Egotrip into the Abyss

On Alison Hargreaves, Benoit Chamoux and passage in the mountains

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How empty is the abyss of the human soul, suspended for an instant between life and death at eight and a half thousand meters? Are the crags and snow and ice above and below now everything? Beyond this, is there no other memory, no more hope? What significance is life now? What significance death? Is there room somewhere there for farewells? The feelings of life before, moments of joy and sadness, now freeze into a picture with one perspective: memories. The dead have nothing more to say. They are gone with the wind. We who stay behind, however, begin the stories — stories with a view to the end of their lives, not the middle of them. It is especially because of this that I find so many obituaries distasteful. And sometimes I experience the oppression of having stayed alive.

The last moments for the dying are always like a liberation. But before that, how cold and dangerous is the mountain at eight-thousand-plus meters? The way back to the living is blocked by darkness, seracs and hopelessness. The ice suddenly begins to crack. Where exactly? Does this shaking come from the innermost part of the mountain? Or was there another danger? Maybe this sound was only the echo of one's own fear, and nothing more.

To be isolated in one's own fear and longing and hopelessness is not like pain. It is insanity. I know how frozen feet and hands function. Avalanches and rockfall are nothing compared to this distancing of everything living and the slow death of the senses. You cannot find your way back to the others anymore; that ringing in the ears is nothing more than your own breath. There is no quiet up there, and no warmth. The final question, however, is not what makes a person feelingless, mute and blind. The question is: What makes them insane?

In a bivouac in the death zone, there is often no room to walk or stand, and when you crouch, the cold crawls into your body more quickly. Those white lightning flashes way down in the valley are no thunderstorms. Are they just twitches in the brain? Day is like night in a blizzard; there is constant hopelessness at a way out. What now? How to go from here? Is this now the end? And if so — the end of what?

She stopped me on my way through Munich's ISPO, the largest sports-tradeshow in the world. I did not immediately recognize her, for in spite of

polar fleece and a backpack, she did not look as though she had come from the Eiger or Mount Everest.

"I am Alison," she said, which helped my altitude-damaged short-term memory. We walked for a while next to each other through the exhibition halls. Jane Alison Hargreaves — small, blonde and curious — was not a bit self-centered. She was seductively enraptured with her accomplishments. She talked in the romantic manner bequeathed us by Gaston Rebuffat. She spoke of her attempt on Mount Everest, and of the five North Faces in the Alps, which she had "done" solo. We debated the science of avalanches, weather and wind problems on the highest mountain of the world, and we weighed the pros and cons of commercial expeditions. Our little evening walk led our thoughts out of the noise and mass of humanity, and into the high valleys of the Himalayas.

"Is it possible to climb the three highest mountains of the world within a single year?"

"Why not?"

"Even for a woman?"

"Women are stronger than men at high altitude."

Alison laughed. She took me to the heart of her story with a simple description of the last few pitches of the North Face of the Grandes Jorasses and a brief point with her finger to gear at individual booths — Wind-Stopper jackets, Titan crampons, Gore-tex tents. We spoke in synonyms, as all climbers do who count themselves in the "extreme" sect. I liked Alison. I liked her because she could dive right into things. Not a whiff of megalo-mania obscured her view.

In May 1995 I read of her ascent of Mount Everest without oxygen. Alison was one of 67 lucky ones who summitted the highest mountain in the world in a clear weather period, in single file. Although the path to the summit had been prepared, during her ascent she was entirely independent of the help of others — a tremendous accomplishment. As I read Elizabeth Hawley's Everest chronicle my regard for Alison grew. Hargreaves herself did not describe her Everest summit as a solo, even though the media had "sold" it as such.

Exactly three months later, on August 13, Alison was on her way to the summit of K2. It was late evening, far too late; a storm kicked up from the northwest. The wind carried more and more driving snow into the church-steeple flanks of the mountain that ended in the pitch black abyss. The trough, which Alison and six men had dug, had vanished without a trace. The summit had also vanished. Not even the faintest ray of light indicated what was up and what was down.

The abyss is black. Where were the others? Vanished, she swallows her

ego. Snowdrifts and darkness surround everything. The cold smothers every smell. Nothing but the storm can be heard, and the foreboding of the quiet to follow. Alison stands, legs and arms buried deeply in snow, and looks into the endless night as she begins to drift. Everything around her is soft and light, and with a cry she lets herself fall. Finally, with immense pressure (was that the wind or the snow slope that fell with her?) she forgets the rest of the world.

Frenchman Benoit Chamoux had climbed the big mountains faster than his competition. He was the leader of two businesses, “Quota 8000” and "Esprit d'equipe," which were to bring him fame and fortune in headlines and team spirit. In every aspect he was a successful man.

Erhard Loretan, the most ingenious climber of the last 10 years and a Swiss mountain guide of phenomenal endurance, did not look for or provoke the meeting with Chamoux that bore so many consequences.

Chamoux's wish is that both teams start the path to the summit together. Loretan and Troillet are far ahead when the Frenchman's Sherpa falls. They do not see the accident. But Chamoux continues. The other Sherpas will recover their countryman. Chamoux must continue; he wants to go up into his “fourteenth heaven.”

Loretan reaches the summit on October 5 with his stalwart partner, Jean Troillet. Chamoux, who arrived at Base Camp with a sheaf of journalistic hangers-on, now radios news updates about his ascent into the valley. The news is immediately passed on via satellite telephone to France and the world at large. Chamoux knows exactly that the one who is first is not necessarily the one who was first on the summit. It is the one who passes on the news of success.

On their descent, 200 meters below the summit, the two Swiss see the two Frenchman on their ascent. Pierre Royer gives up a little later, but Benoit Chamoux climbs on. Slowly. Far too slowly. Is he not in form? Is his ego taking him too far? Or is it the expectation of the general public that needs heroes, dead or alive? Media agencies that fought for the rights to a live broadcast do not reckon on a tragedy and even less with summit success. But still, death on the mountains always “sells” better than success. In his labyrinth Chamoux does not think of that, nor of France. He is no tragic hero like Captain Scott. He doesn't think at all anymore.

High up under the summit of Kangchenjunga, the man who was putting his 13th eight thousander success on show cannot find an exit from his story anymore. On the morning of the next day he checks in one last time. Then the radio is silent. But the live broadcasts from Base Camp continue. Search parties start, helicopters, small planes climb up. Experienced rescuers fly the flanks of the mountain. Nothing!

The small, tough Chamoux steps out of the countdown and disappears at the edge of the world. As his voice fades, a foreign whir of voices in the ether – voices that are questioning, sad, fiery, hateful, enthusiastic, without understanding – tells the rest of his story. But it is a story that no longer concerns him.

Perhaps Chamoux's wife will make a pilgrimage to “Kantch” in order to find comfort in the quiet that Benoit left behind. Jim Ballard, the husband of Alison Hargreaves, has two small children to comfort, and he shows them K2.

“I am not sad that she has died,” he says. “I would be more sad if she had not reached the summit.”

But he does not comfort me, as one of those left behind, with those words. He certainly cannot comfort his children with that. And the onlookers with their morning papers in hand will only shake their heads when the tragedy on Pisang Peak or Nanga Parbat or K2 happens.

Even today, in the ever-deepening chasm between man and mountain, the same questions are unanswered as yesterday, and as in the beginning. And every answer is a new question for those who are left behind. Man does not have to climb up mountains — but as long as people travel the mountains, people will die in them. What we find up there we show not in how we drive ourselves to the summit, but in how much life we retrieve from the abyss of our egos and rescue into the valley below.