one, we've hauled our own gear, set up our own camp and cooked our own food. This climb is a nice diversion from the norm for us, definitely a glamping climb. We all feel very comfortable and safe on this mountain, because of their support.

On Day 3, we have approximately a four hour hike to Karanga camp, which will take us another 3 miles and 250 feet higher in elevation, so not a particularly hard day. There will be plenty of gross elevation gain, however, since we'll be going up and down two ridges and through the lush Karanga valley to get around a small volcano that guards the southern base of Kili. We leave around 7:30 AM, getting an early start to beat the rain as much as possible. It feels like a pilgrimage at this point, walking in a mob with a hundred or more other climbers, and at times we find ourselves stuck in frustrating bottlenecks, when less experienced climbers stop and stare at some of the cruxes, before gingerly negotiating the rock. The first ridge, the Barranco wall, is very steep, and we're in our element, with short sections of class 3 scrambling. Godfrey diligently does his job, offering specifics on handholds and offers his hand to help me up in a couple spots, but soon learns that we're completely comfortable with the rock. I have to chuckle that he offers me his hand instead of our sons, even though I have infinitely far more climbing experience than they do. I may be an old lady, but I do know from when it comes to climbing. This rock is a sweet granite, full of nubs and well-textured, so the climbing is easy and fun. I could do class 4 or even low 5 without pro on this kind of rock and be fine.



At the top of the ridge we pause and take a break, relaxing on the rocks in the sun, while it lasts. My shoes, which were still soaking wet this morning, have begun to dry a little. Groups of climbers are everywhere, taking pictures or just enjoying the view. The valley below is submerged in fog, and across

the valley to the west we can see the top of Meru, the eighth highest volcano in Africa. We finally get going again, and head down the other side of the ridge, into a glorious valley, noticeably more arid, judging from the foliage, though the ground is wet from the recent rains. As we reach the bottom, we head down a smooth and easy path toward the next ridge that we can see, maybe a mile or so ahead. The walking is pleasant ad we enjoy beautiful rock formations, covered with colorful lichen and moss, with beautiful and unusual, at least to us, foliage. One is the candelabra tree, a tree shaped according to its name, made up of gracefully drooping succulent branches, looking like a tree full of churro cacti.

About halfway down the valley, the trail begins to angle slightly up, and it begins to rain. We scramble for our rain suits as the rain intensifies rapidly, our porters trotting happily past us, with loads on their heads and umbrellas in their hands, keeping comfortable and perfectly dry. We reach the ridge and trek up, the rain pouring hard and turning what looks like a very nice trail into a muddy red river, drenching our boots and socks thoroughly. The climb again becomes class 3, and we have to use our hands on the slippery rock, a fairly miserable experience, and we're glad to finally pop up and over the top, with the destination Karanga camp in our sights, not too far away.

The rain is falling in sheets, so hard that the porters are congregated in the ranger station and the toilets, the only two buildings at the site, reduced to peering out at the deluge, smiling as always and shaking their heads at the craziness of it all. The rain may be miserable to hike in, and impossible to set up a tent in, but in this normally arid region, it's always welcome. I kind of know the feeling, since where we live, in Golden, Colorado, it's about the same, and we are always grateful for any rain that comes. At the end of the day, Hakuna Matata. It's not hurting any of us to stop and be in the moment as we watch the rain. The porters did actually manage to set up our tents, but we can't get in yet, because they want to make some trenches to divert the rivers around the tents first. If we got in now, the water would wick up through the floors and the tents would flood completely.

The boys dive into the food tent, where it doesn't really matter so much if the floor is wet, and I follow Frankie to the porch of the toilet building, standing there with the other porters, watching silently and shivering uncontrollably. Even after the trenches are dug, I don't want to leave the porch and run through the driving rain to get to the tent. At this point, I'm sick to death of rain, and am beginning to wonder if all this rain is going to drive us off the mountain before we can summit. Seriously, if I can't get my soaking boots and clothes dry for summit day, that really could be a serious problem. You can't climb in freezing temperatures and snow with wet, frozen boots unless you want to get frost bite, which doesn't sound like much fun to me.

The rain finally seems to be letting up a little, and I take the opportunity to sprint to the tent and dive inside. Hilary and the boys do the same, doing our best to contain our wet equipment in a contained area by the door, so we don't get the entire tent wet with our wet stuff. The tent is dry inside, thanks to the porters' hard work digging the trenches, and we set about blowing up our mattresses and laying out our wet clothes. We're falling into a pattern where we shiver in our sleeping bags, and when we finally stop shivering, we move to the food tent for hot liquids, which eventually warm us up. Cameron pulls out a deck of damp, sticky cards and we pass the time playing cut-throat golf. I lose

horribly the first game, depressing me even more, and decide to sit out a hand in my sleeping bag, trying to shake out some of my clothes, and do a little writing.

I read a little more of Rachel's book, which depresses me even more. At this point, she's going into big oil support and financing of notoriously nasty governments, blithely paying exorbitant amounts of money to, for example, the king of Equatorial Guinea, who squanders it on ridiculously extravagant luxuries and a lifestyle for himself and his family, while letting his people go to rot, committing pretty much every conceivable human rights violation imaginable. All so Rex Tillerson and his cronies can pull down their entitlement of $50 million per year. As if he really needs all that money. While the big oil industry is getting all these tax breaks and subsidies. Like big oil needs it. As they trash the environment and get away with it, not bothering with regulations and procedures to protect the environment, because it would impact their profits to be responsible. And because congress isn't making them do it, because, hell, it's big oil, and they pretty much have bought off all the right-wing house and senate, who will never force their big donors to do anything they don't want to do, preferring to remain rich and powerful, not too worried about the environment, or human rights. Not that's some serious corruption, right here at home.

These horrors drive me to despair. I'm freaked out. I can't help it. I seriously don't know what to do. The height of evil in our leadership, which is turning our country into some kind of kleptocracy, run by thugs and gangsters who care only about their own diabolical agendas. I can't stand it, and I'm truly ashamed of our country. And, what can I do about it? I guess, for starters, when I get home, I'll divest of all big oil stock, and turn it all green. That's the least I can do. I have mutual funds for retirement, and they need to be cleaned up. Also, get the solar panels on our house, and finish insulating the attic. I've been meaning to get us completely off grid and it's time to stop procrastinating and get it done. It's a little scary, a big step, but there's no way I can continue to support the nastiest industry on the planet with my hard-earned dollars. No more. I wonder if Rachel has gone off-grid.

And, I'm motivated to get more active politically. Simply telling everyone I know that a vote for the right is a vote against the planet. It's a vote for corruption, greed and utter selfishness. Why would we vote for nasty people like Trump to run our country? Is that really who we are? I finally get through another chapter and that's enough depression for now. I pull on my wet socks and boots, and crawl out of the tent to join the boys in the food tent. I can hear them over there laughing and joking and having a great time crushing each other at golf. Who knew a silly card game could be such a blast? All I know is, I can use some cheer. It has never stopped raining this entire time since it started today, and I'm about ready to cry. I definitely need the joy and cheer of hanging out with my boys.

Outside the tent, the water is running hard through the ditches that the porters dug around the tents, and I step carefully over the rivers as I make my way to the food tent. Not that it matters much, my boots are completely sopped and can't really get any wetter. When I get there, I find my chair missing, and the boys tell me that Cameron's chair broke when he tried to sit in it, and Elvis took it to fix. Elvis shows up a few minutes later, face aglow with a big smile, and sets up the repaired chair. He's just so awesome! I settle in with some hot chocolate, and warm up as I watch the boys finish out their hand.

I feel better, just being with them, and they seem fairly positive that we'll get up this mountain, rain or no rain. They deal me into a game.

Soon, Elvis shows up with yet another big pot of amazing hot soup, and we dig in. This must be the best soup on the planet. We are ravenous, and take seconds to kill it, just in time for Elvis to set out the main course, an amazing chicken and vegetable stew. The ultimate comfort food, especially with all the rain and cold up here at 13,239 feet. This is followed by rice with mushroom sauce, and we eat ourselves sick, knowing we need the nourishment both to make up for the chill and for the hard work to get here today.

Frankie shows up to tell us tomorrow's plan. We ask about all the rain. Isn't the rainy season supposed to be passed by now? Most of the people we know have done the climb right about now, early winter, and we've never heard of anyone dealing with this much rain. He tells us it's hit or miss, yes, it should be over, but sometimes it still rains. He said that one year a few years back it was really dry, nothing but dust, another year it was really rainy, and yet another it was extremely windy. Up here, you never know what you're going to get. He's been doing this for 15 years, has climbed hundreds of times, in all kinds of weather. The pep talk cheers us up a little. He smiles and doesn't seem worried. It is what it is. He's truly a pro at dealing with nervous clients and knows what to say, and his confident leadership gives me hope. I'm not the only one who's wet here. Suck it up and deal, Julie. Are you a climber or a whiner? Or just another whining climber?

We finish our cards and head to the tents, feeling those food comas coming on. It rains pretty much all night long and we lay there in our warm sleeping bags drifting in and out of sleep, laying there with our eyes shut, resting as best we can. At this altitude, our bodies are starting to feel the impacts of altitude, and one of the things that's impacted is sleep.

In the morning on Day 4, December 29, the rain seems to be finally reaching a tenuous end, at least for now, and we head up the trail to high camp after breakfast, in wet socks and shoes, and partially dried clothes. I decide to leave my long underwear on under my hiking pants, knowing it will be colder at high camp, even if the sun comes out, which is unlikely. A fog fills the entire valley below, but there are a few patches of blue sky amid the clouds as we begin. We have about 3 miles and 2000 feet, all up, to high camp, which will take about 5 hours. We're climbing up through the high and arid alpine desert zone, which has much reduced foliage as we climb higher. The stark beauty is truly mesmerizing. Thankfully, it doesn't rain today at all. Are we finally done dealing with rain, at least for now? I hope so. My boots are drier when we make camp than they have been this entire trip, the tops are mostly dry, though the sides and insides are still wet. High camp is glorious, and we can finally see the top of the mountain and our route up from the camp, which is situated on a high plateau.



As we sit and play cards in the food tent, we notice that the tent feels extremely warm, and, for the first time, we realize the heat is coming from solar gain. To our shock and delight, the sun is out, and the late afternoon rays suddenly warm the entire camp, and when we look outside the sky is about half clear! We see guides and other climbers scrambling to lay their wet clothing and boots out to dry, taking advantage of this brief opportunity, and we follow suit, grabbing all our wet stuff and draping it over our tents, setting out the boots on rocks, positioning them to maximize sun contact and not shade each other. Joyous times for us all! Suddenly, just like that, there is a glimmer of hope that we might actually be able to climb tonight in dry, or at least semi-dry, boots. Up here, these small victories mean a lot, and the elevated mood in camp is palpable.

The timing is great, since tonight's the night! The big night when we go for the summit. We have slightly over 4,000 feet to the summit, which is supposed to take about 7 hours, then, unlike the previous days, we'll have to come back down to camp, and then beyond this camp to a lower one. The total distance today will be about 10 miles and the total elevation loss down to Mweka camp, our final camp on the mountain, will be about 9,200 feet and take about 17 hours. It's gonna be a long day. The plan is to wake up at 11:00 tonight, down some coffee and biscuits at 11:30, and start climbing at midnight. The strategy works well on this mountain, because it allows us to climb in the cold of the night, when the footing on the frozen ground and snow is better, and to reach Stella's point, about a half mile from the summit, around the time of sunrise. We'll take a break there, and then push for the summit. And if there is precipitation, it will be snow, which won't soak our clothes and boots like the rain does.

As soon as the sun drops below the horizon, we grab our gear, which is mostly dry at this point, and put it back in our tents so it doesn't get wet again, just in case. It looks like it could start raining at any minute. When I grab my boots, I see that the soles have been removed and set out to dry separately. I assume Elvis must have done that, since he's the only one who has been around our stuff. What a great idea, and I wish I'd thought of that 3 days ago. Well, better late than never. The boots are nearly dry, but the soles are still damp. I figure I can put them in my sleeping bag tonight, and then return them to my boots in the morning. However, Elvis has a better idea. He offers to dry them in the

cooking tent, which will probably get them drier, so I gratefully let him take them. The boys tell me he dried their shoes too. There's definitely a reason why Zara has such an amazing success rate for clients on this mountain, with these kinds of simple, thoughtful actions that can make or break a climb.

Dinner is early, with yet another amazing soup that we seem to have no problem consuming in quantity at 15,200 feet. This is followed by a main course of pasta to get us carbed up, with vegetables and chicken for protein. We turn into our tents and set to organizing our gear, making sure we have exactly what we'll need in our day packs, no more and no less, for the summit bid. This is a crucial strategic process to minimize our loads while not compromising our climb because of forgetting something important that we can't climb without. We lay down and close our eyes around 7:00 PM, knowing we only have about 4 hours to sleep although, as with most alpine starts, we won't necessarily sleep so much as doze intermittently, laying there with our eyes closed, at least getting some rest and digesting our dinner before we head up the trail.

Laying there, I can hear short bursts of light rain gently tapping the tent from time to time, followed by the silence of a quiet high mountain night. It feels as though the storm front that has been pummeling this mountain for the past four days is finally dissipating. We might be in for a dry climb, and I keep my fingers crossed as I lay there in my semi lucid state.

Our alarm goes off at 11:00 sharp, just a couple minutes before Elvis taps our tent to wake us up. We quickly pull our gear together and get dressed in all our layers. It's butt cold outside, and this is the one day when we'll actually wear every stitch of clothing that we brought. Or, more accurately, that our porters hucked up here for us. Before I can pull on my boots, I need the soles that Elvis took with him to dry by the cookstove. He shows up with them in no time, and they're completely dry for the first time since that first rain on day 1. I slip them into my boots, which are dry at long last, with pure joy and a sense of relief that can't be expressed in words. I pull on the one pair of dry wool socks that I've been saving for summit day, and my feet feel great, which makes me feel great. Outside, we're greeted with a clear sky, a spectacular array of stars at this high altitude, with Orion the hunter directly overhead. The weather is warm, and there's no wind. Our joy can't be described with mere words. Suddenly, all our hard work looks like it's going to pay off. We're about to climb the highest mountain in Africa, and we're not going to lose our toes in the process! What a glorious night for a climb!

We quickly drink our coffee and munch our biscuits, and then follow Frankie up the trail in the darkness, head lamps on, with Godfrey taking up the rear. Others have already started before us, and there's a trail of headlamps forming a festive string of lights that we are now a part of. We head up the trail single file with Frankie setting a slow, consistent pace, "pole, pole", one foot in front of the other. It feels as though we could comfortably walk all day like this.

As we move up, we stop briefly every 30 – 60 minutes, take a couple gulps of water and a couple bites of the snacks that Elvis provided to take with us. About halfway up, as we approach 18,000 feet of elevation, I find that I can't quite choke down the snacks, which are simple crackers and peanuts. The altitude is finally getting to me. It sounds like the boys are having some trouble eating as well, and I'm thinking it's a good thing we gorged at dinner. We're not too likely to bonk, and if this is our worst reaction, we'll probably be fine. I'm breathing hard, about two breaths per step, but still feeling

comfortable with the slow, steady pace. The temperature drops as dawn approaches, the coldest time of the day, and getting colder as we ascend.

We chat as we climb, and talk somehow turns to the Lion King, a cartoon set in the African jungle that came out in the eighties, when the boys were young. The boys, who are about the same age as Frankie, begin comparing notes about the movie that they all saw when they were about the same age, and we find ourselves singing lines from the songs together as we climb. I have to chuckle as it occurs to me how Walt Disney movies, cell phones and Bob Marley can bring two worlds, so far apart on this planet, together. Frankie starts singing "Don't Worry 'Bout a Thing", cause every little thing's gonna be alright, and we all chime in and sing the song together as we march up the trail, effectively drowning out the annoying hip hop blasting from some climber's I-Pod ahead of us.

After several hours, Frankie points out Stella Point, far in the distance, perhaps 1,000 feet above us, and another mile or so. Our timing is fairly good; it's around 4:00 AM by now. My water is beginning to freeze, even though I buried it deep in my pack where it should be well insulated. Cameron has to open the bottle for me, since my hands aren't strong enough to break the ice that is sticking in the threads. I can only take a couple tiny gulps because my brain freezes immediately. As we continue to trudge slowly upward, we have awesome views of the lights of towns far below, and we see the beginnings of the glow of the coming dawn on the eastern horizon. The sky gradually pales and, as we approach Stella Point, we are treated to an absolutely amazing sunrise. We pause to enjoy, and take a short break. Always taking a line from a movie, Hilary holds out one arm reaching towards the valley below as he cries passionately, in the manner of Marlin Brando in "Streetcar Named Desire", "*STELLA*", to the delight of us all.

It's a little breezy up here, and really cold. I'm sure my water is too frozen to drink, though I'm thinking ruefully that I need to at least try. It turns out that I needn't worry, because our wonderful guides who anticipate our every need whip out a thermos of steaming hot tea, which they pour into mugs for each of us. I've never been so happy to drink sweet tea in all my life. At home, I avoid sugar completely, but up here it's a whole different world. This solves all my last-minute problems in one cup: hydration, warmth and quick carbs. There's a reason things taste so much better in the mountains. We chug the tea, and continue on our way.

At this point, we don't have far to go. The summit is less than half a mile away, and maybe a couple hundred more feet of elevation gain. We can clearly see it, and on a Colorado fourteener we'd be there in maybe 20 – 30 minutes easily. But we're not in Colorado. We're in Africa, on Kilimanjaro, at more than 19,000 feet. And the air is really thin up here. For my part, I'm taking 3 breaths per step, and my steps are really slow. The boys seem to be rallying, and they pull ahead of me, moving a lot faster with Frankie in the lead. Even Hilary has picked up the pace, as he tends to do as he nears the summit of a high peak. All of my boys simply do better than my little body does at high elevations, and this is just another example of my body being a bitch in the thin air. But I've been here before, and my stubborn streak will get me up there in the end.

Godfrey stays back with me as I trudge along dutifully. I make no attempt to catch up. This isn't a race and I'm only about five minutes behind anyway. The weather is gorgeous and we have no urgency

to beat a storm or anything like that. The top is now full of climbers coming and going, like a herd, so I'm just trudging along among them. I actually pass a few who are going slower, one woman looks like she's about to die, and is getting literally carried up there by a guide. I'm definitely in excellent shape to do this climb, it's just that my body has to go slow; I'm not exhausted by any stretch, just slow. Godfrey seems a little concerned, and asks if I'm OK, and I tell him that I'm fine. He offers to take my pack, which isn't really very much weight, and I decline. I really am fine, just slow. It must be utter torture for him to walk this slow, and he probably thinks I'm dying or something.

When I finally arrive at the summit, I burst into tears and give everybody a hug. There's another large group ahead of us taking an endless array of picture after picture after picture with every possible variation of everybody in their group, about a dozen at least, and with every camera. Yeesh. We wait them out, and I pretty much recover in the 10 minutes or so that we stand there. Finally, it's our turn, and we roll out the Zara banner and pose while Godfrey gets our picture in front of the summit sign. Then we get a guide from another group to get pictures with Godfrey included.



After our iterations of pictures, we roll up the banner and head down. Frankie had told us that our return route would be different than the ascent route, a bit shorter and steeper, and we'll avoid climbers who are still ascending the narrow path we used to climb up. The trail from the summit back to Stella's point is the same, so I head down on my own pace, without looking back. I'm completely recovered, and make great time, fairly skipping along, the burden of the climb behind me. We made it!

All is good in the world. It's a beautiful day. Nobody got hurt or sick or hypothermic or anything. Nobody had to turn back. Yay!!!

We did this climb as a family, the four of us, and I'm just feeling so, so proud of us. We set a goal to climb the highest mountain in Africa and we did it! Skyler and Cameron and I hop down the trail happily, stopping now and then to take pictures. Frankie seems a little surprised that I, in particular, am now moving so fast after my slow last hour of ascent. The reason is simple. On the way up, my cardio had 4,000 feet of history and, let's face it, a pretty fast climb, in about six hours, but I am in shape, I have done my homework, and my legs are strong. I just needed that breather at the top, and now I'm good to go. Even in the thin air, the cardio part is no challenge at all going down. A piece of cake as long as my legs are strong. And, I also know that after my recent experience on Aconcagua, my body is definitely handling the altitude better. I'd dearly love to know what my pulse ox is, but we forgot to pack the meter.

On the way down, we pass a lot of climbers coming up, and one of them, a young tall blond man, literally looks like a zombie walking, pretty scary, and we wonder if he'll make it. His friends seem to be staying close, so he should be alright either way. We see an oriental woman who summitted, but now she's barely able to move, and is being half-carried by her guides, arms locked around her shoulders to keep her upright, her feet dragging along, looking like she's essentially passed out. There are gurneys stages along the trail, for guides to use to get injured people down, so I guess they'll strap her onto one if she doesn't come to. The best thing for altitude sickness is fairly simple in concept, not always so much in practice, to get the climber down to a lower elevation. As quickly as possible. Hilary is lagging behind, probably having trouble with his feet. His messed up toes combined with Hodgkins neuroma are always exacerbated on the down climb, with the additional force of gravity on every step. Godfrey is staying back with him.

There's no particular rush at this point. The weather is gorgeous, the sky clear and blue, and it's unlikely we'll see rain today. We have all morning to get down to camp, where he'll eat lunch, pack and, as they say, get the hell out of here. To make room for tomorrow's climbers. The view is glorious, with the entire valley and world below in front of us, just astounding. At Stella's point, I remove my down jacket, which has become stiflingly hot, now that the sun is up, and my fleece gloves. Enough layers off for now, after everybody catches up, we head down the descent path, following Frankie. I pull out my poles, which I didn't need on the way up. I carried them because on the descent I'll move a lot faster with poles, and save wear and tear on my knees. The descent is steep and a little slippery, but I move easily and confidently with my poles, and after a half hour we're pretty far down. I'm hot again, so I shed more layers, including my hat.

We continue down with Frankie and I in front, followed by the boys, and I find myself getting into a zone, when I lose time and just go. Loving the easy walk down, the expansive views that change around every corner, the glory of this world. After a while, Skyler catches up, and we rest a bit and drink some water. Hilary is so far behind us that we can't even see him, and after waiting for a while we continue on. Skyler heads on down, and I try to slow down, but I'm beginning to suffer with the heat and layers on my legs. I finally decide to stop and at least remove my rain pants, for a little relief, which

will at least allow my fleece pants to breathe. I have no more room in my day pack, so I wait for Cameron to catch up, and he gladly takes them in his. We can now see the camp far below, less than an hour away, and we stay put until we can see Hilary and Godfrey in the distance behind us.

At this point, I can't wait to reach camp so I can shed my clothes and pack, and get some rest. There are a lot of people heading up this trail, evidently on a different summit schedule than us, timed to top out in late morning. Suddenly, we see some familiar smiling faces – it's Elvis, with a couple of our porters. They've come up to meet us and after giving us hugs and congratulations all around, they offer cartons of mango juice. What a welcome surprise! I happily down one, finally getting a little sustenance, now that we're down in altitude and I'm hungry again. A better word might be ravenous. Elvis insists on taking my pack, and a porter takes Cameron's, and we head down without our loads, a welcome relief for that final push. We linger long enough for Hilary to catch up, and a porter grabs his pack, and we head down together.

At camp, we dive into our tents, and I rip off my hot clothes while Hilary rips off his socks, to assess the damage to his messed up feet. He's in a lot of pain, and his foot in the area around his inflamed nerve bundle is swollen to about double, the worst he's ever seen it after a climb. He downs some vitamin I and tells me we have an hour and a half to rest before we eat lunch, break camp and head down, another four hours, to a lower camp, our last camp on the mountain. Cameron pokes his head in and asks for some painkiller, then we crash. As I lay down, I feel my stomach turn and feel a little sick, so I sit at the tent flap for a bit in case I lose it, then try again to lay down again. It takes a couple tries before I can lay down without feeling sick, and I finally doze off.

I wake to the sound of Hilary chatting with someone outside the tent. It turns out to be our cook. He had seen him around, and finally got a chance to talk to him. His name is Houston, and his English is excellent. Hilary made sure to tell him that his food was the reason we all summitted. Seeing I'm awake, Hilary tells me to get up and get going; we need to eat and start hiking down to Mweka camp, where we'll spend the night. Ugghhhhh – I'm definitely not looking forward to another four hours of hiking. The last thing I want to do right now is move, after only an hour of rest. All I want to do is sleep. I could sleep forever. Thankfully, at least it's warm out.

I pull myself together and pack up my stuff. On this beautiful day, the chairs are sitting outside, and the boys are already munching away on meat and veggie pies. My recently ravenous appetite has disappeared again, but I cautiously take a couple nibbles off a veggie pie, calling it good for now. I'll be good and hungry when we make Mweka camp, and I'm sure my stomach will be able to digest more food by then.

We begin the four-hour slog, and find out right away that it's not to be an easy walk downhill in the jungle. It's a really steep, tough, rocky road, and nearly every step is at least a foot or more of hopping, which is really hard on our knees, feet and ankles. This short cut down might be short, but it's not easy, and I feel for poor Hilary with his Morton's neuroma. The painkillers he took earlier worked, and he has more if he needs it. Miraculously, my knees never do act up, other than a little twanging in the left knee, which works its way out after a bit. Had I known how steep this was going to be, I would have kept my poles, but, alas, I packed them in the duffels, so the porters have them. Shortly, the

porters fly down the trail past us, with their packs on their backs, and our supplies on their heads, effortlessly negotiating the steep trail, smiling and throwing congratulations and high fives as they pass. They're definitely well-trained to make the clients feel important and successful, that's for sure!

If we weren't so exhausted, this would be an absolutely astounding trek through some amazing landscape, and we take our time, doing our best to appreciate and enjoy the stunning jungle with all its diversity. At one point, Godfrey shows us a magnificent view of the mountain we just climbed, capped with snow, through a rare break in the thick green foliage. The sun is out, and the jungle is alive with the music of birds and the calls of monkeys, each drawing our attention as we try to track down the source. Skyler has his fancy camera out, taking photos at every opportunity. Some of the trees are labeled, like a botanic garden, and we stop and have a look, while Godfrey and Frank explain what we are looking at.

We spot one tree with a trunk that looks big enough to live inside, and they tell us that wildlife indeed lives inside some of them, and that poachers have been known to hide in them. We see spectacular valleys, this truly unique landscape is known as moorlands, and they tell us that these are rare ecological zones. We constantly see porters coming and going, in big groups, and we learn that this is how the porters are getting fresh food up to the camps, using this short steep back-trail. All the fresh fruit, vegetables, meats and juices, the breads and rolls, are all manually carried by the porters every day. We were wondering how they got all that fresh food up, and now we know. We ask how many porters there are for our group, and there are 10, 2.5 porters per person. We're definitely supporting the local economy with our little adventure, which feels good. And they are truly earning their keep, that's for sure. We even notice a few women in the mix.

When we finally reach camp, I'm so exhausted I can't move. I get set up as quickly as possible, and collapse in the tent. It's too bad, because this jungle camp is just beautiful, with more birds and wildlife than at other camps, but I'm just too tired, and I just can't do it. Skyler checks it all out and gets lots of pictures, while I simply collapse. After a bit, I can hear the boys' voices in the food tent, finishing up a game of golf, as I lay there with my eyes closed, not feeling like moving at all, just totally spent. Hilary can see me from the open flap of the food tent, and calls over that I need to get up. I know he's right, and I finally drag myself up. I tell myself that I can do with a hot drink, some cards, some dinner, and then I can crash for the night. When I emerge from the tent, the boys are gone exploring, and Hilary is the only one in the dining tent. He's about to leave too, and I tell him I'm going back to lay down; it feels like there's no point in sitting here by myself. I obviously missed the party, and I'm fine with that. He insists on me staying up, and volunteers to sit with me and we have some tea together. The boys return eventually, and we all turn in early, and sleep for a good 12 hours. Let the recovery begin.

We wake early and rested for our last breakfast on the mountain. Our last day of hiking is only 3 miles, downhill, not too steep, a piece of cake, without all the steep rocky steps. It's absolutely gorgeous, as we're still in the moorlands. At one point, when I'm pretty far ahead of the group, I hear loud cracking from the trees, and I stop, looking up carefully. After waiting and watching, I see movement in the trees, and spot a gorgeous big black and white monkey. When Frankie catches up, he tells me it's a colobus monkey. Also, some smaller blue monkeys are moving through the treetops. Once I see one, I realize the trees are full of them, moving with these monkeys, who see us, but don't seem

worried: they know we can't get up there. Two kinds of monkeys in the same huge tree. Later, a gigantic spider web, perfect, held between two large trees about 20 feet apart. It's hard to imagine the engineering logistics of a spider placing that one! I'm fascinated, but careful not to walk into it, and stare at it for a long time, wondering where the spider is lurking. It's probably big and scary, and no doubt watching us right now. A couple hours of walking through this fascinating rainforest, and we're out of here.

At the exit, it's a bit of a carnival, with a visitor center and all kinds of shops. We take a quick photo by the exit sign – WE DID IT!. We sign off with the rangers "We got out alive!" We're glad to be back in the world of sit-down toilets and cold beer. Hilary is fascinated with the bidets in the restrooms, and vows to check into some for our house when we get home. We withstand a little fleecing at the gift shop, then jump in the van for the short ride to Moshi to celebrate. Done and done. YAY!!!

