

THE WALK UP

NAME LESS RIDGE

A Kindle Single by

HUGH HOWEY

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*the walk up nameless
ridge*

hugh howey
(2012)

Rating: ★★☆☆☆

Tags: sci-fi

On planet Eno, there stands a mountain that has never been summited. Many have tried. All have failed.

This climbing season finds three teams making their bid up this murderous peak. And one man among them will discover

these ugly truths: There are fates worse than death. There are fates worse than obscurity. To be remembered forever can be its own curse.

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The Walk Up Nameless Ridge

by Hugh Howey

1

It was difficult to sleep at night, wishing good men dead. This was but one of the hurtful things I felt in my bones and wished I could ignore. It was an ugly truth waving its arms that I turned my gaze from, that I didn't like to admit even to myself. But while my bag warmed me with the last of its power and my breath spilled out in white plumes toward the roof of our tent, while the flicker of a whisperstove melted snow for midnight tea, I lay in that dead zone above sixty thousand feet and hoped not just for the failure of those

above me, but that no man summit and live to tell the tale. Not before I had my chance.

It was a shameful admission, one I nearly raised with Hanson, my tentmate, to see in the wrinkles of his snow-beat face whether this was a guilt shared. I suspected it was. In the mess tents and around the yellow craters we dubbed latrines, the look among us was that only one would be remembered. The rest would die alone in the snow or live a long life forgotten—and not one of us would've been able to explain to a child the difference. Frozen to death by altitude or by time was all the same. The truth was this: History remembers the first, and only the first. These are the

creeping and eternal glaciers, the names etched across all time like scars in granite cliffs. Those who came after were the inch or two of snowdrift that would melt in due time. They would trickle, forgotten, into the pores of the earth, be swallowed and melt snow at the feet of other forgotten men.

It was a quarter past Eno's midnight and time to get up. If Shubert and Humphries were to make it to the top, they likely would've by now. If any of their gear still worked, they would be radioing in their victory, taking the first pictures of starlit peaks wrinkling far past the limits of sight. By now, they would know how many fingers and toes it cost them, how much oxygen left in

their tanks, whether or not they would live to speak of the mountain's conquest.

The faint odor of tea penetrated my dark thoughts. It must've been a potent brew to smell it at all. We had already scaled beyond the heights where taste and scent fade to oblivion. One had to remind himself to eat and drink, for the stomach is one of those organs that knows when to quit. It is the first, in fact, to go. The mind of the climber is the last.

Hanson brought me tea. I wormed a single arm out into the cold, though my heating bag had become a feeble thing. I did not want to lose what little it held. I coughed into my fist, that persistent cough of the dead zone, and accepted the steaming mug.

There were no words spoken as we forced ourselves to drink. Every twitch was an effort at those altitudes. We were sleeping higher than all the fabled peaks of Cirrus VII. Our fourth camp along the Slopeson Ridge, at 42,880 feet, was higher than any speck of dirt on Hanson's home planet. And when we arrived on this wasteland of a frozen ball, out here in a corner of the galaxy where men go either to not be found or to be remembered for all times, we set up a basecamp very near to the highest peak of the place I grew up: Earth. Where men were first born and first began to scale to deadly heights.

I sipped my tea, burning my numb lips, and told myself it would be an

Earth-born who scaled Mt. Mallory first. This was a distasteful idea that I and many others were willing to share. The secret I kept to myself was that others could die if they dared climb her before me.

2

Two other private teams were making a go of it that season. Government expeditions and collectives of alpine clubs had given up decades ago. They now watched as men such as I took leave of our day jobs and with borrowed funds and the best of gear and medicine at hand, set out to prove what was possible.

The window of opportunity for a summit was but a bare sliver of a crack. Half a day at most when the fearful winds of that dizzy world slowed to a manageable gale and before the

monsoons buried the rock under drifts a hundred meters deep. The problem, of course, was in not knowing when that half day would fall. Every climber across thirteen worlds studied the weather charts like daytraders. As the season neared, predictions were logged on the net, men in their warm homes with their appetites intact and the feeling still in their fingers and toes would make guesses, watch reports from the satellites left behind by those government expeditions, and make bold claims.

I had been one of those prognosticators until recently. But now, after spending a night at camp 7 beneath the Khimer Ridge, I felt as though I had

graduated to one who could sneer at the antics of those at lesser heights. By dint of my travel between the stars and my arduous climb thus far, I was now an expert. It lent Hanson and I the illusion that our guess was far more refined than the others.

Or perhaps it was the lack of oxygen that made us crazy this way. In the middle of that terrible night, rather than spend my last morning thinking of my wife and kids or dwell further on the debts incurred to travel to frontier stars and hike up a murderous peak, I thought of all my fellow climbers who were safely ensconced in their homes as they followed our every move.

Right now, they likely followed

Shubert and Humphries, two strong climbers who had knocked out all else the galaxy had to offer. They would also be keeping an eye on Hanson and I. And then there was the pairing of Ziba and Cardhil, who were also making a bid that year.

Ziba was an enigma of a climber, a small woman who looked far too frail in her heatsuit and mask. When first I saw her navigating the Lower Collum Ice Falls above basecamp, I mistook her oxygen tanks for double-oughts in size, such as they dwarfed her frame. The consensus was that there was little to fear in her attempt that year. I had done some digging before my uplink succumbed to the cold, and read that

Ziba had knocked out the peaks of her home planet, none of which top thirty thousand feet, but she had at least done them in style. No oxygen and swiftly, one of those modern climbers. It had been a private joy to watch her give in to the true mountaineering methods necessary on Mallory's great face. The methodical lift of crampons, the bulging tanks of air, the fogging and frosted masks. These were the ways of the true climber. Mallory is an instructor to all, and Ziba did not seem too full of herself to submit, learn, and adapt.

Cardhil, I figured, was the great unknown. Ziba had chosen an odd tentmate in the android. And if it were a manchine that was the first to summit

great Mallory, the consensus across the alpine forums was that nothing would have occurred at all. There would not even be an accomplishment to asterix. And anyway, I had sent notes a week ago to an old climbing buddy, telling him not to worry. The cold was worse on the manchine's joints than our own. Hanson and I had left camp 6 while Ziba was chipping away at Cardhil's frozen ankles. And please don't tell me that a man's memories counted for the man himself, that the android lived because he remembered living. I have had many a conversation with Cardhil around basecamp and watched him with the Sherpas. He is no different than the droid who cleans my pool or walks my

dog. A clever approximation, but with movements too precise, too clean, to pass for human. The other day, Hanson nudged me in time to turn and catch Cardhil taking a great spill on the East Face. The way he did even this was unnatural. Supremely calm and without a whimper, the manchine had slid several hundred feet on his ass, working his climbing axe into the deep snow, with all the false grace of an automaton.

Nobody feared this duo as long as they were behind and below us. There, off our ropes and out of our way, they had only themselves to kill.

3

Hanson and I left our flapping tent in utter darkness. The driven snow blocked out all but a few of the twinkling stars. Near the tent, a pile of spent oxygen bottles gathered a drift. They glowed bright in Hanson's headlamp. Debris such as this would be left for all time. They were an addition to the landscape. The local Ha-Jing, whose lands included half of great Mallory, made good money selling permits to aspiring climbers, and this litter came with the riches. The south face of Mallory, which some climbers

posited would make for an easier ascent, was governed by the irascible Hiti. Great climbers by all accounts, but miserable at governing. The only assaults on that face have been clandestine affairs. There had been some arrests over the years, but like many who come to Eno hoping to etch their name in the history books, most simply disappeared.

Hanson broke snow for the first hour, his head down in a stiff breeze. We had radios in our parkas but rarely used them. Good tentmates had little need for words. Roped in to one another, the union becomes symbiotic. You match paces, one staring at a flash-lit patch of bright snow, the other staring at a man's

back, illuminating a spot in a sea of darkness. Boots fell into the rapidly filling holes of the climber ahead, each lifting of a crampon some new torture, even with the springs of the powered climbing pants taking most of the strain.

I'd lost count of the number of peaks we'd climbed together. It was in the dozens across a handful of planets, most of those climbs coming over the past five years. Climbers tend to orbit one another long before they share tents. The first time I met Hanson was back on Earth on a new route of Nanga Parbat, a small mountain, but notorious for gobbling souls. Climbers called her "Man Eater," usually with knowing and nervous smiles. Tourists from other

planets came to exercise on its west slope or to make an attempt on its south face while preparing for harsher climbs. Some took the tram to Everest to hike up to the top and join the legions who made that yearly pilgrimage only to walk away wondering what the fuss was about.

I tended to bite my tongue during such diminishing talks of my planet's highest peak. My twenty-year partnership with Saul, my previous tentmate, had ended on a harmless run up Everest. There was a saying among the Hiti sherpas: Ropes slip through relaxed grips. The nearest I ever came to death was while climbing indoors, of all things. It wasn't something I told anyone. Those few who had been there and the

doctors who tended to me knew. When anyone noticed my limp, I told them it happened during my spill on Kurshunga. I couldn't say that I'd failed to double back my harness and took a forty foot spill on a climb whose holds had been color-coded for kids.

Saul had also fallen prey to a relaxed grip. He had died while taking a leak on Everest's South Col. It was hard to stomach, losing a good man and great friend like that. Hanson, who trudged ahead of me, had lost his former tentmate in more glorious fashion the same year Saul died. And so mountains brought couples together like retirement homes. You look around, and what you have left is what you bed down with. Ours, then,

was a marriage of attrition, but it worked. Our bond was our individual losses and our mutual anger at the peaks that had taken so much from us.

As Hanson paused, exhausted, and I rounded him to break snow, I patted the old man on the back, the gesture silent with thick gloves and howling wind, but he bobbed his head in acknowledgement to let me know he was okay. I coughed a raspy rattle into my mask. We were all okay. And above us, the white plumes and airborne glitter of driven ice and snow hid the way to glory. But it was easy to find. Up. Always up. One more foot toward land that no man had ever seen and lived to tell about.

At sixty thousand feet—the height of two Everests stacked one on top of the other—man and machine alike tended to break down. We were at the limit of my regimen of steroids. The gears in my hiking pants could be heard grinding against one another, even over all that wind. And the grease smeared over the parts of my face not sheltered by the oxygen mask had hardened until it felt like plaster, like blistered and unfeeling skin, but to touch it and investigate it was to invite exposure and far worse.

Batteries meant to last days would perish in hours up there. The cold was death for them. And so our suits gave up as we moved from the death zone to a land that begged for a name far more sinister. The power left in struggling batteries went to the pistons and gears, routed away from the heaters. Fingers and toes went first. They would grow numb; the blood would stop flowing through them; the flesh would necropsy and die right there on the bone.

The Sherpa of Changli had a saying: A man can count on two hands all the climbs he conquers, and that man conquers nothing. I always took this to mean the more we summit the more we lose. Climbers were notorious for

staring down bars in basecamp at lifted mugs, silently counting digits gone missing, making a measure of a man's worth by how far they'd pushed themselves. Saul had a different take on the Changli saying. To the people who lived in the shadows of mountains, these were not things to conquer. To climb them was foolish, and who would think to do so? As much as I had loved Saul, he was always too politically correct for my tastes.

Breaking snow up that unnamed ridge, my mind turning to mush as supplemental oxygen and doped blood could only do so much, I felt the first pangs of doubt. My cough rattled inside my mask; my limbs felt like solid lead.

Two days prior, at camp 5, I had pushed myself beyond my abilities. Eating and drinking moved from inconvenient chores to something I dreaded. My weight was down. I hadn't been out of my clothes to see what I'd wasted away, just comforted myself instead on how much less I now had to lug to the top.

The radio in my parka clicked on with the sound of Hanson breathing. I waited a moment between arduous steps and listened for what he had to say. When the radio clicked off, I turned to check on him, my headlamp pointed at his chest so as not to blind him. Hanson was a strong climber, one of the strongest I'd ever seen. He had fallen back to the end of the rope that joined us,

his breath clouding his mask. Lifting a hand a few inches from his thigh was all the wave he could muster.

“Take your time,” I told him, clicking the large switch on my belt. What I wanted to say was what the hell we thought we were doing. There, five thousand feet below us and eight light years away, was the tallest peak ever climbed. We were moving into the thin air above the highest of heads. We would have been in outer space on some small planets, in orbit around others. And still, we wanted to conquer more.

The rope between us drooped as Hanson took a few laborious steps. I turned and broke snow, resigning myself to an extra hour at the head, an extra shift

to give him more rest. It was hard to know what drove you once you passed the thresholds of all pain. Maybe it was the thought of Shubert and Humphries somewhere above us, either in glory or buried in snow. Maybe it was the fear that Ziba had gotten Cardhil's ankle sorted and that they would begin their push later that morning. Or maybe it was the promise I'd made to myself after telling my wife and kids that I would be safe. I had told them that I wouldn't take chances. But I had already promised myself something different: I would come home with that final ridge named after me, or I wouldn't come home at all.

5

My altimeter died at 62,000 feet, even though the manufacturer sold these with a guarantee of 100,000. Such guarantees were bullshit gestures with no real-world testing. As I climbed, I composed the post I would make on the forums complaining of its failure. And had my remaining fingers been any kind of functional, I would've removed the strap from my arm to save the weight. Instead, I carried one more dead thing up with me. From then on, I had to guess how high I was by the hour. It was still dark and we were probably at 63,100

feet when I stumbled across Humphries.

He wore an orange suit, the kind men with low confidence and a care for their mortal coil wore. It made them more easily found and more *likely* to be found, two very different things. I pointed out the snow-dusted form so Hanson wouldn't trip on him, but I didn't slow. Humphries had died facing the summit, which meant he hadn't made it. I felt a mix of relief and guilt for the awful thoughts I'd held in my sleeping bag all night. Shubert, of course, was still out there. We could meet him stomping down in the dark, his eyes as bright as the handful of twinkling stars above, and whatever was driving Hanson and I upward would likely leak out our pores.

Whatever glory I had hoped to win would be spent in future days recounting my time on the same slopes as this other man. I would detail my ordeal up Shubert Ridge, a horrible name if ever there was one. I would write of his glory and bask in whatever shadows fell my way. These were my mad ruminations as I left his dead tentmate behind and crunched through that terrible snow a thousand feet beneath the peak.

A tug at my harness gave me pause. Hanson was flagging again, at the end of his rope and ours. I questioned what I was running on for Hanson to give out before me. I wondered if the doctors hadn't worked some kind of special magic between the doping and the

careful regimen of drugs. Perhaps the coils in my pants were holding up better than his. Hanson had skimped on his gears and had invested in more heat. I may be freezing to death, but I was still climbing. I saw the look on his face, beyond the glare of my flashlight and the frost of his desperate breathing, and that look told me that this was as high as he would go. It was a look I'd only seen from him once before, but enough times from others to not need the radio.

After a coughing fit, I jerked my thumb toward the summit. Hanson lifted his hand from his thigh and waved. As I pulled the quick release that held our rope to my harness, I wondered if I would be stepping over both him and

Humphries on my way back down. God, I hoped not. I watched him turn and trudge into the dark maw of night and white fang of snow before looking again to my goal. The summit was several more hours away. I would be the first or the second to stand there. Those were adjacent numbers and yet light years apart in my esteem. They were neighboring peaks with a precipitous valley between. Being second was death to me, so I lifted a boot, gears squealing, toes numb, and remembered with sadness the lies I had spoken to my family. There was nothing about this safe. If I loved them as much as I loved myself, I would've turned around long before Hanson had.

The highlanders of Eno have a saying about climbing alone: The winds seek out the solitary. And sure enough, with Hanson dropping back to camp—*hopefully* dropping back to camp—the winds came for me and shoved my chest for being so bold. With my oxygen running low, the mask became an impediment to breathing, something to catch my coughs. Adjusting the top of the mask against my goggles, fingers frozen stiff, I let the wind howl through a crack, invigorating me with the cold. The gap sang like the sound a puff makes across

the mouth of a bottle. This whirring howl was a sort of musical accompaniment. It made me feel less alone. The dwindling oxygen made me feel crazy.

When I came across Shubert, I thought he was already dead. The snow was covering him, and the ridge here was perilously narrow. Solid rock stayed dusted with snow and ice, otherwise it felt the ridge itself should be blowing away.

Shubert stirred as I made my slow and agonizing way around him. He was faintly swimming toward the summit, clawing through the ice, throwing his axe forward. I stopped and knelt by the young and powerful climber. His suit made no noise. It must've given out on

him, leaving him alone and under his own power. My thoughts were as wild as the wind, disturbed by my air-starved mind. I thought of Cardhil, and how something so reliant on its mechanical bits held any hope for rising above camp 7. I rested a hand on Shubert's back to let him know he wasn't alone. I don't know that he ever knew I was there. He was still crawling, inch by inch toward the summit, as I trudged along, head down, mask singing a sad lament. If I made the top and got home, I decided I would name that ridge after him. I was already dreaming not just of being a legend, but the awesome humility I would display even so. It was delusion beyond delusion. I was dying, but like

Shubert, I cared only about the next inch.

The oxygen ran dry as the sun broke. My headlamp had grown feeble anyway, frosted with ice and with its battery crippled by the freezing temperatures. This was my last sunrise, I was fairly sure. Cutting through the shark's teeth of peaks that ran the breadth of this alien continent, the dull red glow was empowering with its illusion of warmth. Once that large foreign star lifted its chin above the most distant of snow-capped crowns, it seemed to rise with a vengeance. It made a mockery of my own agonizing ascent.

It occurred to me in the wan light of dawn that I was the highest man in the universe. Coughing into my mask, I

couldn't feel my legs, but I could at least balance on them. The handful—not quite—of fingers and toes I had left would be gone. But that was optimistic. I could see the summit up the ridgeline. There was no more technical climbing, no ice to work up, no faces or craggy steps, just a long walk on unfeeling stumps. A walk to a grave that stood far over all mortal heads.

I found myself on my knees without remembering falling. The snow was thin here. It blew off sideways and was just as soon replaced. There would be no flags ahead, no weather stations, no books to scribble in, no webcams showing a high sunrise to millions of net surfers. It was just a lonely and quiet

peak. Not a footstep. Not ever. Untrammeled earth, a thing that had grown exceedingly rare.

The people of Eno had their own name for Mallory. Locals always did. It translated to Unconquerable, but of course nothing was. It was always a matter of time, of the right gear, the right support teams, all the ladders and lines and camps and bottles put in by hardworking sherpas.

I was on my hands and knees, mask howling, lightheaded and half-sane, crawling toward my destiny. And I missed Hanson. I wanted him there. I missed him more than my wife and kids, who I would never see again. There was my grave up ahead, a bare patch of rock

where snow danced across like smoke, like running water, like angels in lace dresses.

I wondered if my body would lie there forever or if the wind would eventually shove me off. I wondered this as I reached the summit, dragging myself along, my suit giving up the last of its juice. Collapsing there, lying on my belly, I watched the sun rise through my mask. And when it frosted over, and my coughing grew so severe I worried those were flecks of purple lung spotting my vision, I accepted my death by pulling the mask free to watch this last sunrise, this highest and most magnificent sunrise, with my very own eyes.

The tallest climbs, often, are the easiest. All the great alpinists know this. Tell someone you've summited Mokush on Delphi, and the mountaineer will widen his eyes in appreciation while the layman squints in geographical confusion. The steep rock approaches of Mokush more than make up for the lack of elevation. And of the several hundred who have reached the top—Hanson and I among them—thousands have perished. Few peaks have so bold a body count and so brief a list of conquerors.

On the other hand, list the highest

peaks of the eight old worlds, and most will whistle in appreciation. Everyone knows the great climber Darjel Burq, the first to top the tallest mountain on each of the civilized worlds. But other climbers know that Darjel was hoisted up many of those by sherpas, and that he never once assaulted the great Man Killers who stand along the shoulder of those more famous giants and claim the more daring of men.

This was a peak for climbers like Darjel, I thought, lying on the top of the universe and dying. Here was a peak for the tourists. One day—as I coughed up more of my lung, pink spittle melting the frosting of snow on my mitts—the wealthy would pay for a jaunt to the top

of Mallory. The drugs and heatsuits and blood doping would improve. In another five years, I would have made this climb and lived to tell the tale. But not today. And anyway: in five years, it would not have mattered. I wouldn't have been the first.

The sun traveled through its reds and pinks until the frozen skin of Eno was everywhere golden. It was a good place to die. And when my body was found, they would know I'd made it. Unless it was many years hence and the wind and blizzards had carried me off to a secret grave, they would know. Such had been Mallory's fate, the great and ancient climber whose name graced this peak. I was of those who never believed

Mallory had made it to the top of Earth's highest summit. But no longer. The madness of my oxygen-deprived brain, the sad glory of my one-way victory, and suddenly I knew in that very moment that Mallory had climbed to the top of my homeworld. He had simply never planned for the climb back down.

Sleep came amid the noisy and blustery cold. It was a peaceful sleep. My breathing was shallow and raspy, but at least the cough had gone away. I woke occasionally and looked an alien sun in the face, whispered a few words to that orange ball of fire, and allowed the ice to hold fast my lids once more.

I dreamed of my wife. My kids. I went back to the party my office had

thrown, all the confetti and balloons, the little gifts that were well-meant but that I would leave behind as useless. Coffee and dried meals, boot warmers that were suited for lesser hikes, the kind of gifts that show how little these revelers and kin know of where they are wishing me off to with their gay ribbons and joyous cards.

The mementos, likewise, had been left behind. The picture of my nephew that my sister dearly wanted me to carry to the roof of all the worlds. A dozen of these that seemed so small and light to each giver but added up to difficult choices and considerable weight, and so none of them even made it to basecamp.

I longed for all of them in that

moment. Not that I could have dug them out with my dead fingers, but just to have them on my body. In case my preserved form was ever discovered and picked through by future explorers. Just so they would see that these things were there. That I wasn't so alone.

I woke once more and spoke to the sun, and he called me a fool. His climb was rapid and impressive. And who was I? I was a mortal pretending to do godly things. I had wax for wings. I was already dead, my body frozen, but all the effort of my being, my slowing and cooling blood, the best drugs doctors could pump into me, kept my thoughts whirring. Slowly whirring like gears with their dying batteries. Just one more

turn. Another thought.

I woke and spoke to an angel. So small. The world was outsized for her. An angel in a mask, breath fogging it with ice, no tanks on for that final and swift climb of hers.

I passed out again, but I felt the world shudder beneath me. The mountain was rising. They did this, you know. Confounding last year's climbers by lifting up a fraction more for the next season. Always this: our accomplishments subsiding to time and acclimation. That fear that our former feats were yesterday's glory. Every year, the mountains moved just a hair higher. And I was likewise now rising and falling, numb everywhere except in

my mind. Only in my head, by the jounce of my neck, could I feel the world move.

Ziba was there, a face behind a mask, an angel with no oxygen, laboring down that nameless ridge having summited after me.

And Cardhill, whose ankle had seized, whose gears whirred, whose mind was said to be that of the great climber of the same name, but it was not something I ever believed. Until that moment. And I would never doubt again. It was Cardhill who carried me. And the perfect grace that had seemed inhuman at basecamp felt like a real man to me on that summit. Cardhill staggered and limped along. He cradled me in his mighty and trembling arms.

At camp 7, Hanson tended to me, though he was in no shape to do so. He said my hands were gone. My feet as well. I believed him.

At 6, we notified basecamp. We informed Humphries' and Shubert's team that they had perished nobly. The controversy was not in my mind at camp 6. I was weeping frozen tears. I was still dead on that peak, blabbering to alien stars. I had not yet been carried anywhere.

There was no memory of camp 5. I'm not even certain we stopped there. At camp 4, a doctor removed my lips and my nose. It required no instruments. My sherpas were there to congratulate me. The horror of what I'd done was far

worse than the horror of what I'd become. I could look at myself in the mirror with no revulsion. To think on myself, though, was to invite black thoughts.

Ziba and Cardhill made it down the mountain ahead of me. I asked Hanson to work the radio, and I tried to form the words with my new face. But it wasn't my lips that caused problems. It wasn't my tongue.

At basecamp, at this approximation of civilization, I was provided a glimpse of what awaited me across the worlds. And it did not matter who I told or how often. I wrote in every forum, had letters crafted by those who could form them, who could understand my muted, lipless

words, but Ziba, I was told, was already off to explore new worlds. And my exhortations that she be remembered fell on deaf ears. Ridgelines had already been named. And when my wife kissed my new face weeks later, the tears I wept were not for seeing her again but for the misery, the pain, of not having been left there where I deserved to lay, where I could be forgotten, frozen in the vastness of time, spinning lazily with broken wings beneath that great orange and alien star. Beneath that star who alone would ever know the awful truth of my most hollow glory.