

L'Inespérée

The push for the top of a new route in Greenland's Tasermiut Fjord

by LIONEL DAUDET

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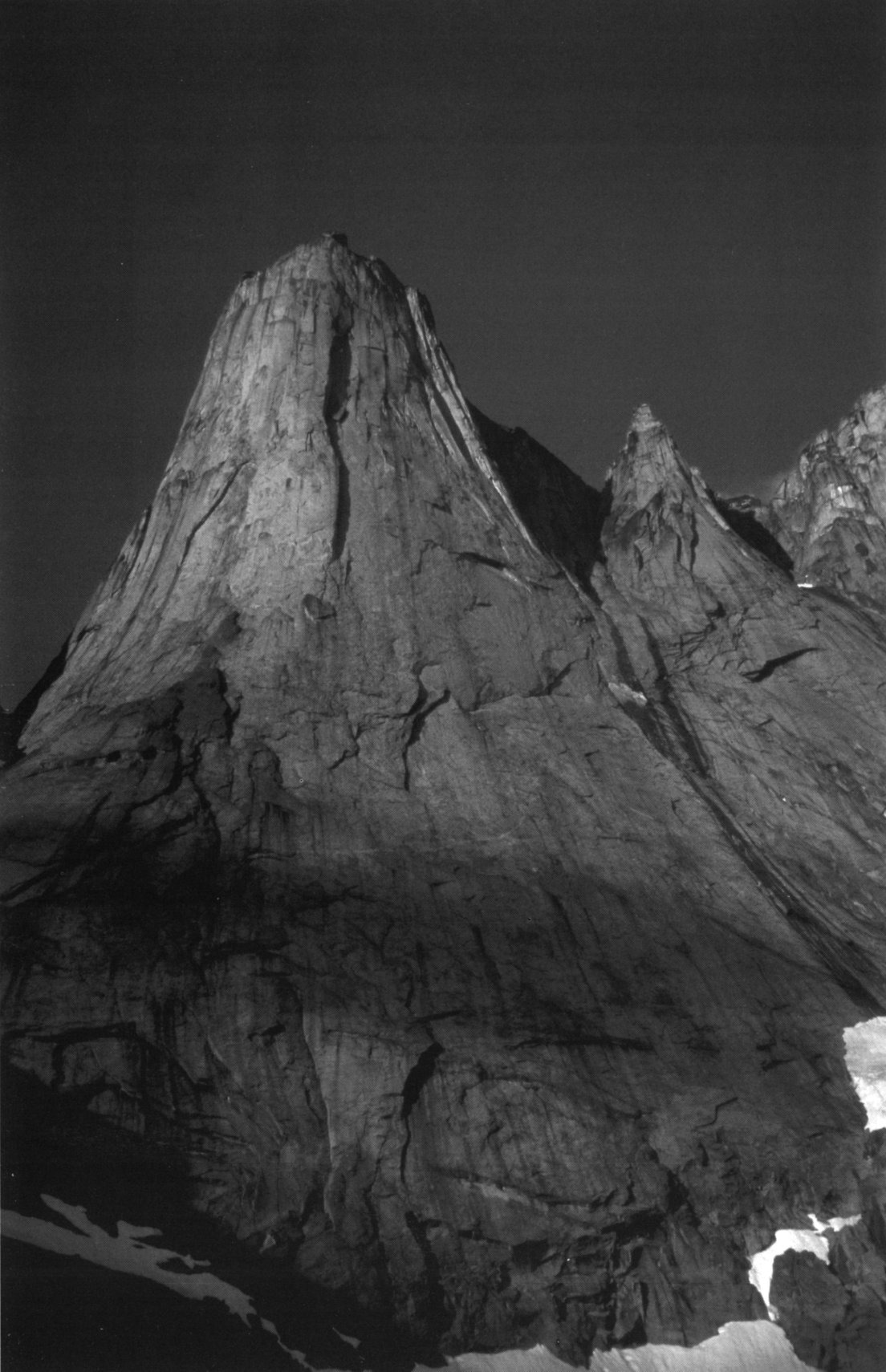
Ulamertorssuaq, from Tasermiut Fjord, Greenland. Lionel Daudet collection

JUNE 23, 1996.

We've already spent 10 days on the west face of Suikarsuiak (1800 m). Below us, fantastic dihedrals, a roof that juts out six meters, a compact wall with the hardest pitch of aid climbing that I have ever done mark the boundary of an unfathomable drop. At the crux, a fall of some 30 meters. . . and 500 meters of sustained and, sometimes, exposed slabs. We have no pins left, and only one hammer. . . .

3 A.M.

Daylight has returned in its entirety and with it new hope in lieu of renewed strength. I start off again with difficulty after a two-hour rest hanging in my harness that cut into my thighs. . . . I snort and gasp, wedging myself into this horrible and unprotectable mess—free-soloing with a rope. Two knees cry out in pain as they are ravaged against the cold rock; two knees suddenly become still once the chimney is below me. A complicated triangulation of three cams for an anchor, a vaguely sloping ledge, a relief after having been suspended in a seeming void—a belay! A man frozen to the marrow of his bones joins me—Benoît. I pass him my jacket and start



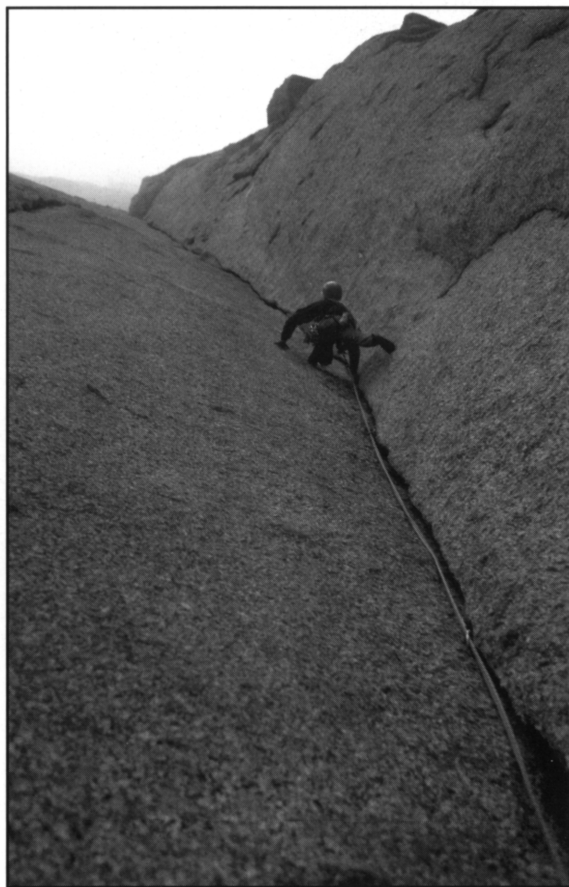
up a new pitch in the dihedral chimney. Once again, I am struck by the beauty of a fantastic climb, by happiness despite a fatigue that would like to drown out everything, despite a body that cries out for mercy. A nerve extended to its extreme sings out. . . .

An incandescent lamp crackles brutally, a camera flash inundates the space with a white light, a brazing breaks up my skull. A hallucination? Yet another! I stop counting them. As for Benoît, he hears voices from every direction. We have neither food nor water left. Nothing! Nothing, and yet everything: this life-force feeds me with its crazy energy, its blinding light; this hope hammers away at my body, this sacred flame immolates me. Above my head looms an overhanging dihedral with a crack blocked by a roof. Never a summit in sight. I start up again, always starting up again, starting up—to go where? Initially I work my way up, half free climbing, half aid, dispersing cams as I go. My progression becomes increasingly dependent on aid: fatigue overpowers me, driving me to my very limits.

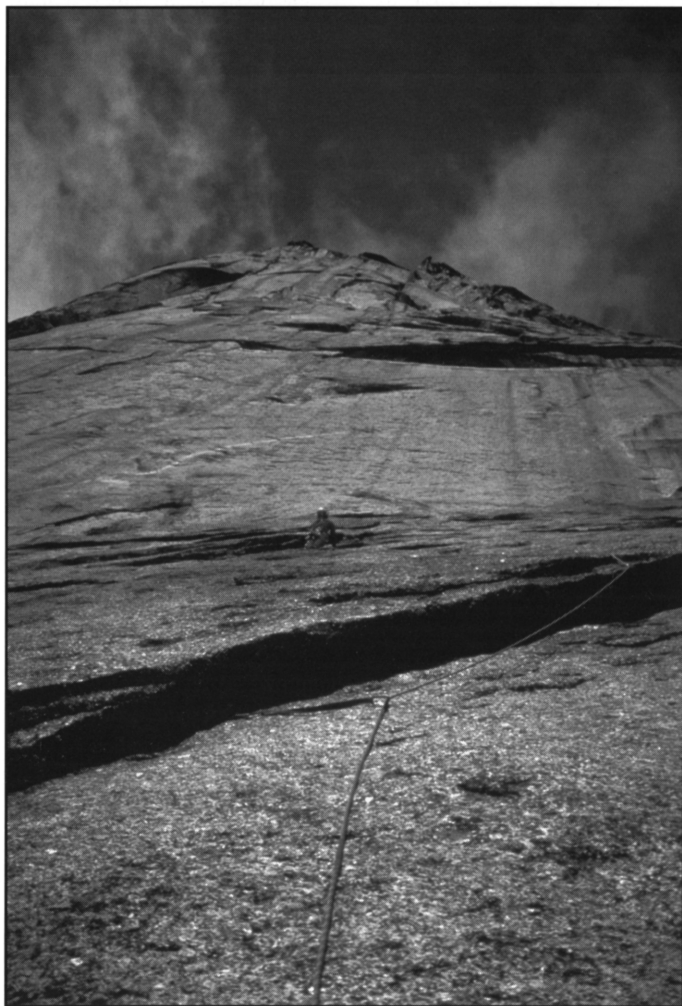
Benoît falls asleep while hanging at the belay. I persist, meter after meter—but I stopped existing a long time ago. I am no more than a feeble breath, followed by another, vaster, more infinite breath. . . one breath illuminates the next. A body that struggles with these cams, ignoring itself, a spirit that has let itself go. . . are the ropes slack?

SUCH A PURE EMPTINESS.

I manage to climb the roof with difficulty. A badly placed cam can be attributed to my exhaustion; can one even characterize this state anymore? And I take flight! Fifteen meters? Maybe more, maybe less. I drag myself painfully up to my high point; the rope is ruined, I'm almost out of cams; I double my precautions. "That's me!" yells a voice that exhaustion has transformed into a savage death-rattle. A 50-meter pitch, and I must belay here, in this wet crack that keeps soaking my fleece and chilling me to the bone. The summit? So improbable, so outside the realm of



Robert, perfect hallucination. Lionel Daudet



Robert, with the top still far above. Lionel Daudet

hope, the thought has not crossed my mind since the start of the climb. Besides, there are no more thoughts now. They have been still for some time, cowering deep within my soul, leaving room for the luminous emptiness. Benoît climbs up to me, giving no indication of being touched by the present unknown, or that which will come later, on the descent. Two soaked spirits, one of which is flailing. I must hurry, and begin again, animated by a morsel of energy. A spark of genius springs from Benoît's exhaustion: what about going right to the dihedral and leaving this wet and hostile crack that I intended to aid?

At first, I manage to place my biggest cams—but then it gets too wide! An anxious Benoît calls out, "Is everything alright?" I can't protect myself. . . .

Silence. He prays; he

prays with all his might, with all his soul. A frightening calm comes over me, along with a demented attention—a crazy hope.

THE SUMMIT.

Two trembling, starving, thirsty miserable souls raise themselves up on this vast summit plateau after one last easy pitch. Two puppets animated by a life that dictates their moves, has them take pictures, fills them with joy. Two human beings fall prey to this rapture, two human beings illuminated by pathetic smiles that some might mistake for a laugh. . . . A roped party, there, high on the Suikarsuiak, two individuals that have left their identities below in order to join humanity. An hour and a half passes on the summit, a landscape the sublimeness of which I could not describe, since

words cannot do it justice. The icepack in the distance before me, the fjords of Tasermiut running almost two kilometers below my feet, the Ketil-a to the right, at the end Islandis, me in the middle of it all. Ha!

THE DESCENT.

Now, it's high time we thought about the descent that so worries Benoît, the descent on which we have left no anchors except for the one in the wet crack. Since we left the fixed ropes, we have had no more bolts. A first rap down into the unstable tiers allows us to find the slot. Yet another length of webbing, and I swing into the 1000-meter void of Suikarsuiak. Distress, cold sweat, pearls of adrenaline: the rope is stuck in the back of the dihedral. Fortunately we manage to retrieve it and find the stoppers of the soaking belay station. I place another cam during the next rappel to avoid finding myself hanging irretrievably in the void. Yet another rappel, always of such disarming and apparent simplicity, but which takes on a different dimension once we're in its midst.

THE FIXED ROPES!

Our happiness refuses to subside; it lasts, increasing infinitely like the beating of a drum. At the same time, we retain our lucidity, and become more vigilant now than ever. Two men, stiff-jointed with fatigue, let themselves glide down hundreds of meters, breaking their descents with belay devices that heat up and become polished. Two men who refuse to believe—cannot believe—that they have come back from the summit. Two men float ethereally in a dream, sustained by invisible forces, and finally collapse like two inert forms on their portaledge. To drink, at last, to drink this water, the taste of which had almost been forgotten.

We throw ourselves into our sleeping bags, our bodies crying out, shouting with the pain they have suffered for so long. The invisible forces withdraw into the silence of the mountains. Ben and I sink into what we badly missed: sleep. It has been 30 hours since we left the portaledge.

JUNE 24, 1996.

The last night on the portaledge. We rise late, at ten o'clock; it would have been difficult for us to get up any earlier. A sea of clouds floats level with us, a few peaks emerge vaguely from the mists. Slowly, we come to a decision, retrieve the fixed ropes above us, eat a little. I take advantage of the jumars to take some pictures of the surreal, enigmatic and magical ambience. I relish these moments as the very best reward—like cherries on the top of a cake.

Summary of Statistics

AREA: Tasermiut Fjord, Greenland

NEW ROUTE: *L'Inespérée* (900 meters, VI 7b A4+) on the west face of Ulamertorssuaq's West Summit; June 13-24, 1996 (Lionel Daudet, Benoît Robert)