

30 Years of
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MAGAZINE

Fast Train

Alison Hargreaves climbed Everest, unsupported and without oxygen. Two months later, she summited on K2, but died with six others in a fast-moving storm, leaving behind a family and many questions.

By Alison Osius

Alison Hargreaves was pressed for time. The weekend we spoke last fall, she was less than three weeks home from an Everest attempt. On Friday, her book had come out, and she, an English climber living in Scotland, signed copies and did interviews in Edinburgh. Saturday she spoke at a mountain-literature festival in Leeds, England. She granted me interviews on Sunday and Monday, and Monday evening sorted photos. Tuesday she had a lecture at the Alpine Club in London, and an interview with a big London newspaper. On Wednesday were a book signing, a TV show, a magazine interview, and three radio interviews. Thursday was a sponsor meeting at Sprayway, Friday a book signing in Manchester.

But after Hargreaves climbed Everest (29,028 feet) May 13, unsupported and without oxygen, she *really* took off.

I reached her via an overseas phone call in early June, having made an appointment through her p.r. team, headed by Cally Fleming and Hargreaves' husband, Jim Ballard. Hargreaves was ensconced at the Nevis Range ski-area compound, doing interviews. How many? "Hundreds," said Fleming.

I had five minutes with Alison, who was home for two weeks before leaving for K2. Except for a day trip to Italy to see a sponsor, and one "fantastic" day spent with her two children at the beach, every day had been "chock-a-block" with interviews, she said.

In mid-August, the climbing world was stunned by news of Hargreaves' death on K2 (28,251 feet), second-highest mountain in the world, which according to one summitter, Greg Child, has only been climbed 124 times and has taken 45

lives (it is attempted something like 100 times annually, Everest 1000).

At the news I thought again and again of a few images and exchanges. One was how Hargreaves had told me that K2 was to be "just" by the mountain's *Abruzzi Ridge*, and non-solo this time. "I'm going to enjoy myself," she said. She'd been invited to join an American team there.

Another was her explanation at the literature festival of how she dealt with the risk inherent in her endeavors. When she undertook a climb, she said, she was extremely well-prepared, physically as well as in her knowledge of things like weather and the descent route. "I'm not bloody foolhardy," she said firmly. "I've got a hell of a lot to live for. I don't think I'm reckless. I think I'm conservative."

The image that kept me awake was from her book, *A Hard Day's Summer*, and a May newspaper interview, of how Ballard never saw her off with the children prior to a climb. She would slip away because Kate, 4, would weep seeing her mother leave.

We'll never know all the factors that made up the layers of Hargreaves' decisions to continue on K2. A lot of very big and very mundane bits of information are gone forever when a person disappears.

Even *driven* alpinists said that Alison Hargreaves, who died at 34, was driven. She was meticulous and careful, but alpinism is dangerous. As she built achievement upon impressive achievement, she was cashing in a lot of chips.

But I have a certain vivid memory of the fresh joy in her voice as she described for the nth time what it was like for her on Everest. She laughed as she spoke. "It was *amazing*," she said with fervor. "That's all I can say. I've never actually felt that emotional about anything ever before." At the summit, she wept. "So many tears, it was unbelievable. Yeah, it really was amazing ... just ludicrous." She didn't really know why she was so overcome. "It was a combination of relief and happiness all rolled up into one. It was really funny, really funny."

After coming off the mountain, she went with friends to the Rum Doodle restaurant in Kathmandu, where Everest summitters customarily sign in. Describing it, she again laughed a little. "I went with some guys to go and sign my name, the last evening in Kathmandu, and I just got so emotional, so overwhelmed, I just could not sign my name. It was really weird. It was such a powerful thing."

Hargreaves first came to the fore of climbers' consciousness with a string of solos in the Alps in the spring and summer of 1993, including the North Face of The Matterhorn and the Grande Jorasses via both *The Shroud* and, in November, the much harder *Croz Spur*. Before that she'd piqued interest with her five-and-a-half-months-pregnant ascent of the North Face of the Eiger in 1988. Later came her wonderfully in-control ascent of Everest. After K2, she hoped to do Kangchenjunga, climbing the world's three highest

mountains, without oxygen, in a calendar year — a momentous triad.

Then came the news of what had happened on K2 — the deaths on Sunday, August 13, of Hargreaves; Rob Slater, 35, of Boulder; Jeff Lakes, 33, of Calgary; Bruce Grant, 31, of New Zealand; and Javier Escartin, 46, Lorenzo Ortiz Monson, 24, and Javier Olivar, 39, of Spain. In America, the news was almost immediately on-line Wednesday morning and passing around a huge outdoor-industry trade show in Reno.

At the same time, in a disturbing irony, Jim Ballard was calling *Climbing* magazine's office. He'd heard rumors that Alison had been killed and was trying to find out if they were true. He spoke quietly so as not to be heard by the children, yahoos in the background.

The climbers were probably blasted off the mountain by the increasing winds that reached full intensity lower on the mountain by 7:30 p.m., possibly hitting the top by then or working upward to hit at about 8 p.m. Grant and Ortiz Monson radioed from the summit at 6:30 p.m., Hargreaves and Olivar at 6:45 p.m. Slater and Escartin were on their way up and should reach the top soon, but the first four planned to descend immediately before the bad weather hit them. They were told to call again when they reached the Traverse (where the ropes started) above the route's Bottleneck Gully, but that call never came. The next morning a body thought to be Alison's was seen at 7400 meters, having either fallen or, more likely, been blown off, some thousand meters. None of the climbers was using oxygen; on K2, almost no one does.

Jeff Lakes nearly survived. He had turned back from his summit bid five hours earlier at about 1:30 p.m. on Sunday and reached Camp IV, only to be avalanched there in his tent. He huddled there that night, and the next morning tried to dig his equipment out, staying — in weather that was clear and even hot — until about 11 a.m. He struggled on to Camp III but reported on the radio that it was destroyed by serac fall. Though he had no crampons, axe, harness, or descender, he used his penknife to cut a piece of fixed rope to tie from his waist to the line, then came 2000 feet down the Black Pyramid rock band to Camp II, taking until 1:30 a.m. Tuesday, 36 hours altogether. He was now in the hands of friends, dehydrated and exhausted, but not frostbitten. He died in the night.

Two Spaniards, Jose Pepe Garces, 39, and Lorenzo Ortas, 42, who had stopped at their Camp IV, 150 meters higher on the Shoulder, at 7950 meters, barely survived. According to Ed Douglas of *Climber* magazine (UK), Garces' tent blew off the mountain, with Ortas grasping at it as Garces cut his way out of the back. Both waited in Ortas' tent until that, too, blew away, then huddled in the snow until dawn.

This K2 tragedy was uncannily like that of 1986, when five climbers, including Julie Tullis, the first and only other British woman to summit on K2, died in storm on the descent. Three other women have reached the top of the mountain: Liliane

Barrard, who also died coming down, and Chantal Mauduit, both of France, and the Polish climber Wanda Rutkiewicz, who was later killed on Kangchenjunga. [Since publication of this article, Mauduit also died in the Himalaya.]

A few days before the recent calamity, the rest of Hargreaves and Slater's team had gone home, conceding to abysmal weather, and Alison had nearly gone with them, but at the last minute decided to give the mountain one more try. She and Slater joined with the New Zealand team on the mountain.

Peter Hillary (son of Sir Edmund), 40, was quoted in the London *Independent* saying that the summit party was "blinkerered by the summit" and used poor judgment. He had turned back on K2 at noon because, he said, he saw storm fronts approaching from the north and south. The others strove upward for another six hours.

Said Hillary, who stopped at the Spanish team's Camp IV, "I saw Alison and she simply said, 'I'm going up.' Nothing was going to stop her. ... Alison was a brilliant climber, but she had tremendous commercial pressures on her and she became obsessed." He also suggested that climbers in groups feel a false sense of strength in numbers.

Another issue of the *Independent*, however, quoted the frostbitten Spanish survivors: "The conditions on the mountain were very, very good. It was cold, but that's normal ... that made the snow very firm and ideal for climbing. There was nothing wrong with Alison's judgment," said Garces. "When the others in our team reached the summit, there was no snow and no wind. That was between 6 p.m. and 7 p.m., and then within 15 minutes the wind came up incredibly strongly. One minute it was fine, the next it was incredibly dangerous."

Scott Johnston, 42, of Bend, Oregon, who spent some 60 days on K2 with the American team and Hargreaves, said, "They made some mistakes, but they weren't suicidal, careless people." He told a story that was sometimes unsettling and sometimes wrenching. It began with the weather, which was "jerking us around," Johnston said. "All of us were getting frustrated, about to go off the deep end." Hargreaves, who had arrived hoping to spend only two or three weeks on the mountain, was especially distraught. As time went by, Johnston said, she "pulled no punches in saying she really, really wanted to get back down to her kids: 'I want to go home, I hate this, I want to go home.' She said she'd *never* go on a long trip again without her kids. She was so torn, she was at her wit's end." Her moods swung back and forth, he said.

Once she got out of basecamp and back on the mountain, though, her purposefulness returned, he said. "She would take the bit and run with it," said Johnston. "[Then] there was never talk of leaving. All of us would feel better on the mountain. None of us liked sitting around, especially Alison."

Professional and commercial pressures played a role, too. Doors had been opening for Hargreaves. She had received an invitation to meet the queen, and

had been the keynote speaker at a luncheon of "famous women;" there was talk of movie rights to the Everest story. There were major sponsorships. Britons love to make heroes: after her death, Hargreaves filled the British press for days and weeks straight. There would probably have been a media blitz if she'd returned successful.

The turning point for Johnston and Kevin Cooney, 39, of Boulder came when they made another trip up to Camp III, and discovered — for the second time — that it was buried. "Kevin and I said, 'We're outta here,'" said Johnston. "We felt the conditions just were not safe." Richard Celsi (pronounced Chelsea), 46, of Seal Beach, California, called it quits the next day. Hargreaves came down the mountain two days later intending to go home, too. She and the three American men spent a whole day in the rain packing, dividing loads, and taking down tents. The next morning, again in rain, Hargreaves told Johnston, "Well, I'm not going to go." For weeks she had been setting dates by which she'd leave if weather didn't improve, and then letting them pass. Sometimes she'd change her mind five or six times a day, others said.

The three others helped unload her gear, and gave the two freshly unburdened porters loads of trash to carry out instead. "Alison was crying off and on," said Johnston. She cried hard when they left. "She couldn't let herself go home and do what she wanted to do," he said.

No one else was torn. Said Celsi, "Other than at a personal level, this wasn't going to change our lives. But it's fine to have a [climbing] career, and think about what certain climbs will mean to your career."

Hargreaves once told Johnston that if she could even have one chance to try for the summit, she could leave feeling OK.

Alison Jane Hargreaves was born February 17, 1962, and raised in Derbyshire, England. She was 5'4" and 130 pounds; she shared her weight, unlike many women, with no embarrassment.

She wasn't really a prepossessing figure. At the International Mountain Literature Festival, on first glance she could have been mistaken for a pleasant-faced librarian. "I'm not at all what people expect from me," she said. "I'm a far more normal female human."

Then you noticed an intent stillness in her gaze. There was a great directness to Alison, the feeling of a fist-strong personality. She had warm coloring, wavy light brown hair, broad cheekbones, and a sturdy, power-pack physique.

She was a combination of determination, competitiveness, and downright sweetness. Her manner in conversation was generally unaffected, friendly, and humorous. She made thoughtful little gestures, such as sending the 10-year-old son of one of Celsi's friends a postcard from K2, signed, "Climb carefully." In her signature, she always signed the "A" as a smiley face.

Alison began her career in outdoor pursuits at age 13, at her school, where Hillary Collins (later the widow of Peter Boardman) was her role model. "That's what I wanted to be, an instructor like her, [to] take people canoeing every day, always look brown and very fit," she said.

Asked if they were close, she said with a laugh, "I think Hillary used to find me a bit obnoxious. I was quiet, but would weave my way through and get things." Collins organized various weekend trips; Alison *always* went.

Alison's parents, brother, and sister were hillwalkers. "I don't ever remember not enjoying the hillwalking," Hargreaves said. She later returned to it, spending the year after her first baby was born "Monro bagging" with a papoose.

At 14 she got "absolutely obsessed" with climbing. She and her young partner, Bev, used to go to a climbers' pub every week. "We'd go around there every Sunday, to be around climbers. We just liked to see them. They used to have their coffee there, so we did. I just wanted people to [someday] accept me as a climber, I suppose."

At 15, she was about to solo *Black Slab* (5.6) at Stanage when asked to take a rope up for someone else. As she climbed, trailing the rope, another person traversed across her path, fell, and grabbed it. "Down he went, down I went," she recalled with a laugh. She broke the tibia and fibula on one leg, and the other heel. She begged the medics not to cut her boots and harness off. "They were so precious, they were *mine*, I was so proud to have them."

Hargreaves seemed focused, disciplined, and positive, but the issue of confidence surfaced often as she spoke. She said of her book, "I hate it. I absolutely hate it. I'm a very unconfident writer. If I wrote it again I'd do it in a different style. I'd be more open.

"I'm not a very confident person," she added. That was hard to reconcile with her feats as a soloist, but she clearly found coping with people and mountains very different. She said of her soloing, "Presumably I must be very good at it because I haven't fallen off yet."

Asked further about her nature, Hargreaves said candidly, "I'm obsessive. If I want something, I go to any lengths to get it. I was like that with boyfriends in school. Scheming and devious. I sometimes hate it in me, getting so devious, but it gets you somewhere. Sometimes it makes me stand back, and think, should you be doing that? Sometimes I think the more successful you are, the more you upset people."

Since her achievements in the Alps, she had reached a new state of acceptance in what she did and sought. "I've always felt climbing was incredibly self-indulgent. At the end of the day, it's only me that gets pleasure out of it, not the kids, not the husband. I get the ego boost." But after her book came out, and people began approaching to say she inspired them, she relaxed. "Now I feel I'm helping people, now I feel I can justify it. It's made me feel morally much better. I am what I am."

Coming into her own as a climber, she was very much preoccupied with her world and her place in it. While explaining that her lectures were at the moment still mostly to outdoor groups, she said, "I've got a much broader appeal because I have got the children and I am a woman. The book is already going into paperback. Normally that takes a year. There's obviously been a big interest in the women's market and general public. I do actually have quite a wide appeal."

Hargreaves liked goals, targets, lists of things to do. "What if I get up Everest? What'll be my next project? It worries me," she said last fall. Later came the K2 and Kangchenjunga plans, and she didn't intend to relax if she achieved her trilogy. "No. I'm sure I'll be wanting more and more," she said in our phone conversation in June. She was, for example, "desperately keen" to go to Antarctica; she had always been drawn to snowy wild places.

As full as her life was, she was not overwhelmed. "I need to have more than one thing at a time," she said. "To me, climbing itself is not fulfilling — if I got an agent, if the children grew up and went away, if I had seven days a week to go climbing, climbing wouldn't be enough. I'd need more."

"Alison was not just a good female alpinist, she was among the strongest and best of either sex," said Jeff Lowe, who climbed with her on the Northwest Ridge of Kangtega in 1986. "I was truly impressed by her ability to carry all the weight necessary for a 10-day alpine-style traverse, and her finesse in leading the technically difficult mixed rock and ice pitches."

Hargreaves' book promo material lists her pre-Everest records: in 1985, the first British female ascent of the Grandes Jorasses via *Croz Spur*; in 1986, the first woman to reach 7000 meters on Lhotse Shar; in 1987, the first British woman to climb *The Shroud* on the Grandes Jorasses; in 1988, first British woman to climb the Eiger North Face (while she was five and a half months pregnant); in 1989, the first British woman to climb the North Face of Les Droites; in 1992, the first female winter solo of the Matterhorn; in 1993, the first woman to ascend the six classic alpine north faces in one season.

One thing that drew fire from other climbers, however, was the last claim (which she penned herself). The six classic alpine north faces are those of the Eiger, Matterhorn, Grandes Jorasses, Dru, Piz Badile, and Cima Grande. Though Hargreaves had climbed the North Face of the Eiger before, with a partner, in 1988 (and it was very impressive to do it while pregnant), in 1993 she actually climbed the easier northeast face, the Lauper snow route. An Eiger North Face solo is a great prize, done, for example, by only four Americans, Mark Wilford, Charlie Fowler, Alan Bradley, and Jeff Lowe; the only woman to solo it was Catherine Destivelle of France, in March 1993.

Hargreaves was almost amusingly shameless about her sponsorships. In her book, besides listing them in an appendix as is common in expedition tomes, she peppered the text with brand names, as in, "I refuelled with a litre of Isostar (never known anything like it for rehydration!) and Jordan's Frustrated Bars." Asked about those citations, she explained without a trace of apology, "It should be blatantly obvious to people that I needed the money and I couldn't have done it without it. You have to give these people some kind of payback."

After her successes in the Alps, Hargreaves tried to get on an Everest expedition, and couldn't come up with the money; then she got on another, had to produce \$10,000, and chased around until she landed the equipment manufacturer Farino of Italy as a sponsor. On that, a medical expedition to the South Col, she turned back at 8400 meters with cold toes. Finally, she climbed Everest, via its North Ridge, exactly as she'd resolved to do — without oxygen and unsupported, even declining cups of tea when offered.

Greg Miller, an American who was heading up the North Ridge the morning of May 14, told *Climbing*, "Her tent on the North Col was next to mine, and she was completely cheerful the whole time, while the rest of us found reasons to whine — food, wind, cold, etc. On her descent she was skipping with joy, having summited the previous day. Without oxygen. We briefly chatted, she said she looked forward to seeing her children and eating a real meal, and had a couple of weeks before leaving for K2. ... She looked very fit, and did not seem to suffer — physically or emotionally — from the deterioration typically associated with living at altitude."

When I asked her how the Everest climb had compared with her other major climbing experiences, she said, "Obviously nowhere near as technical. For example the *Croz Spur* was *much* more technical, but [Everest] just demanded so much willpower. Even just getting up and getting out the tent and, you know, just carrying heavy rucksacks and things, it's just physically very hard work. ... And having to think, right, well, tomorrow I've got to carry a load up to so-and-so, if I don't do that, it might not be in the right place ... I was incredibly motivated on this trip. Obviously part of that was the fact I'd failed in the autumn, and I didn't really want another failure. The thought of having to go through it all again was all too much."

As of June, 32 women and 576 men had topped out on Everest. The first men to climb Everest without oxygen were Reinhold Messner of Italy and Peter Habeler of Austria in May 1978. The first woman to climb it without oxygen was Lydia Bradey of New Zealand in October 1988, though her ascent was unofficial and disputed. Hargreaves was the first woman, and just the second person, to make an unsupported ascent, and the second woman to climb Everest without artificial oxygen. The only man to climb it unsupported, and the only person to make a genuine solo, was Messner, in August 1980. Elizabeth

Hawley, a Reuters correspondent and climbing writer, has termed Hargreaves' ascent a "culmination" of women's Himalayan efforts.

Though Hargreaves was self-contained, there were 215 climbers on her route and the adjoining one during her weeks on the mountain. She was behind two Italian climbers, Marco Bianchi and Christian Kuntner, who had broken trail, joining them on the summit at 12:08 p.m.

It's an open question how much physical and psychological help a lone climber gets from other parties on the mountain. The climber can't help it if other people are on the route, but that makes a big difference in psyche and difficulty. With many climbers on a route, a trail forms.

What emanated from wires worldwide was: "A Briton has become the first woman to reach the top of Mount Everest alone, her supporters reported yesterday." The statements were attributed to Hargreaves' "training camp in Scotland."

Her camp's news release simply credited Hargreaves for being alone, unsupported, and oxygenless. It did say, "This is the most important climb ever undertaken by a woman in the history of mountaineering."

When I asked Hargreaves' about hers vis-a-vis Bradey's ascent, she answered readily. "Well, the difference is that I was carrying my own tent, all my own kit, above basecamp. I was making my own tent platforms and putting my own tents up and carrying my own stuff. So it was unsupported, as opposed to actually sleeping in somebody else's tent and things." Bradey was with others until high on the mountain, and used mutually established camps.

Did Hargreaves personally believe that Bradey reached the summit? She said she couldn't know without ever having met or talked to Bradey. "But quite possibly."

How did she feel about the words, "most important climb ever undertaken by a woman"?

"I don't actually know where that came from." She gave a mirthless little laugh. "I don't know. I can't see that it is."

Did she feel such statements were necessary regarding sponsorship and so on? "No," she answered.

If you're discussing Alison Hargreaves, you have to click in to her having children, because children are so consuming, with women usually the primary caretakers.

"When the time came, I wanted to have children," she recalled. "When I'd actually had a baby, something inside of me had been fulfilled, almost like nature waiting to have this baby. Then my body settled down, and I settled down mentally, and my stamina got much better." She felt, she said, that motherhood had made her a much more stable person, less likely to panic.

Hargreaves' children were part of her climbing life. When she soloed her Alps

routes or training routes in areas like the Calanques, her kids would often be playing at the base of a route, or around the corner so that their voices couldn't drift up to her. Ballard, 49, would care for them, and fix pasta dinners for all. The family lived out of tents and a car all summer. More recently, traveling to the South Col with the British Everest medical expedition, she was concerned about taking the kids to altitude, and ready to respond. On the walk in, at Gorak Shep at just over 5000 meters, Kate said she had a headache, then became violently ill. Hargreaves took off down the mountain in the rain with Kate on her back, her other child, Tom, now 6, descending, too, as did Jim Ballard; eventually one of the big Sherpas carried Tom. It was dark, rough, and boulder-strewn, but, coursing with adrenaline, Hargreaves "could have walked for days."

"All that mattered was to get Kate down safe," she said. She, Tom, and Kate took turns singing. "They thought it was great, it was dark, they were being carried, it was exciting." She blazed along for nearly five hours, arrived at Pheriche, found a tea house, and made someone open it. The next day the kids were fine. Celsi, who was on that approach with her, recalled the whole experience as fantastic for the children, full of adventure, scrambling, and such games as high-altitude cricket.

Hargreaves didn't take the children on her second Everest trip, but hoped to bring them to Kanchenjunga.

Years before, she had canceled a trip to Alaska when she first found out she was pregnant, because an altitude specialist advised her not to go over 4000 meters. Plenty of people criticized her for climbing the Eiger while pregnant, though none to her face. Would it have bothered her? "No, because people will always find fault with you, no matter what you do."

Much has been made of Hargreaves taking risks as a mother. But look at John Roskelley, George Lowe, Alex Lowe — all fathers and bold alpinists. Or the late David Cheesmond, a father of a daughter; the issues of fatherhood versus risk are absent in all these men's cases. While Hargreaves was alive, a columnist in *The Times* of London criticized her "reality-denying self-centredness." (Readers defended her in subsequent letters.) After her death, a debate raged on the Internet and in the press as to whether she had been too selfish. To be fair, part of the debate is due the fact that she had made having a family part of her public persona. But only part.

Hargreaves herself actually accepted a variable standard. "It *is* different. I think a mother is more important to the child than the father. It's a terrible thing to say, but you carried the child, you bore it. A father can make up for things, but can't bridge the gap."

To mesh the worlds of child-rearing and risk-taking, she would compartmentalize: "I can go climbing, and that's climbing, and go back to the valley and be with the kids." When actually on a route, she didn't think about the risk,

but simply concentrated and thought about route-finding. "It's usually afterwards if I've had any doubt.

"The *Croz* shook me a little bit," she conceded. "One bit was very scary. My feet actually came off at one point. For awhile that shook me up. I don't like to be too close to the edge."

This year was the most time she had ever spent away from the children — 150 days. "If I thought that I was going to have to do that forever, then I would be seriously thinking about [my climbing career] again. Because I know this is just for now, I can cope with it," she said.

She was at the beginning of a new life chapter, both in the climbs unfolding before her and in other life decisions. Last fall, after speaking at the Banff Film Festival, she took a ski trip during which she excitedly asked the names of many of the peaks she saw, planning to come back and climb them. Last fall, she offered, on the record, that she was seeking an amicable divorce: "We've just sort of grown apart. We have totally different opinions. There's no animosity at all. I want to change things. I've got an awful lot of years left."

Hargreaves faced an ideological conundrum in terms of wanting to be accepted as a climber, not a *woman* climber, yet using her gender to get sponsorship. "It's easier for a woman to get coverage. In some ways, though, you earn it," she said. A man did not have to strive to be accepted as a climber the way a woman does, she said. "You can also say it's harder because as soon as I leave the kids I feel I should be there." She also pointed out how much time it took to get fit again after childbearing.

"In some ways I'm as keen now as I was 10 or 15 years ago," said Hargreaves. "I feel I've got as much enthusiasm as before. I'm behind, really. I've got four years [two per baby] to catch up. I've got to make up for lost time."

Hargreaves and the other climbers often said they never wanted to get stuck in bad weather up high on K2. Hargreaves once abandoned Camp IV when the wind picked up, for that reason.

The expedition cook, Ghulam Rasool, told Scott Johnston that Hargreaves sobbed in her basecamp tent, emerging once or twice for a cup of tea, the night before moving upward for the summit bid. On the morning of Saturday, August 12, Grant, Lakes, Hillary, Hargreaves, Slater, and Matt Comesky, 31, and Kim Logan, 43, of New Zealand left the American Camp IV at 5 a.m. and moved up to the Spanish Camp IV. They arrived at 8 or 9 a.m., too late for a summit bid, and met with the Spaniards. The first group decided to descend to Camp IV, with the plan to set off at about midnight and meet the Spanish somewhere above. The morning was hot and sunny, early afternoon brought clouds, snow, and spindrift, and at 10 p.m. the clouds receded again, though a bank remained in the north.

That night, Lakes and Hillary again left at midnight, and Hargreaves and Slater at about 2 a.m. with Grant and Logan, though Logan turned back with altitude sickness. Comesky also decided to descend. Hillary and Lakes went on until 4 a.m., when they stopped between the Spanish Camp IV and the Bottleneck, disliking the extreme cold and the look of the weather to the north. A vast, dark bank of clouds stretched across the northern horizon, though it had not moved near yet. They retreated to the Spanish camp.

Hargreaves passed Hillary, as he was descending, at just above Spanish Camp IV. "I said what I was going to do, which was to try to warm up in a tent, and she said, 'I'm going on.'" Slater too passed him. At 7 a.m. Hillary spoke via radio to Bruce Grant above, at the bottom of the Bottleneck. Grant said that conditions were really good, which prompted Hillary and Lakes to resume the climb.

But at the bottom of the Bottleneck, Hillary stopped for good, eyeing the clouds. A layer of altostratus and cumulus cloud in the north-northeastern area of China was banked up behind the Karakoram; a pillar of cloud was building up above K2. "There just wasn't enough leeway in it for me," he said. Lakes thought he'd continue for a while, saying he'd never forgive himself if the others summited and he didn't at least give it a try.

The climbers above caught up with the Spaniards just at the bottom of the Bottleneck. Ortas had stayed in camp, and Garces turned back at the Bottleneck with cold feet.

Hillary could see Ortiz, Olivar, and Grant moving fast, then waiting for the other climbers. The second trio started across the Traverse.

Clouds drifted across the mountain. "Periodically I'd see this little line of people moving across," Hillary said. He couldn't be sure he was making the right decision: "You do think these guys might get up and come down and say how great it was, and you'll think, blast it."

Conditions deteriorated, and as Hillary made his way down in a whiteout, he got lost on "elementary" terrain between the Bottleneck and Spanish Camp IV, and Camps IV and III. At 5 p.m., the storm "turned on like a tap and it just roared." He reached Camp II at 7:30 p.m. Told that the others had summited, he said, "Oh, my god," thinking the worst.

The storm that killed the summitters was part of a pattern of progressive buildup to the north, but this one came in earlier than usual — in late morning rather than late afternoon. The climbers had hoped the wind would stay as mild as it had been in the previous few days, but it seemed to be 70 or 80 mph even at Camp II, and was likely 100 or more up high.

"I can imagine the closer Alison got to the summit, the more eager she became," said Johnston. "It made her more willing to take the risk, to try to dash up there." It's also easy to imagine how frustrated the climbers had been, being

on the mountain, knowing they were good enough to climb it.

Hillary felt the lessons to be learned were not to trust in seemingly gentle northerlies, but to be alert for weather coming from anywhere. He also called K2 a "seductive mountain. When you get to the Shoulder the terrain is easy and you start to focus on the [exposed] route above to the summit, and feel very secure, but it's too high to be able to stay there for any length of time if you're caught out by conditions. It's an awfully long way down." Finally, he felt that except in the case of a few individuals, people should fix more rope on the mountain. A 5- or even 3-mil rope left for direction between Camps III and IV would have helped him, and might have helped Lakes and perhaps some climbers in 1986. (Fixing in the Bottleneck and on the Traverse has been common recently, after fatalities there.)

Alison Hargreaves died in a swirl of sorrow, loss, and controversy. There was testimony in the end that pointed to obsessiveness, which may or may not have influenced final events. Teammates say that she and Slater at one point said they thought Cooney and Johnston (a marathoner and a former U.S. team nordic skier), who'd done the most trailbreaking, intended a secret summit bid, which was not the case. Then there was an incident in Camp III, when Slater and Hargreaves arrived to find themselves unable to locate a buried tent. They had only one sleeping bag and down suit between them, and hoped to go for the top. When Richard Celsi arrived at 6 p.m. after a 10-hour trip from Camp II, he argued with the two over their taking a pad from a cache he'd left two weeks before. They asked for help digging; he said he wanted to catch his breath, but soon helped. He has said that he dug for some 20 minutes, that Hargreaves then said she thought the tent was gone, and that five minutes later the two told him he looked terrible and should descend. At the same time they asked for his sleeping bag and some other gear. Celsi has said he told the two he was not altitude sick, then, amazed at the conversation, decided to quit the mountain, and headed down, giving over his bag, down suit, and food. Hargreaves trailed him down to Hillary's tent, 15 meters below. He thought she was going to offer him her water bottle, which would have been in line with her normal helpfulness, but she asked to borrow the overboots he was wearing, and he declined. It was dark, and the descent involved 34 rappels down the Black Pyramid over some of the most technical terrain on the *Abruzzi*, with some ropes frozen in place. "From the standpoint of a person who's fatigued, [that section] is the worst place to be," Johnston said. Hillary said, "We were very unhappy about the rappel, and tried to talk [Celsi] out of it. It was an uncomfortable situation."

To Celsi, the real issue was not illness or danger — he feels the two weren't thinking of the danger — but equipment. "Without the equipment,

their summit bid was over," he said, explaining further, "These people were [my] friends. We shared a lot. I tend to believe they got completely focused in a very selfish way. There's a fine line, with the need on big mountains to succeed, between focused and selfish."

The weather turned the next day and Hargreaves, Slater, and several other climbers at Camp III again retreated.

We cannot hear Slater and Hargreaves' side of the story, but according to Johnston and Cooney, Hargreaves later told them she thought Celsi was ill and could have died in the night. Johnston and Cooney felt if that was the case, Celsi should have been accompanied or carried bivy gear.

Hargreaves, Slater, and the others who died on K2 this year took a big risk. Had they made it, they would have been lauded for their boldness; after all, climbing history is replete with tales of great successes by people who have hung it out in the big mountains. But in this case they rolled the dice and lost.

Alison Hargreaves was a complicated woman, with ambition and single-mindedness mixed with team spirit, courage, and maternal devotion. K2 was one mountain in a long career.

Hargreaves was public property; her death, news round the world. It was especially painful to women climbers, many of whom had been trying to sort out their own conflicting obligations to self and family. We felt for her, trying to pursue her dreams. Some thought of those kids and wondered, well, *had* she been selfish? But we cannot judge that, not unless we are prepared to judge the entire pantheon of lost climber fathers. We can only draw our own lines.

In the end, Hargreaves was a great climber managing a hard balancing act. Obsessive, yes; tenacious, too, and tenacity is something all the great climbers have had in common.

I like to remember something she once told me in a climbers' pub. "If you're given opportunities, and there are two options, always take the harder one," she said. "If I choose the harder one, and succeed, I'll be really happy. If I fail, at least it was trying the harder one."

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