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The View from the Top
For the years of Greg Mortenson’s life leading up to his K2 expedition, the closest thing he had to a home was his grandmother’s old burgundy Buick and the closest thing he felt to love was a crush on a resident anesthesiologist at the UCSF medical center where he worked. Other than La Bamba and Dr. Marina Villard, Mortenson’s life consisted of work and a keen awkwardness induced by a lack of familiarity with his own culture. After failing to summit the second highest peak in the world, Mortenson stumbled into the neighboring village of Korphe. The combination of his appreciation of the warm hospitality he received and the shock associated with his realization of the lack of a system or venue of education motivated Mortenson to return Korphe with supplies to build a small school. The memoir *Three Cups of Tea*, written by David Oliver Relin and lived by Greg Mortenson, traced Mortenson’s journey of personal growth as he fulfilled his mission to educate the children of Pakistan and surrounding regions one school at a time. In *Three Cups of Tea*, the problems Mortenson faced with gathering funds, being manipulated by former companions, and communicating overseas resulted in networking that would be useful throughout his journey, a sense of dignity, and true love.

Upon returning to the United States from his attempt at the K2, Mortenson kept the promise he made to build a school on the forefront of his mind. His first obligation was to accumulate the funds he would need to purchase necessary supplies. Mortenson brainstormed celebrities, coming up with hundreds of addresses to which he would send pleas for donations, hoping to reach his goal of $12,000. After several months had passed and 580 letters had been sent, Mortenson’s only response that included a donation amounted to a meager “one hundred dollars and a note wishing him good luck” (52). Things did not begin to look up until Mortenson
contacted the Swiss-born physicist, entrepreneur and climber, Dr. Jean Hoerni. After conversing with Mortenson about his plans for the school, Hoerni sent a check for the full requested amount and “a note scrawled on a piece of folded graph paper: Don’t screw up. Regards, J.H.’” (55). What Mortenson did not know at the time was how important Hoerni would be in the upcoming years as a source of funding to build more than just one small school in one confined area. Greg Mortenson’s struggle for financial assistance brought about an invaluable source of mentorship and income. With enough money to build his school and live on a tight budget, only the first of Mortenson’s problems was resolved.

His failed attempt at the K2 left Mortenson in a state of disappointment and defeat. He left his dignity and pride up in the ice-glazed peaks of the Karakoram. The next obstacle Mortenson faced prompted him to regain his sense of empowerment, contrasting his previous condition. Nearly a year after Mortenson promised the nurmadhar of the village of Korphe, Haji Ali, that he would return to Pakistan to build a school, Mortenson arrived in Khyaban to begin the process. As the word spread rapidly that he had arrived, Mortenson was the victim of a tug-of-war between anticipative Pakistani men. Akhmalu, Janjungpa, and Changazi, the cook, high altitude porter, and trekking agent during Mortenson’s K2 expedition a year earlier, attempted to bribe Mortenson into using his funds to build neither the type of school he had envisioned nor at the location he had promised. They used the limited food supply plagued to most of the Balti region at the time to attempt to suborn a seemingly naïve Mortenson. Before a maliciously premeditated feast and dozens of Khane village men (the village to which he belonged), Janjungpa deceitfully broadcasted a thanks to Greg Mortenson “for honoring us and coming to build a school for the Khane village” (88). Janjungpa proceeded to request a climbing school in
particular, to teach Balti porters the most basic mountain rescue techniques. Dismissing Janjungpa’s plea, Akhmalu interrupted only to interpose his own request to build a school for the children in the Khane village, while Changazi pleaded for a school in the village of Kuardu. Mortenson managed to untangle himself from this web of lies and pretense, and just as presently, he was betrayed yet again by Changazi who attempted to squander the supplies Mortenson collected for Korphe. Wasting so much time being subject to schemes, days he could have spent building his school in Korphe, left Mortenson with no other choice but to take a stand. “I have nothing to discuss until you take me to Korphe,” a fed-up Mortenson declared in an unusually empowered fashion (94). This point in the novel marked a turning point in Mortenson’s life. Never had Mortenson possessed the courage or self-regard to take such an indomitable position- not in approaching women, familiarizing himself with the formalities of the American culture, or even understanding himself. Mortenson was draped with a newfound pride that would shield him throughout the smaller obstacles he would face while continuing on his route to Korphe.

When Mortenson finally reached Korphe he thought all his troubles were over. He recovered most of the inventory of supplies he purchased and was proud to announce, “I bought everything we need to build a school” (97). Much to Mortenson’s dismay, there was yet another hurdle caused by the lack of communication of plans and necessities between Mortenson and the village elders while he was in the United States. Mortenson was informed that building a school would be impossible without first building a bridge that would span the Upper Braldu, enabling the transportation of equipment to the site where the school would stand. With no more money to buy the supplies necessary to build a bridge, Mortenson was
driven back to California to raise additional funds; at the time it was unknown that he would return with much more than money. Back in the United States, Mortenson had the opportunity to reconnect with Jean Hoerni and another supporter of his mission, George McCown. Not only did Mortenson receive the money he needed to build a bridge and survive while doing so, he also received an invitation to an American Himalayan Foundation (AHF) event that would change his life. At the AHF’s annual fundraising dinner, Mortenson met Tara Bishop, a woman he would fall in love with and marry after a brief, joy-filled six days. The need to return to his home and accrue a means of building a bridge caused by poor communication overseas indirectly ended Mortenson’s sequence of unsuccessful relationships and awarded him true love.

Although Mortenson was unable to summit K2, his climb was inspiring in itself. Each painstaking and strenuous step he took brought him one step closer to finding himself and empowering others. He demonstrated the necessity of being fully submerged in a culture in order to build relationships with others and to create an overall support system. The three major stumbling blocks on Mortenson’s trek, and his ability to overcome, ultimately paralleled Mortenson’s progressive understanding of the significance of sharing three cups of tea in the northern Pakistani region of Baltistan. “The first time you share tea with a Balti, you are a stranger. The second time... you are an honored guest. The third time... you become family” (150). Mortenson was finally home.
Works Cited