

Men in black lycra

by John Ewbank ©

Dave Wallace gripped the wheel of his Jeep Cherokee and squinted into the heat waves rising from the surface of the Los Angeles Freeway, heading home after what was supposed to have been a week of rock climbing in Yosemite. His vacation had turned into a disaster from start to finish, as torrential rains and thunderstorms flooded the valley. He clenched his teeth and cursed his own bad luck as he tried to adjust the visor to keep the blinding afternoon sun out of his eyes. He'd prepared for this trip for the entire winter, training in the gym three times a week, fine-tuning his body in anticipation. Now here he was, heading back to Hollywood and still obsessing about climbing as usual, but without a single tick on his tick list and totally depressed by the failures of the past week.

After three days of sitting it out Dave and his climbing partner had become so stir crazy they'd decided to ignore the weather warnings and tried to take advantage of a lull in the deluge to sneak in a quick route. They'd gotten themselves half way up a medium grade six-pitch climb on an isolated buttress below El Capitan when the clouds burst open with such violence that within minutes they found themselves stranded half way up a waterfall.

The rain had turned to hail that came down with such power it felt like it was being thrown rather than just falling with the force of gravity. In the following thirty minutes the wind more than tripled as the temperature dropped twenty-five degrees and the hail was replaced by icy sleet. By the time Dave and Jim had managed the three rappels to the ground the worst of the lightning was over and the thunder was rolling away to the East, beyond the upper reaches of the valley. They'd stood in the creek that was now washing down beside the base of the cliff and tried to pull the ropes down from the last rappel. The ropes were jammed: they decided to come back for them another day. They were both shivering almost uncontrollably and happy to be alive on level ground. They trudged back to their car and drove back to their tent amongst all the other washed out climbers in what the Yosemite climbing community referred to as 'Camp Four' – also known as the Sunnyside Campground; never before had it seemed like such a forlorn misnomer.

That evening in the Mountain Bar even the locals had grudgingly admitted that the storm had been unusually sudden and severe; in fact it had created a flash flood that had washed away many riverside campsites and several sections of the road. The rain had then continued falling steadily for two more days and then slowed to light drizzle. Dave and Jim went back to retrieve Dave's ropes, only to find someone had beaten them to it: the ropes were gone. Finders keepers; loser weepers. Thievery amongst climbers was not rare in the valley, but the ropes were brand new and Dave was furious. They looked up the route; the slings and karabiners and cams that they had abandoned at the rap points had also gone. They stood under the dripping trees and felt sorry for themselves, and all their subsequent enquiries had failed to locate the equipment. After another two days of sitting in the lodge cafeteria and watching the falling rain, they had packed up and headed for

home.

Dave had dropped Jim at a friend's house in Modesto and then topped up the gas tank and resolved to drive straight through to L.A. Now, close to three hundred miles later, he squinted into the setting sun as he angrily turned off the radio and put a Smashing Pumpkins tape into the player. It was O.K. for the Yosemite climbing bums, Dave thought to himself, they had all the time in the world, playing hackiesack and bouldering all summer long. They'd be in the valley until the first snow began to fall in November, so a week of rain was not the end of the world in their scheme of things, but for a weekend warrior like himself the floods had been a disaster. As if to make him feel even worse, the sky had been clearing all day until there was not a cloud in the sky and the extended forecast had just been broadcast on the car radio, predicting glorious weather in the Sierra Nevada. He'd eaten nothing since breakfast, he was out of cigarettes, he'd lost his favorite pair of Ray-Bans, the gas needle was on empty and he was absolutely bursting for a piss.

The fact that he had to be back at his desk at Feel Rock Pictures in the morning did not help any, and the only thing that brightened his mood was the sudden appearance of a service area; being fined \$150 for running out of gas on the freeway would have been the final straw. He took the exit ramp and headed into the parking lot, stopped the car right outside the men's toilet and hobbled inside. Thank God for small mercies he thought to himself, standing at the urinal and ripping down the zipper on his pants.

Next, he went into the store for a pack of Camel non-filters and the moment he was outside again he lit up, inhaling mightily, taking one deep drag after another. He walked back across the parking lot, bladder emptied and bloodstream filled with nicotine, just as, like in one of his favorite Dylan songs - "...the night came falling from the sky."

The rest of the trip home to Santa Monica was slow and uneventful, as he smoked one cigarette after another, just another driver caught up in the evening rush hour on the greatest urban freeway system in the world. Sometimes they all raced along for a few miles, and then they crawled bumper to bumper before speeding up again. He traversed the entire breadth of the City of Angels in this manner as the darkness deepened and the number of lights that were switched on exceeded those that even exist in many small countries. He headed southwest and eventually took the Santa Monica exit and drove down the pleasant boulevard towards the beach. He turned left at the boardwalk and into the tree-lined street where he lived, carefully pulling into the narrow driveway beside his condominium. He checked his mail and listened to the messages on his machine before going back to the car and unloading all his camping and climbing gear - which he dumped with disgust into a wet pile on the bedroom floor.

What a joke he thought to himself! Here he was, thirty-three years old and unattached, making close to 100G a year as a respected, albeit undistinguished, screenwriter, paying a mortgage of \$2000 a month and yet climbing less than when he was twenty-one! His annual dry-cleaning bill alone came to more money than some of the Camp Four climbers would live on for the entire season. There was something drastically wrong with his life

and he knew he wanted something different, but he was scared to make any changes. He looked around his apartment at all the various large and small luxuries that a good steady income can buy and let out a deep sigh.

He knew he didn't want to end up like Sid Stanton, the head of creative script development at Feel Rock Pictures. Sid was a talented guy and a pleasure to work for - but he was not a happy man by any means. Dave didn't want to end up like his own father either - his dad was another dude on the dark side of fifty who was not a happy camper. In fact, he realized, he didn't want to end up like any of the older men that he knew. What was he doing with his life he wondered? If he was so smart why was he so miserable? If climbing had anything to do with developing the ability to display grace under fire (which as a younger man he had certainly believed it to be), why was he now living his life like such a wimp? Who would write his great lines if he didn't write them for himself? In an industry that created a dozen new heroes every month he was finally becoming jaundiced by the lack of any real ones.

He made a pot of coffee, poured himself a large mug, sat back on the sofa and switched on the TV. After channel surfing for a few minutes his interest suddenly picked up when he came across Beck Weathers being interviewed about the 1996 Everest tragedy. Dave reached for his Camel non-filters, lit up and inhaled deeply, thinking how he had to quit smoking soon. He absent-mindedly took a sip of coffee and then settled back to watch the show, pleased that at least one thing had finally gone his way.

Like millions of others around the world, Dave had been fascinated by the 1996 disaster and had followed all the news coverage closely. He was knowledgeable enough about mountaineering and savvy enough about the news media to spot most of the whoppers, to read between the lines and understand at least some of the spin. He'd read Jon Krakauer's book several times and now, after being almost drowned on the Nutcracker Buttress, he'd spent an entire day drying out in Yosemite Lodge and reading 'The Climb' - Anatoli Boukreev's very different account of the very same disaster.

Dave's experience in the Yosemite Valley flood had had a profound effect on him. He'd been tentbound in mountain storms before, and caught out in a few, but never had he been rendered so helpless so fast in what should have been an easy to escape situation. It had been a humbling and sobering experience, which had led to an epiphany of sorts. Though he and Jim hadn't talked about it, Dave kept wondering what would have happened if the ropes had jammed after the first rappel rather than the last? They would have freed the ropes somehow and gotten down eventually - he was sure of that - but it would have been hell to jumar 140 feet up a waterfall when they were already suffering from hypothermia. Especially since they were not carrying jumars! Doing it on prussic knots would have been a nightmare. Climbing a wet 5.8 had been challenging fun for Dave; he could comfortably lead 5.12 trad routes on a good day and power up 5.13s in the gym - but that 5.8 had gotten awfully serious mighty fast when it had turned into a raging waterfall.

The experience of spending an hour in the freezing water had certainly made Dave see

the details of Boukreev's book in a new and far more forgiving light: a storm where the wind-chill factor had driven the temperature down to the equivalent of an ambient temperature of minus 100 degrees? On the go without shelter for over 20 hours? Perhaps it was because he read the book so soon after his own mini-ordeal, but these details had a far more profound effect on him than when he had read about them earlier. In any event he suddenly understood something that was both savage and profound: the most remarkable thing about the entire complex tragedy was not that people had died in the terrible storm on Everest that night; it was the simple miracle that anyone at all had lived...

Dave had never climbed in the Himalayas, but he had been trekking there twice, once to the Annapurna basin and once to Everest base camp. In fact, he had followed the TV coverage of the Everest tragedy as much in the hope of seeing footage of the mountains as anything else. Dave had climbed Mt Rainier, as well as Mt Blanc and other peaks in the European Alps, but the Himalayas were something else. Dave would never call himself religious in the usual sense, but he had to agree with what his ex. had said when they were trekking around Annapurna: "Being here is like being in the greatest cathedral in the world, only better."

He learned little new from watching the show, but then he hadn't really expected to; that would have been as silly as expecting to gain new insights about JFK's death by watching yet another long-winded documentary about the assassination. However, he was amazed by Beck Weathers, who appeared to bear no grudge or animosity towards any of his teammates or the climb leaders, despite having been abandoned and left for dead. He even seemed to be in reasonably good humor about the entire ordeal, not bad going for a guy with stumps instead of hands and a nose rebuilt from other bits of his body.

Dave lit another Camel and sucked in as deeply as he could and made a mental promise to quit soon. But quitting cigarettes might have to wait a while, for even as he was making that promise to himself, his resolve to carry it out was being weakened; an idea for a new screenplay was nudging its way into his thoughts. Like many writers, Dave Wallace's ability to create and his craving for nicotine seemed to be directly connected. He believed that he owed it to his muse to be ready for action twenty-four hours a day, and if that meant smoking three hundred fags a week he was as ready as a man could be. The nudging was getting more insistent, and he lit a fresh cigarette from the one he was already smoking as he began thinking about work the next day. He got up from the couch and went to look through his video collection, which covered three entire walls, floor to ceiling. As a screenwriter it was part of his job to keep abreast of new releases, and he had built up an impressive collection over the years.

Within the project development department at Feel Rock he was still considered to be a rising star, which was not bad in light of the fact that he'd been with the company for five years without writing a hit. It's hard for a writer to stay on the payroll for that long without at least one big kill to his credit, (as the writers joked amongst themselves: "It's a jungle in here") and so far, despite several near misses, Dave had failed to deliver his trophy. His pay scale reflected his position as a middle feeder, but he had begun to crave

a hit for reasons other than the financial benefits. He was simply tired of being in the middle league in every aspect of his life.

The fact is there had never been a hit movie that featured climbing, and Dave had been thinking about various angles from which to approach writing such a screenplay. His favorite big budget climbing movie was *Scream of Stone*, directed by Werner Herzog. Unfortunately for Dave this did not bode well: *Scream of Stone* had failed to get a general release and had died a total death at the box office. Even more depressing to Dave was the fact that, to his knowledge at least; it had never even been released on video. The only way he had been able to obtain his copy was to pirate it through a friend of a friend who worked for Taurus Filmworks in Milan. *Scream of Stone* was the last movie Taurus had produced before going declaring bankruptcy.

Dave looked through the titles in his climbing section. It contained over a hundred titles, varying from movies with just a few frames of climbing to movies that were entirely climbing oriented. Taking pride of place in the latter category was *The Eiger Sanction*, starring and directed by Clint Eastwood and produced in 1975, ten years before Dave had started climbing. It was in fact the first 'climbing movie' that he had ever seen. He had watched it many times since, not because he liked it, but in an effort to understand the convoluted plot and because the dialogue never failed to double him over with laughter. He was still not sure if he had the plot figured out or not, and the only thing he could say about it for sure is that without Clint's star power the entire movie would have sunk like a lead soldier.

Naturally he had *Cliffhanger* with Sylvester Stallone and was of the opinion that the casting director who had put John Lithgow in the role where he had to try to play a threatening heavy should have been given the red cabbage award for artistic cruelty. But then the entire movie sucked such a big lemon that this was just one more minor detail. On the other hand he had been known to go so far as to defend *K2*, which he quite liked. He considered it as being by far the best out of 'the big three,' but he was also quite happy to admit that it was a mangy dog of a movie by any other standard.

His collection included many easy to obtain mainstream movies, such as *The Guns of Navarone*, with its famous cliff climbing sequence and he had all the James Bond's in which the various 007s hang from various cliffs. He also had rare items, such as the 1953 Tom Stobart film about the first ascent of Everest and the 1956 version of *Summit Fever*, starring Anthony Quinn and Gina Lollabrigida. This really awful movie had been marketed as 'the gripping true story of the love and the passion of the husband and wife climbing team who froze to death while attempting the first ascent of Aconcagua.' As it turned out, the movie was so bad that it had almost stifled the budding careers of both its stars.

Dave had also managed to scrounge a lot of old footage from the British Broadcasting Corporation, who had made a whole series of TV documentaries dating as far back as the 1960s and had them lovingly transferred onto video before returning the films to the BBC archive in Middlesex. He was especially fascinated by the early ones, which featured an

English climber by the name of Joe Brown, who was constantly referred to as both ‘The Climbing Plumber’ and ‘The Human Fly’ and he could never figure out if this was British humor at its driest or British snobbery at its most pernicious. In contrast to these grainy black and white classics he had every super sharp climbing documentary that National Geographic had ever produced. With a collection as diverse as this he could be forgiven for thinking of himself as something of a connoisseur of the medium, and he had even gone so far as to compile a computerized filing system that cross-referenced the plots and the action of everything in his collection.

Dave turned off the TV and sat at his desk, still wired from the drive and the coffee, not to mention the frustration of the previous seven days in the valley. Boukreev’s book was still going round in his head and Beck Weathers was now in there as well. He turned on his computer and began to read the script idea that he had been working on just before he had gone to Yosemite: it had seemed shitty when he last looked at it, and now, eight days later, it seemed even shittier. It was a suspense drama based on a jealous wife murdering her husband while they were both championing the land-rights of an Indian tribe. This husband/wife lawyer team is working gratis for a group of Indians who are being cheated of their casino lease by a cartel of corrupt federal officials. The husband is tempted into putting in a few extra hours late one night – and ends up in a hot sexual encounter that has been carefully orchestrated by the Feds. Every detail is recorded on a hidden camera and a copy of the resulting R-rated video then turns up on his wife’s desk. In a fit of jealous rage she takes out the family gun – the movie is set in America after all, and while her errant husband is sitting on the crapper she takes advantage of the situation and in a classic Kodak moment she levels the gun and points and shoots. But – and here’s the plot twist – the wife isn’t the one who actually killed him, she just thought she was – or – and here’s another twist, he wasn’t actually dead – or was he? Or, to put it all another way, as Yul Brynner once so famously put it in ‘The King and I’ – “Etcetera Etcetera Etcetera.”

Dave groaned with the sheer frustration of it all as he read his own script with mounting distaste. If only he had the conviction to get fired he might at least write something that pleased him, even if it was never produced. All his efforts to write this other stuff were going nowhere anyway, so he might as well. He had nothing to lose except his conviction that he was capable of cranking out a hit, and the time had come to either put up or shut up. Middle feeder, middle class, middle of the road. All he needed was the percentage points from one mega hit and he could get out while the going was good and go back to the dreams he’d had when he had first started climbing. He’d get the hell out of LA and open up his own climbing center somewhere in the High Sierra, complete with guiding service, indoor training wall and accommodation. He’d start training seriously, get away on some expeditions and finally do some major climbs. He could even think about stuff like Everest himself...

He opened a new document and started throwing clichés onto the screen as fast as his fingers could hit the keyboard. Climbing Everest! That was it! It was the perfect recipe. Now it was just a case of adding the other ingredients, getting the proportions correct and then finding the right star. Finding the right star, that was the key to success. Sylvester

was passé and Clint was too old. Brad Pitt had vowed to never work with Feel Rock again. Leonardo was too young and in any event he would want too much money. Kevin Costner would be good but he'd be too expensive. How he could still be commanding such fat fees after three mega flops in a row was a greater mystery than the Bermuda Triangle. Bruce Willis was just wrong, but Nicholas Cage was a definite possibility. Dave worked half the night, and by the time he went to bed he had a smile on his face and five pages of notes printed out ready to take to the office. He could worry about the star issue later. In the meantime he had a week in which to polish the various scenarios and subplots before presenting his ideas at next month's project development meeting. He decided to throw any pretensions of artistic purity out the window and drifted off to sleep calculating how many acres to buy and where.

As he drove along Wiltshire Boulevard on his way to work the next morning he passed the offices of HF Management. Sitting at his desk inside the plush suite was Harvey Finklestein himself, who, at that very moment, was staring tenderly at his most important tool of trade, his telephone. Harvey Finklestein hadn't felt so confident of a fail-safe business opportunity for his most famous client since he'd been offered the starring role in *Six Degrees of Separation* over six years before.

Harvey would be the first to admit that he had subsequently made a humdinger of a mistake when he had initially rejected the offer of a starring role for his client in *Men in Black*. Harvey had only given the screenplay a most superficial reading - and then (without so much as even having mentioned the project to Wil Smith, his most bankable star), he had written a short reply to Feel Rock Pictures. In his letter Harvey had simply explained that, "Mr. Smith has prior commitments which make it impossible for him to consider your offer."

Fortunately for Harvey, the role had also been rejected by several other film stars and various rap artists to whom it had been offered. These rejections had put the casting department into such a state of desperation that when they had resubmitted the role for Wil's consideration they wanted to make certain it would be accepted. The screenplay had been delivered by special messenger and accompanied by a case of champagne and a generous new contract proposal. The enticements the proposal contained included the offer of an extra two million dollars on top of the original offer of six million, plus a percentage of the gross. After a brief discussion with Wil, Harvey had phoned Feel Rock with the news that, due to an unexpected change in schedules, his client Wil Smith was now available to take one of the lead roles in *Men in Black* after all.

In his inimitable Hollywood fashion, Harvey had been able to put a spin on that serendipitous series of events, which had eventually led to Wil landing the starring role and making it look as if the whole deal was the result of his sharp business savvy and savage negotiating skills, rather than just good fortune. As luck would have it, Wil had quite simply loved the script, the director had loved Wil, the public had loved the movie and Harvey had loved his 25%. *Men in Black* had gone on to become the blockbuster movie of the summer, and grossed a gigantic amount for Feel Rock. It was not to be outdone at the box office until it was totally ploughed under by the greatest block buster

of all time, the stupendously successful and profitable Moonbeam production: *Titanic*.

Now, just over two years since *Men in Black* had been offered to his client, Harvey had put the phone down after taking a telephone offer for Wil to star in a sequel. His secretary had announced the caller as 'Rufus Murder'. Could it really be THE Rufus Murder, Harvey had wondered? Sure enough, and to Harvey's astonishment, it was. Murder had introduced himself quite simply and modestly as 'the new owner of Feel Rock Pictures' and then come straight to the point: did Harvey think Wil would be interested in starring in a production of *Men in Black Part Two*? Throughout the remainder of the conversation Murder referred to the project simply as 'MIB2'. Harvey found this familiarity most annoying, coming as it did from an upstart who had not been involved in the production of the original, and who was in any case a total novice in Hollywood, an industry outsider and an Australian to boot. On the other hand, if Murder was truly the new owner of Feel Rock Pictures and if fifteen million dollars was a genuine opening offer, Harvey felt sure he could learn to live with his annoyance.

Moonbeam and Feel Rock had been locked in combat for over twenty years. When Moonbeam released *Titanic* they not only smashed every record that had been set by *Men in Black* but they moved themselves into a position of almost unassailable superiority. Nowhere is the adage 'nothing succeeds like success' as true as it is in Hollywood. Feel Rock stock had been losing value for months while the company searched frantically for a property with the potential to reestablish its supremacy. In the mindset of Hollywood, anything that followed a mega hit had to be at least as big or bigger at the box office than its predecessor, or else carry the stigma of being considered forever as a failure. After experiencing the euphoria of such gluttonous windfalls, studio bosses were notoriously unwilling to accept the fact that they would have to return to the humdrum routine of business as usual, at least until fortune smiled upon them again.

The executives at Feel Rock Pictures were no exception to this rule. They thought the success of *Men in Black* was of their doing rather than just the result of a cultural phenomenon, as unpredictable as some of the wilder forces of nature. They came to believe that they could duplicate its success, a dangerous delusion in an industry that resembles nothing so much as a high priced crapshoot. They were like fishermen, who, having once tasted the glory of landing the biggest marlin on record would now prefer to starve rather than pull in anything smaller.

However, try as they might, their top creative talent had come up with exactly zero, or at least nothing that could garner the blessings of the studio heads. Every formula and cinematic cliché had been exploited and submitted in every possible combination. It seemed as if nothing would persuade the bean counters to open the purse strings. In utter desperation some of the guild writers had even gone so far as to submit plot lines which contained microscopic snippets of originality, but these had also been rejected. The studio had spent a fortune optioning the rights to some of the decade's best sellers, but nothing had gone beyond the most basic developmental stage. The mood at the studio headquarters was grim; the creative department was in the grip of a collective ennui worthy of a salon of French symbolist poets. On the other hand, the Feel Rock

shareholders were being true to the values of the market place and the realities of making movies: Fuck the Art - Where's the Money?

Then, in a sudden and vicious coup, masterminded by a small group of investment bankers, the CEO of Feel Rock was fired. In the chaos and infighting that followed, none other than the Australian media tycoon, Rufus Murder, had jumped in and filled the ensuing power vacuum. He'd been looking to expand into the movie business for quite some time, and with the instincts of an outback dingo, he sensed this opportunity and seized it. If there was one class of people that Murder despised more than "those inbred chinless wonders that pass for blue bloods amongst the English aristocracy" it was "the spineless sycophants known as America's business leaders." Murder's legendary competitive spirit relished this opportunity to take them all on, especially in an industry which, (as he cheerfully admitted), he "knew bugger all about."

Murder's inexperience notwithstanding, the majority of the shareholders at Feel Rock felt reassured and only too happy to have him at the helm of the sinking ship. Within a month, he had restructured Feel Rock into the proverbial lean and mean fighting machine that was the trademark of his empire. After the perfunctory and perfectly predictable dismissal of several top executives, he wasted no further time and summoned a meeting of all the departments.

Murder had arrived for the meeting a few minutes late and ignored the spot which had been reserved for him at the head of the conference table. After a nod to no one in particular, he walked through the boardroom to the small kitchen, opened the fridge and took out a beer. He walked back in, sat down on the edge of a windowsill, one foot on the carpet, one leg straight out along the sill. He opened the beer and took a swig.

"You all know who I am, and I know most of you. Those of you I haven't had the pleasure of meeting face to face, well, I'm looking forward to making your acquaintance over the next few days." He allowed himself a quick smile, put the beer down carefully and removed his jacket to reveal his rolled up shirt sleeves. "I've just flown in from Kuala Lumpur, a bastard of a flight but a great opportunity to think movies."

He paused, took another swig of beer and rubbed a hand over the dark stubble on his chin. "Now I'm not one to blow the national trumpet, but we're a small nation down in Oz. There's more people in California than in all of Australia, but in the last twenty years we've made movies that stand up with the best." He paused again, this time purely for effect, and looked around at the expectant faces that were now giving him their full attention. "Now I'm no movie expert but I know this much: *The Man from Snowy River* and *Crocodile Dundee* were the two biggest grossers ever made in Oz. Now what did they do? What did they do?"

He raised his eyebrows, screwed up his eyes and smiled widely but without actually opening his mouth or showing any teeth, like you might if you were in a sandstorm in the outback, rather than in an air-conditioned luxury suite on the twentieth floor of a skyscraper in Century City.

No one had any intention of breaking the spell by being so rash as to actually hazard a guess. Murder knew this and so did everybody else in the room. He could milk the pause for as long as he felt inclined, like a famous conductor playing to a concert hall filled with adoring fans. The double glazed windows cut out any noise from outside world, so the faint hum of the air conditioning was the only sound. This was a moment. These people had arrived, they were there and they knew they were there, in a meeting with one of the supposedly smartest, richest and most powerful men in the world. The silence had a reverence to it, a reverence that only a madman would dare to break. After close to ten-seconds, Murder answered his own question:

"I'll tell you what the bastards did. **THEY MADE THE SEQUEL!**" He almost shouted the words as he suddenly rose to his feet and began pacing the room. Sid Stanton, head of Creative Development, stared down at his hands and flexed his jaw muscles. Julia Bergen, chief controller, rubbed her hands together. Murder did a quick circuit of the table, like the Indians circling the wagons in an old western. He sat back on the windowsill, looked down at his feet and, just loud enough for everyone to hear, not a decibel more, he spoke again.

"They made a sequel, that's what the bastards did! And the sequels did bloody well. And cost bugger all. And they involved hardly any risk. And at the same time they boosted sales of the originals. We're talking a win-win situation here." He stopped to take a breather and let his words sink in. He loosened his tie and looked out of the window towards the Santa Monica Mountains.

"Now I've put close to five hundred million into getting this studio. I like a gamble; I like a bit of sport. But I didn't just think about movies all the way from KL to LA; I took a gander at the balance sheets: I felt like jumping out of the plane. Since MIB this studio has done nothing except hemorrhage dollars. Everything we made on MIB has been used up in this endless search for a follow up". Murders constant use of acronyms was one of his most well known and most joked about eccentricities, but everyone took care not to smile. "The monks of Tibet find the new Dalai Lama in less time than it's taking FRP to find a new product. We need a hit, and we need it now."

He looked at the assembled faces, but now he focused specifically on each one for an instant, rather than on the entire room. After momentarily locking eyes with all the key players in this manner he suddenly rose from the windowsill and walked to his place at the table, as if he'd only just now noticed it. After sitting down and making himself comfortable he cleared his throat and continued: "Meanwhile, the dream vehicle we need to take us into the next millennium is already sitting right under our noses." He opened his eyes wide and tapped his nose rapidly, all the while staring directly at Sid Stanton.

"I'm talking MIB Part Two. I took the liberty of phoning Wil Smith's agent this morning and he reckons that Wil's hot to trot and ready to sign, script unseen. I met Tommy Lee at a dinner party at Arnold's place the other night and sounded him out about doing a sequel. He told me that for twelve guaranteed and box office points he'd shoot himself in

the back with an elephant gun! I like him; he's a funny bastard. I want TLJ and WS stitched in and I want a new MIB project rolling in time for release next summer." He paused and broke into his famous winning smile, all lines and creases and accompanied by a hearty chuckle. "The ball's in your court ladies and gentlemen. Just write me a masterpiece and we'll all be happy. It's been a pleasure and I'll see you all tonight."

Sid Stanton called his entire department together and thirty minutes later his development meeting was underway. He recounted Murder's comments and then threw the meeting open. From the tone of the memos that Murder had been firing off, even in the weeks before his actual arrival, it was already obvious to the creative department that he regarded them with the same disdain as that which he regularly expressed for the "Fleet Street Hacks over in London." Now this development had taken things to a new level entirely and everyone looked at each other incredulously. Did Murder seriously believe that they had not already considered the most obvious? Some of them were amused, some were outraged. Of course they'd thought of a sequel, but all the post MIB market research had revealed that the public were science fictioned out. The 12 to 31 years old MIB target audience was also known to be growing bored with special effects movies, no matter how spectacular.

Sid listened to his colleagues and felt tired. Tired of bottom lines and deadlines and lines of dialogue so bad that directors needed cattle prods to force actors to deliver them. He'd come to Hollywood in his early twenties as a writer, and now, thirty-five years later, he had reached the point where he no longer liked what he saw in the mirror; Jesus he was tired. He looked around at his colleagues, most of who were about half his age, and decided to just roll with it.

"OK. Any ideas? We've got two stars and no sky. El Supremo has set the budget at seventy-million." He shot a glance to where Julia Bergen was seated. "Don't ask me where he got that figure Julia, I have no fucking idea! I've seen some weird shit in this town but this should be sent to the Smithsonian. O.K. don't be shy! Who's going to save our collective bacon?"

Everybody laughed, even the ones who had shares in the company, and so the meeting got underway. There were a few moments of silence and Dave Wallace tried to absorb all that Sid had just told them. If ever there was a moment to be grasped, this was it and yet he was almost paralyzed. He knew instinctively an opportunity like this would not come his way again and he needed to give it everything he had, but he hadn't been expecting to make his pitch for another week or so. He felt woefully ill prepared for the job at hand, like launching up an off-width with a rack of RURPS.

Dave hadn't even seriously considered either Tommy Lee Jones or Wil Smith as the hero of his Everest movie, let alone the two of them. No matter, an opportunity like this would never come again. If he didn't grasp it with both hands he knew he'd regret it forever. He cleared his throat and began to speak, prepared to put in his own off-the-cuff Oscar winning performance. He was ready to wing it and lie through his teeth if need be. He grasped his notes and stood up, trying to sound as low-key and as casual as possible.

"That's amazing! What a coincidence!" He paused and looked around the table. All eyes were on him now. "I can't believe it! I've just been working on a new screenplay idea - Men in Black on The White Mountain!"

No one spoke up to object so he continued immediately, trying to keep pace and cobble his fragmented ideas together to include *Men in Black*. "OK. You know that anything less than, like, *Titanic* is going to be a failure as far as Murder and the gang are concerned. I have an idea." These meetings were supposed to be filled with people who were filled with ideas, but everyone was so fed up that no one could even be bothered ribbing him about the obvious. His brain went from overdrive to auto pilot and suddenly he was cruising; all he had to do was relax and speak truthfully, a tall order certainly, but not impossible. "I've been thinking a lot about the *Titanic* phenomenon, you know, beyond all the romance between Leo and Kate, the public was, like, genuinely fired up by the tragedy of the biggest boat ever built sinking to the bottom of the ocean. You know, it's like that elemental force of nature thing that they tried to get at in *The Edge*."

Everybody was listening. Dave was a fine screenwriter, despite his apparent inability to speak without adding at least one qualifier to every sentence. He affected his speech this way intentionally, in the belief that sounding intellectually insecure would make him more attractive to the Grrrl Power girls that he constantly met in the film industry.

"I mean special effects are out, we all kind of know that. I mean like special effects for the sake of like special effects. But special effects that serve a real story, like *Titanic* and *Saving Ryan's Privates* - they're blowing the roof off. The way I see it, we've got no choice but to use Tommy Lee and Wil, but we're not really locked into the same *Men in Black* sci-fi formula. Here's my idea." He paused for a moment before launching his spiel. Despite their seeming collective cynicism, most of the individuals in the room still genuinely cared about the movie industry. The problem was staying in without completely selling out. It was like being a boxer and deciding which hits to take and which to try to avoid. The fact is that Dave, like everybody else in town, wanted his ideas to be taken seriously.

"You all know I'm really into is outdoor stuff, like when I'm not working I mean. Last week I was in Yosemite and my friend Jim had brought along that book by John Krakauer, 'Into Thin Air'. It's been on the best seller list for months! The guy summited as well and he's still got all his fingers and toes." Dave leaned back and paused for a few moments. "I've read it twice already so I picked up a copy of the new book by the Russian dude who was on the same expedition. It's just come out and it's gone straight onto the best seller lists right alongside Thin Air! And the Russian guy's dead! He died on another big mountain not long after he'd finished writing it. I mean he's not even around to promote the damn thing and it's still like a best seller! This climbing gig is really hot, and I mean especially Everest." He had everybody's attention now, no small feat in a development meeting.

"Now you've got the *Everest* IMAX movie, sixty minutes long, \$12 a pop and you have to stand in line to get in to see it! I've seen it three times, and you know who's in line?"

Everybody! Everybody's in the freaking line, from, like little kids upwards. Lots of teenagers. I mean like lots. But a lot of old folk too. And I started to think like; everybody wants to like know about climbing this freaking great mountain. And, you know, climbing is like any other sport, once you get into it. You meet the in crowd and you always find these weird snobbish value systems at work that the general public is not even aware of."

Dave stopped and looked around to see how he was doing. Everybody seemed genuinely interested, but he had to be careful not to go too far off track. He had a great subject but no real plot with which to sell it. It was only now that he realized just how much he had been thinking about it all; not as a business project, but as a phenomenon that genuinely interested him. His enthusiasm and his knowledge showed and carried his normally jaded colleagues along. Nevertheless he knew it was only a matter of time before Sid would be banging the table and laughing as he asked his trademark question: 'What's the hook?'

"Here's the thing. In the climbing community, it used to be fashionable, for a while anyway, to claim to not even want to climb Everest. They'd say it was just a big rubble heap with no great climbing. But that's starting to change again now. There's a lot of hard routes on Everest, and the fact is that even the best mountaineers in the world can still buy the farm on the so called easy route! But get this: there are hard climbs everywhere now, I shit you not. Not mountains, just short hard rock climbs is what I'm talking about. A lot of them are what climbers call 'sport climbs', with bolts and everything already placed in the rock, ready to clip the rope into. Climbing them is about as dangerous as playing tiddlywinks and watching people climb them, for the general public at least, is about as exciting as watching paint dry, but that's not the point. There are sport climbs on some little cliffs only twenty miles from where we are now, in the Santa Monica Mountains, and even though they're only thirty feet high, the best rock jocks in the world can spend weeks trying to inch their way up these things! I mean these things are desperately hard, you need tendons on top of tendons and a strength to weight ratio like an ant just to get an inch off the ground, let alone get to the top! But there are thousands of virtually identical climbs, which are just as hard, up thousands of other virtually identical cliffs, which are within easy reach of major cities all over the world. I'm not comparing the two things, that would be like comparing apples to oranges, but it's interesting, how big this climbing thing has become." Again Dave stopped to collect his thoughts and decide how best to get his sales pitch across.

"You know the big traffic jams in Yosemite that were in the news last summer? Well, a lot of the people in those cars went there just to see those climbers suspended like flies on those walls! It's awesome! The whole place is like one big projection screen! It's like going to Yellowstone to see the bears! And some of those cliffs are thousands of feet high and can take forever to climb. But now there's climbs like those all over the world as well! Venezuela, Argentina, Greenland, Antarctica, Pakistan, you name it. But Everest is different. No matter what else might be said, it is the one and only highest mountain in the world. Of course you can say that every mountain is unique, and that's true, but Everest really is."

Dave looked across at Sid Stanton and found him to be hunkered down into his chair, a good sign. Dave was doing better than he ever had before. Sid must be either desperate or very tired or very interested.

"...But all these climbs have just gone on to underline the uniqueness of Everest. I mean even the Poles are spoken of in the plural. One's at the top and one's at the bottom, one with penguins and one without, but it's all over for the Poles. Nobody gives a shit about getting to the North or South Pole anymore, except some guy who does it backwards in winter on a bicycle with a teapot balanced on his head and one eye closed. And even then the only person who cares is the guy who did it with a coffeepot and the other eye.

But Everest holds more fascination for more people now than it did when it was first climbed. It's like the *Titanic* of mountains, the biggest one, that never sinks, but where the people die anyway. Instead of dying a mile below sea level they die five miles above it. A lot of 'em just disappear, just like the book says, 'into thin air!' Never seen again! And you know what else? All that, like, spiritual shit that they tried to serve up in *Kundun* and *Seven Years in Tibet* and *The Last Emperor*? You know why it didn't sell? Because it was like phony spiritual shit, that's why. Not because the public won't buy tickets to movies that attempt to capitalize on spiritual stuff - I mean look at the success of *Close Encounters* and *ET* - but because it was phony spiritual shit without any corresponding entertainment value. Bastards. At the same time they had the balls to try to market that junk as though it was more than just, like, cotton candy. Maybe we are guilty of making the audience dumb by making dumb movies, but they're still not that fucking dumb.

But you know what? Everest has all that, like, spiritual stuff built in, without having to hit anybody over the head with it. I mean, high mountains have always been a symbol of spirituality, and Everest is the biggest spiritual motherfucker of the lot. Adventure movies are big again, and you all know what else is big? Buddy movies. I say we get to work on a screenplay for a spiritual adventure buddy movie starring Tommy Lee Jones and Wil Smith climbing Everest! The *Men in Black* go to the top of the world! We get some girls in there for the sex and romance angle and then throw in a rival team of bad guys for everyone to hate. It's not going to take a genius to create plenty of drama, suspense and tragedy with a situation like that. I mean the goddamn story will just about write itself, just like it did in real life when they all died in '96. Like a classic Greek tragedy where the lines of personal intersection had all been drawn up way in advance, just waiting for the fateful time and place when they would all be drawn together for the final act to be played out when the storm blew in. And here's the real beauty of it: The public is already obsessed with this freaking mountain; *they'll buy anything with Everest written on it.*

You know, I once read that the reasons men and women like to fuck so much is because it's the closest most of them ever come to the feeling of flying. Well, it's a similar thing with some of these climbers. I mean the ones who are into it in a really heavy-duty way. It's a bit like a skier I knew who loved to ski steep backcountry powder, even when it was on the verge of avalanching; he called it 'Dancing with God'. This guy and his pals were far-out, and they weren't kids. I mean, some of these guys were in their like, forties. Anyway, one of this guy's best friends had climbed Everest, and said his few minutes on

top were worth the rest of his life put together! We're talking some crazy shit here. A lot of these guys are half a bubble off plumb and even the ones who are on the level seem to wish they weren't. And the Himalayas are just so, like, fucking beautiful to look at. We'll film everything on location. I shit you not my friends. This could be the next *Titanic*." He suddenly broke off and grinned. "The Men in Black take on the Chinese and the Arabs and save the free world and at the same time they get to the summit of Everest and fall in love with members of the women's team who are also on the mountain. Well, I guess that's kind of it."

Sid Stanton thought the idea was brilliant and he was already planning how they might best present it to Murder at the barbeque, but in his usual style he let the ensuing discussion run its course and took note of where everyone stood. Everybody had an opinion and nobody was shy about expressing it, but the consensus was positive. Dave fielded all the questions and objections brilliantly and fleshed in the details. It was an hour before Sid spoke.

"Dave, I'm not going to beat about the bush with this thing. I've been in the business too long to waste any more time polishing turds. I love your idea. You've got the rest of the day to get your presentation ready! If Murder thinks he's the only one who can work at the speed of light he'll soon be finding he's not." The room burst into applause and fell to congratulating Dave, who beamed from ear to ear. Nothing had happened this fast at Feel Rock for years. Sid stood up and walked to the door and then turned back to face the room. He screwed his face into a facsimile of the sandstorm smile and put on his best fake Aussie accent. "Tooroo for now. I'll see you bastards at the barbie!"

At eight 'o clock that evening Sid and Dave's limo rolled through the gates and into the spacious grounds of Murder's mansion high up on Mulholland Drive. They climbed out of the car and laughed as they marched with mock seriousness towards the marquee that had been set up on the front lawn. "Right then Dave" said Sid in a conspiratorial tone, "Let's do it!"

"There he is" said Dave, motioning towards Murder who was standing on the lawn and telling a joke to a small group of friends, holding a drink in one hand and stabbing the air with the index finger of the other. He delivered what must have been the punch line and everyone in the group burst out laughing and Rufus beamed. The timing of their arrival could not have been better. "Right then Sid" said Dave, mimicking Sid's every inflection perfectly, "Let's do it."

"Welcome" said Rufus, excusing himself from the group and greeting the two men warmly, touching Sid on the elbow and directing the two newcomers toward the marquee. "The food's over this way. Best New Zealand lamb and Sydney rock oysters, just flown in fresh today. What have you got?" Sid and Dave exchanged looks. They had expected very little in the way of preliminaries but even so, they were still taken by surprise. Dave remembered a joke he had once heard about the definition of Australian foreplay: "Are you awake?" Sid was the first to speak.

"Rufus, we've got something that is going to make you a happy man. We've got the perfect sequel. It's the story of Wil and Tommy taking on Mt. Everest, the highest mountain in world. This is the movie the public's been waiting for. This is the Death Mountain, *Titanic* in stone. David here is an amateur mountain climber himself and he's drawn a compelling story. Listen to this Rufus: the Arabs have mounted a big expedition up the North Face, on the Chinese/Tibetan side of the mountain, trying to set up a secret spy satellite relay station two-thirds of the way up this freaking thing. Meanwhile, the MIB are trying to climb to the summit from the Nepalese side, by way of the West Ridge. Climbing it in a manner that mountaineers refer to as 'Alpine Style.' That means there's just the two of 'em going from bottom to top with no fixed ropes. They'll be all dressed in black, carrying all their stuff in black backpacks, sleeping in black sleeping bags in a black tent and using black ropes. They'll have black ice picks, black snow goggles and of course Wil Smith himself is already black. This is going to look fantastic against the white snow and the blue sky.

Rufus listen to this: the storm from hell suddenly blows in. On the other side of the mountain the all-women team sponsored by Ms. Magazine is on the South Col route. They have an emergency on their hands because they have just learned that one of their members is over five months pregnant, a fact that she had so far managed to keep secret from the others. She's a sort of free-spirited late-twenties Colorado neo-hippie astrologer who wants to be the first pregnant vegetarian Sagittarius to reach the summit of Everest. You know the type I'm talking about right? Kind of bright-eyed, new-age innocent; you've probably come across a lot like her in Australia? The problem is the altitude has brought on complications which have resulted not only in her pregnancy becoming obvious but also life threatening.

The leader of the women's expedition is Jenny Faxit, a hard-nosed New York attorney, and she is doing her best to seduce the expeditions youngest member, Veronica Flewinsky, an innocent 23-year-old intern at the White House. You know, with the target audience we're going for, a bit of that type of humour will be appreciated. We slowly reveal that Jenny, as well as being a classic lipstick lesbian health fanatic, is also a sadistic bitch with a death wish and a fixation on her dead father. We further come to learn that her dad was a very well known American mountaineer who disappeared on Everest in the mid-sixties, when Jenny was still just a little girl, and whose body has never been found! Here's where it gets really interesting."

He paused for a moment and glanced at Murder, whose face was giving nothing away. The three of them continued walking slowly toward the buffet tables and Sid turned to look at Dave. "It's your baby, Dave. Why don't you take it from here?"

Dave Wallace took a deep breath and tried to sound as relaxed and low-key as the situation allowed. He had a lot of dreams riding on the outcome, but he smiled and felt himself actually relieved now that the waiting was over and the moment for action had finally arrived.

"Sure, thanks Sid. Let me see now." He collected his thoughts for a moment more and

then turned towards Rufus. “O.K. Mr. Murder, this is the thing. The Tommy Lee Jones character is sponsored by Nookie, a big manufacturer of sports footwear who has recently received very negative press for the heartless exploitation of third world child labor. Nookie are hoping to somehow use Everest to burnish their tarnished image. We make it clear early on in the movie that the whole exercise is just a cynical marketing ploy on their part. They become the evil of capitalism personified.

We gradually reveal the fact that Tommy has been Wil’s mentor for years, and that it was Tommy who got Wil started as a climber when he was one of Tommy’s students at a college somewhere back East. I think we might make it Dartmouth College in New Hampshire. The campus has one of the oldest mountaineering clubs in North America so it would be nice to blend in some real historical details of that sort whenever we can. It’s going to give the movie some street credibility amongst actual climbers, and a little word of mouth can go a long way with that crowd. Another interesting cross-reference to get across is that it was the fraternities at Dartmouth that inspired *Animal House* with John Belushi. Just an in-joke for film buffs, but you know the drill: that’s the sort of detail that helps the critics feel good and increases the chance of them giving a movie a favourable review.

Anyway, it turns out that Wil was the only black kid in his class, on a scholarship as a champion middle-distance runner. He quickly became Tommy's equal as a climber, and whenever the two of them went into the mountains together they were inseparable. Tommy had even talked Nookie into sponsoring Wil. We’ll get some great action stuff of Wil and Tommy training on Mt Washington in winter, and some classic New England images: picturesque villages with colonial houses and white picket fences, with old glory flying from flagpoles on the front lawn. That image of a wholesome Americana is good for domestic ticket sales Rufus, so we might as well get as much mileage from it as possible while we’re setting up the main action.

Anyway, it turns out that even though Wil and Tommy have done many great climbs together over the years, the partnership has begun to sour; Wil is the young idealist, the kind, naive romantic type. Tommy is the pragmatic and seasoned old campaigner who believes that the end justifies the means. He's had too much bad luck with women over the years, all the romance knocked out of him. He hides his hurt by making the kind of jokes that allow his enemies to call him a misogynist. Things get even grimmer between them when Wil's conscience forces him to end his own contract with Nookie and sign on with Olympus, a company famous for fair labour practices and showing concern for the environment. However, the two men are still determined to do this one final great climb together, to cap off their careers. Meanwhile, Nookie have their own agenda, and they are now busy behind the scenes, doing everything possible to sow destructive seeds of suspicion and jealousy and dissent between the Men in Black!

Now, the Arabs who are trying to set up the satellite station on the North Face of Everest are real bastards. Terrorists; non-Christians who'll eat their own kids on toast. They're coming in from the Tibetan side and they're in cahoots with the Chinese, who are helping them in return for the Arab League’s promise to vote against Tibetan autonomy in the

United Nations.

Tommy and Wil, while trying to transmit a routine message on their radio to their own base camp, pick up the Arabs and Chinese and learn of the evil trickery on the North Face. Shortly afterwards their radio dies completely and they have no way of relaying this information back to the outside world! The fate of Western Civilization as we know it is solely in their hands! They have a heart to heart and decide to sacrifice their chance of reaching the summit and instead to thwart the high altitude spy station! They decide that the defense of the free world and mom's apple pie is more important than their own ambitions! They make a desperate traverse across the entire side of the mountain to the North Face and take on the Arabs and Chinese.

After killing twenty-seven heavily armed Arabs and Chinese with their bare hands they dismantle the spy station, again with their bare hands, and hurl all the bits and pieces into the void! But now a second storm strikes and makes returning to the West Ridge impossible! To descend the North Face into Tibet will lead them straight into the arms of about a hundred million Chinese soldiers! They realize that the only way to freedom is to climb to the summit and then escape off the mountain by climbing down the South Col and back into Nepal. They might reach the summit after all! They look into each other's eyes for a long time and shake hands.

They climb! They slip! They climb! The wind howls! Avalanches everywhere! Another storm starts to build! They slip! They run out of food! They drop the tent! Wil loses his snow goggles! Tommy starts to develop frostbite in his hands! Fuck Leo! They look into each other's eyes again! Fuck Kate! They look down! Fuck James Cameron! They look up! Fuck the Titanic! They hallucinate! Fuck the Iceberg! They argue! Fuck the Atlantic! Finally they reach the summit! Fuck Everest! They smile! They hug each other and hold on for a long time! The sun sets! Fuck the lifeboats! The music swells! We'll use Vangelis...

They put on their headlamps and descend a very short distance to a potential bivouac site just below the summit. This will be the highest altitude at which anyone has ever spent a night and lived to tell the tale, if they live to tell the tale. If they don't survive it will be the highest altitude at which anyone ever froze to death. As Tommy Lee observes with his customary grim humor, they can't lose, either way will be a world record.

They begin to enlarge a small shelf off to the side of the ridge. The pick of Wil's axe suddenly breaks through into a mini-crevasse between the summit cornice and the rock backbone of the ridge! They squeeze down into it to shelter from the wind and prepare to settle in for the night. As they try to arrange themselves more comfortably Wil uses his ice axe to pry a rock aside to create some extra space. After doing so he catches sight of an object lodged in the crack behind it and stares down at it and then reaches in. He is amazed when he pulls his hand out to find himself holding an old style folding Kodak camera!

They both gasp and shine their headlamps onto it and find that, apart from a little rust and

dirt, it appears to be otherwise miraculously well preserved. They examine it closely, trying to estimate its age, and Wil, who is a bit of a photography enthusiast himself, says he thinks it is a style that was popular before the Second World War! The two of them exchange a meaningful look. They can make out some engraving on the bottom of the camera casing, but it is difficult to decipher. Using the Velcro fastening tabs on his mittens like steel wool, Wil starts rubbing at it. After a few moments the letters are plain and unmistakable! "HS" followed by the inscription: "Everest 1924"

My God! Howard Somervell's long-lost camera! When George Mallory and Andrew Irvine had disappeared near the summit of Everest over sixty years before they had been carrying a camera which had been lent to them by Somervell. What may be the key to solving the greatest mystery in the history of mountaineering is in their hands! Finding the camera virtually on the summit of Everest is almost proof that the first ascent of the mountain had been made in 1924 – not 1953 by Hillary and Tensing!

The two men can hardly believe their good fortune, although, as Will points out, having to potentially pay for the camera with their lives might seem an odd definition of good fortune to most folk. They carefully stow the camera into one of the packs and then settle in for the night as best they can. If they survive until dawn it will be a miracle. If they then succeed in getting down alive it will be a triple miracle and change. They rub each other's extremities all night long, rationing their oxygen supply and talking about God and Nookie and Everest and Olympus. And the fact that they will never go up another mountain if they ever get down this one alive.

Next day at sunrise we find the MIB still alive and stumbling out of the crevasse. Wil is now snow blind as a result of having lost his goggles the day before, and is in excruciating pain, with a bandana wrapped around his eyes to prevent further damage. Tommy's fingers are practically useless due to the frostbite. They stand in the snow, virtually holding each other up and Tommy, after fumbling with his frozen fingers, manages to remove his oxygen mask. 'I'll be your eyes' he says, 'and you'll be my hands'. Wil feels for Tommy's face and puts the mask back on for him and then throws his arm over his friend's shoulder. The music swells as they shuffle back up to the summit again and Tommy makes a joke about being the first people to have climbed Everest twice in twelve hours.

Rufus, I shit you not, this one scene alone will redefine the meaning of what is and what is not a Buddy movie. The camera sweeps around a full 360 degrees before tracking down the South East Ridge, where it focuses in on five brightly colored tents, half buried in snow on the South Col, three thousand feet below. We notice a few figures moving between the tents and then the camera pans back up to the MIB. Close-up on Tommy as he says he can see the women's expedition camp on the South Col and says that if they can make it down that far they'll be OK.

Wil turns his face toward Tommy and we can see his cracked lips creasing into a slight smile as he replies. 'If we make it there and you tell that joke about the difference between an all woman expedition and a New York Transit System I promise I will

personally strangle you.' Then we see the two of them laughing and staggering downward, one blind and one crippled. I'm telling you Rufus, there won't be a dry eye in the house".

Rufus Murder had stopped alongside one of the heavily laden buffet tables. There was a smile on his face as he looked at Dave and Sid. "Jesus, you blokes can move when you want to, can't you?" It was more a statement than a question, spoken as a compliment, not a criticism. "Help yourselves. What happens next? This is a bloody good story you bastards have put together. I was starting to think you septics had nothing in you. Go on."

"Down at the South Col we zoom in on Veronica Flewinsky, the twenty-three year old intern. She's all dressed in white and chewing on a small salami as she looks through a telescope, inspecting the route they'll be taking up to the summit. Suddenly she spots the MIB who are slowly working their way down the ridge, and she starts hollering for her teammates to come and look. Now, as far as they know, they are the only people on the South-East Ridge, so it doesn't take long for them to figure out who the two figures are. Jenny Faxit, the team leader, comes out of her tent and joins the women who are taking turns looking through the telescope.

'Yes,' she says evenly. 'It's those arrogant bastards we met on the trail to base camp; the West Ridge Yahoos.' Her voice is dripping with disdain. 'Well, they'll get no hero's welcome from me; not after the joke one of them told in the Yeti Bar in Katmandu. Something about the difference between the US women's soccer team and the New York Transit System. I'm not sure if I got the joke but he was totally inappropriate and offensive'"

Dave went on to flesh out the rest of his story line as quickly as he could. He didn't want to skip too many details but he didn't want to lose his listener either. Billionaires and six-year-olds are not very different when it comes to their attention spans while being entertained by a storyteller.

"The progress of the MIB is astonishing; they manage to lose height rapidly, despite the terrible shape they're in. However the combined effect of exhaustion, dehydration and the lack of oxygen eventually takes its toll and their progress slows until, still about a thousand feet above the camp, they eventually sink into the snow, unable to descend any further.

Their plight now becomes apparent to the women's expedition, and an argument breaks out: should they mount a rescue and compromise their own chances of reaching the summit, or should they just let the men die? They already have a crisis of their own with Margaret the pregnant hippie to worry about, who will not be able to descend to base camp under her own power. Faxit pulls rank and says that as the leader it is her call, and her decision is to head for the summit the next day as planned and lend whatever assistance they can on their way down. This way they won't be accused of abandoning fellow mountaineers in distress, and at the same time they will still have a chance of

reaching the summit themselves.

A great ideological debate starts to take shape, but is interrupted by a broadcast from Radio Free Tibet, which they start to pick up on their radio. They learn from a Tibetan eyewitness, who had watched the whole thing through a telescope, how the joint Arab and Chinese plan on the North Face was foiled by the heroic effort of two men in black.

That settles it! All the team members, except for Jenny and the pregnant hippie, decide to try to rescue the MIB. Jenny is left standing alone as the others head up. Now, with her lifelong dream to climb the mountain that killed her father in ruins, she decides to take her own life, in the vicinity of the earthly remains of the only man on earth who she is willing to concede might not have been a total pig. Head bowed low she walks away from Everest, and towards the neighboring giant, Lhotse.

Meanwhile, the other women reach the MIB. They revive them with the oxygen they have brought up and ply them with mugs of hot tea. When the two men are sufficiently recovered to be able to stand up, the women mount a tremendous effort and finally succeed in getting them down to the tents on the South Col.

Wil is helped inside one of the smaller tents and Veronica offers to look after him. She crawls in with hot chocolate and first aid supplies. He lies there, snow-blind and helpless. He thanks her for saving his life and reaches out to feel the features of her face. She puts her hand on his and then she leans over and gently kisses his sunburned eyelids.

The music swells again; Vangelis is the man for this movie for sure. We'll do plenty of scenes in slow motion as well, just like in that British film that Vangelis did the soundtrack for – the one about the runners at the Paris Olympics in the 1920s. We have a soft focus close up as Veronica spears a marshmallow onto a fork and then dips it into the hot chocolate, taking it out again just as it begins to melt and putting it in Wil's mouth. Wil moans gently, the wind howls and the pink tent fabric shivers as the scene fades out through a gauze filter. Sort of David Hamilton meets Stanley Kubrick.

Meanwhile, over in the big tent, after a few mugs of tea and a hot meal, Tommy Lee - I'm thinking of naming his screen character 'Stone Anvil' by the way - is telling jokes and recounting what had happened on the North Face. His frostbite is treated as best it can be in the circumstances, and this will provide a lot of opportunities for close-ups of his frostbitten fingers and of his face contorted with much pain and accompanied by a great deal of grimacing and groaning. The women are passing Somervell's camera around and excitedly discussing the events of the past 36 hours. One of the team members goes to check on Jenny, only to return with the news that she is not to be found in any of the tents! They all scramble out of the main tent and find the prints of her crampons, leading across the plateau toward Lhotse. They explain to Tommy what had happened earlier in the day.

Tommy feels responsible for the chain of events that has led to Jenny's disappearance. We go into a flashback of Tommy as an eight-year-old, when his mother abandoned him

and his younger brother and his alcoholic father. We see Tommy and his little brother climbing to the top of the huge slagheap beside the coal mine, down into which their father goes to work every day. Every morning they climb to the summit of the cone shaped pile and stand there holding hands, scanning the dirt road that leads towards town, to see if their mother is coming back. Rufus, there will not be a dry eye in the whole cinema.

I don't have a particular director in mind yet Rufus, but they might even want to juxtapose these flashbacks of Tommy as a child with more recent flashbacks of Tommy as a grown man reaching the summits of real mountains. I mean, using a sledgehammer on the audience never hurts as far as I'm concerned, but anyway..."

Dave's voice trailed off and Rufus turned to look at him. "Dave, you're no slouch! What happens next?" Dave took a deep breath and continued: "Well Rufus. Everybody in camp is so exhausted that there is a general feeling of 'Lets just wait and see if Jenny comes back of her own accord' but Tommy Lee will have none of it. He tells the women to rest up, and if he is not back within an hour to come look for him. He ignores their protests and goes into high gear super-hero mode. Rufus, I swear on my dear dead grandma's grave, this one scene alone will reduce the role Stallone played in *Cliffhanger* into looking like the Easter Bunny on lithium. Tommy Lee Jones, or Stone Anvil as I now think of him, sets off to find Jenny, following her footprints over a small rise and disappearing from view. The camera tracks him from high up and we can see him closing in on a tiny figure that is sitting in the snow at the foot of the sheer face of Lhotse. Zoom in as he gets closer. The figure of course is Jenny Faxit.

She is weeping and staring at the wall of ice. Embedded in the ice and perfectly preserved and staring right back at her is her dad! Tommy kneels down beside her and puts his arm around her shoulder. After a while he says something like: 'this is a beautiful resting-place. I know your father would be proud of you and pleased that you came, but there's nothing more we can do. We'd better go now.' I thought of a really dreadful joke for him to tell her, the old one about the Eskimo who falls in love with the seal that's under the ice? I don't know if you've heard it or not but it's too risky; it could sink the entire movie. I think we're better off just going with something sweet and predictable here, a few tears, a few clichés, nothing too risky, maybe mention God or Fate. A few tender moments of remorse and regret followed by resignation and reconciliation and then we see them walking slowly back towards camp as the sun sinks behind Everest. Big Vangelis moment.

In the next scene we have the entire women's expedition and the MIB safely back in civilization, drinking a toast in the Yeti Bar in Katmandu. Jenny and Tommy Lee have their arms around each other, and have obviously become an item, while Wil and Veronica stare adoringly into each other's eyes. From the repartee between them it is also obvious that the rift between the two MIB has been totally healed by their shared ordeal on the mountain. Tommy Lee regales everyone with his inexhaustible supply of jokes, occasionally glancing over towards Wil, who wags a finger at him in mock admonishment. Margaret, looking very pregnant, very happy and now fully recovered,

has a smile on her face as she softly recites a popular mantra and reads a horoscope.

Everybody piles out of the bar and into the bright sunlight on the street where a convoy of open back jeeps is waiting to take them to the airport. Just as they all are climbing on board, a large group of local people, monks and tourists appear and take it in turn to hug and shake hands with the MIB, in gratitude for what they did on the North Face.

Final scene: in the airplane heading home for the good old USA. Tommy Lee and Wil get into conversation about the future. They decide to hang up their boots now that they've not only climbed the big one, but also solved the biggest mystery in climbing. Anyway, Tommy Lee muses, he cannot in good conscience continue to take sponsorship dollars from Nookie, after having experienced Third World poverty first hand. In a total reversal of their earlier roles, Will tells Tommy Lee that he can get him a deal with Olympus! They then realize, in the same flash of inspiration, that they now have a new Holy Grail: to stamp out the exploitation of child labor by multinational corporations such as Nookie! They exchange a high five and blow kisses to Veronica and Jenny as the credits begin to roll. Margaret stares out the window and strokes her belly with a beatific smile on her face. Sound track goes totally El Whacko, double Vangelis. Not a dry eye in the house! Audience totally set up and primed in anticipation of another sequel to the sequel: *Men in Black Versus Nookie*. That's it"

Dave felt as drained as if he'd just run up and down Kilimanjaro, but he managed to sound up-tempo as he turned to look squarely into the face of the man who could make or break his entire future. "Well, Rufus" he said, "What do you think?"

Sid beamed in the darkness and held his breath and waited. Dave pursed his lips and stared down at the endless streetlights of Los Angeles. Several seconds passed with all three men in silence. Finally Murder spoke. "Bloody brilliant! That's all I can say. Bloody brilliant! What's the title?"

Dave paused. "Well, we hadn't really got that far, but because it's not exactly a sequel we thought it best to avoid '*Men in Black Part 2*.' We don't want to build false expectations, it could create a negative backlash. I don't know if you're aware that all our market research has shown the public is sick to death of sci-fi and special effects? We wanted a title that would capitalize on the MIB image without leading anyone into thinking it would just be a continuation, so we thought '*Men in Black Polar Fleece*' might be a good title."

"Men in Black what?" The volume at which Rufus spoke had suddenly risen.

"Polar Fleece; it's what the climbers wear."

"Jesus Christ! It sounds like a porn movie about fucking black sheep."

"Well, we had '*Men in Black Tents*'?"

"That's worse. Sounds like Bedouins."

"What about '*Men in Black Balaclavas*'?"

"Give me a break! That sounds like Northern Ireland."

"Men in Black Tights?"

"Fuck me. You told me a Buddy Movie not a Poofta Movie"

"How about 'Men in Black Spandex?' A lot of guys wear Spandex, big guys too, the type of guys who take steroids and are so ripped they look as if they'd have muscles in their shit."

"Not bad, but people think bright when they think spandex, they don't think black, they think sunny bimbo; they don't think Makalu, they think Malibu. What else have you got?"

Dave and Sid were silent. They'd heard about Murder's propensity for micromanagement and they were getting their first real taste of it. Of all the dumb stuff to be worrying about at this point in the game. Still, it was obviously of crucial interest to Murder so Dave racked his brain and tried again. "When I go rock climbing I wear pants made of Lycra, but it's not really what you'd wear on Everest."

"Lycra?" Murder repeated the word and mulled it over, as if hearing it for the first time and trying to memorize it. "That doesn't matter. It's got a ring to it. It flows. Men in Black Lycra? Not bad. That's not bad! Good enough for now. And let's make Jenny a confused bisexual rather than an all out man-hating lezzo, otherwise her sudden love interest with Tommy will seem too forced." Murder stopped for a few moments and considered before continuing.

"I love the Arab bit and the Chinese-Tibetan conflict; bastards won't be able to accuse me of being soft on the Chinks if I make this movie! Tibet's the flavor of the month at the moment, that's good, maybe we can get Richard Gere to do a cameo in the Katmandu scene? How about working the DL into it? That shouldn't cost too much. It'll put extra bums on seats. I'm sure he could use a quid." Murder stopped and reached out to shake Dave's hand. "Congratulations Dave, we're doing it!" He turned and shook hands with Sid. "You too Sid, well done, both of you. This is brilliant. Those bastards at Moonbeam won't know what hit 'em! Let's eat!"

Dave felt like he'd finally got up the off-width that he'd launched out on back at the afternoon meeting. It was hard to believe that it was only a matter of hours since then, it felt more like it had been several days, but then off-widths always did have that effect on him, even imaginary ones. He followed Sid and Rufus to the buffet tables, suddenly aware of his hunger and realizing that he hadn't eaten since breakfast. He dumped his imaginary rack of RURPS onto the starched white tablecloth and loaded up a very real plate with very real Sydney rock oysters and a few wedges of lemon. Dave excused himself from Rufus and Sid, who were excitedly discussing finer points of the plot, and walked across the lawn to where the manicured gardens fell steeply away. He leaned against the trunk of the huge gum tree that grew on the edge of the property and looked down at the lights and the dreams of LA.

He had just been handed an opportunity that would allow him to stay on in comfort in this city for as long as it pleased him to do so. Of course he would still be subject to the same old show biz criteria as any other entertainer: 'You're only as good as your last gig.' But the difference between this 'last gig' and that of, say, a standup comic who's just done a killer set in some dump on Melrose Avenue, would be measured in millions

of dollars, not style or content. The amount he stood to make would also afford him the freedom to leave just as much as the freedom to stay. He started to think about the climbing school idea again, and real love and real romance and real adventure and real life and the possibility of somewhere other than LA...

And so it was that faxes flew, emails went back and forth, phones rang, messages were recorded onto answering machines and everybody did eventually get back to everybody else. There were power lunches and power breakfasts and late night suppers and early morning jogging sessions. There was high speed walking and high speed talking, cappuccinos, frappuccinos, power bars, cliff bars, boulder bars and mars bars. Enough designer label bottled mineral water was consumed to have made the Mojave bloom for ten summers. Business was done in the sauna, at the gym, on the beach, on horseback, on the tennis court, on the golf links, on the beach, in bed and on the web. Every twelve-step meeting from Long Beach to Malibu was buzzing with the latest gossip about the progress of the movie.

Men in Black Lycra walked the walk and talked the talk and drank the drink. It jumped the jump through all the hoops and what was most remarkable was that when it came out the other end of the production tunnel it was still recognizable as the same vehicle that had gone in. The miracle continued across the cutting room floor and into the final edit and then past the preview audiences and the distribution decision-makers. The miracle kept unfolding and the movie was released on time and to budget, in the summer as planned. And just as Dave had so brazenly predicted, the movie was such a mega-hit that by the year's end it was on the way to becoming an industry legend and had smashed every record that had been set by *Titanic*.

When it came time for the Academy to give out its employee of the year awards MIBL had a winner in almost every category. Wil Smith snagged the Oscar for Best Actor for his 'sensitive and yet riveting performance as Garth Hunter' and Drew Barrymore won Best Actress for her 'heartfelt and illuminating portrayal of Veronica Flewinsky'. Tommy Lee Jones won the award for Best Supporting Actor in his role as Stone Anvil, which was hailed as 'macho and yet tender, a mesmerizing tour-de-force by a screen actor who has never shied away from exploring both the darker and lighter sides of the human spirit'. Glenn Close did a brilliant job as Jenny Faxit and won the award as Best Supporting Actress: "Still a force to be reckoned with, Ms. Close has the uncanny ability to invest every gesture with new depths of meaning - depths that serve to not only reinforce and augment the script itself but also illuminate a sub-text that we would not even be aware of were it not for her consummate artistry".

The only major award that the movie did not win was the Oscar for Best Director, which was perhaps just as well. If it had won, the statue would need to have been cut into quarters, one for each of the three directors who had been hired and fired in quick succession and one for Rufus, who had ended up taking over completely and finishing the job himself.

An interesting turn of events that had occurred during production was that both Tommy

Lee and Wil developed a real passion for climbing and insisted on doing some of their own stunts. They eventually went up as far as 25,000 feet on the North side, but all the on-location action shots above that were done using climbing doubles. Finding a high altitude double for Tommy Lee Jones hadn't really been a problem, but finding one for Wil Smith had posed quite a challenge. As the producers found out, the number of black mountaineers who are experienced at high altitude is somewhat limited. In the end they had to settle for the well known and dark skinned French-Algerian, Pierre Mattisse; at least he had the same body size and build. Pierre was in turn assigned his own high altitude climbing valet and makeup artist to keep him looking as much like a dead ringer for Wil as possible. This person in turn needed a high altitude guide and support crew for themselves, thus creating a mini version of the archetypal pyramid problem that traditional siege tactics created. The exponential logistical nightmare of trying to make Pierre look like Wil, at five miles above sea level, threw the entire make-up department into a state of constant uproar, from the moment they arrived at base camp right up until the day they left.

The added financial risks of Wil and Tommy doing any of their own stunts caused the underwriters to double the insurance premium. However it generated so much free word-of-mouth publicity and gave the movie such extra street credibility that the added box office returns more than compensated for the production costs. It had also led to one investment consortium pulling out of the project entirely, a decision that its members were later to find themselves deeply regretting. Thinking about the huge profits they would have made if they had stayed in drove several of them into such desperate states of depression that they had to seek medical help and needed to be put on high dosages of prescription drugs. The chairman of the group (who had also been its biggest investor and whose personal dividend would have yielded over five million dollars tax free), was rumored to have gone into a tailspin of such despair and regret that he was hospitalized and put under a 24-hour-a-day suicide watch.

Murder had started drinking again as the three different directors had come and gone, but he was back on the wagon within one week of the hugely successful opening. Dave's smoking addiction went completely through the roof, from his usual two packs a day to almost five, as he worked around the clock attempting to maintain some tiny measure of artistic control over his script. He finally learnt the true extent of the Faustian pact he had made when, as a salaried staff writer, he'd sold 'all rights'. He discovered that 'all rights' meant exactly that. A simple lesson but a good one. He managed to maintain some sanity by reminding himself that he was only in it for the money and that if the movie was a hit he would be getting so much of it he'd need a wheelbarrow to get it to the bank.

Vangelis won best film score and the MIBL soundtrack became a top selling album all over the world. Couples started using it as wedding music, especially track 12, ('The exchange of the vows') - from the scene where Wil and Tommy stand on the summit at dawn and promise to keep each other alive. In stark contrast to this was Track 4 ('The storm comes in') - which became an instant staple at funerals, and was usually played as the casket was lowered into the ground or rolled into the furnace. Track 16 ('Let's Whoop it Up!'), the up-tempo song that Vangelis had used for the post-expedition party

scene in the Yeti Bar, was so catchy that it became a worldwide hit for virtually every artist who recorded it - from The Spice Girls to Tony Bennett. The song was so naturally catchy that the only interpretation that managed to be financially unsuccessful was the dirgelike twelve-minute duet version that was put out by Leonard Cohen and Jim Screwloose and released on the Oblivion label.

Richard Gere did make a cameo appearance, just as Rufus had proposed he might, playing the role of a Peace Corps Volunteer, and he was in turn able to persuade his friend the Dalai Lama to make a cameo appearance as Himself. This did indeed, as Rufus had predicted, put “a few extra bums on seats”. The popular image of the Himalayas as some sort of pre-industrial paradise became more widespread than ever, as Hollywood idealized every aspect of the local life out of all recognition and cuted it to death. The region was presented as a theme park that was irresistibly attractive to the Western imagination, a sort of Luddite Heaven, complete with a native population who not only smiled beautifully but who were also grateful and friendly to boot. They never said, ‘Bwana’ of course, while the occasional use of the word ‘Sahib’ was considered ‘appropriate’ and ‘ideologically inoffensive.’

The Chinese government and the Arab League of Nations both lodged formal complaints in the General Assembly of the United Nations, demanding a public apology from Feel Rock for the manner in which their countries had been besmirched in the movie. The Arabs had made a similar protest after the release of *True Lies*, starring Arnold Schwarzenegger, claiming that the movie had gone completely over the top in it’s portrayal of Arabs as a nation of idiots, wimps and monsters. Their claims had been dismissed as paranoia, as had their arguments about the effects that such popular entertainment might have on the collective political psyche of a gullible and ignorant American public.

The two countries paid jointly to place full-page notices in every major newspaper across the world, condemning MIBL as ‘simplistic propaganda’ and stating it was time for Hollywood to ‘grow up’. The only effect these notices had was to further increase the public’s interest in *Men in Black Lycra* and generate even greater ticket sales. The publicity department at Feel Rock held a lavish party shortly after the first of these notices appeared - to celebrate the box office receipts of MIBL surpassing those of *Titanic*. The head of Feel Rock’s print advertising campaign got so drunk he even sent the Chinese government a telegram of thanks. The affair dragged on for months as usual and, as usual, every one of the joint Chinese and Arab demands was ultimately either dismissed, trivialized or quite simply totally ignored.

Men in Black Lycra went on to increase the gigantic interest that the public already had in Everest, and in the months following the movie’s release, over ten thousand people applied for climbing permits. Olympus stock went into orbit and the revenue of the outdoor equipment industry went from six to nine-billion dollars per year worldwide. Meanwhile, the chairman of Nookie committed suicide and the company went bankrupt and all its third world factories were shut down. Unfortunately for these kids, the western nations who had been so effective in saving them from gross exploitation then lost

interest and they were left to their own devices, free to choose between prostitution and starvation.

Eight local Nepalese men were killed during the on-location film work. Two were porters who had died in a rockslide and three had been laborers who had been drowned while attempting to repair a washed out footbridge. Three extras had died of hypothermia and exhaustion when they were trapped in a high camp by a sudden storm and a logistical mix-up left them without a radio, sleeping bags or fuel. The families of all these men were generously compensated, above and beyond the amounts prescribed in their contracts. A well-known American stunt man, hired to do climbing sequences, had also died, of a heroin overdose in base camp. The famous European climber who was doubling for Drew Barrymore, fell, unroped, into a crevasse and suffered serious internal injuries and several broken bones. She was very lucky to be pulled out alive and was evacuated by helicopter and then flown home to Germany.

The Nepalese government used most of the revenue that the movie generated in an ill-advised attempt to establish its own film industry. They spent the money on equipment, borrowed more, built a soundstage in Katmandu, and made three movies before the entire venture went kaput. All the villages in the local region enjoyed a tremendous temporary boost in their economies, and some long-term benefits as well.

Feel Rock never did make the sequel to *Men in Black Lycra*. 'Men in Black and Kids in Blue' - as the project had been tentatively titled. It never got beyond the most basic stage of script development. What happened was that after the deaths of the locals was revealed on a 'Sixty Minutes Special' which aired in prime time, Tommy Lee and Wil became convenient scapegoats in all the mud slinging, name calling and blame laying that followed. When the harsh working conditions under which the support crew had labored was then compared with the luxury conveniences that the stars had enjoyed, the situation deteriorated even further. Their reputations and street credibility tainted in the worst possible way, and especially considering the subject matter of the proposed sequel, it had been decided that the MIB needed some real life PR. To help achieve this, Harvey Finklestein had suggested that the two men should climb Everest for real.

Six weeks into their attempt to climb the mountain they were caught in a massive freak avalanche on the Lhotse face section of the South East Ridge route. Tommy Lee and Wil died under a pile of snow and ice that was big enough to have buried the 'Titanic'. The search parties never found their bodies, or those of the two guides and the three Sherpas who were with them when the avalanche hit.

When news of the disaster broke, public opinion swung a full 180 degrees and both men were idolized once again. The moment they were safely dead the icon-making machinery was put into full gear. In the USA especially there was an outpouring of public grief reminiscent of the Dianamania that had swept Great Britain a few years earlier in the wake of the death of the Princess of Wales. Tommy Lee Jones' hometown in Texas was renamed Tommyville.

The worldwide demand for the *Men in Black Lycra* video, which had just been released, exceeded supply to such a degree that it took the distributors almost eight weeks to catch up with the backlog. The video game, the action figures and the board game then came in quick succession, followed by the web site and then several documentaries and biographies.

The number of black baby boys who were christened 'Wil' more than quadrupled, which was a clear indication of the high level of respect in which Mr Smith was held in the Afro-American community and a similar increase was reported for the name 'Tommy' amongst white infants. Several leading sociologists argued that the missing 'Lee' indicated that these new little 'Tommys' were being named in homage to the cartoon character in the popular TV series 'Rugrats.'

Orville Haskett, a previously unknown academic at an obscure Mid Western university, published a thesis with a title that managed to be unwieldy even by the standards of Ph.D. dissertations. Titled "Black parents of America name their boys in honor of a film star, while White parents name their boys in honor of a toddler who crawls about with his nappy full of poop: Christenings, male power and the decline of the patriarchal society in contemporary America." It became the publishing Cinderella story of the year and went on to be a national best seller. By a strange twist of fate, it was this book that pushed "Into Thin Air" out of the #1 spot, which it had again occupied since the Lhotse face tragedy had again gripped the book buying public with Everest Fever.

Another extraordinary side effect of this post-tragedy mania was the manner in which it boosted the record sales of the British singer Tom Jones, who had been such a superstar in the '60s and '70s. Acting with a strategy worthy of PT Barnum, the marketing division at his record label reissued all his recordings on CD - with nothing but his name and a picture of Everest on the cover. A gullible and grief stricken public were so desperate for any souvenir of their idol that it sold briskly, at least for as long as Tommymania had a grip on the nation, and to this day most of them are none the wiser and are happily listening to the wrong man.

The distributor for the movie *Tom Jones* tried a similar ploy but the campaign backfired and they were sued for false and misleading advertising. Likewise the publishing house that attempted the hasty rewrite and reissue of the Fielding novel, with all the action re-located to the Everest region, fell foul of the law and were sued by the executors of the Fielding estate and forced to withdraw the books from sale.

The Queen, citing the evidence of the camera, awarded home-boy Mallory with a posthumous knighthood and regretfully announced that, in light of his having reached the summit 29 years too late, she had no choice but to de-knight the colonial Ed Hillary and ask him to send his medal back. Her ministers and advisers tried to explain to her that it was only a movie but she insisted that Hillary step down. Hillary refused, and then - displaying a spirit similar to that which had gotten him to the top of Everest - he finally shot a telegram off to Buckingham Palace suggesting that the Queen should 'dip her left eye in hot cocky poop and shove her head up a dead bears bum'. Somehow the telegram

was leaked to the press and the British public was outraged. The government responded to public pressure by placing a ban on the import of all New Zealand sheep products. The New Zealand government in turn erased the union jack from their flag and minted an entirely new currency with the Queen's likeness replaced by that of a Maori war canoe. Both countries ordered their consuls closed and suspended all communication.

Dave Wallace cashed in his chips and got out of the screenplay business and left LA. He opened his climbing school on the western edge of the Sierra, twenty miles north of Mt. Whitney. He ended up buying nearly 200 acres and built from scratch. He still smokes like a chimney. Shangri La Climbing Ranch can be reached for bookings at (toll free)1 800 991 4813.

The latest gossip from Hollywood is that Moonbeam has a new venture in the works. Everything about the project is cloaked in secrecy, except for one prediction: it will be so huge it will make *Men in Black Lycra* look like *Titanic* and blow Feel Rock out of the water.