

## The Original Hardwoman by Alison Osius

This year I asked a few young women, active climbers, if they knew who Catherine Freer was. One said she thought she'd heard the name. Four shook their heads.

I was dismayed. And so, 11 years after what happened, I want to tell you about Catherine. She was, you see, the original hardwoman, at least to some of us.

I met her at a funeral, of the smart and super-solid young climber Ted Johnson, in the summer on 1982, Portland, Oregon. I was 23 or 24, as Ted had been. I walked into a kitchen and saw her at the counter, and could only think, *strong*. She had a hawkish nose and chiseled cheekbones, a wide mouth, square teeth, and bundles of muscles. (Sometimes Catherine just looked rugged, but the last time I saw her, at a trade show, she was downright glam, in a slick black catsuit, her hair waving down her back.

She was 32, which at the time seemed both old and magical to me. People didn't turn into climbing phenomenons overnight then. "Experience" was a big word. Catherine had been climbing since she was 19. She led trad 5.11s, she'd done the *Zodiac*, she'd traveled. I wanted to be like her.

We talked about climbing, and why I said I didn't really ice climb anymore, she peppered me with question why. Abashed, I offered up my circulatory disorder, Reynaud's Disease.

At the time I thought her questions admonitory. Later I realized that they were because she questioned her own growing involvement in the more dangerous facets of the sport. She was painfully aware of how many friends she'd lost in the mountains, the "ghosts" from her old days around campfires in the Pacific Northwest.

In the late 1980s Catherine was surely the best American woman all-arounder. She, her longtime partner Todd Bibler, Sandy Stewart, and Renny Jackson made the cutting-edge first ascent of the North Face of Cholatse, alpine-style, when that style was just evolving in the Himalayas; she attempted Dhaulagiri, K2, and Everest. She and Todd did a winter ascent of the East Face of Longs Peak in Colorado, the second ascent of *Zenyatta Mondatta* on El Cap, the West Ridge of the Moose's Tooth to the Middle Summit, the North Face of Mount Sir Donald in the Canadian Rockies, and many other hard and varied routes.

Once Catherine started up a route, she was absolutely determined to finish it. But at the top she would be disappointed, wanting it to keep going.

People always talk about how tough she was. Yes – tough about physical hardships, like bad bivies. But she wasn't tough about emotions.

For all her imposing effect, Catherine was all feeling. Other women loved her. Children loved her, and she struggled with the questions of whether having them could fit in her world.

Catherine once joined a women's climbing meet in Wales. Most of the top climbers, of which she was one, hung out together and did hard routes. Catherine, however, felt it was important to climb with all of the women, and spent much of her time on mid-range routes.

She shared and listened intently. She'd tell you that she found some motivation in insecurity, and that she was afraid of dying in the mountains. She used to get frustrated climbing with silent males, and considered it a breakthrough when, after a climb, one might tell her of his fears. Of course, she

could drive fellow climbers a little nuts, wanting to talk about feelings *now*, like during a pitch. I remember one photo of her at a Himalayan belay writing in her journal.

Catherine was 37 when she and Dave Cheesmond vanished on the Hummingbird Ridge of Mount Logan in 1987. Like everybody else, I couldn't believe it at first: surely in a few days they'd come crawling out of a snow cave.

When hope faded, I thought, "If it could happen to her, it really could happen to anybody." I was sad for Catherine and for myself: sorry I'd never again thrill to what she was doing, hoping she pulled the next one off, and just sick that I wouldn't see her anymore, feel again like a dorky kid, and light up when she would suddenly turn, peer into my face, and ask, "So how have *you* been?"

This spring in Telluride I met a 5-year-old girl, Teak Freer Stephanchild. Her mother was asking around for "Catherine stories" for the young namesake. These were some; there are many more.

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