



Looking up the Godwin Austen Glacier towards K2 from Concordia, Pakistan. The Abruzzi Spur (south east ridge) is on the right of the 3000m South Face; the Shoulder at 7900m to 8000m is above the wispy ribbon of stratocumulus. This cloud often forms around K2 and usually signifies good weather.

5 K2

8611M, 1995

My head ached and my body felt like it was being crushed in a vice. Climbing at extreme altitude is agony. Torture. Yet, even through that haze of suffering, my oxygen-starved brain was aware of the intense seriousness of my situation. No celebration was due yet. I was completely alone on the summit of K2, the world's second highest and possibly hardest mountain. Now I had to get down. Some of the world's best climbers have died descending K2. Many have been killed in good weather, with optimum conditions and in daylight. It was now between 6.30 and 7.00pm and the light was already fading. I would be descending in the dark.

I had to keep reminding myself, 'I must get down in one piece... No mountain is worth a life, or a finger or toe to frostbite... Returning from an expedition is a success. The summit is only a bonus.' I had to concentrate on the descent back to the world, back to my daughter Fiona.

As the sun dropped and the temperature plummeted even lower, K2 began to cast a huge triangular shadow across the Earth. The temperature was 40 below and in the bitter cold I realised frostbite was a real danger. I checked my headtorch and, drawing on many years of mountaineering experience, started my descent.

It was the culmination of three consecutive years' attempts on K2, known as the Savage Mountain. My first view of K2 had been from Concordia at the junction of the Baltoro and Godwin Austen Glaciers, on my way to Broad Peak four years earlier in 1991. Straddling the Pakistan–China border in the northern Karakoram, it pokes up dramatically from the barren rock-strewn glacier and moraine. At 8611m, K2 is a mountain of almost perfect proportions. Massive and impressive, it soars over 3000m in a stark pyramid of ice, snow and rock. To a mountaineer it is a glittering prize,