

I HAD TO SURVIVE

HOW A PLANE CRASH IN THE ANDES
INSPIRED MY CALLING TO SAVE LIVES

DR. ROBERTO CANESSA

AND

PABLO VIERCI

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I HAD TO SURVIVE

*How a Plane Crash in the Andes
Inspired My Calling to Save Lives*

Dr. Roberto Canessa
and Pablo Vierci

Translated by Carlos Frias

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To those who are suffering and don't yet realize there is hope.

ROBERTO CANESSA

To Roberto, an inspiration to all of us.

PABLO VIERCI

Part One

Where is the line between life and death?

Through the screen of an ultrasound machine, I study the heart of a child about to be born. I take my time, watching the tiny hands and feet on the monitor, feeling as if we're communicating somehow through the screen. I'm fascinated at this life that will soon be among us—and at this heart that will have to be repaired in order for the child to survive.

One moment I'm gazing at the ultrasound screen, and the next I'm staring out the window of the crumpled fuselage of a plane, scanning the horizon to see if my friends will return alive from their test hike. Ever since we escaped from the plane crash in the Andes mountains on December 22, 1972, after being lost for more than two months, I have asked myself a litany of questions, which is constantly changing. Foremost among them: What do you do when all the odds seem stacked against you?

I turn to the pregnant mother, who is lying on a gurney on the second floor of the Hospital Italiano in Montevideo, Uruguay. What is the best way to tell her that the child in her womb has developed in utero lacking the most important chamber of her heart? Until just a few years ago, newborns with these kinds of congenital heart defects, who came into the world stricken through no fault of their own, would die shortly after birth. Their only mark on the world would be a brief agony followed by a lasting trauma for the families. Fortunately, however, medicine took a crucial step forward, and this mother, Azucena, with the look of consternation on her face, can now have hope. There is a long, arduous journey ahead for the woman and her baby daughter, as well as for her husband and their two other children. It is an uncharted path as precarious as the one I made through the Andes. My friends and I were lucky enough to emerge from those mountains finally and reach the verdant valley of Los Maitenes. That's where I'm trying to lead these children, into their own verdant valley, although I carry the burden of knowing that not all of them will survive the journey.

This is my dilemma as a doctor. I find myself teetering between life and death as I watch this baby, whose mother has already named her Maria del Rosario. She can live for now, tethered to the placenta in her mother's womb, but what is to be done afterward? Should I propose a series of long, drawn-out surgeries so that she has a chance at living? And will it be worth all the risks and costs involved? I'm sometimes overwhelmed at the similarities between our predicaments.

When we finally left the fuselage to trek across the peaks and chasms leading to that valley in Chile, we encountered a vast no-man's-land. It's almost impossible to remain alive in that weather, at thirty below without any gear and after having lost nearly seventy pounds. It was impossible, everyone assumed, to trek more than fifty miles from east to west directly over the Andes, because no one in our weakened physical state would be able to withstand the rigors. We could have chosen to remain in that uterine fuselage, safe until it, too, became inhospitable when we ran out of the only nourishment that was keeping us alive, the lifeless bodies of our friends. Just as the infant gets nourishment from the mother, we were able to do so from our friends, the most precious thing we had in that world. Should we stay or should we go? Remain huddled or press forward? The only equipment we had to help us on our journey was a sleeping bag we cobbled together out of insulation from the pipes of the plane's heating system, stitched with copper wire. It looked like something plucked from a landfill.

This child, still a fetus, still connected to her source of nourishment, can survive a little longer, just as we did in the fuselage. But one day, as with us, the cord will have to be cut if she is to live, because we are in

race against time. I was the last one to decide to venture out, and that's why this recurring image has remained with me, intense and haunting. ~~When should we cut the cord? When should we subject ourselves to the ordeal of attempting to cross the hostile mountain range?~~ I knew that a hasty decision to trek across the mountains carried great risk, just as premature labor does for these children with congenital heart defects.

It took me a lot of deliberation to make my choice. There were simply too many factors, but I knew we were down to our last chance. Nando Parrado understood my doubts because he was wary as well, although he couldn't say this out loud for fear of letting down the rest of the survivors of the plane crash. With each person who died, we all died a little bit, too. It wasn't until Gustavo Zerbino told me that one of the bravest of our friends, Numa Turcatti, had died, that I decided it was time to go. It was time to leave the safety of the fuselage, to be born with a heart that wasn't ready for the outside world. One of my friends, Arturo Nogueira, who'd had both of his legs broken in the crash and eventually perished, told me, "You're so lucky, Roberto, that you can walk for the rest of us." Otherwise he might have been the one here today, in my place.

I was nineteen years old, a second-year medical student, a rugby player, and Lauri Surraco was my girlfriend when our plane crashed into the mountain that October 13, 1972. Those seventy days on the mountain were literally a crash course in the medicine of catastrophes, of survival, where the spark for my vocation would become a roaring flame. It was the most brutal of laboratories, where we were the guinea pigs—and we all knew it. In that sinister proving ground, I gained a new perspective on medicine: To be healed meant simply to survive. Nothing I learned since could compare with that ignoble birth.

In the hospitals where I've worked, some of my colleagues have criticized me, behind my back and to my face, for being domineering, impetuous, for flouting the rules or going beyond what's considered proper conduct—something my companions on the mountain accused me of at times as well. But patients don't care about the social mores of a medical corporation; they come to a hospital and then go home, no longer subject to its rules. My ways are the ways of the mountains. Hard, implacable, steeled over the anvil of an unrelenting wilderness in which only one thing matters: the fight to stay alive.

OCTOBER 13, 1972

When I close my eyes, I often travel through time and space to find myself back in the Valley of Tears of the day of the crash. Until that moment, my friends and I had been living in a predictable universe. Then, of a sudden, there was a tear in the expectations of our lives—and we were left adrift in an eternal limbo where time neither begins nor ends.

It was 3:29 p.m. on October 13, 1972. When I looked out of the plane window, I was surprised to see the peaks of the Andes so close to the wings of our Fairchild FH-227D. Our rugby team, from Stella Maris Christian Brothers, had chartered the forty-five-passenger turboprop from Uruguay's air force to carry the players, alumni, and fans to a match in Chile.

Suddenly, I felt the plane drop into a pocket of turbulence. Then another. The plane tried to pull up and gain altitude. Although the pilot had the engines at full thrust, they simply were not powerful enough. A moment later, there was a sinister sound as a wing was lost to the mountaintop. This was followed by a shattering explosion, the sound of crumpling metal, and a spinning descent.

We were tossed around as if in a hurricane. I was stunned, dizzy, as the plane made impact and tumbled amid deafening explosions, sliding down the side of the mountain at what felt like supersonic speed. I was gripped by the realization that our plane had crashed into the Andes—and that I was going to die. No one walks away from an accident like this, man and machine, limbs and steel, twisted and smashed. I held on to my seat so fiercely that I tore off chunks of fabric with my bare hands as my insides were jolted about. I bowed my head, ready for the final blow that would send me into oblivion. *What will it be like to die? Will I gasp for air, lose my sight? Will the world go dark? How much pain can I tolerate? Will I have to watch my limbs be torn from my body? Will I be aware until the final moment of my death? When will I finally lose consciousness?*

We quickly came to a violent stop, and my seat, to which I was still belted, ripped away from its moorings and plowed into the seat in front of mine, a chain reaction that didn't end until our rows of seats were piled up against the cockpit. *But I'm still breathing.* I started to think that maybe this was death because I couldn't believe I was still alive. I hadn't yet realized that death would come for us in small doses, bit by bit.

I passed out for what seemed like seconds. When I came to, I couldn't quite grasp what had happened. I was having trouble seeing and was dizzy and in pain, but I couldn't seem to pinpoint what hurt. I heard disoriented moans and groans and breathed in the pungent fumes of jet fuel. Looking behind me, I saw the body of the plane was wide open. I couldn't believe my eyes: The fuselage had been torn apart and the tail section was missing. There were mountains all around us where the rest of the plane should have been, and a blizzard was whipping aside everything in its path, lashing us with the cold. Heads and hands started to move in the chairs that had been strewn about, torn free of their bolts. Flaco Vazquez, who was in the seat across the aisle from me, looked at me for help. He was pale, confused, in shock. . . . Someone behind me removed the tangle of seats and metal that was pinning me in. I turned around to see Gustavo Zerbino. He looked at me as if to say: *You're alive!* Wordlessly, we asked ourselves: *Now what? Where do we begin?* But then Carlos was Carlitos Paez, another friend, who, still in shock, finally managed to speak, saying only, "Canessa, this is a disaster, isn't it?"

I looked over and realized Flaco Vazquez's leg was injured, and we had to stop the bleeding. There was

a moment to lose. The instinct to act kicked in, helping me to take my first steps. It wasn't that I had no doubts; it was just that there wasn't any time for them.

As I started to move about, I stumbled over something—or rather, someone: Alvaro Mangino, who was lying under his seat, trapped by twisted steel. Gustavo lifted the seat and I dragged Alvaro out. His right leg had been pinned under metal, and when I freed him, I could see that his leg was broken. I told Alvaro to concentrate on anything else, and then quickly, I set the break. Tears ran down Alvaro's cheeks, but he didn't so much as grunt. I wrapped his leg tightly in a piece of torn shirt that Gustavo handed me. That was all I would have to do until we could find something better to make a splint.

We continued our search through the wreckage. The next person we came upon was the heavyset Enrique Platero. He pointed down at his body, as if it were someone else's, to show us a piece of metal jammed into his stomach. How deep, we had no idea. Gustavo told him to turn away, and he dislodged the metal, which came out with a piece of peritoneal fat. I tucked it back inside and bandaged it over with a piece of rugby jersey. "Thank you," Platero said.

The cold was immediately everywhere. Instead of the 75 degrees it had been inside the cabin, it was now 10 below, and we were surrounded by blustery snow and ice. We opened luggage in search of jackets and sweaters, as well as T-shirts that we could use as bandages.

I saw our team captain, Marcelo Perez del Castillo, followed by a few others who were all helping to move the survivors. We tried to clear a path in a cabin riddled with twisted, razor-sharp shrapnel that was pinning many other passengers, who began to stir like shadows from another world. A short distance away, Gustavo joined Daniel Fernandez and Moncho Sabella, who were trying to speak with the agonized copilot about what had happened—and what was going to happen next.

"This one's alive. . . . This one's dead," Gustavo noted as we moved about the ruptured cabin, and he reached down to check the pulse of a third. We bandaged one, consoled another . . .

God, I'm exhausted. Why is it so hard to breathe? I looked toward the back of the plane, through the gaping maw where a snowy universe was visible, a world indifferent to the terror and plight around us. For the first time, I asked myself, *Where the hell are we? Could we have crashed this far up the mountain? How could a plane, filled with fuel, crash into a mountain ridge and not totally explode?* I looked out and saw my best friend, Bobby François, sitting on a piece of luggage in the snow, shaking his head and muttering over and over, "We're doomed."

Before I knew it, darkness began to fall. Almost immediately, it became completely black. We used our lighters to see, all the while fearing that we might ignite the jet fuel that permeated everything around us. Three more lighters flicked on, their flames whipping and fading in the dark ruptured cabin as the freezing gusts battered us.

The air was so thin at this altitude that I was completely exhausted. My hands were covered in the blood of the dying and the dead. I found a corner where I could rest without stumbling over the injured, the mutilated, or the corpses. The net that delineated the luggage compartment, near the flight deck, was supported by two aluminum bars, forming a kind of hammock. When I got there, I realized someone else had had the same idea, someone I had never met, Coche Inciarte. We huddled together, shivering in the darkness, and lay down to sleep. I closed my eyes and tried to use all my senses. At first, I thought how unlucky I was. But then, as I moved my tired muscles and felt my body respond to each of my brain's commands, I felt exactly the opposite: No one on earth was luckier, and for that, I should be eternally grateful.

My mother was a brave, beautiful woman, but she had a quirk: She stuttered when she was nervous. However, that never stopped her. On the contrary, it seemed to make her more determined, more audacious, and impervious to criticism or embarrassment when she knew she was right. I never actually noticed her stutter.

My father's family, meanwhile—all Genoese descendants who held Italian citizenship—was focused on medicine. My great grandfather was a prominent member of the medical academy, and my father was a highly regarded professor of cardiology at the medical school.

Although Papa was elegant and dapper, Mama never worried about dressing her sons like well-off people. My father's sober disposition was the yin to my mother's yang, and I think that's why they got along so well for so many years. They complemented each other, which made for a rare home life for me and my siblings—a place where no two days were alike. They ended up raising four completely different children.

My mother's family was huge and loving. Since my grandfather had died at an early age and my mother's sisters didn't yet have children of their own, I was the beloved baby boy in a family of doting aunts in the thirties. My mother had asked my father if she could name me after her late father, and so I was named Roberto Jorge.

My family believed in the free, secular, and mandatory education that Jose Pedro Varela had established in 1876 in Uruguay—the first Latin American country to have such a system—and so education was like religion in my home. Teachers and professors were among the most important people in society. Education was so central to our lives that my mother took in an orphan boy and fostered him for years just to ensure that he would graduate.

Since I was the only boy in such a large family, they loved to spoil me. They gave me too many liberties, and I became wild and mischievous. My aunts exposed me to all kinds of art and music. Throughout my childhood, I wrote poetry they loved to read aloud or have me read aloud, mixed in with some of the famous poets such as Gustavo Adolfo Becquer, Antonio Machado, and Jorge Manrique. One of my uncles jokingly called me “Satan's spawn” because I was such a rascal. And one of my aunts gave me a horse, Alfie, for me to burn off some of my pent-up energy. And so the son of a well-to-do doctor and college professor began riding through the streets of the manicured neighborhood in tattered clothing and on horseback.

Everyone assumed I would go on to do well in school, which was the highest calling in my family, but school turned out to be my first big challenge. Everyone figured that my natural brightness would carry me far, but my free spirit clashed with the Irish Christian Brothers of the 1950s and 1960s. I may have been hardheaded thanks to my aunts' spoiling me, but the Brothers more than matched my stubbornness. I kept banging my head up against that ceiling because I didn't want to acknowledge that there were rules I had to respect.

Going to school was like being in the military, or in jail. I'd often end up in fights. But the Brothers were never intimidated by my rebelliousness. For the Brothers, to whom attitude was always more important than academic achievements, dealing with me was like trying to break a wild mustang. I had the hardest time trying to figure out my new surroundings.

The Brothers told my mother that clearly I was different from all the other boys, but that they wouldn't deviate from their teaching method. That fair-but-tough upbringing was as much a part of their trademark as their great rugby teams were. The only reason they didn't expel me, as they had so many others, was

because amid all the havoc I'd wrought, I had never lied. Just one little white lie, they told her, and they'd kick my butt right to the curb. They checked in with all my teachers frequently, but I never committed the one transgression they wouldn't tolerate.

I learned the mores of this new society the hard way. And the Brothers started to understand me as well. By the time I was fourteen or fifteen, they gave me the honor of naming me leader of Iona House, one of the groups our school was divided into for intramural sports and academic competitions, as well as group prefect. I was perplexed as to why, when it came time to pick a leader, they had chosen the most undisciplined, troublesome boy among us. I asked Brother Brendan Wall, who had become my friend, why they had picked me. "Who better to deal with the knuckleheads than a retired knucklehead? Takes one to know one," he told me.

By the time I was sixteen, I'd started to come into my own in school and prepared to enter college, where I intended to study medicine. Meanwhile, I got better at rugby every day as my body began to develop. I worked out tirelessly, and soon I left behind a scrawny physique to earn my nickname, "Muscles." Since I loved to make individual plays, I was moved from my position of half scrum to wing, where I could take the ball and make a play all on my own—which fit my personality. And in 1971, I was named to the Uruguayan national rugby team.

One of the unique things throughout my childhood was that my parents would let my siblings and me spend the weekends at the small family farm of Elena Bielli, who worked as our nanny during the week. She was a humble farmer from Las Piedras, on the outskirts of Montevideo. My siblings got homesick sometimes, but I never did. I immediately adapted to the place, which felt rustic and mysterious to us and which fascinated me. The farmers tilled the soil with an ox, grew vegetables, made wine from their very own vineyard, and raised pigs, which they sometimes butchered for meat and homemade sausage. I jumped right in like one of the farmworkers, because here, at Elena's house, our roles were reversed: She was the boss, and we were the workers. I'd arrive neat and clean, and a little while later, I would be helping butcher pigs and stuff sausages, my clothes stained with blood and guts like a military field medic. When they dropped us off at the farm, I could see my mother turning in her seat as the car drove off, my father looking back at me through his dark sunglasses in the rearview mirror.

In a way, I was a cross between all my backgrounds: my father's dignified professorial family; my mother's loving, free-spirited, humanistic family; and Elena Bielli's humble, hardworking farm family.

There's a reason why I wasn't much for following society's conventions: It's something I learned from my mother. She wasn't much for following the rules, and, without saying a word, she taught me to do the same.

One day, when I was a boy, years before Armstrong, Collins, and Aldrin landed on the moon in 1969, my mother was chatting with me in my room. "Roberto," she told me, "even if you decide to go to the moon, you can count on me to pack your bag." The day I watched Armstrong actually set foot on the moon, I looked at my mother, who was sitting next to me, completely enthralled. *Maybe she wasn't kidding.*

There was a time when my parents were still dating that the professor of clinical medicine failed my father on an exam, unjustly my mother thought, and she went to pound on the teacher's door for an explanation. That episode caused my father equal parts admiration and worry. At first they complemented each other. But in time, that kind of behavior wore down the bond between them, until the day my father left her, fracturing our home.

My mother was not only fearless, she also had no filter. Thoughts became actions, with no stopping point in between. It was with this indefatigable determination and certainty that she loved and supported me, her firstborn son. It was with that drive and determination that she taught me to swim upstream, so to speak, in turbulent waters. "Don't be afraid, Roberto. Fear is a fantasy. Rise above it and watch as it disappears." It was that drive I kept with me on the mountain and have carried with me all the days of my life. After

returned from the Andes, she would stop by every day so that she could watch me up close, to make sure she wouldn't lose me again.

Her unconditional love and support were so strong that they erased my fears. I lost the fear of failure. I became brave enough to face life head-on, because I knew she was much braver. "Never hold on to any bitterness," she would say, as she called my father's new wife, who was also a doctor, to ask for medicine when she needed it for her four children.

She didn't use her strong nature to hurt or be domineering but to express her point of view, however odd it might be—even if she had to deliver it through syncopated speech. Some might think that those who stutter do so because they're hesitant and unsure about what they want to say. My mother taught me it's the other way around. She was so steadfast in her point of view that her body was trying to physically temper her delivery, a sputtering torrent of emotion that left me both stunned and in awe of what came thundering out. It was my mother, finally, who prepared me to understand and confront the mountain.

The first night seemed to last forever. I woke up startled amid a nightmare. I looked around: The fuselage was frosted over, and everything near the open end was covered in ice. The area toward the front of the cabin had been mostly sheltered from the snow. The light of the overcast morning took forever in coming and when the first rays finally fell on the battered plane, I could barely believe my eyes. Only then did Coche Inciarte see my face: He stared at me bewildered, as if he'd seen a ghost. A frigid night of moans and wails had aged us in a matter of hours.

What survived of the fuselage lay on its side in the snow with eight cabin windows turned to the sky, five pressed against the ice below. The plane evidently had broken apart before it hit the ground at an angle. Loose cables and wires were dangling from the ceiling. I headed outside to face an overwhelming sight, a vast amphitheater of open space stretching to the east (Argentina) and an intractable U-shaped wall of mountains hemming us in on the west. There was no time to feel sorry for myself.

I began my morning rounds with Gustavo Zerbino at my side. Several had died overnight. Some, such as Enrique Platero, remained stable, while others, such as Nando's sister, Susana, had only gotten worse. Nando, who we had feared dead, remained in a coma.

Our first task that morning was to remove the bodies from the fuselage. As opposed to the previous night, when the surrounding snow had been powdery soft (our friend Carlos Valeta had taken a misstep and sunk in over his head), the ground was now packed and frozen. Jagged black rocks and chunks of airplane wreckage covered the terrain.

Some of the bodies were stiff, and it took three of us to drag them out with straps fashioned from airplane seat belts. The goal was to stabilize the seriously injured until help arrived. That second day, we were under the illusion that it was a miracle we had survived, and since we believed that we had crashed much farther down the mountain than we actually had, we firmly believed our rescue was imminent. It kept us from being overwhelmed with panic after a hysterical night, during which the darkness was filled with desperate screams and groans. Before he died, the copilot, Dante Lagurara, the only crew member from the pilot cabin that had survived, said the Chileans knew we had passed Curico and were in the Chilean foothills, which he thought would be the key to our rescue. The plane's altimeter read only 7,000 feet—a figure we later learned was wrong, a result of the needle going haywire after the impact.

Marcelo Perez del Castillo got a group together to round up whatever food and useful items we could find. But we found only a scarce amount of food. The mores of our snowy society began to develop. We rationed the found provisions equally, and there were no disputes over a jacket or shirt or pants anyone might find while searching the wreckage.

We had to remain calm; if we panicked, we were dead. Everyone moved languidly due to the altitude. Whatever aches or regrets any of us felt, we kept to ourselves. The worst was behind us, we told ourselves. We needed to stay positive for those who were seriously injured, to give them hope. They were our responsibility, and we refused to disappoint or abandon them.

Marcelo and his group arranged the empty baggage that we found into the shape of an enormous cross so that our rescuers might see us from high above. We scratched out an S.O.S. into the snow with our feet. But to our astonishment, shattering our expectations, no one came for us. With nightfall, we returned to the fuselage to await another frigid evening, hoping that this one would be less brutal after we'd built a wall of suitcases over the opening.

The next morning we clearly heard a jet flying high overhead. Almost immediately afterward, a prop plane followed it, even higher than the first. Each of us swore we saw the first plane dip its wing, a clear message that it had seen us—a sign that we should get ourselves ready, that a blessed rescue was finally on the way. We were sure of it. An hour later, when we heard the distant buzzing of a small, twin-engine airplane, we were convinced that it, too, was part of the rescue—the plane was scanning the ground below, sending coordinates back to base about the location of the wreckage, the debris field, and the tiny moving dots that were us, the survivors.

We jumped and screamed and cried because we'd been found—we were saved. Our main concern in that fleeting moment of euphoria was how we would explain what had happened to the families of the deceased. Little did we know that before long, some of us would be counted among the dead.

Despite all our predictions, despite the signals that the planes had so clearly sent us, help did not arrive that day. There were no more hopeful signs, no charitable drops of food or warm clothing. And so began the series of questions without answers: Why? Where are we? When are they coming? What did we do wrong? We lied to ourselves again, to buy some time, to let ourselves down easily so that we didn't go insane. It was not an easy rescue, we told ourselves; they'll need helicopters, or possibly they've already set off on foot with mules; it's only a matter of time before we'll see them come over the least treacherous mountains to the northeast.

When dusk arrived, we trudged back inside the plane. Another fearsome night awaited us.

On day three, we heard the buzzing of airplanes again, but to our surprise, they were no longer overhead. The search had moved on to another area. We discovered a commercial airplane flight path high overhead from a world that was going on without us—and which we were no longer a part of. I began to pray that some guiding hand would lift my pleas to the planes overhead, and miraculously, they would send down help. Even to this day, whenever I fly over a mountain range, I feel that very emotion and ask God to bless the shepherds below, sleeping in caves as they tend their flocks.

We didn't know what was taking so long but remained convinced that help was on the way. What could those planes be searching for so far away from us? Maybe the rest of the broken Fairchild? The crash site? The tail section that ended up God knows where? We remained in limbo.

Gradually, as the days passed, the fractured cabin ceased to be the wreckage of a plane that had had a destination—and a destiny. It was now a wretched refuge amid a hostile mountain. The fuselage and those of us huddled inside were no longer of this world. The twenty-seven of us—which would soon become nineteen . . . and then sixteen—were strangers now, beings from another dimension. We could not imagine in those first desperate days that our shelter would soon become a tomb.

Roberto's Father: Juan Carlos Canessa

At 7:00 p.m. on October 13, 1972, I was driving down the road in Montevideo, near the Rio de la Plata when I heard a radio report that they believed a Uruguayan plane had gone down in the Andes mountains. Minutes later, they revealed the details that it had been on its way to Santiago, Chile, but had never arrived. My hands began to shake. But since Roberto and his friends had been traveling the day before, on October 12, I stopped the car and sighed with a mixture of fright and relief. They dodged a bullet—we dodged a bullet! Thank God, Roberto just barely missed crashing into the Andes!

But when I pulled up to our house in Carrasco, the mayhem on the sidewalk made my heart sink. A nervous crowd had formed. It suddenly reminded me of a wake. I parked in the driveway and got out, and when I stared into their faces, that was when it hit me: Roberto was on that plane. *How could it be, if they landed yesterday?* I did the math, tried to will the days to be wrong, when someone said, “They laid over for the night in Mendoza because of bad weather.” The words were like a physical blow to my chest, what I always heard a heart attack felt like. I knew I was too young for a heart attack, but it was exactly what’s described in the medical journals when someone suffers overwhelmingly joyous or painful news too intense for the heart to withstand.

The next day, on October 14, I flew to Chile with Luis Surraco, the father of my son’s girlfriend, because we wanted to be part of the search team. But they wouldn’t let us on the flights. The Chilean search and rescue team was in charge of the mission, and there was no room for relatives on the planes. I returned to Montevideo, but when they still hadn’t been found five days later, I flew back to Santiago. I posted myself outside the home of the president of the republic, Salvador Allende, because apparently the best helicopter for the task was assigned to his administration. But I wasn’t able to get them to loan it.

I returned to Montevideo empty-handed. Without my son.

Time passed in a constant nightmare. I don’t remember what was real or imagined. But what I do know is that on October 23, the Chilean search and rescue team abandoned its search.

In the midst of October storms in the Andes, which sometimes kept us trapped in the fuselage for up to twenty-four hours at a time, the death toll began to mount. It took a new victim every few days and exacted a toll on the survivors, who began to see that dying was much easier than clinging to life in this frozen Andean field hospital that was the wreckage of our plane.

Our group began to transform into a single organism, including those who could barely move for lack of oxygen or serious injuries. We would gravitate around the best ideas, just as humans might have done to survive at the beginning of time. Each one of us contributed in his own way, selflessly and without ego, so that our efforts grew exponentially. In a way, we were like a rugby team unable to substitute players; when one man went down, it only forced us to extract that much more strength from each individual. Everything else we might have brought with us from the outside world—selfishness, vanity, dishonor, greed—was forgotten in this frozen world.

Nando Parrado had a severe cerebral edema, which might have killed him, but a fortunate accident proved the best treatment imaginable: He spent one night with his head against the ice. And ice, as it turns out, is not only the world's most abundant medical provision but is also the best remedy for edemas and pain relief, which the field of medicine wouldn't begin using widely as such until twenty years later.

The first thing that struck Fito Strauch in those early days was the problem of thirst: Although we were surrounded by snow, attempting to drink it irritated our gums and made our tongues and throats swell. The method he discovered for melting the snow was as simple as it was ingenious. He set a thin layer of ice on a sheet of aluminum from the back part of the seats, twisted it into a funnel out in the sun, and let it drain into a bottle.

We took apart the seats and lay the cushions over the cold metal below us. I pulled off their thick turquoise fabric and used electrical wiring to sew them into blankets. With the leftover squares, we made mittens and caps.

Women's perfume became disinfectant, razor blades scalpels. Rugby jerseys became bandages.

Fito worried that the glare off the snow would eventually lead to snow blindness, so he fashioned several pairs of sunglasses out of the sunshield we found in the cockpit. Since it was impossible to walk outside after midday without sinking waist-deep in snow, Fito strapped a pair of seat cushions to his feet with seat belts to use as makeshift snowshoes.

We developed a rotation for sleeping in the more comfortable parts of the fuselage and eventually fashioned a sleeping bag for our expeditions. That heat would mean the difference between life and death.

Our team, whose average age was twenty, grew into a family, with all the unconditional attachments that link mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, grandparents, aunts, and uncles.

I can still see them: Gustavo Nicolich and Fito Strauch rebuilding the cross out of luggage every morning after it had been covered with snow; Alvaro Mangino and Arturo Nogueira running the water production for me, taking care of Vasco Echavarren's injuries; Daniel Fernandez massaging Bobby François's feet so they wouldn't freeze; Coche Inciarte telling stories to hearten the two youngest members of our group; Roy Harley organizing the inside of the fuselage to keep it habitable; Carlitos Paez entranced with a glow-in-the-dark statuette of the Virgin Mary and the rosary he had found; and Gustavo Zerbino storing in a small suitcase the documents, medallions, crucifixes, and watches of those who had died.

Each of us performed a vital function to sustain this delicate balance, like the various organs of the

human body. Our common goal was to survive, to overcome nature's inherent desire to destroy us, to break us apart, to transform us into what we rightly should have been up there on that frigid mountain: ice. Sometimes we advanced; other times we retreated into the shell of our fuselage. There was a delicate dance between the organic and the inorganic.

The power we had initially bestowed on our captain, Marcelo, eventually passed to the three Strauch cousins—Fito Strauch, Daniel Fernandez Strauch, and Eduardo Strauch—after Marcelo died in an avalanche. With that power came the respect of the other survivors, who treated the three like tribal elders even though they were only a few years older than the rest of the group. The cousins didn't make all the decisions but rather would give their approval. They led the group, but they listened to the others' ideas.

While we had imbued them with moral authority and the power to render justice, it was not surprising that at times individuals questioned their decisions. On other occasions, unjustified complaints would arise among us, because the group required escape valves to maintain its balance. The scapegoats were strong enough to withstand this occasional pressure, to help alleviate the group's tension. But we had to be careful: we knew the group's stability relied on regulating this dynamic. And so we came to this sort of equilibrium—the homeostasis of a desperate group, the seesaw between justice and catharsis.

In that erratic and precarious society, my role was to play every role. I asked the cousins to allow me to use my outside-the-box thinking that had often earned me the title of “unbearable” in the civilized world. It was time to proverbially jump back on the untamed horse of my childhood, to push things to the limit, even though it might come off as bold or reckless or even disrespectful. The cousins, in their wisdom, agreed that this kind of thinking could be favorable to the group.

Our story became world famous because of how we survived: by eating those who had died. It was, by far, our most eccentric idea, one that was simultaneously simple and audacious, and perhaps inconceivable. But we had felt the sensation of our bodies consuming themselves just to remain alive, the feeling of total and complete starvation, where merely standing up was enough to make us dizzy and pass out from hunger. We experienced that primitive instinct of true hunger—and perhaps what wild animals feel. It's something innate, irrational. It was a young man with his mouth stained blue after trying to eat the synthetic leather luggage that, in modern times, is no longer made from actual hides. Hunger demands, above all else, to be satisfied.

When my son Hilario was four, his kindergarten classmates came up to him and said, “Did you know your dad ate his friends?” And, as if it were the most ordinary question in the world, Hilario sat them down and said, “Yes, let me tell you how it happened.” When he finished telling his story, their hunger had been satisfied.

When we finally resorted to the cadavers to survive, we thought we had gone mad, or that we had become savages. But later, we realized that it was the only sane thing to do—although the outside world might always carry a kernel of suspicion that we had, indeed, gone insane.

The decision to nourish ourselves with the bodies—Fito Strauch, Gustavo Zerbino, Daniel Maspons, and I would be the first to make the incisions—would be the last definitive step in our transformation. The final goodbye to innocence. We were pushing the limits of our fear. I knew the protein in the bodies could help us survive. And I also knew that if we delayed our decision any longer, we would become too weak to recover from starvation. We couldn't wait forever, or our bodies would be so far gone that the effects would be irreversible. But at the same time, what if a miracle occurred in time to avoid this transgression? Nevertheless, the consequences of time seemed so gruesome.

Ultimately, we must face these critical moments on our own. I will never forget that first incision, when each man was alone with his conscience on that infinite mountaintop, on a day colder and grayer than any before it or since. The four of us, with a razor blade or a shard of glass in hand, carefully cut the clothing of

a body whose face we could not bear to look at. We lay the thin strips of frozen flesh aside on a piece of sheet metal. Each of us consumed his piece when he could finally bring himself to.

Javier Methol prayed to God for enlightenment and said that God responded that it was like a holy communion. Javier recited the New Testament verses to us, straight from memory from John 6:54 and Matthew 26:26: “He who eats of my flesh and drinks of my blood will have eternal life, and I will resurrect him on the last day. Take and eat, this is my body.”

In turn, my God had become dissociated into two personalities. There was the God of the outside world, the one of the Ten Commandments, who ordered that we not steal or lie. But my God of the mountain was different. While I prayed to him for eternal life, I also begged him to allow me to stay on earth just a little bit longer. He was the God I prayed would help me make it across the mountain range, the one to whom I made promises I have yet to keep: that if he saved me, I would go to church every day at 7:00 a.m. after having the most succulent breakfast imaginable at 6:00. Because true hunger is atrocious, beastly, instinctively primordial—and the God of the mountain witnessed the groaning of my insides. So while I promised to honor him, he saw me and knew I had lost the ability to lie or to conceal my overwhelming starvation.

So I prayed to my mountain God about whether I could eat my friends. Because without his consent, I felt I would be violating their memory, that I would be stealing their souls. What’s worse, I could not ask for their permission. But a rational and loving solution to the question that had haunted me emerged to quiet my fears and fill me with serenity. While we were still alive, those of us who were willing said out loud that if we died, the rest could use our bodies to survive. And for me, it was an honor to say that if my heart stopped beating, my arms and legs and muscles could still be a part of our mission to get off that mountain, and that it could always be said that Roberto died trying to make that goal a reality. That was our greatest invention in the Andes: a generous death.

I cannot help but associate that event, using a dead body to continue living, with something that would be realized the world over in the coming decades: organ and tissue transplants. We broke the taboo, and in some way, the world broke it along with us in the years to come as what was once thought bizarre became a new way to respect and honor the dead.

For us, taking this leap was a final break, and the consequences were irreversible: We were never the same.

Saying “You’re the ones who saved yourselves by eating your dead,” is too much an oversimplification. We offered our bodies up to one another so that in some way, we might all walk off that mountain together. Besides staving off starvation, it bought us time. When it was clear that the search had been called off, we knew we had to turn to eating the dead to survive. It became a tool, as critical as sleeping huddled together for warmth or rigging that sleeping bag. As critical as organizing a new flawed and fragile society. As critical as daring to hike off that mountain.

What was at first taboo simply became another part of our struggle, like using our minds and our courage to do what was necessary to stay alive. Plan A, waiting for help, had failed. The world of the living evidently had carved our tombstones—and we were on our own. Against that backdrop, where there was no help in sight and adversity continued to mount, our deceased friends became nourishment. Plan B became doing whatever was necessary to get back home.

A day later, on October 23, 1972, ten days after the accident, as we were scanning our tiny Spirit transistor radio for news about where the search was centered, only to learn that it had been called off. Another memory from my home in Montevideo filled the airwaves and resounded all around us: the tangy “Volver” (Return) by Carlos Gardel and Alfredo Le Pera. My heart shuddered. *Was he singing directly to me?* “I imagine the flickering of the lights that in the distance will be marking my return,” he sings.

Both Gardel and Le Pera had died in a plane crash in the Andes thirty-seven years earlier in Medellín.

Colombia.

~~“To live . . . with the soul clutched to a sweet memory that I cry once again.”~~

Was he singing to me about the lights marking my return? Was he talking about the twinkling lights the snow all around us, the way the sun played over the angles on this mountaintop? Was he saying that twenty years were nothing, that I had to cling to the memories of those things that would make me cry tears of joy again?

Now, more than forty years later, when the snows of time have silvered my own temples, I feel once again as I did that morning in the Andes when I shuddered at hearing those words.

As a teenager, I had been wild and romantic, all at once. Or maybe I was just a wild child until something changed when I was fourteen. Shortly after I met Lauri for the first time, she asked me to help her bury her dead pet hamsters. Somehow in that role as gravedigger, with a pair of tiny animal corpses in my hands, I also became her spiritual adviser and confidant. I wasn't grossed out at handling the tiny bodies because, as Lauri had said, I was a beast myself. Yet there was something about me, she said, in the way I could handle her dead rodents and yet still talk to her about the sadness she felt at losing her pets. That's the reason she kept talking to me. I grew from a boy to a young man in those next few months.

Our conversations went on and on, as one topic segued into the next, and we found that we thought and felt the same way about many things. "Maybe you're not such a savage. Maybe you're even a little bit romantic," she told me one day. We've spent the past forty years talking that way.

I began to be a little less of a wild child. A few months earlier, an aunt had given me a horse. I had yearned for a horse so long that when I went to the train station to pick it up, I immediately named it "Alfin"—after the Spanish phrase "al fin," meaning "at last." Right there in the station, in the center of the city, I put on its saddle and rode it all the way home to Carrasco through the morning traffic. We would spend all day together and take long rides along the beach at sunset, following the tide's ebb and flow.

Eventually I started to feel a new emotion—shame. Shame at the way I let Alfin clip-clop over neighboring gardens or tear up people's lawns. One day when I tied him to a sprinkler spigot and he got spooked at a loud noise, he tore off down the road dragging forty feet of plumbing behind him. I became ashamed of being such a rambunctious student. I wanted to be *more*—more disciplined and less rebellious—and I decided I wanted to go to medical school when I turned eighteen. I began by training my horse to be less feral—and Lauri started training me. Although neither my horse nor I would ever change who we were, we became on friendlier terms with the world around us.

Years later, when Lauri and I were dating, and I was getting ready to leave for Chile to play rugby in October 1972, Lauri called me and said, "I left a letter for you inside my mailbox." I picked it up and kept it with me for the entire time on the mountain. I still carry it with me to this day.

I used to go camping with Lauri's family. It was just one of the many things we had in common: We loved being outdoors, in nature, and we always felt at ease there. One day, we had set up camp near the Doña Esteban River, about 125 miles from Montevideo. While we were pitching the final tent, I noticed my future father-in-law, the doctor Luis Surraco, carefully studying the roof of one of the tents. "What are you looking at, doctor?" I asked. We had left behind one of the poles for the tent I was supposed to sleep in and would somehow have to make two poles do the job of three. Dr. Surraco just stared up at the roof and thought. Suddenly, he had it. He took apart one of the telescopic poles, whittled a tree branch with his hunting knife, and inserted it into the top. The tent stood perfectly.

I did exactly the same thing when I had to finagle hanging beds for the injured passengers inside the fuselage. Using the telescopic poles in the aircraft stairs and the net I'd slept on that first night with Cochran Inciarte, I rigged several hammocks that hung from the luggage racks. They held until the very last injured passenger died.

Everything was in short supply on the mountain, but we did have several important strengths: We were a group with a lot in common, a team that had played rugby together, a sport that requires discipline, effort, and the cooperation of every player to work together for the sake of the team. Most of us had known our

another for years. We had been ingrained with the same religion and taught by the strict Irish Christian Brothers at Stella Maris, who prized a tough, stringent, altruistic brand of education. My long and curious relationship with the Brothers formed part of my arsenal for staying alive.

I remained friends with many of them, who now live and reside on the fourth floor of the Cardinal Newman School in the Boulogne neighborhood of Buenos Aires. They always joke that my parents ought to have paid double what the other kids' parents paid because the Brothers always had to keep me after class for two-hour detentions. And I always got in trouble for the same thing: acting out in class. At first, I'd do my detention indoors, performing chores or reciting prayers or working on extra math problems on the blackboard. But the Brothers eventually realized this wasn't helping straighten out my feral, independent personality. So instead they let me remain outside for my detention. They couldn't get over the fact that I was always in a good mood and that after my detention was up, I'd ask for a ball to play rugby out on the field for another couple of hours. In all that extra time—which I'd use to perfect my penalty kicks—I developed a closer relationship with the Brothers, especially once they started joining me out on the pitch. Their lives were lived against the grain, too—far from their homes, their friends, their loved ones.

I'd often noticed them looking down at me from their third-story window, as if trying to figure me out. When it got dark, I'd saddle my horse—which I tied to the fence on the back rugby fields during school—and ride home to 1726 Espinola Street. I'd let my horse graze on the field next to my house.

Except for the horse, I became that boy again in the Andes. I threw out all the norms and focused on coming up with practical solutions to help ease as many people's suffering as best I could. That's how I became the mountain doctor.

Lauri's letter, which I took with me the night of October 11, 1972, reads: "I love you very much and am enchanted that you're both a romantic and a savage all at once. I think we're a lot alike. Oh, and don't forget to take the sweater I knitted for you to Chile."

On my nineteenth birthday, eight months before the crash, Lauri had given me a sweater she'd made herself, one so thick and heavy that I figured I'd never get the chance to use it in the mild Uruguayan winters.

"Well, I do like it," I'd told her. "But why did you make it so thick?"

"It's rustic and strong like you. And don't worry about it being too thick. I know you're going to need it one day," she had said.

It wasn't until eight months later that I recalled the conversation we'd had in front of her house in Carrasco. We were two young kids who had just turned nineteen arguing over the kind of cold neither of us had ever experienced. At that moment, we had no idea what we were talking about. But it's clear that we were both preparing for what lay ahead.

The moment the wing of our Fairchild FH-227D clipped the top of the mountain to the south of the Valley of Tears—the name of the place where the accident happened—I stopped believing in chance. Thanks in part to the warm red sweater my girlfriend had knitted for me, I was able to survive in the days after the crash. Wearing that sweater, I returned to the land of the living, and I still have it to this day.

We matured fast, too fast, up in the Andes, although we had only recently left behind our adolescence. We soon learned that failure was only the operating cost of success. Our first forays out on the mountain were to try to determine where we were. It was frightening not knowing what might await us beyond the peaks to the north and the south or the wall of ice to the west. The only open landscape lay to the east, toward Argentina, where the land extended over a series of mountains culminating (we would later learn) with the volcano Sosneado, which blocked our view of what was beyond it. We were in the middle of an ice block whose walls kept us from guessing where we might have crashed because we couldn't judge distances.

We decided to take exploratory hikes, which would allow us to temper our bodies and minds against this new reality. Instead of lying down like lambs, licking our wounds, we felt emboldened like lions. Although we were starving, frozen, and gasping for air because of the altitude, we set out to overcome that wall of ice. I participated in the first hike and all the final ones. Many of the others who did the same died.

Each hike accomplished two things: It kept our spirits up and it taught us something. Those of us who attempted to scale our snowy surroundings learned valuable lessons, as did those who stayed behind huddled in the fuselage, even if it was just whether the hikers could make it back alive. When they delayed returning, I waited for them outside for hours, trying to see if I could spot them on the horizon. When the cold was too great, I watched from one of the windows of the fuselage.

Our first hike took place on the fourth day after the accident. Fito Strauch, Numa Turcatti, Carlito Paez, and I set out. We didn't hike too far, because Fito thought it was too dangerous. We were surrounded by soft snow that was God knows how many yards deep; we could easily disappear down a sinkhole, like Carlos Valeta had on the day of the crash.

What we learned was that we were in a much more inaccessible area than we had ever imagined. Only a snowy society would have to come together to get through this, because any other society was too far away.

Our second trek occurred on our eleventh day on the mountain, one day after Roy Harley and Gustavo Nicolich fixed the small Spica radio and we learned that the search for survivors had been called off. By that time, we had all begun eating the bodies, and that hike was perhaps the most desperate—and the rashest. Gustavo Zerbino, Numa Turcatti, and Daniel Maspons each set out with their shoes wrapped in nylon cloth, using our innovated snowshoes. Numa and Daniel would die shortly thereafter.

They hiked south toward the place where the plane had first hit the rocky peaks that had sawed the fuselage in half. They would soon come across a trail of bodies and human remains, a propeller, shards of twisted metal. They pressed ahead, against their better judgment, to try to find the tail section and whatever else might be helpful. But as night fell, there was no time to hike back. In their desperation, they had not been thinking clearly and had miscalculated the distance and hour of the day. They had to sleep outdoors in the 30-below temperature without the necessary clothing, and they nearly froze to death. The only thing they found was an infinite vista of snow and ice, probably the worst thing any of them could have seen at that time.

Numa Turcatti returned with the look of death in his eyes, believing that we would never escape this wintry trap. Gustavo had lost his improvised sun visor during the trek and had become snow blind. Carlos perhaps his mind just didn't want to look at any more of this world. I think that may have been what saved him. He hadn't seen what was at the end, and when he made it back to the fuselage, I bandaged his swollen red eyes with strips of a torn rugby jersey. He said he felt sand and needles in his eyes, and his teeth had

gotten so loose from the beginning stages of frostbite that I had to chew up the frozen bits of meat before feeding it to him. After that hike, Daniel Maspons, a close friend and classmate, lost the vigor and vitality that he exuded and had once spread to the rest of the group. He died six days later in the most sinister episode in our odyssey: the avalanche.

We would massage their feet for hours over the next few days to try to relieve the pain of their near-frostbite.

We didn't strike out again until November 5, after the avalanche, when Tintin Vizintin, Carlitos Paez, and Roy Harley headed out on another fateful trip in which the three of them nearly died. Carlitos and Roy returned in terrible shape. Only Tintin would join Nando and me on the final attempt to escape the Andes.

I had paid close attention to how the previous groups had returned from their hikes. My role at that moment was to tend to their injuries from that trial by ice. I observed carefully which parts of the human body seemed the most easily injured and which were heartier in this cold. I tried to figure out what mistakes they had made, what we were doing wrong—and where, in that freezing death, salvation might be lying in wait.

The number of volunteers, those who felt that they needed to try it for themselves, soon waned. And as domineering as I can be, I'm not the kind of person to offer himself up as a guinea pig. But I finally realized that I had to be the one to make the final push and that perhaps salvation was not completely impossible, just highly improbable.

I started going out on scouting missions. Those left behind in the fuselage suffered a particular kind of misery; ours was a different, nomadic brand. We became outsiders to the group—even though we knew they still relied on us to be their eyes and ears, their arms and legs, and their hope. But they had their own challenges in staying alive—and sane. Those left inside became explorers of their own minds, entering new regions of consciousness to keep from going insane.

To be part of this group you had to have the physical, psychological, and spiritual fortitude, and I felt I did. Or you had to be like Nando and have a desperate need to flee this place. He could not bear to be trapped in the fuselage when the time might come that his own mother and sister would become food for the rest of us, his mother having died in the crash and his sister eight days later. But on the day he and I left the fuselage for good, he told Fito and the rest of the survivors that if their lives depended on it, they could indeed take that desperate step.

It was curious how being among the group that hiked afforded us certain privileges. We were allotted more food, better clothing, and a choice spot to sleep in the fuselage. We were even freed of several chores we trained for the long hike, although I still kept up my duties. In the end, these freedoms felt like ephemeral vanities that disappeared into the thin mountain air once we began our trek up the San Hilario Sierra. The higher you climbed, the smaller and humbler you became, as hikers hugged one another for warmth to survive another night in the Andes. Whatever privileges you might have had, the mountains stripped them away with impunity.

Leaving the plane, venturing out a little farther each time, meant stretching our umbilical cord, knowing that one day it would finally snap. We were like tiny satellites spinning into the eternal cosmos, drifting farther away from the sun each time, hoping to find warmth in some other place in the Milky Way.

Toward the end of October, it snowed for days and the world seemed cloaked in gray. Time vanished, or rather, we seemed caught in a place where time meandered at its own pace. That period, the worst of all, began with the avalanche on the night of Sunday, October 29, sixteen days after the accident. Those days stood on their own, under their own wintry sky, apart from the rest of our time on the mountain.

We had huddled inside the fuselage early that day, at four in the afternoon. It had snowed nonstop in the days before, and we had already heard the rumble of avalanches in the distance. But to us, the idea of being caught in an avalanche was as alien as it had once been to believe we could be involved in a plane crash: it was something that would happen somewhere else, because we'd already had our share of bad luck.

It was my turn in the rotation to sleep in the best part of the fuselage, near the cockpit, away from the opening, alongside Daniel Maspons. Suddenly, we heard a rumble, and then there was a flash like a signal flare. I was smacked in the chest by a wall of ice and snow that instantly became as hard as cement as it enveloped me. It was hard to understand exactly what was happening because I was quickly turning into stone. I pissed in my pants, and for a second I was surprised by this suddenly agreeable warm feeling between my legs. When you're dying, you think about few precious things.

Just before passing out for good, forever—I knew what it felt like because I'd already passed out once; for how long, I can't even guess—Roy Harley's face popped up in front of mine. He dug the snow away from my mouth, and I gasped. With the oxygen, just as in the moments after the crash, came the frenetic desire to breathe, to survive. They dug out my arms, and I pulled myself up from my grave, shivering, still trying to figure out what had happened. I tried to get my bearings as time seemed to have stopped. I fell to my hands and knees, stunned. And I was surprised to find my heart still beating. Everything felt incongruous, unreal. We were suffocating and we were soaked. In the tiny pocket of space, plunged in darkness, we had barely any air to breathe. Shadows resurrected all around us, rising from their icy tombs, but there was no room to stand. So they remained with their heads hunched over, like otherworldly creatures, their heads pressed against the roof of the plane. Others who had managed to shake off their bewilderment started digging through the compact snow with their bare hands to find other stirring shadows. *Move, Canessa, move!* I told myself, and then, in a flash I remembered: Daniel had been right next to me. I clawed desperately at the ice and snow, scraping it with my nails. I wanted to tear away the ice with my teeth like a wild animal. I dug and dug until I uncovered the face of my friend, my dear friend Daniel Maspons, who had survived the initial crash without a scratch on him, who had set out on the most dangerous and desperate of hikes over the mountains trying to find a way out. I swept the snow away from his face and out of his mouth, and I leaned in to listen for his breath. But there was only silence. My friend was dead. The briefest thought flickered through my mind: *Daniel, my friend, you can finally rest in peace.*

I continued digging until I fell over from exhaustion. I took one breath, two breaths, and continued digging. One person emerged and then another. Some gasped for breath again, others did not. All around me, I noticed those who were digging finally stopped, one at a time, utterly exhausted. Methol sobbed over the body of his wife. Someone else began to count aloud until they summed up the final tally: "Eighteen and eight."

On the night of the avalanche, the worst night of my life, we lost eight of our friends along with everything we'd managed to construct—the clothes on our backs, the ponchos we'd fashioned out of the airplane seats, everything. We were soaked down to our socks and shoes. And we didn't know how long the

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