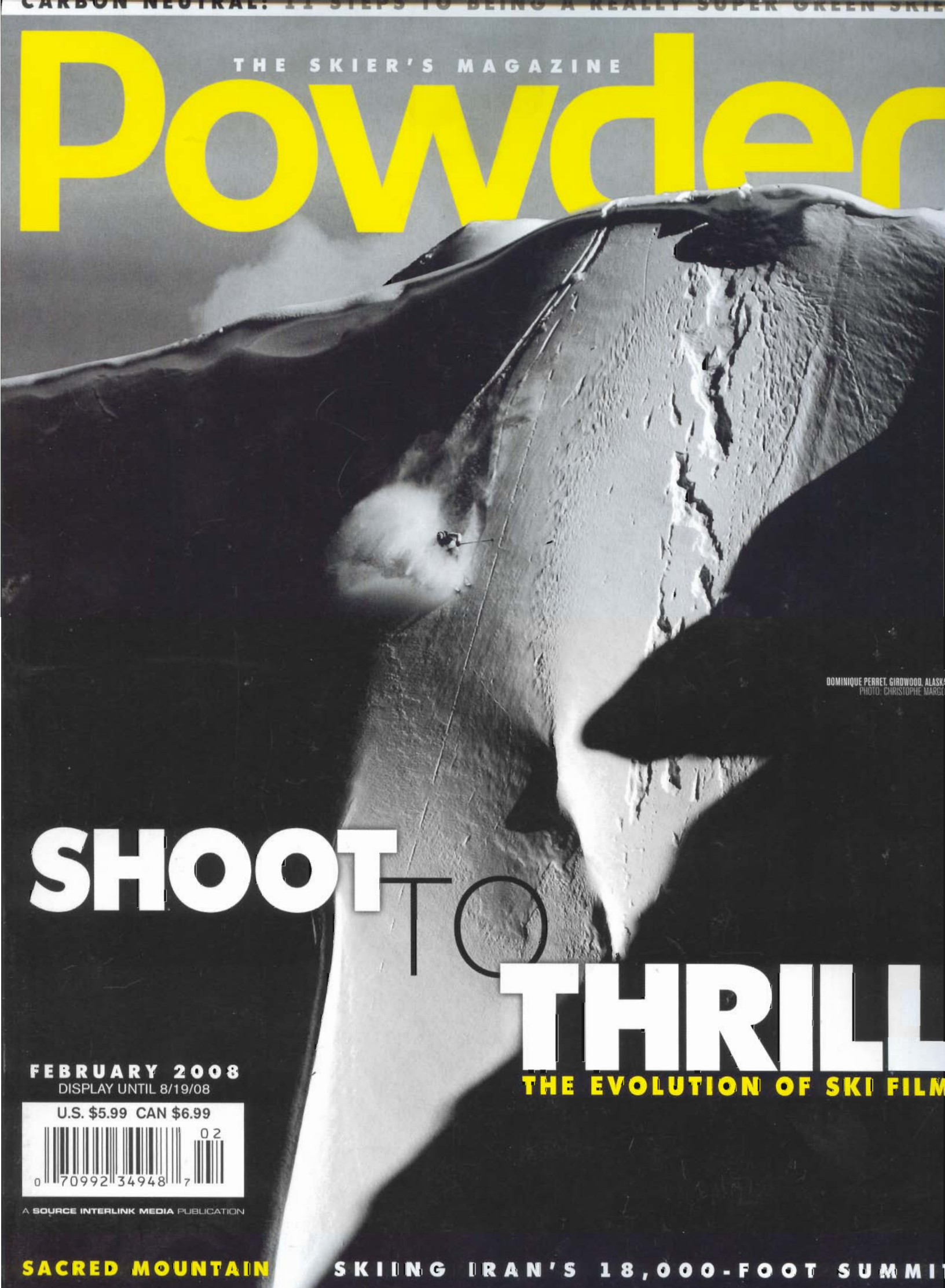
CARBON NEUTRAL: 11 STEPS TO BEING A REALLY SUPER GREEN SKI

THE SKIER'S MAGAZINE

Powder



DOMINIQUE PERRET, GIROWOOD, ALASKA
PHOTO: CHRISTOPHE MARGO

SHOOT TO THRILL

THE EVOLUTION OF SKI FILM

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SACRED MOUNTAIN

SKIING IRAN'S 18,000-FOOT SUMMIT

McLEAN, MAJID AND FREED EYE THE MAP TO FREEDOM.

MEDIA

SKIING IRAN'S 18,605-FOOT MOUNT DAMAVAND

The Ayatollah is watching. Long white beard and black turban, eyes sidelong, lips parted. Grand Ayatollah Seyyed Ruhollah Khomeini is everywhere, glaring from billboards, covering sides of buildings, gazing from picture frames above cash registers. Powerful in life when he led the Iranian Revolution in 1979; undiminished by death almost two decades later. The Ayatollah presides in quiet omnipotence, while Tehran, on a muggy afternoon in mid-spring, explodes.

Fourteen million people and seemingly as many cars and motorcycles fill the city. The streets are clogged and exhaust-choked, the air reverberating with horns and two-stroke engines. A city bus creeps along Taleqani Avenue past the former U.S. Embassy—site of the hostage crisis in 1979, now known as the "U.S. Den of Espionage." A slogan on a long brick wall flanking the sidewalk is painted in curling Farsi script and translated into English:

WE WILL MAKE AMERICA FACE A SEVERE DEFEAT.

Passing before the compound in the bus, a young Iranian man poses an ill-timed question. "Where are you from?" he asks me loudly. "Uh, the United States," I mumble. He looks confused, then brightens. "Ah," he says. "AMERICA!" Ehsan, 23, has never met an American in Iran. "I love America," he gushes. "I want you to find me an American wife. Can you do this for me, James? Do not kid me. This will be a most valuable favor. It will be easy as a cake for you." I'm unsure how to respond. "Why do you want an American wife?" I manage. Ehsan is incredulous. "So that I can have an American baby!" he says. I scribble his e-mail address in my notebook and mumble something encouraging about Match.com. *Khodah hafez*, Ehsan. Goodbye.

I'm an American in Iran. I'm the Great Satan in the Islamic Republic. Heads swivel when I pass, people whisper and point, strangers ask for an e-mail address. Iranians may hate our government but that doesn't mean they can't love you.

A few hours after meeting Ehsan, I squeeze into a rusty Jeep Wagoneer. Sitting shotgun is Greg Von Doersten, a photographer from Jackson Hole who hatched the idea to not just visit Iran last spring but to ski there. On my left is Andrew McLean, the renowned ski mountaineer from Park City. On the right is Dylan Freed, McLean's martial arts-fighting, Tool-listening, 21-year-old understudy. Each are survivors of serious hairball shit, lethal avalanches in the Rockies, Alaska, and the Himalaya; each is concerned right now not with the hazards of the mountains but those of the city, where a nasty wreck seems not only possible, but inevitable. At the wheel is a trim Iranian man with a stained blue polo shirt, dark mustache, and crazy Borat grin; this is Majid Dorodgar, 39, one of three employees of Iranian Mountain Guides and one of no more than a dozen serious ski mountaineers in Iran. He whips us through traffic, no respect for lanes, no respect for pedestrians, totally normal for Tehran. A motorcycle cruises the wrong way down the street; a white taxi, the driver on his cell, veers out of his way and straight toward the Jeep. The Wagoneer swerves and an old lady dives for the curb. "Yo, shit!" Majid yells.

BY JAMES VLAHOS • PHOTOS BY GREG VON DOERSTEN

LION'S DEN...

...LION'S PLAY.

Spring slush, spring sun, blue sky, my face frying, body sweating, a long valley, steep sides, snowy chutes squeezed between black spines of rock. No trees. A line of skiers extends from a lonely huddle of tents on the valley floor, Andrew and Dylan in the lead, Greg, Majid, and I following. Iran has big mountains, and we're in the Alborz, a northerly range stretching from Armenia in the west to Turkmenistan and Afghanistan in the east. The range holds dozens of peaks above 12,000 feet; the highest and most famous summit in Iran, Mount Damavand, reaches 18,605 feet. Last night as Greg studied the map of the Alam Kooh region, where we're spending the first five days of our tour, Majid became increasingly uneasy. "Too dangerous," he kept saying. Greg gestured at the map. "Well, I'll tell you right now, Majid, you may think this is impossible, but all of these couloirs right here, Andrew and Dylan have skied steeper, much steeper. This is what they like to do, 55-, 60-degree terrain."

"Everything you like, I can show to you," Majid finally said. "If I think is dangerous for me, I don't go." And that's exactly what happens. We climb into the early afternoon and reach a cirque, the peaks rising like the fingers of a giant white baseball mitt. Andrew, Dylan, and Greg head for a sheer snowy ramp, later dubbed *Couloir az Daard*, the Couloir of Pain, while Majid and I aim for a more sane face. Two hours of switchback skinning brings us to the top of a pass called *Siah Sang*, Black Rock.

Majid looks relaxed. In the U.S., people wax abstractly about the mountains as places of freedom; in Iran, that freedom is literal. After I talked to Ehsan in Tehran, Majid approached. "You don't know who anyone is," he said tensely. "That man may be secret police." Undercover agents circulate in the population and pose as normal citizens, Majid explained; they lure you into saying negative things about the government and then arrest you. This happened to a client of his, a Russian skier. He was nabbed at the airport and detained for a week.

Majid's own liberty is limited not just by government rules but also social ones. Five years ago his wife was killed when leaking gas from their kitchen stove exploded. Majid has since met another woman, and they want to get married and provide a traditional home for his 10-year-old son. But his late wife's parents won't consent. "I don't like it in the city," he says. "In the mountains all is clean and free and nice."

Across the valley the trio nears the summit of a never-before-skied peak called Chaloon. Nobody is acclimatized. Andrew has a horrendous lung infection that he picked up either on the plane or in polluted Tehran. They hunch over ice ax ski poles, posthole to their knees, move 30 steps at a time and stop, gasping. The effort will be worth it. Seeing them begin their descent, I take off, too, a few crust turns at the top, then fat reckless arcs through corn. Greg goes non-stop from 15,000 feet to camp at 9,000, no problem.

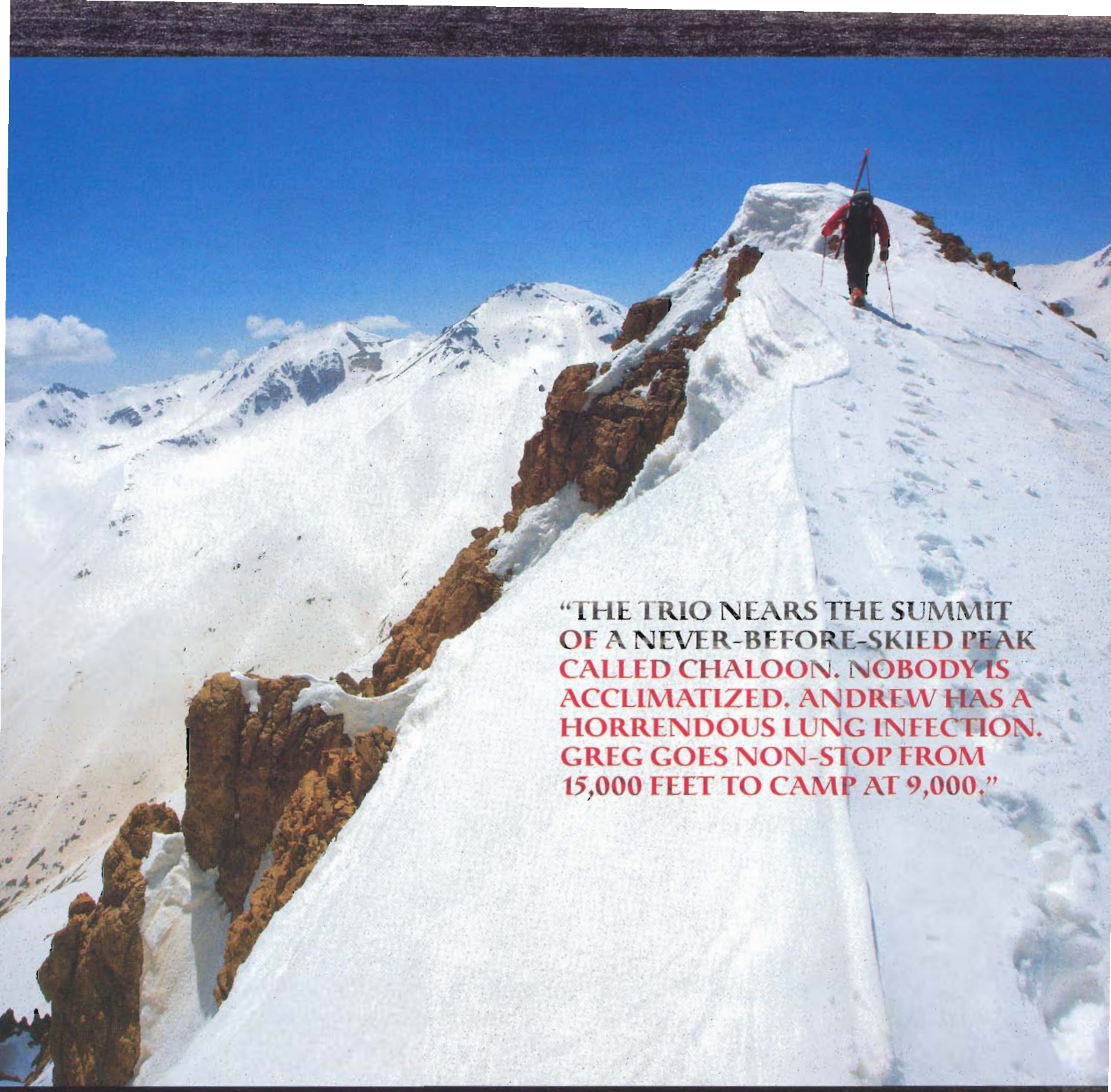
In camp, Majid, a devout Shiite, faces Mecca and kneels to pray. I scramble to move my damp boot-liners out of his way. The backcountry Cultural Awareness lessons go both ways. We have our own religion, that of fast and light ski mountaineering, a cult over which McLean rules as Supreme Leader. After dinner he prepares pudding in a Nalgene bottle, tasty stuff, until he lets on that pudding bottle and nighttime pee bottle are the same. "Bringing a bottle just to pee in would be extra weight," he says. "Don't worry, man. Urine is sterile."

People back home said Iran would be scary. They didn't know what they were talking about. Or so it seems up here. Down in the cities a crackdown on civil liberties, the most severe in years, is underway. Police detain 150,000 people for wearing "un-Islamic" clothing. Eight university students are jailed for the seemingly reasonable statement that no human–supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei included–is infallible. Newspapers are heavily censored. And while we ski, three visiting Iranian-Americans–a scholar, a scientist, and a businessman–are imprisoned on what appear to be trumped-up charges of espionage.

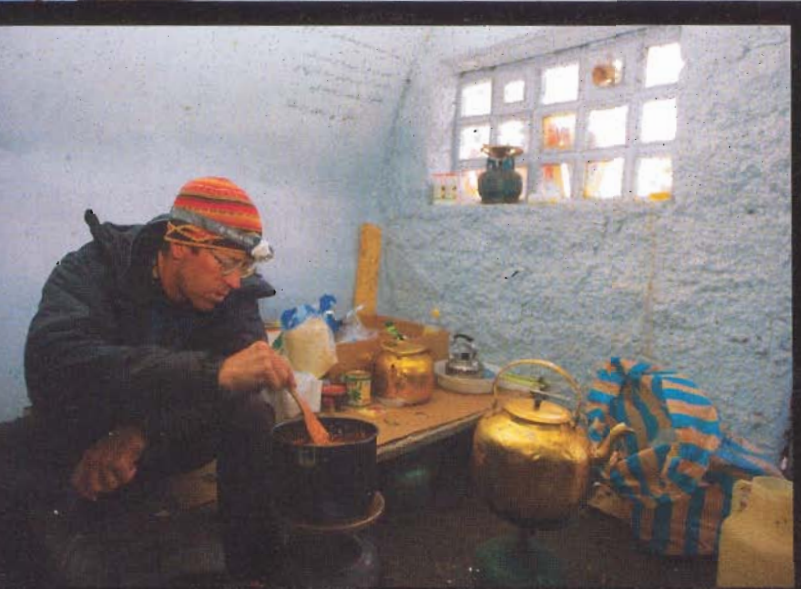
Iran is disorienting for a newcomer because it's not one society, but two: repressive, conservative, and religiously controlled; hospitable, gregarious, and pop-culture aware. Back in Tehran, I had to report to a government office. On the way in, as a soldier searched my backpack, his cell phone rang to Usher's "Yeah." After I filled out a ream of forms, government clerks mobbed me. "Hello! Welcome! What do you think of our country?"

Leaving the city I spotted three cylindrical white towers on the horizon, the unmistakable silhouette of a nuclear power plant. Stupidly, I leaned out of the Wagoneer and snapped a photograph. It's a lousy time to be a snooping infidel. (Just ask the 15 British sailors who allegedly trespassed into Iranian waters in March and were imprisoned for two weeks.) In the middle of my trip, the International Atomic Energy Agency announces that Iran's nuclear program is racing toward weapons capability. Soon afterward newspapers report that Dick Cheney and other Bush Administration hawks are investigating an end run around diplomacy in favor of military strikes. President Ahmadinejad's public comments are defiant: "We advise them not to play with the lion's tail."

SNOOPING INFIDEL: PEE SOUP; DIPLOMACY.



"THE TRIO NEARS THE SUMMIT OF A NEVER-BEFORE-SKIED PEAK CALLED CHALOON. NOBODY IS ACCLIMATIZED. ANDREW HAS A HORRENDOUS LUNG INFECTION. GREG GOES NON-STOP FROM 15,000 FEET TO CAMP AT 9,000."



MAKE TURNS, NOT WAR.

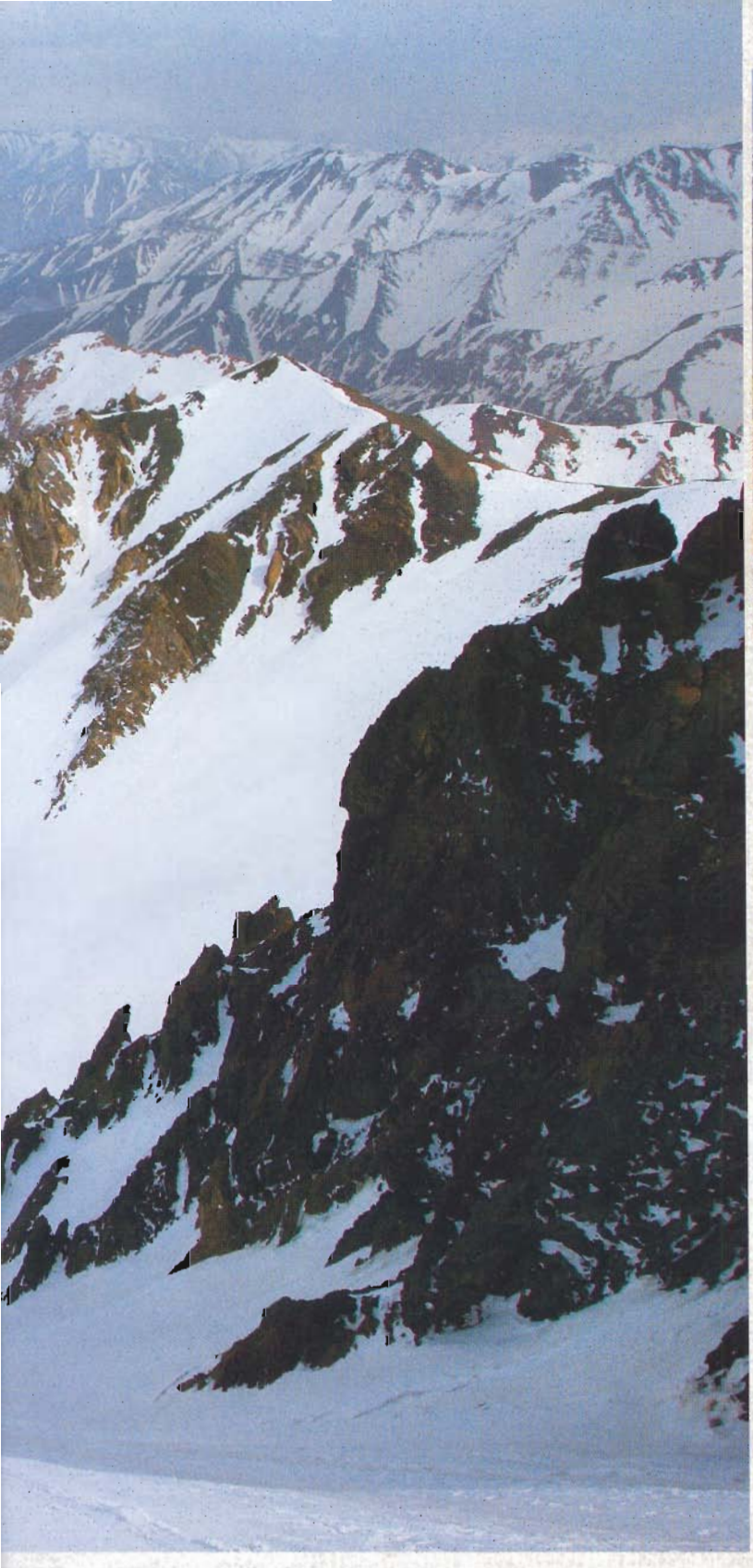
"I'M AN AMERICAN IN IRAN. I'M THE GREAT

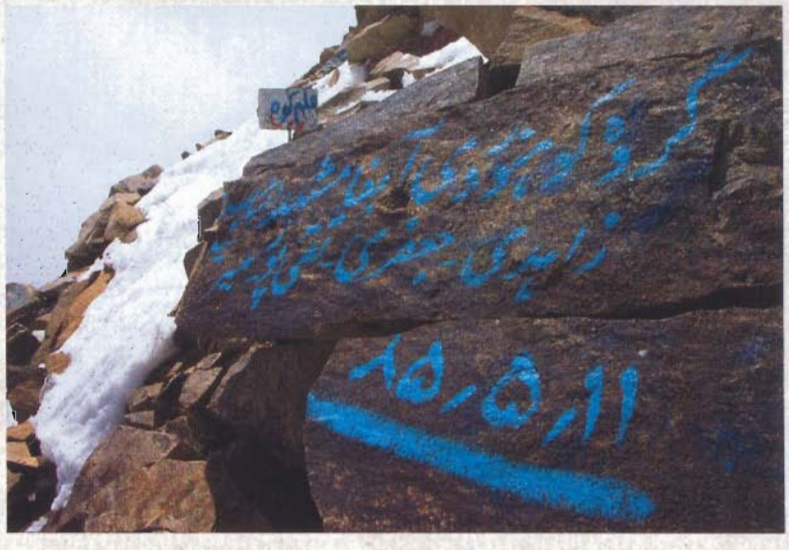
On my stomach, clinging to a makeshift ski pole picket, skis askew. Since 5 a.m. we've been climbing, the goal Alam Kooh, heaven-scratching shark tooth of black rock, namesake and highest point (15,912 feet) of the region. Early afternoon, me tired, technique poor, skis washing out on a sheer slope. Finally I'm able to set the edges and stand, and minutes later, I'm on a high saddle with the others.

From here a narrow ridge leads to the summit. But the cloud layer and morale are dropping. Greg tries to rally. "Eat another gel shot, another bar, and let's go," he says to me. "You'll be fine." Maybe. I ask Majid how the route is—steep, technical, a knife-edge? "Yes," is all he says.

Andrew is hurting. I can't believe the guy made it out of the tent with his illness, much less led a climb at a good pace to over 14,000 feet. After a quick conference, he and I decide to head down. We leapfrog past one another, yelling, doing ski pole high fives, cruising as if airborne through blue sky and swirling wisps of snow. Above, the weather continues to darken but never outright socks in. Majid stops short of the top but Greg and Dylan summit. Together they stand atop Alam Kooh, peering over the edge of a cliff that drops 2,000 feet straight down.

Down from the mountains. Out to the Caspian Sea, the Wagoneer cruising the main drags of kitschy coastal towns, the sidewalks teeming with bodies. Many of the younger dudes look like they could be trolling Williamsburg, Brooklyn; they have the dark jeans, snug logo Tees, painstakingly styled bedhead. The women, meanwhile, are all shrouded in Koran-mandated and government-enforced hijab—don't display your "ornaments" to strange men, thank you very much. There are chinks in the Islamic armor, though. Persian babes with head scarves slipping toward the back of their heads to reveal elaborately coifed hair; faces painted enticingly with Maybelline; manteaus, not trench coat-like, but form-fitting and, without a doubt, ornament displaying. Weird





SATAN IN THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC."

but true: Islamic fundamentalism will make you horny.

Gender segregation prevails. Greg talks to a middle-aged woman and politely touches her shoulder as he says goodbye. She recoils and says, "We don't do that here." But strange vibes flow. At an Internet cafe, two teen girls spy on Greg and me, giggling, not using a computer. The following evening in Reyneh, a foothills village that is the staging area for Damavand climbs, two more follow me. *Salaam.* Please sir, where you from? Please sir, what is your name? Please, your telephone number?

This must be illegal. I pick up the pace. "Mr. James! Mr. James! Come with us. We are unmarried women. You understand?" Yes. But I'm not single. Even if I were, I'm not so into being caught and castrated by the secret police. "Please, Mr. James! You want to fuck?" I remember a word Majid taught me. It was for telling the waiter that you're done, but it should work here. *Kafiyeh*, I say. That's enough.

Thousands of years ago, after the invading Turians of Central Asia penetrated far south into Persia, an old man named Aras stood atop Mount Damavand. It had been decreed that the northern border of Persia's post-war territory would be drawn as far as he could fire an arrow. Aras stripped naked, pulled the bowstring and shot; he turned into the arrow, soared for hours, and landed, to the humiliation of his Turian foes, deep in Central Asia. To this day Damavand symbolizes resistance to foreigners; it is Iran's Mount Rushmore, Statue of Liberty, and Washington Monument. On February 11, 2007, President Ahmadinejad delivered a defiant speech to a chanting crowd. "Oh world, see Iran, which like Mount Damavand is standing up firm and insisting on its inalienable rights," he said.

Worshipped from afar, Damavand is abused up close. Three hours of skinning brings us to the Barghah-e-Sevvom shelter at 13,600 feet. Piles of garbage and feces sit out front, half-finished packages of food inside. "There's no way we're staying here," Andrew says. He proposes camping at a mosque several thousand

TWO CULTURES, ONE VISION: "CLEAR, FREE AND NICE."

feet below. But that would make for a massive summit day tomorrow. Dozens of members of the Iranian national mountaineering team have also just arrived, and after everyone pitches in to clean up, we decide to stay.

The next morning, 4 a.m., headlamps bobbing in the darkness. The hiss of stoves, the smell of gas, the whispery rustling of gear being stuffed into packs. Greg comes in and reports on the climbing conditions. "It doesn't look so great," he says. "The wind is blowing pretty good. We'll just have to start up and see how it goes." I grab my pack and head for the door.

A long white ramp, thousands of vertical feet of climbing ahead. Andrew, having finally kicked his chest infection, is back at full speed. He and the rest of the group soon leave me behind. The wind dies. As the sun crests the horizon I pass squads from the Iranian team. I top 16,000 feet, then 17,000. My pace slows. The snow softens. The crampons on my boots stop biting the surface and instead punch deeply through. Finally, with the GPS showing 17,600 feet, I stop to catch my breath.

Damavand is not technical, but people die on it every year. Most succumb to altitude sickness but some blunder into sulfur-belching volcanic vents. The mountain's treachery was known at least as far back as 1000 AD, when Iranian poet Ferdowsi recorded the tale of the Demon-King Zahhak. Satan kisses him, brain-devouring serpents sprout from his shoulders and he rules Iran in tyranny. After a heroic peasant defeats him, Zahhak is chained eternally atop Damavand.

I'm preparing to climb again when Majid and the others appear on the rocks above. They've already summitted and are heading down. What's more, they want me to turn back, too. They spent an hour on the summit, which was clouded in. It's too late, I'd be alone. I could sprain an ankle, or plunge into a vent. "I don't want to ski all the way down and have to climb back up to rescue you," Dylan says. Reluctantly, I begin the long ski back to camp.

Abdolah Nahid, 58, is an auto mechanic in Tehran. He drives to the mountain early in the morning, parks, straps sunglass lenses to his face with a strip of cloth, and throws some olives into a daypack. Then he climbs 9,000 vertical feet to the Damavand summit. Late in the afternoon on the descent, he steps into the shelter, his skin wind-chapped and smile wide under a gray-black mustache. He shares the last few olives with me and I ask if he has climbed Damavand before. He laughs. More than 300 times, he says.

Admiring his passion, a foolish idea dawns that this moment is bigger than right now, that this conversation could be about more than just two people. With Majid's help as translator, I fire questions at him: What do you really think about the war in Iraq? Do you think the U.S. will invade Iran, too? Do you know about the conference that Condoleezza Rice and Ahmadinejad are attending?

Nahid scrunches up his face, like he hasn't quite understood, but then Farsi pours from his lips, and I realize that he has, all too well. The tirade lasts several minutes, fast and without break for translation. Then he stops, looks directly at me, and pronounces clearly in English: "It is a pity to be in nature and speak about politics!"

He's right, of course, especially here. But I'm frustrated. On a fundamental human level, is there more that unites us than divides? Yes. But do either of us really understand why our countries are intractable enemies, and can either of us do anything about it? Not really. All we've got is the fact that we both like the mountains and that we could be friends. The conclusion is both obvious and corny, but it's more than I knew before coming to Iran and is the most important observation I'll take home. Majid, sitting on a bunk next to me, bites his lower lip and shrugs. "At this time, never again can I translate for you about politics," he says.

Nahid grabs his pack and heads for the open door. Clouds fill the valley below, but we're above, where the reddening sun still shines. "People go all the way to Mecca to pray," Nahid says. "My Mecca is here." ■