

Alone on the mountain, with their emergency air supply running out, Ernie laughed. A long, hearty laugh, one that almost seemed to dispel the hopelessness of the situation.

"Gee, Bert," he giggled, "even after all these years, the view really takes your breath away, eh!"

Bert opened his mouth to retort, but thought better of it - he only had so much oxygen left, why waste any? And in truth, the landscape that lay before them was truly a beautiful sight.

Before their eyes were vast snow-covered peaks, boldly challenging the clouds, almost as if they wished to surpass them. And there was, in the distance, a great verdant plain, scattered with trees, and crystal-like water, glimmering on the horizon like a distant memory that is all but forgotten.

Bert had never forgotten.

No, he had never forgotten. Though it was half a lifetime ago, he still remembered everything - his mother, her valiant but fruitless battle with cancer. His wife, her soft smile, her gentle lips, that he could *almost* feel against his forehead. His infant son, the gentle smile on his face... though he should be nearly 30 by now, if his reckoning was right.

He even remembered the taste of oatmeal, a luxury that the freeze-dried rations up in the research center could never match.

"Yes Ernie," he finally agreed, "the view is wonderful."

A warning light flashed on the display panel near the door. "Ah," Ernie said, "I'll get the cylinder."

Neither of the friends dared to mention, but both knew, that this little tube of oxygen was their last.

After a few seconds, a gentle whirring sound indicated that the cylinder was working. Thirty minutes worth of air.

"Well," said Ernie, ever the optimist, "there's still hope for rescue! Let's send out another distress signal!"

Over the past few years, they'd sent out thousands, and none had even been met with an answer - they'd tried several times, many years ago, to climb down the mountain's slopes, but each time were driven back by the harsh conditions.

Bert had long ago resigned himself to the cruel inevitability of their fate, but it touched him in an almost inexplicable way, to see his lifelong friend dial the distress number, a glimmer of hope still alive in his eye.

The shrill ringing began, and it ended. There was, as always, no reply.

"Ah," said Ernie, "that's a shame."

For a few seconds, there was silence. Bert's thoughts washed slowly through his mind, with the lightning-quick leisure of a man who has resigned himself to death.

He thought of