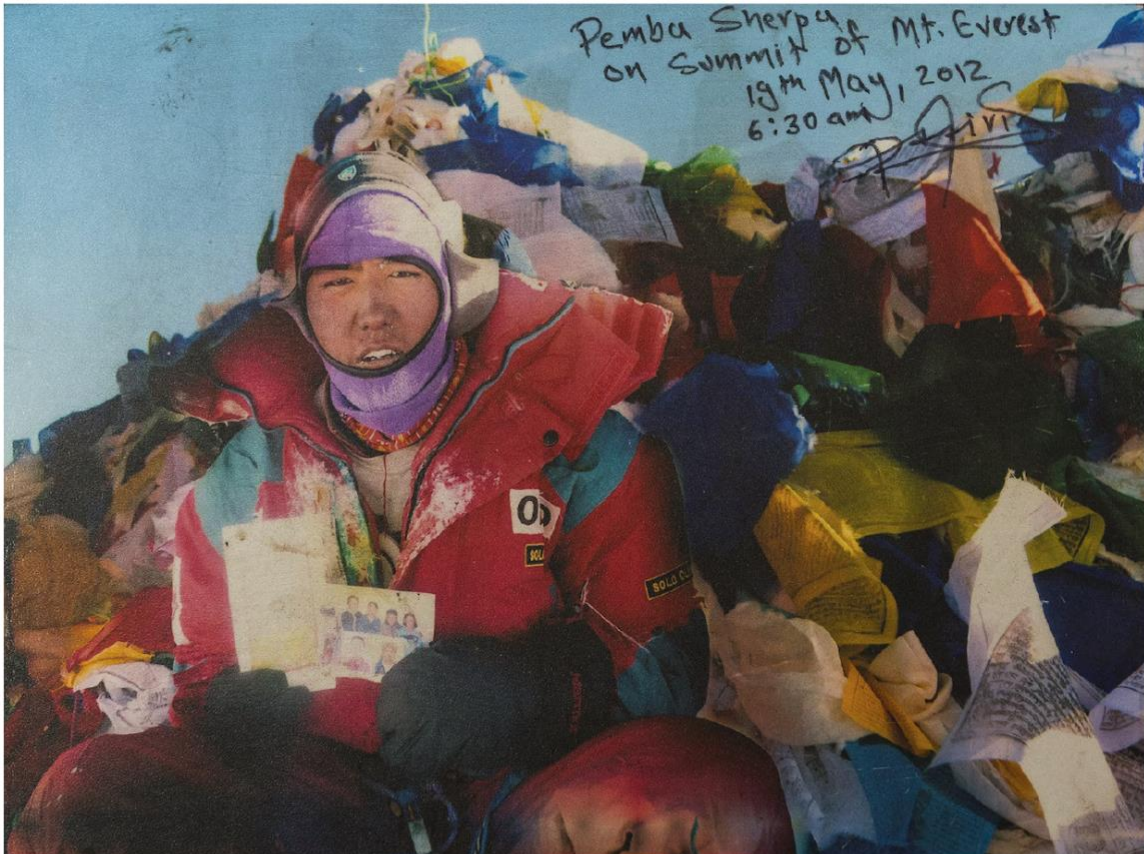


NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC



| Pemba Sherpa keeps this 2012 photograph of his first summit of Mount Everest. He's wearing his father's old down suit and holds a blessing card from Lama Geshi.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF PEMBA SHERPA; PHOTOGRAPHED BY AARON HUEY, NAT GEO IMAGE COLLECTION

IN FOCUS

A Year After Everest Disaster, This Sherpa Isn't Going Back

Memories of the killer avalanche endure, but Pemba Sherpa is also worried about the Tibetan calendar.

By Molly Loomis

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"Daytime, Pemba is OK," says Ngawang Karma Sherpa. "But nighttime..." Ngawang Karma's broken English trails off. She crinkles her nose skeptically and shakes her hands in a "so-so" gesture.

Last April 18, Ngawang Karma's 24-year-old son, Pemba, was guiding a client through Mount Everest's treacherous Khumbu Icefall when a massive avalanche killed 16 Nepali high-altitude workers.

"There's a chill in my heart," says Pemba, referring to last year's tragic avalanche. But that's not the reason he's missing Everest this year.

It was the deadliest avalanche in the history of the world's tallest mountain and led all the commercial expeditions to leave the mountain before attempting the summit. It also deeply touched the community of local workers who are the backbone of Himalayan expeditions, carrying out tasks such as establishing climbing routes, hauling loads, cooking, cleaning, and guiding clients, who pay an average of more than \$50,000 for the help. Without such assistance, the vast majority of mountaineers wouldn't have a chance of successfully scaling Mount

Everest's 29,035-foot (8,850 meters) summit, the veritable top of the world.

Pemba escaped unharmed, but he says he is not going back this year. His mother

SHERPA HOMELAND

Sherpas (Sharwa in their own language, meaning "people of the east") are believed to have migrated from Tibet into the valleys near Mount Everest about 500 years ago. The Solukhumbu District includes Everest, Cho Oyu, Pumori, and Lhotse, among other giant peaks.

worries that her son hasn't recovered from the emotional experience of being so near the avalanche and knowing all the men who died.

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'I Felt Numb'

For Pemba and his client, a man from Alaska in his mid-40s, the goal that day was to get acclimatized to the increasingly thin air on Everest by hiking from Base Camp, the makeshift village of tents at 17,290 feet (5,270 meters) that serves as a staging ground for climbing expeditions, to an area known as the Football Field, a relatively flat expanse of snow and ice at 18,850 feet. For climbers, it is the only respite from objective hazards like collapsing seracs and rock and ice fall, as well as the grueling climb up the icefall's 2,000-foot gauntlet of massive, shifting ice formations.

Pausing to sip water at the edge of the Football Field, Pemba felt a strong gust of wind blow down the valley. Later he would regard it as a warning, like the exodus of animals before an earthquake. Five minutes passed. Then he watched in awe as building-size blocks of ice tumbled off Everest's west shoulder.

Of the estimated 200 adult men in Phortse, more than 90 percent have summited Everest. Most of them have done so multiple times.

"Clip in! Clip in!" Pemba shouted to his client, who in a panic had detached himself from the safety line and was running downhill toward a minefield of crevasses. A cloud of pulverized snow and ice ballooned and funneled down the narrow valley toward them. Pemba and his cousin Phinjo Dorje Sherpa, who was just behind Pemba on the fixed line, crouched down and hoisted their packs overhead as shields against the shower of debris. Then their world went dark.

When Pemba and Phinjo Dorje rose, a blast of fresh snow had covered them. They quickly gathered their clients and began descending.

"I felt numb. I couldn't talk," Pemba says. "The question 'What's happened?' kept running through my mind."



| Bundled for transport, Ang Kami Sherpa was one of the three survivors from the avalanche that claimed the lives of 16 Nepali workers in the Khumbu Icefall last year.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ANDY TYSON, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

He heard the voice of Mingma Tshering Sherpa, also from Pemba's village of Phortse, who he knew was carrying loads closer to the avalanche's main impact zone, scratch over the radio:

"Just backpacks."

Then:

"Hands and legs."

Pemba tallied up the people he recalled seeing on the mountain earlier that morning, and realized that each one who came to mind could be dead. None of the 16 men who were killed was a close friend, but Pemba knew all of them.

Nearly a year later, "I still have them in my eyes," Pemba says.

'I Was Almost Near the Death'

For Pemba and the hundreds of other Nepalis working in the mountains, the decision to climb is often not necessarily a simple one. Financial motivation is the easiest explanation—an experienced high-altitude "personal Sherpa" could make up to \$8,000—that's nearly ten times the average annual wage in Nepal. But for each man, myriad factors are at play, as nuanced and complex as the icefall these men traverse.

This wasn't Pemba's first time dealing with death in the mountains. His second season on Everest, in 2013, he helped carry the body of a friend down from Camp III, which is at 23,484 feet (7,158 meters). But that fatality was the result of a medical condition, he says.

This time, "I was almost near the death."

The morning of the avalanche, 16 miles away in the small village of Phortse, Pemba's family learned of the tragedy from trekkers who were staying in their guesthouse, the Namaste Lodge. By mid-morning, family members finally reached Pemba by cell phone. Pemba didn't want his mother worrying, so he lied and said he was fine and that he'd taken a rest day at Base Camp.

"Everyone was getting pressure from their families. They were saying things like, 'We don't need the money; we need you to come back. We'll work hard in the fields; we'll survive; come down,' " Pemba says. "The message was loud and clear."

The next evening, when Pemba returned home, his mother greeted him in tears and his father, Lhakpa Dorje Sherpa, did so in a silent hug.



"My father was happy to see me, but he couldn't smile," Pemba says. Lhakpa Dorje, a seasoned sirdar, or lead guide, and veteran of 34 Himalayan expeditions above 8,000 meters (26,247 feet), understood the depth of what had happened and the potential impact on his son.

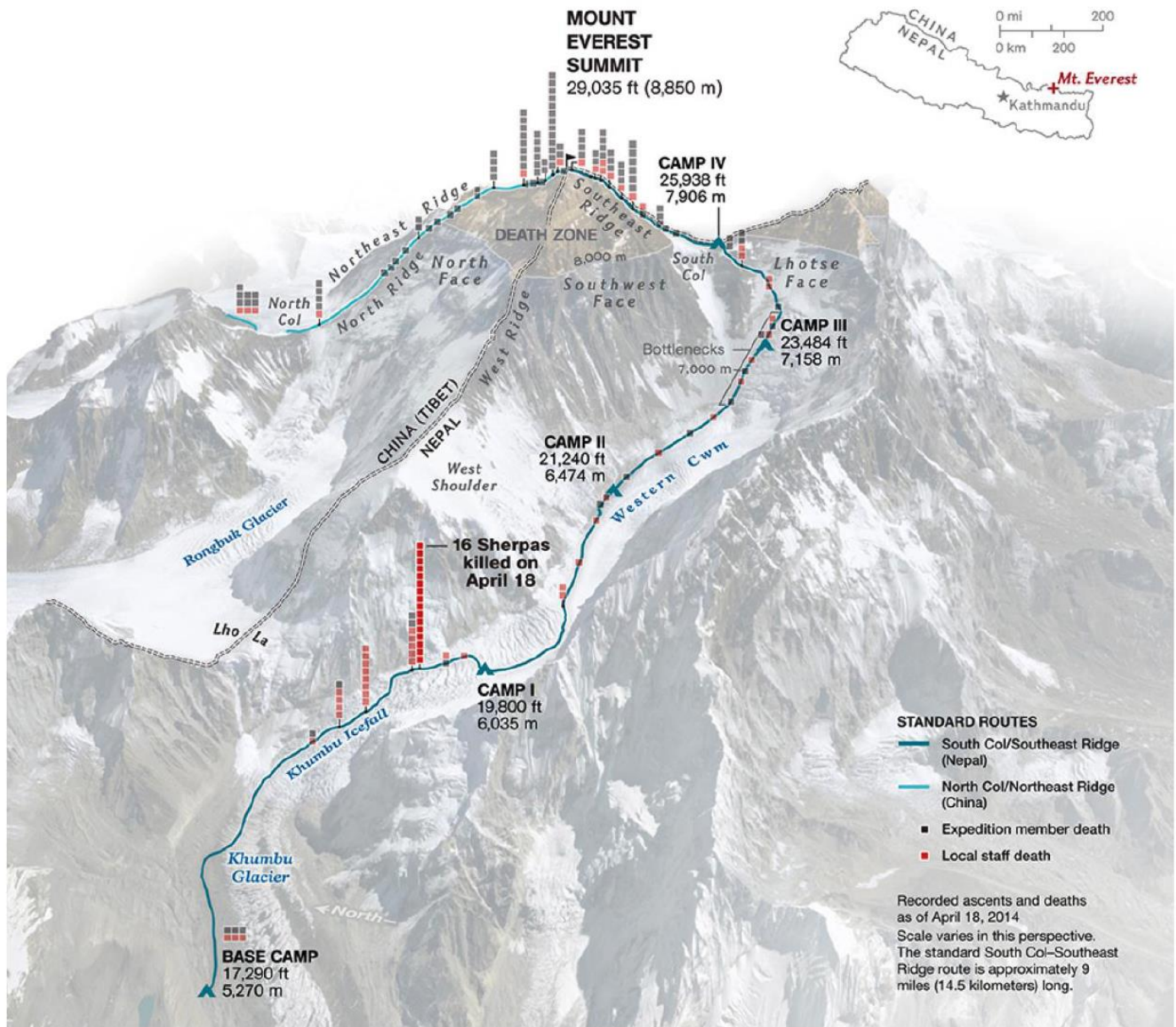
Like many men in the Khumbu, Lhakpa Dorje worked hard in the mountains so his children wouldn't have to. Lhakpa Dorje and Ngawang Karma were determined that Pemba, their youngest child and only son, would receive an excellent education and opportunities far beyond the reach of the high mountains that had confined them. (Sherpa tradition dictates that the youngest son inherits the family land and looks after the parents; daughters traditionally move to their husbands' homes.)

SHERPA HOMELAND

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Deaths on Everest

Charting the number of fatal accidents on Mount Everest's major climbing routes since 1921.



NG STAFF

SOURCES: GERMAN AEROSPACE CENTER; RAYMOND B. HUEY, UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON; RICHARD SALISBURY, HIMALAYAN

DATABASE

Lhakpa Dorje began portering at age 14. Food was scarce in Ngawang Karma's large family, and she would often leave home for kitchen jobs with mountaineering expeditions, hoping for a solid meal. They wanted a different life for their children and saw education as the key to a better future.

When Pemba turned eight, his parents enrolled him in a top-notch boarding school in Kathmandu, a two-day walk and 45-minute plane ride away. Like an increasing number of Sherpa children, he grew up far from his cultural and ancestral home, and his time with his family and in the Khumbu was limited. But while many of his Sherpa classmates gravitated toward the kinds of jobs not available to them in the Khumbu—such as medicine, business, and aviation—Pemba increasingly thought about returning to the mountains.

"You grow up being asked all the time, 'When will you climb Everest?' " Pemba says. "Being the son of a (climbing) Sherpa, I felt I must get to that point once in a lifetime."

Following His Father Into the Mountains

Of the estimated 200 adult men in Phortse, more than 90 percent of them have summited Everest. Most of them have done so multiple times. Although Lhakpa Dorje vowed never to return to Everest after an expedition left him for dead high on the mountain as he struggled to descend with a dull ice ax in hard ice, he has climbed many other high Himalayan peaks.

Pemba's maternal grandfather, Nyima Tenzing Sherpa, worked on nearly 20 expeditions. His paternal grandfather, Karma Tshering Sherpa, supplied yaks to the expedition of Edmund Hillary, who along with Sherpa mountaineer Tenzing Norgay in 1953 became the first to reach Everest's summit. Including Pemba's uncles, the family's tally adds up to more than a hundred high-altitude expeditions, and that's not counting cousins.



| The village of Phortse sits on a high plateau overlooked by the peak known as Ama Dablam (center). Of Phortse's estimated 200 adult men, 90 percent have summited Everest with commercial mountaineering teams.
PHOTOGRAPH BY AARON HUEY, NAT GEO IMAGE COLLECTION

In nearby villages such as Namche and Kunde, most families are prosperous enough that their men are no longer tempted by the paydays garnered on Everest. But many families in Phortse and Thame, towns farther off the tourist track and less developed, still need the work that Everest provides.

Those expedition earnings often are used for the next generation's education, as Pemba's family did for him. He's benefited from a good education, but the next step is uncertain. The expense of a university degree didn't feel worthwhile when Pemba knew he'd be returning to Phortse, where a diploma has no direct correlation to wages. According to Sherpa tradition, as the youngest child and only male child in the family, Pemba will eventually become responsible for the well-being of his family and their lodge.

Pemba could have worked in the lodge or stuck to the safer trails as a trekking guide, but neither would be as lucrative as high-mountain guide work. And for Phortse men, the historical ties to Everest and other high mountains in the region are long and illustrious. Young Sherpas can recite the members of early expeditions and their sirdars like baseball fans recollecting World Series lineups. The draw is understandable.

Three years ago Pemba, determined to understand his father's work, approached a Pangboche sirdar for a position on an Everest expedition. He was intent on going despite the tears and anger that followed when he told his parents of his plans.



Pemba (left) relaxes in Phortse with his grandfather, Karma Tshering Sherpa, who helped Sir Edmund Hillary build schools in the Khumbu region.

PHOTOGRAPH BY AARON HUEY, NAT GEO IMAGE COLLECTION

Pemba worried that the years in Kathmandu—being away from *tsampa*, the fortifying Sherpa porridge, as well as the rigorous life that the Khumbu demands—would put him at a disadvantage on the expedition. Tasked to ferry loads up Everest, Pemba got the opportunity to carry gear for a client on a summit day. On May 19, 2012, about 6 a.m., Pemba stood atop Mount Everest.

In his family's lodge, a photo of Pemba on top of the world is displayed prominently.

"It's a very hard question. People say sometimes you need to listen to your elders. I listened to them this year."

He's dressed in his father's old down suit, and between his gloved hands he cradles a blessing card from Lama Geshi, the monk who bestows benedictions on hundreds of climbers each year. It's a pose reenacted in countless photos of Sherpa climbers and hung in homes and teahouses all over the Khumbu. In the photo from Pemba's second ascent, in 2013, he crouches with his hands in a gesture reminiscent of an L.A. gang sign. A card from Geshi is tucked into one of his pockets.

Pemba says working expeditions isn't just about the money; he's fallen in love with climbing.

"When you're in the mountains, you sometimes get bored or homesick. But when we get back down, we forget all those hard times," he says, echoing a sentiment common to mountaineers everywhere. Like most 25-year-olds, Pemba also appreciates the independence and break from home life that expeditions give him.

The Year of Highest Danger

But Pemba won't be climbing this year, and the reasons are more complex than just the lingering trauma of last year's avalanche.

Born a quarter century ago, in the year of the iron sheep according to the Tibetan calendar, Pemba has entered what is known as a *gyak* year (pronounced "kack"). According to Nyingmapa, the form of Tibetan Buddhism that Sherpas traditionally practice, *gyak* years are supposed to be a period of obstacles and increased danger.



Surrounded by family photos, Da Nuru Sherpa shares a laugh with his mother, Daki Sherpa, at her home in Phortse. Da Nuru has summited Everest 16 times. Eight of Daki's sons have worked as mountain guides. PHOTOGRAPH BY AARON HUEY, NAT GEO IMAGE COLLECTION

For many men, this means taking a break from risky activities such as guiding on high peaks. The predominant gyak years consist of three cycles of three years each: 12, 13, and 14 years of age; 24, 25, and 26; and finally, 36, 37, and 38, with the middle year of each cycle feared as the most potent. According to some lamas, age 25 is the worst year for women, and 37 is most dreaded for men. With his 25th birthday looming, Pemba says he has a special incentive not to work on Everest this year.

"Think of December 24 as the first gyak year. There's a lot to do and worry about—you're a little stressed getting ready for Christmas Day. December 25 is the big day—that's where all the attention goes, the main gyak," explains Sange Dorje Sherpa, whose grandfather was sirdar to the famous Irvine-Mallory and Hillary-Norgay expeditions. As his family's youngest son, Sange Dorje worked in the safer trekking business, which sticks to hiking trails and lower peaks, instead of the riskier high-altitude climbing industry.

"Then the last gyak year, it's like December 26, you're hung over, feeling a little sick and lazy from all the food and drink on Christmas Day, and your fridge is full of leftovers." Sange Dorje points out that he was diagnosed with early onset diabetes at age 37, during his main gyak year.

Da Nuru Sherpa, Pemba's next-door neighbor who has ascended Everest 16 times, turned 37 last year, and like other Sherpa born in the year of the horse, he patiently bided his time trying to remove obstacles and minimize risk through pujas and prayers that his father, Nima Rhita Sherpa, Phortse's head lama, prescribed for him.

"So *Kyaggur* is to turn bad luck into good," says Lama Nima Rhita, explaining how offerings of grain and alcohol to the bad spirits associated with the *gyak* can appease them. Specific readings and decoys, called *Lu*, can also help redirect the malevolent forces.

Because of his *gyak* year, Da Nuru did not work on Everest last April, so he missed the avalanche. This year, his parents, wife, and children have made it clear that they want any climbing he does on Everest to be done on routes on the Tibet side of the mountain, which avoid the deadly Khumbu Icefall on the Nepal side.

But Da Nuru will not be returning to Everest this year after all. The mountaineers who have hired him have decided to climb the 23,517-foot (7,168 meters) Baruntse instead and save Everest for next year.



Da Nuru (orange helmet) and Panuru Sherpa carry loads for a commercial expedition up Ama Dablam.
PHOTOGRAPH BY AARON HUEY, NAT GEO IMAGE COLLECTION

Annual Migration to the High Mountains

This month, as Phortse transforms into a ghost town devoid of young men who work as guides on Everest and other mountains in the region, Pemba admits that part of him would like to go too.

Instead he'll be working in the lodge, guiding a few trekking peaks, and visiting lamas such as Da Nuru's father and Lama Geshi. Each lama will consult the *Khunu Lodu*, an almanac of Tibetan astrology, for advice on which will be the most "auspicious" times for Pemba to hang prayer flags and perform purifying ceremonies and specific mantras for minimizing the dangers and obstacles of his *gyak* year. The next time Pemba travels to Kathmandu, he'll free 50 birds and fish sold in the Sherpa section of town, to help combat *gyak* forces.

Secular cynics will dismiss all the tiptoeing around the calendar as superstitious pageantry, but for many Sherpas, the "auspiciousness" of one moment versus another is crucial and represents a complex interplay of cosmology and astrological elements, like wind and fire, which can be calculated down to the second and are specific to the exact time of each person's birth.

So, what happens next year once Pemba's *gyak* year is over? That depends on whom you ask.

Pemba would like to return to Everest despite last April's avalanche. He says the Nyingmapa belief that the day of one's death is predetermined helps quell any worries about returning to the icefall. And he acknowledges that concept might be hard for a foreigner to understand or embrace, but he is not alone in attributing the avalanche, in part, to an isolated event orchestrated by unhappy mountain deities.

"Fear comes and goes. I won't have the fear until there's another," he says, referring to last year's avalanche in the icefall.

And if his parents say no? Like many other concerned parents and spouses, Pemba's mother has made it clear she doesn't want him going back.

"It's a very hard question. People say sometimes you need to listen to your elders. I listened to them this year," Pemba says. His voice trails off, leaving the difficult question unanswered.



This year the *Khunu Lodu* predicts that April 18 will be a fortuitous day. The complementary elements of earth and water will dominate, making it an excellent day for planting and farming. And mountain climbing? Nuptal Rinpoche, a lama from the Manaslu region who is studying in the United States, says making predictions about climbing is very hard to do. After all, in ancient times, when the Tibetan texts were written, there was no such thing as mountaineering.

While Pemba's neighbors farm potatoes and his friends, cousins, and uncles shoulder loads through the icefall, Pemba will light 32 butter lamps—two for each victim—in honor of those who died in the avalanche.

Molly Loomis is a writer based in eastern Idaho.