ILLUSTRATION BY MATT MAHURIN

MURDER at 19,000 feet

by Jonathan Green

The People's Republic of China is spending upwards of $60 billion to host next year's Olympic Games. But no amount of cash or uplifting propaganda can conceal the country's brutal occupation of Tibet, as dozens of mountaineers discovered to their horror 19 miles west of Everest.

THE FIRST GUNSHOT WENT LARGELY UNNOTICED BY THE climbers. Most were still in their tents — the sun had risen, but it hadn't been up long enough to blunt the knifing cold — and no one expected to hear small-arms fire on a mountaineering expedition, much less at 19,000 feet in the Himalayas. Later, though, a few climbers would recall that the ravens that hung around camp had suddenly lifted from the snow in a small, black, squawking cloud, a missed omen.

Earlier on September 30, 2006, the first clear day in a week, the Sherpas in camp had conducted a ritual for the safety of the climbers. There were at least 100 at Cho Oyu advanced base camp; most had not yet made their attempts on the summit because of the poor weather. The world's sixth-tallest mountain, Cho Oyu is the second most popular Himalayan peak, and it's often used as a test run for those who aspire to climb the most popular one, Mount Everest, 19 miles to the east. As part of their ritual the Sherpas had uttered incantations beneath fluttering Tibetan Buddhist prayer flags and burned juniper, which left a resinous aroma around the 70 or so brightly colored tents.

Among those the Sherpas blessed was Luis Benitez, a 34-year-old commercial guide from Colorado who was getting his three clients ready for the four-day summit push. When the first rifle shot was fired, his crew were in their tents packing, sorting, and repacking, and could have mistaken the gun's report for a snapping tent flap.

A few minutes later, near 8 AM, Benitez's team had gathered at their dining tent for breakfast. Moments later two of Benitez's Sherpas burst in: "Chinese soldiers are coming, very bad!" This time they all heard the distinctive, percussive cracks from Type 81 assault rifles, the Chinese answer to AK-47s.

Benitez and the others dropped their mugs and ran outside. They were shocked to find a handful of Chinese soldiers belonging to the People's Armed Police, or PAP, a mountain paramilitary unit, lined up on a shelf of ice over the moraine about 500 yards away. They were doing most of the firing. Others, hefting matte black rifles, marched toward the camp. Still other soldiers, in small clusters, perhaps three or four in each, were farther down along the icy, hummocky terrain,

about 200 yards. As they popped off rounds, the smell of cordite had replaced juniper in the air.

At first some of the climbers thought the gunmen might be shooting at animals. Then, to their horror, they realized that the soldiers were actually taking aim at two snaking lines of 20 to 30 people moving up a glaciated slope at least 100 yards away. Against the aching white expanse of snow the figures were tiny black silhouettes, but even at a distance of several hundred yards, the climbers could make out that many of the figures were smaller still — children — and stumbling as the bullets thudded around them. At that range, the Type 81s — street-fighting weapons, not sniper rifles — are woefully inaccurate, so the gunmen were essentially taking potshots.

Benitez heard cries of anguish drifting across the glaciated pass, punctuated by the crack-popping of the Chinese Kalashnikovs, which made his ears ring. Taking a grave risk, Romanian climber Sergiu Matei, 29, took out his Sony DCR170 video camera. "They are shooting them like dogs," he uttered. Then what looked to be three figures dropped to the snow. Two struggled up and staggered on. One figure tried to crawl, but then collapsed in an immobile heap.

CHO OYU, ELEVATION 26,906 FEET, LIES JUST NORTH of Nepal in Tibet. Sherpas know it as the Turquoise Goddess, while some Tibetan Buddhists believe that Padmasambhara, who brought Buddhism to Tibet, buried instructions on how to save the earth from chaos somewhere on the mountain. At the height of the main climbing season, in autumn, the slopes of Cho Oyu are as cosmopolitan as an olympiad, as climbers from around the world make for the top of the sacred massif, the easiest of the earth's 14 peaks that rise above 8,000 meters (or 26,247 feet). In September 2006, advanced base camp had alpine athletes from the U.K., France, Australia, New Zealand, Romania, Slovenia, Russia, and the U.S., among others.

With foreign mountaineers and guides like Luis Benitez, Cho Oyu is an international crossroads because of the Nangpa La Pass, not far from where advanced base camp is established most years. Because it is remote, hard terrain, Nangpa La Pass is a difficult part of the border for the Chinese to patrol, and thus it's one of the few places where Tibetans looking to leave their occupied homeland undetected risk the elements for freedom abroad. In 1959 the Dalai Lama used a route like this one to escape into exile; Xinhua, the government-run Chinese news service, has dubbed it a "golden route" for Tibetans seeking asylum from Chinese rule.

It's also a trade route; some of the traders using the Nangpa La Pass had stopped in camp to sell their wares, including knockoff name-brand parkas from Beijing. But the people the Chinese were shooting at now didn't look like traders, and they weren't. Many were nuns and monks, unable to practice their faith freely in Tibet. While a few Tibetans are able to obtain passports to travel abroad, fleeing refugees violate Article 322 of the Chinese criminal code, are jailed immediately, and, according to Human Rights Watch, are often tortured and then monitored by authorities for years after.

As the shooting erupted around him that morning, Benitez says he contemplated a "Rambo move" to try to disrupt the Chinese soldiers. Only Benitez is no commando; he's a sunny, sincere mountain guide. To his self-confessed shame, Benitez did nothing to stop the soldiers as they used the Tibetans for target practice.

On the one hand, this most recent Himalayan disaster had a familiar ring to it, as the mountaineers had to choose between their own selfish goals and helping others in distress. Several of the climbers, including Benitez, continued up toward the summit after the Chinese soldiers stormed their camp, rounding up refugees.

But in most other respects this incident stood alone: A cold-blooded murder by the host nation's own police left foreign witnesses not knowing at all what to do. Confusing matters further, a handful of commercial outfitters and their guides allegedly told climbers not to tell anyone outside of camp about the shooting. Fearful the Chinese authorities would revoke their permits to operate on Cho Oyu and the Chinese/Tibetan side of Everest, or that they'd seek revenge on the Tibetan cooks and porters in their employ, two of the top Everest guide operations allegedly suppressed news of the shooting.

The incident made headlines, especially in Europe, when it reached the media in October 2006, but drawing on more than 30 interviews, transcripts of interviews conducted by the Washington, DC–based International Campaign for Tibet (ICT), and visits to Cho Oyu and India, this is one of the most complete accounts yet compiled. Before the climbers spoke out, and Sergiu Matei aired his video, the Chinese claimed the shooting was in self-defense. Meanwhile, climbers were left to contemplate what it meant for their sport that peers would put personal and commercial goals ahead of reporting an atrocity. The episode could play as farce if it hadn't cost at least one young woman her life and if it hadn't exposed, on the eve of the Beijing Olympics, the brutal contempt the Chinese authorities continue to have for Tibetans.

■ Clockwise from bottom left: The black dot circled in red is one of three Tibetan refugees gunned down by the Chinese border patrol; soldiers gather around the body of a nun shot by Chinese forces; American guide Luis Benitez was the first to speak out about the shooting.

GROUP: MAC MACKENNEY/SAVETIBET.COM; BENITEZ: DIDRIK JOHNCK; SNOW WITH RED CIRCLE: AFP/GETTY IMAGES

■ Cho Oyu, the sixth-tallest mountain in the world, as seen from advanced base camp, where Matei videoed the shootings.

LIKE MANY OF THE ESTIMATED 2,500 to 3,500 Tibetans who flee their occupied homeland each year, Kelsang Namtso wanted the freedom to practice Tibetan Buddhism. A serious young woman who dressed in the traditional long skirts of a Tibetan nomad, Kelsang, 17, and her best friend Dolma, 16, rosy-cheeked and more jovial than her friend, left Nagchu, their home in a rural area northeast of Tibet's capital, Lhasa, with the intention of seeking out the Dalai Lama, their leader in exile, in Dharamsala, India.

Kelsang and her five brothers grew up with parents who struggled to make ends meet as semi-nomads, Dolma told me. Forced to recite paeans to Mao Tse-tung, Kelsang dreamed of becoming a nun. (In Tibet it's an honor for one child from every family to follow a Buddhist calling; it accrues "merit" for the whole family.) But Kelsang's parents were against it. Her mother had arthritis and felt that her only daughter should be at home helping her. "Her mother didn't want her to be a nun because she was the only girl," says Dolma. "She said she had to help her mother."

AS THE TENT ZIP RIPPED UP, HE NEARLY RETCHED FROM FRIGHT; HE FEARED THAT A CHINESE PRISON CELL, TORTURE, AND SHAME AWAITED HIM.

Undaunted, Kelsang took vows with lamas in secret, stopped listening to music and dancing, which she loved, and maintained a strict vegetarian diet. Eventually, she left under the cover of night for a free life, on September 18, 2006.

After dodging Chinese army patrols in Lhasa, Kelsang and Dolma were crammed into the back of a truck with 75 other refugees numbering monks, nuns, and children as young as seven. Dolma, Kelsang, and the others had paid around $500 each — two years of wages for rural Tibetans — to two men, illegal guides, who were secretly stowing everyone in the truck. Even before they left, one man's courage deserted him. He jumped off the truck and fled home. As they lurched on into the night, another started vomiting with fear.

As the vehicle rumbled out of Lhasa, sliding past Chinese checkpoints, the mood inside was desperate. Inside the juddering, dark, and airless interior, children began to cry, cries that risked everyone by alerting Chinese border guards. The guides urged them to be silent with hoarse whispers. Guides face up to 10 years in prison for leading refugees out of Tibet.

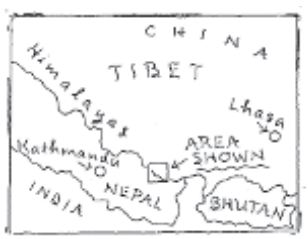
The guides pushed hard, getting angry if anyone faltered. Temperatures dropped to well below freezing. Dolma and Kelsang walked with the hems of their skirts sodden and caked with snow, their arms folded across their chests to keep their fingers warm as they stumbled and fell. They had left with a store of *tsampa*, roasted barley flour, to sustain them, but their supply ran out; worse, they found themselves without water. At one point they came across herders, who charged them 70 yuan (about $9) for plastic bags of water.

Kelsang, with Dolma at her side, was faring badly. The altitude and lack of food gave her splitting headaches. Finally, 12 days after leaving Lhasa, a monk in the group spotted orange and yellow climbers' tents, incongruous against the dazzling white.

Figures clad in long coats clambered down the rocks toward them. The monk thought they might've been Tibetan monks in religious dress and waved. The refugees embraced one another as relief swept through the group. Then they realized the long coats were actually fur-lined Chinese army–issue, known as *dayi*. The smiles froze on the refugees' faces. Some in the group shouted warnings, "They are soldiers!" and urged everyone to run.

Pandemonium erupted. A soldier started screaming, "*Thama de!*" which translates as "Fuck your mother." Puffs of snow erupted around them as bullets tore into the ice.

"I heard the bullets zinging past my ears," says Dolma.



CHO OYU: ALEX GAVIN. MAP: JAMES NOEL SMITH

■ Clockwise from top: Survivors of the Nangpa La incident travel by bus en route to India; a sign protesting the '08 Olympics; Russell Brice, who criticized Benitez's decision to spread information about the shootings.

"The noise was like, *tag, tag*. And then when they came past my ears, they were like, *pew, pew*."

Refugees split off running in different directions, which at that altitude is a superhuman feat. A few escaped. Somewhere in the melee Dolma lost Kelsang. Her back to the soldiers, woozy from the altitude, Kelsang presented a slow-moving target. She was a few yards from cresting a ridge and getting out of range when a 7.62mm round tore into her back, just under her left arm. She slumped in the snow and, 20 minutes from freedom, died.

BACK IN CAMP SERGIU MATEI, THE ROMANIAN CLIMBER, switched off his camera. "I didn't want to film her dying," he said. He had nearly 30 minutes of film that would have a devastating worldwide impact — if he could get it out of the country. Immediately Matei felt a lingering gaze from a soldier nearby. He waved to the soldier and swallowed hard, trying not to betray his fear before walking back to his tent to stow the tape.

Minutes later the Chinese police marched the first of several groups of refugees they'd captured into camp. One group included about a dozen kids.

"The children were in single file, about six feet away from me," Steve Lawes, a British climber, later told the International Campaign for Tibet. "They didn't see us — they weren't looking around the way kids normally would; they were too frightened. By that time advanced base camp was crawling with soldiers. They had pretty much taken over, and the atmosphere was intimidating. We were doing our best not to do anything that might spark off more violence."

The soldiers marched the kids into a big green tent flying a Chinese flag, a tent that was off-limits to foreign climbers. About an hour later a PAP soldier entered the camp with an injured Tibetan on his back. The Tibetan appeared to have been shot in the leg, but the soldier dumped him on the snow like a sack of grain. In all, nearly 30 refugees were brought to the green tent, then herded off to a detention center. There, according to testimony given to the ICT, several were severely beaten.

The climbers were appalled but felt helpless to intervene. A few of the PAP soldiers were actually friendly to the climbers; in their late teens, the soldiers took breaks in camp, lit cigarettes, and carried on as if everything that had just happened was routine, a morning's work.

Four hours later a Tibetan kitchen boy came running to Matei. Someone was hiding in the toilet tent, he said. Matei went to investigate. Hunkered in the latrine, his hands shaking, was a man called Choedron, a poor farmer in his 30s. He had tried to bury himself in rocks, pathetically using a toilet paper bag to cover himself. As the tent zip ripped up, he nearly retched from fright; he feared that a Chinese prison cell, torture, and shame awaited him. Instead, he was confronted with Matei, whose red goatee and shaved head lend him the look of a death metal bassist. Unable to speak Tibetan, Matei repeated the one thing Choedron said: "Dalai Lama." Choedron put his hands together in veneration. They understood each other.

Matei acted quickly. First he tried to convince the Nepali base camp manager to help the terrified refugee. He refused. "The Chinese will shoot us if we are caught," he said. "It is much too dangerous." Over the manager's protests, Matei took Choedron from the tent and fed him. Starving after nearly two weeks in the snow, he devoured any food set in front of him. Afterward Matei gave him all of his spare clothes and then hid him in his tent.

As darkness fell Matei wanted to videotape Kelsang's body as evidence of the murder. But he had noticed that the PAP soldiers had night-vision equipment, and he feared being shot in the dark.

By 2:30 AM Choedron was ready to leave. The stress of hiding Choedron, along with the tape he had of the shootings, had turned Matei into a nervous wreck. With the pass below them glistening in the moonlight, they looked at each other awkwardly. Matei clapped Choedron on his back, and said, in Romanian, "God will be with you."

Out in the night a group of refugees was hiding in a snow hole, waiting for their turn to run under the protective cloak of darkness. A few crept to Kelsang's body. One nun crouched by her side, lifted her arm, and saw congealed blood, now frozen.

The next day a small detachment of Chinese soldiers and officials returned to Kelsang's body. There they posed for pictures, with the body in the foreground and Cho Oyu in the background. According to one eyewitness account, they wrapped the corpse of the 17-year-old nun-to-be in a red blanket or body bag and hurled it into a crevasse. It is believed that later they returned to take the body into custody.

AMID DOUBTS THAT HE SHOULD BE DOING MORE TO HELP the captive Tibetans, Benitez had reflexively returned to his clients and their summit preparations. "My first responsibility is to my team," he recalls thinking. Besides, focusing on what he knew helped calm his nerves. It was a decision, he says today, that "I'll regret the rest of my life."

Matei, watching as Benitez and other teams carried on to the summit, was disgusted. "No one was saying, This is bad," he says. "Everyone was just like, Where's my coffee? Let's have some tea and get ready."

Benitez didn't make the summit. Nor did two of his clients — one was suffering from symptoms of altitude sickness; the other was simply exhausted, mentally and physically, after the events in base camp. One turned back on the first day, returning with one of Benitez's Sherpas. The other lasted a second day before Benitez took him down after assessing his condition.

"On that climb I've never had such heavy feet," Benitez says. "The summit push is meant to be where all your hard work pays off; it was

BUS: BIKASH SANGRAULA; SIGN: JONATHAN GREEN; BRICE: MARK ROGERS/DISCOVERY CHANNEL

the final fight of the mountain, but at that point it felt like I didn't want to go to the top. My heart wasn't in it. We were fighting to reach the top, but we felt that we were fighting for the wrong thing. All we had were questions about what we had seen. We had no fight in us."

When Benitez returned to camp he was surprised to learn no one had reported the shooting to anyone outside the camp. "I really thought all the climbers would be standing up for human rights," he says.

Instead, climbers were being urged by at least two guides not to tell anyone what they had seen. Renowned Slovenian climber Pavle Kozjek, 48, who witnessed the aftermath of the shooting, said, "For many people in the base camp the most important thing was to be able to come back again. They decided not to tell what had happened because of this." And, he said, "I heard some expedition leaders forced their clients not to report these events."

"I THINK YOUR NAME HAS BEEN GIVEN TO THE CHINESE," HE HISSED. "IF I WERE YOU I WOULD LEAVE AHEAD OF YOUR GROUP, OR YOU WILL GET THEM INTO TROUBLE."

But Benitez couldn't live with himself. He sent an e-mail to ExplorersWeb.com, an expedition website, just after 7 AM on October 2. The header of the e-mail read: "story not being told here in tibet." He detailed the shooting, asked for his name to be kept out of it, and ended by emphasizing the need to "tell the world about this little corner of the planet, where people are dying attempting to reach for a better life."

A few hours later Kate Saunders, from the International Campaign for Tibet, alerted governments worldwide, which took the issue up with China. "Over those few days I was trying to speak to as many climbers up there as possible," she says. "Luis was the only climber who would speak to us from Cho Oyu, inside Tibet."

Meanwhile, as Benitez was ordering yaks and packing for the trail down, he confided to his assistant guide, Paul Rogers, that he'd sent the note. Immediately afterward, Benitez claims, Rogers "did a Judas." (Rogers declined to comment.)

According to Benitez, Rogers went straight to Russell Brice, owner and operator of Himalayan Experience, the biggest commercial climbing operator on the north side of Everest. Brice, hero of Discovery Channel's *Everest: Beyond the Limit*, dropped the sage, avuncular manner of his television persona and became enraged. Brice works closely with the Chinese, depending upon them for climbing permits to run his business; all told, he pulls in, by some estimates, as much as $10 million a year. "And that's a low estimate," says Tom Sjogren, who runs ExplorersWeb.com with his wife Tina and is a known critic of Brice. "Just about any business on Cho Oyu or Everest somehow has Russell Brice involved in it."

Brice, with Rogers at his side, stormed down the hill at around 3 PM. "Paul told me you sent an e-mail to ExplorersWeb," Brice accused Benitez. "Are you trying to get us kicked out of the country?" He began jabbing his finger at the younger guide. "Are you fucking crazy?"

"This 'free Tibet' thing is bullshit," Rogers jumped in. "The Chinese have done more for Tibet than you know. These people they shot at were human traffickers. It's a girl-smuggling ring to Mumbai. The only reason you want to tell everyone is that you want to be famous."

Benitez was shocked. If he were out for fame, as Rogers claimed, he was going about it the wrong way, requesting that ExWeb keep his name out of it.

Then Brice stunned Benitez further. Not only had Brice harangued him for sending the e-mail; he and his team had treated the Chinese soldiers who killed Kelsang for snow blindness shortly after the shooting. Now Benitez went on the offensive: "So, basically, you've been treating the people who were doing the shooting?"

Benitez retreated to his tent, but 45 minutes later Brice and Rogers returned with a third man, climbing operator Henry Todd. During his whole career Benitez had always had "great respect" for Todd, and had often sought his advice.

"You should be fucking hung out to dry for what you have done," Todd yelled at Benitez. Todd, a.k.a. the Toddfather, is a large, ruby-faced man known for his vicious temper; he's an ex-con, having served seven years in jail for possession of LSD as part of a massive drug sting in Britain in the late 1970s. In 2000 Todd violently assaulted one of his own clients, an American reporter named Finn-Olaf Jones, who felt so threatened by the incident that he took a helicopter out of camp a few days later. Nepalese authorities banned Todd from Nepal for two years. Since then he changed the name of his company from Himalayan Guides to Ice 8000, and is now in operation in China. Having been cast out by the Nepalis before, Todd didn't want to get banned by the Chinese, too.

"I think your name has been given to the Chinese," Todd hissed, trying to intimidate Benitez. "If I were you I would leave ahead of your group, or you will get them into trouble." Eventually the three left, but from that moment on, Benitez kept to himself. (Neither Brice nor Todd responded to repeated requests for comment.)

Benitez and his clients made it to Kathmandu. Border guards didn't detain them, but Benitez was indeed a wanted man. Word was, the Chinese embassy wanted to talk to him, along with [*continued on page 179*]

WILL OLYMPIANS SPEAK OUT AGAINST CHINA?

There are plenty of reasons for athletes to protest in the 2008 Beijing Games. But do corporate sponsors, like some climbing outfitters, just want their clients to keep quiet? *by* JORDAN HELLER

The shooting of Tibetan Buddhists; oil money to Darfur; new coal power plants; lead-painted Thomas the Tank Engines — there's no lack of issues to tempt a conscientious Olympian to act up. But will athletes stage protests in Beijing?

Political statements have a long history at the Olympics. American sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos became symbols of the Black Power movement when they raised their fists on the medal platform at the 1968 Mexico City Games. During the same Games, gold medal–winning Czech gymnast Vera Čáslavská turned her head during the Soviet anthem — just months after the Soviets had rolled tanks into Prague. And in 1980, President Jimmy Carter led a multination boycott of the Moscow Games (in protest of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan).

BETTMANN/CORBIS

But those were pre–Air Jordan times. "The corporate pressures on athletes to bite their tongues are very strong," says Bruce Kidd, ex-Canadian Olympic runner and author of *The Political Economy of Sport*. Recently, Nike endorser LeBron James declined to sign a petition to save Darfur, though most of the Cleveland Cavs did. It doesn't take a statistician to connect the dots between LeBron's ambivalence and Nike's $2.1 billion in annual revenues in Asia.

The United States Olympic Committee isn't keen on protest either. Spokesman Darryl Seibel says that if an American athlete in Beijing were to, say, flaunt a FREE TIBET T-shirt they would be acting "contrary to our code of conduct," which means you won't likely be seeing any protests at the medal ceremonies.

MURDER *continued from page 146*

two other British climbers, including Steve Lawes. Hoping to leave Nepal without further confrontations, Benitez holed up in the Radisson hotel in Kathmandu. On October 7, doubts assailing him — *What if these people really were people traffickers? Maybe I put my career on the line for nothing...* — his phone rang. Unsure of who knew he'd checked in to the Radisson, he didn't know if he should answer.

THE ROMANIAN WHO'D TAKEN THE VIDEO of the shooting, Sergiu Matei, faced his own anxious journey to safety. He knew that he had incontrovertible proof that Chinese riflemen had shot an unarmed teenager in the back. He stashed the tape in a belt pouch, and burned a hole in the casing of the cassette with a cigarette to make it look like an ashtray.

At the New Delhi airport a man with a gun under his coat approached Matei, saying he was with the Austrian embassy. He asked him what his occupation was and if he'd been on Cho Oyu. "I'm a dentist," Matei lied. "I was on Annapurna." It seemed to satisfy the man, whoever he was, and he left. "I was shitting my pants," said Matei. "On the mountain, if they had caught me with that tape, I thought I would be shot on the spot, and the Chinese would have said a Romanian had died in an avalanche. It made me hate communism and the idea of communism."

On October 12, 2006, the Chinese released a statement citing an unnamed official who claimed that soldiers had found "stowaways" and tried to "persuade them to go back to their home. But the stowaways refused and attacked the soldiers." The official said that "the frontier soldiers were forced to defend themselves and injured two stowaways." The report added: "One injured person died later in hospital due to oxygen shortage on the 6,200-meter high land." (In August 2007 the top Chinese general in Tibet was reportedly forced into early retirement over the incident.)

On October 13, Matei's footage aired on Pro TV in Romania and was quickly screened by the BBC, CNN, and other networks worldwide. (It can now be seen on YouTube.) Diplomats from around the world condemned the Chinese actions — none more forcefully than Clark Randt, the U.S. ambassador in Beijing.

Away from news cameras, says the International Campaign for Tibet, some of the captured refugees reported being beaten with rubber hoses and electric cattle prods. Police questioned the children, and Chinese officials later claimed that they had been sent to India to be "trained" by the Dalai Lama, then sent back to China as "splitists," who want to see Tibet independent. Some of the youngest children were not collected by their parents and so remained in custody for three months. When their parents came they were fined 100 to 500 yuan ($13–$66).

Dolma, who witnessed her best friend's death, made it to freedom in Dharamsala, India, where the exiled Tibetan government is based. She met the Dalai Lama and is today pursuing a secular education; she may later join a nunnery. She sat in a green park and gazed out at the Himalayas. Her hands clasped under her thighs, she rocked back and forth as tears rolled down her cheeks. "Kelsang would have been pleased that I made it," she said. Kelsang's body was never returned to her family.

AFTER SEVERAL RINGS, BENITEZ SNATCHED the telephone from its cradle. Instead of a Chinese agent, it was Kate Saunders, from the International Campaign for Tibet. She offered to assuage his fears that he'd been misinformed by letting him meet 43 Tibetans.

In an SUV with smoked windows, Benitez and a Tibetan ICT representative drove along Kathmandu's bustling backstreets to the Tibetan Refugee Reception Center, on the eastern edge of the city. There he saw monks sitting in prayer alongside families with children in cheap, tattered sneakers. He looked at snapshots covering an entire wall outside of the medical clinic. Many were painful to see, as they depicted the horrific frostbite many Tibetans suffered, their toes and fingers blackened, as they made it over the Nangpa La Pass. He met many of the refugees; any doubts he'd had about interfering with policing human traffickers quickly dissipated. He wept for a moment before regaining his composure.

In May 2007, Benitez made it to the top of Everest for a sixth time, and he did it from the Nepal side. Normally wasted but ecstatic atop the roof of the world, Benitez says that this time he experienced disappointment.

"I realized I'm not a fireman or a policeman or anyone else who saves lives," he says. "I'm just a mountaineer, part of a substrata of society that people can't peg. What happened on Cho Oyu made me realize that there's something more important than just reaching the summit. So I stood on top of Everest and thought, What's the point of this?"

WHERE TO BUY PAGES 156–161 Malo suit at Malo Madison Ave. **Perry Ellis** shirt at perryellis.com. **Peal & Co.** for Brooks Brothers boots at brooksbrothers.com. **Boss Selection** suit at hugoboss.com. **Banana Republic** shirt at bananarepublic.com. **Levi's** 514 jeans at levi.com. **Brooks Brothers** suit at brooksbrothers.com. **Canali** shirt at Nordstrom. **Façonnable** tie at Façonnable boutiques. **Montblanc** watch at montblanc.com. **Allen Edmonds** shoes at allenedmonds.com. **Ermenegildo Zegna** suede jacket at zegna.com. **7 for All Mankind** vest at 7forallmankind.com. **Canali** shirt at Nordstrom. **Banana Republic** pants at bananarepublic.com. **Cole Haan** leather jacket at colehaan.com. **Inhabit** sweater at Stacey Todd, 818-981-7567. **Gap** T-shirt at gap.com. **Perry Ellis** pants at perryellis.com. All grooming products available at department stores and drugstores nationwide.