

Kilimanjaro Ascent

By Warren Florence

It's 5 degrees at 2 a.m. and quiet, except for the low, cadence-like voice coming from our guide, Peter Mato. He's singing some legendary summit song in Swahili; I can make out only a couple of the words: please, kind, big, friend. He explains it's to help take our minds off our anticipation, and less than half the amount of oxygen at sea level. Against Peter's dark skin, we can only see his big smile when he says, "Not much further." He's lying, but it makes us feel better.

A thin cloud line streams up, then over the big fella, then vanishes. Though only slightly restricted in my protective clothing, I have on enough for a Michelin tire man audition. My lips are so cold that a dentist, or baby, could interpret if needed. From the full moon overhead, we can just make out our dark shadows against the brown volcanic scree. Everything looks like a photo negative. The top of Mt. Kilimanjaro is no where in sight. Nor will we see it for another four hours and 3000 feet. You know, you can walk a horizontal mile—5280feet—feet in about 30 minutes. Run it in ten.

Our walk is getting steeper. The pitch must be close to 60 degrees. Peter has us walking in switchbacks—side to side along a scree field while gaining little vertically. With each step taken on the scree we slide back down six inches. In our straight line and just in front of me, Nate is bent over his trekking poles. His head is low. My head takes on a mild thump.

In a few words per breath, I ask how he's holding up.

"Nate? This scree. Hard, right?" to make sure I'm not the only one struggling. Nate has stopped for a little longer than he should and now getting too cold. We both want to rest, take a little nap, but we can't. It's already been a long day, and the sun has yet to come up. "Yeah," he gasps. "Hard to breathe. Tired."

We move on. We're well aware that not everyone makes it all the way to Uhuru Peak at 19,340 feet. Standing there doesn't ease the difficulty, nor get us any closer. I can't feel my fingers gripping the poles. I don't know about the rest of the group, but second guessing this very moment becomes the topic of my own destructive conversation. Why am I trying to survive where nothing can sustain life. Why is it taking so long? Just be positive. Listen to the Peter's song. Think about something else.