

1 The body – 1999

A group of five climbers move slowly across the north face of Everest. Suddenly, one of them sees something strange on the rocks below him. Something whiter than the snow. Carefully, he climbs down towards it. Then he calls his friends on his radio.

‘Come down here,’ he says. ‘Look at this.’

Coming closer, they see it is the dead body of a climber. The wind has blown some of the clothes from the body, and the skin is clean and white, like new stone. In the icy cold, it looks like the body of a man who died a few days ago. But the bits of clothes that are still on the body are old, brown and grey – nothing like the brightly coloured clothes that modern climbers wear. The body is lying face down. Above the head, the fingers of one hand are dug into the icy ground. One leg is broken in two places below the knee, and the other leg is lying over it. The body looks strong and healthy, they think, like the body of a runner or dancer.

The climbers photograph the body carefully. Then, very gently, they touch the dead man’s clothes – the hobnail boots, the trousers and shirt made of wool. How little he was wearing, they think, on this icy cold mountain. ‘I walk out on the street in Seattle with more clothing than he had on,’ one of them says. Yet here they are at 8,155 metres on Mount Everest, the highest mountain in the world.

Who is this man? He can only be one of two people, they think. But which one? Then they find a name inside his shirt. ‘George Leigh Mallory’, it says.

