

The Way the Wind Blows

by Paul Piana

When I first heard that David Cheesmond and Catherine Freer were overdue on the Hummingbird Ridge, I wasn't overly concerned. Both were survivors, well-equipped physically and emotionally for any potential epic. The weather had been bad in the Yukon and I could picture them holded up somewhere, stretching out a dwindling supply of food and fuel until conditions warranted retreat. Or they were slogging back down Mount Logan's easier routes, lean, hungry, and happy after a successful second ascent.

It soon became apparent that this was not the case. During a short break in the weather, Kluane National Park officials made a thorough helicopter search of the ridge, finding no signs of life. David and Catherine's basecamp was empty; fresh snow obscured any tracks on the ridge itself. And at 13,500 feet at the start of the mile-long corniced ridge which makes up the crux of the route, rangers spotted two packs, a small yellow tent hanging from an ice axe, and a bit of fixed rope stretched over a gap left by a huge broken-off cornice. A second helicopter search a few weeks later revealed no further trace of the pair.

No one will ever know precisely what happened to David and Catherine – it can only be assumed that they were swept off the ridge as the cornice collapsed beneath them.

When we first started planning a women's issue several months ago, Catherine Freer was an obvious choice for a profile. Very talented on rock, she was also at home in the mountains; and with her recent experiences on Cholatse, Dhaulagiri, K2, and Everest, she could fairly be called the best female Himalayan climber in the U.S. Many people were intimidated by Catherine's reputation for toughness – I certainly was before meeting her. But as we got to know each other at trade shows, on the boulders, and over beers, I realized how sensitive she really was, how much she thought about her actions, how freely she expressed her fears and doubts. These attributes, even more than the climbs she'd done, made her story an interesting one.

Paul Piana spent several days interviewing Catherine in Boulder in the month before she left for Canada, and was anxious to talk with her again before finishing his story. After the news of her death

had been confirmed, he pulled together some additional research to round out this profile. I think that it captures much of what Catherine was and hoped to be – very warm, very human, and now, very much missed. – MK

When the news broke and we knew Catherine had died, a group of friends gathered to remember her, and to share the grief and frustration of our loss. We had suddenly been robbed of a friend who was so easy to love, who could inspire us with strength and determination and make us look inside and come to terms with our own hearts – or at least recognize our fears.

So we came together and talked about our friend Catherine. We looked long and hard at about a dozen slides. It was a quite time with views of Catherine on Cholatse, or in Baja, or here and there – and now there will be no more.

We told stories of our times with her. It was good, even necessary, and our shared remembrance brought back enough of our friend to let her go. And when the quite became too heavy, and no one could say any more, the slide projector was switched off. The image of

Catherine's face faded into the night. It's amazing how well you can see something when it's gone...

A few days before she left for the Hummingbird ridge, Suzanne Jackson and I had invited Catherine over for an indoor picnic; we wanted to visit with her before she headed north. I had also been working on an interview with Catherine for this issue of *Climbing* and had a few more questions to ask her.

Catherine had lent me a stack of her journals, which she hoped would help me with this project. It was both exciting and unsettling, having a good long stare into someone's soul. But I liked it – I could stop and spend more time with the passages I admired.

There were unfinished letters, a few old bills, an almost-checked-off Christmas shopping list that included an 11mm x 50m rope and one of Fred Beckey's guidebooks for herself, and ice tools, pile clothing, records, volumes of poetry, homemade workout apparatus, and opera recordings for others. And an unfinished Christmas card:

"...I am always intending to write and it seems I never do. I am on my way to Arizona to winter there and climb; to try and be in

shape for spring climbing in Yosemite.

"In the summer I worked in Oregon for a mental hospital. We took patients into the woods, taught them rock climbing, and ran a river with them. It's a program that will become a year-round program, in which case I might get my wings clipped a bit, and I'm kind of worried about that – not getting to do as much climbing as I'd like. So I'm putting off finishing school. I'll probably return in the fall to finish.

"The weather just turned cold and clear, and I managed to get into the mountains and do an exciting route – a 2,000 ft. face. Mixed ice pitches and steep snow. It's hard for me to leave when the weather is this good..."

In these journals were poems, excerpts from other writings, and quotes that Catherine seemed to live by:

"And those who say, 'I'll try anything once, often try nothing twice, three times, arriving late at the gate of dreams worth dying for.' –
Carl Sandberg

Catherine, 37 at the time of her death, grew up in Seattle, the second of three children. She started climbing at age 19, and in another interview (published in *Empire*, June 15, 1986), Catherine

recalled what attracted her to the sport: "The thing I like about it was that my success was proportional to my effort. I wasn't inhibited from what I wanted by anyone else's fear or intimidation."

At the time, she was studying to be a psychologist. Even after taking up climbing full time, she continued to read a great deal on the subject, an interest which never waned. If she wasn't climbing, Catherine though she'd "probably be working with middle class neurotics. Except I've been saying that so long now that it sounds like a good answer to a difficult question." And why middle class neurotics? "They have enough developmentally to be able to help you, and they are interesting! You can't help *them* without growing yourself."

"I think what really helps people grow is to be vulnerable. Of course, with some kinds of psychotic patients you can't do that. Those patients have to perceive you as being really strong and in control, so that they can rely on you to pull both of you through. And maybe that takes a different kind of person than I am – somebody who's more conservative and more rigid, and less willing to immerse themselves into what's going on."

“On the levels that I’ve worked with psychotic patients, all I hope is that I can communicate with them, make a difference; if you do that, then you’ve held on. It’s a lot of work without much reward – but because I care about them to begin with – it’s worth it.”

For Catherine, action offered a more concrete satisfaction. “Climbing is an extrapolation of struggle. Like Rebuffat said, you’re given all these things when you’re born, judgments, talents, faculties, and you rarely get to use as much as you have of them. Climbing is one of those things, like war, when all these pressures call on the great parts of you, and the reward is the climb. I like that!”

There aren’t many women (or men) in the world with the all-around skills necessary to succeed in the variety of climbing games that Catherine played. Her technical credentials were impeccable, and she was as strong as anyone. An excellent free climber, she was also adept at big walls: with Todd Bibler, she made the second ascent of *Zenyatta Mendata* on El Capitan over ten days in 1983. The pair did numerous hard climbs together, including a winter ascent of the complete east Face of Long’s Peak in Colorado. To save weight, they

carried a single sleeping bag between them, which Catherine insisted that Todd use.

In 1984, Catherine, Todd, Sandy Stewart, and Rennie Jackson made the first ascent of the North Face of Cholatse in Nepal. Done in pure alpine style, this very-difficult mixed route was one of the major achievements of the year for an American team. Catherine described the climb in an article published in *Climbing* no. 89.

It was Catherine’s first visit to the Himalaya, but not the last. The following year, she went to Dhaulagiri with Todd and two other men, but delays on the approach march, bad weather, and poor morale thwarted their attempt on the North Face. Catherine and Todd’s unique and formidable partnership started to crumble during the trip, and they split up for good shortly after returning.

In 1986, she spent well over six months in Asia, first attempting the North Ridge of K2, and later going into the Chinese side of Everest. Both were larger expeditions than she was accustomed to; neither trip was successful, and although they provided valuable experience, Catherine expressed some frustration with Himalayan expedition politics. “It’s more challenging for me to

pick a mountain, however big or small, and to go with a team that makes it feel like this is my own thing. Not like hooking up with another dozen people, where I’m a peon in this big organization.”

Always a strong performer by anyone’s measure, Catherine was bothered by the idea of expeditions taking along sometimes-underqualified women, solely to get funding. “It’s a big joke. Certain women who do have experience have fallen prey to having a reputation. They can’t be considered strong climbers – they don’t train very much and aren’t in a leadership-position. The whole thing is a farce.”

“I’ve looked back at some trips and seen that the men who were organizing them needed to feel *they* were the ones putting the women on the summit – it made them feel stronger. That stinks! I mean, other countries don’t do that. Wanda Rutkiewicz climbs mountains nobody else from her country does – she was the first Pole to get up K2.”

The Everest trip was particularly difficult for Catherine. She had been promised a place on an expedition attempting the West Ridge, but was more interested in another team’s plans for the North Col route. “I wanted to be on the Mallory and Irvine search expedition a whole

bunch, because I thought those guys had a good chance of getting to the summit.” Catherine had just spent four months on K2, climbing on an equal basis with the likes of George Lowe, Alex Lowe, David Cheesmond, and Steve Swenson; highly motivated and already well-acclimatized, she felt she’d be an asset to the North Col group, which was not just climbing but also making a film.

“They kept me waiting for days, knowing all the time that the answer was going to be no. I was told that all the other women voted vehemently against me joining the trip, which I think they probably did, because they saw me as a threat. So I said, ‘Take me out of the film. Let me be part of the camera team – edit me out of all the footage.’”

But the answer was still no. Catherine was disappointed, even bitter about the decision. “I told them, ‘You’ve got so much stuff here, you could put anybody on the summit.’ They told me they could put a sack of potatoes on the summit. What does that imply? It made the whole expedition into a big joke for me.” After a Sherpa died in an avalanche on the North Col, various summit attempts were thwarted by poor weather and conditions.

Despite her strength and skill, Catherine suffered from an image problem. “I’ve been working hard on my reputation as not being a troublemaker. I’m interested in being seen as a cooperative person, because I *am* a cooperative person.

“The way the chances are on a big mountain, you have this big logistical thing, and you’re putting people places, working hard, getting sick, getting well, and then the summit day comes up for a brief little 24 hours. And before it’s gone, if you’re in the right place, at the right time, with the right people, well, maybe you get to make it. You end up giving everything to be in that position. I accept that, but I do hate putting myself in a place where I’m trying my guts out for imminent failure.”

It must have been frustrating for Catherine to have worked so hard on both K2 and Everest without a summit. Nevertheless, the Himalaya still fascinated her, and she had a keen interest in returning to Asia. “K2 is really hard not to go back to. I wasn’t the only one who wanted to stay, but we all managed to decide that when it was all over – really all over – that it was. I mean we weren’t getting dragged away from the mountain.

“I’d love it if K2 turned out to be the highest mountain in the world – it is really beautiful. If we could have come up with the money to go back this season, I would have said, ‘Take me, take me!’, because I really want to go back. I don’t know if anybody else on the team would have done that – but I get pretty dogged about some things.”

Catherine was always off somewhere, and it seemed like none of us ever saw her any more. She often talked about kicking back and doing some of the things she missed while away on these big trips.

“I haven’t really been rock climbing for a whole year. In some ways, I feel that I’m more of a rock climber, except that I have this background in mountain climbing. I don’t think I’m an alpine climber like people who climb in the Alps, so maybe I should go there. That would be a challenge.

Personal things like where I think my climbing should go, or where I’m the weakest, what I need to learn, have been set aside. I know that the first U.S. woman who gets on top of Mount Everest is going to have some nice little perks from that – like money, you know! It’s real tempting, especially if you feel you’re strong enough to be that person.

“On the other hand, I can’t stand the way it feels when you’re in a field of those people. I didn’t even know that other women were trying to climb K2 last year. We got back to Beijing, and I found out that four women made it – three of them died, but four of them made it. I don’t like the way it feels. I don’t like feeling hard, competitive, and disappointed in myself that I didn’t make it. I’m trying to deal with that. I don’t know, maybe climbing isn’t like that for me.”

Catherine had a great deal of drive to succeed, and worked hard to achieve her goals. But these climbing goals were often in conflict with her desire to complete her education and become a psychologist. She was fascinated by children and wanted a family of her own. However, the list of successful climbs kept growing, and each new project kept her from pursuing what most would call a normal lifestyle.

“The more I go for it, the more it draws me into the kind of life that I always used to feel critical about. You know, ‘What do you mean? We just got back from Cholatse, and you want to go to Dhaulagiri? We just got back yesterday!’ What do you do? Tell them you can’t go?”

“Are you going to let all of life be ‘away excitement’ –

excitement in the East? You’ve going to miss the gradual kinds of continuity and relationships with people that are deep, that you get something from, not just in great big chunks, in summits or no summits.”

In many ways, her climbing career took over and wouldn’t allow time for other interests. This was a problem which Catherine constantly struggled with, and which I’m sorry she couldn’t resolve.

“I’d be gone six months and come back ready to relax and people would say, ‘What are you going to do? Where are you going?’ I didn’t know. There is a certain amount of pressure, if you’re going to do big mountains, to keep climbing them. It’s just like any job you get into. The companies that you work with expect you to know several seasons in advance what you’re going to do. What they’re banking on is that you are in it for the long haul.”

Catherine’s plight had its good and bad sides. The opportunity to climb and to excel was a strong force. It would be difficult to ignore a perfect vehicle for the fulfillment of dreams, and yet the desire to give it up in favor of a more conventional lifestyle was still there. Catherine often wondered if she would be happy with the “jobs” she

had acquired, and if she had chosen the proper path.

“You know, I’m going to complain about all these things, and then I’m going to go out and go on another expedition. Then I’ll come back to Boulder and worry that all my long-term friends are all over the world.

“Aren’t I choosing to live the way I want to? Well, maybe no. I may not get to choose to have kids when I want them. I sometimes think I’ve gone too far and can’t go back. Maybe I made too many choices to guide rivers, to go climbing, to spend seasons in Joshua Tree and Yosemite and Colorado, and I didn’t make choices to go back to graduate school and do those other things.

“In some ways I’ve painted myself into a corner. It’s not like there wouldn’t be opportunities to go back to school if I wanted to, but having made all of those choices, little changes were made in my life orientation, personality, something in there, that makes me keep making them now. Even if it is a conflictual decision.”

“Part of me ends up wondering whether whatever you do, you bring the center of yourself to it. I ought to be as happy climbing as I would be going to graduate school.

The only thing I probably won't get is kids. Maybe I live on more of a day-to-day basis than you might think, and I'm going for the next thing that's going to give me the most instant gratification."

Even though she seemed undecided, I think Catherine had come to terms with her doubts. On the surface she appeared unsure, but it was her nature to question not only her friends but herself. She didn't just need to know the answers – she needed to feel the answers. And I'm certain she was the most content in situations where she could feel the most, which is why climbing was such a force in her life.

"If you're climbing and doing it with your heart and are open to what's in the world, living and growing and not stuck at a developmental low level...than you're cooking! And when I'm fifty, when I quit climbing because I can't do it full time anymore, I'll be simmered to a nice cooked-ness! Then maybe I'll start writing. I may never have a substantial financial situation like my parents would certainly like to see me have, but I might not need that – assuming that I get to live that long."

"If I'm really doing what I should be doing, when I get there I'll pick up the

next thing that I should be doing, and I'll do that. Not thinking about money for a few minutes, I think it'll make a satisfying life."

Going to the Hummingbird Ridge was, in some ways, a return to her roots, to the days of simply climbing without the pressure of reputation and sponsorship. Catherine was well aware of the dangers of the route, of the long, arduous days and mental effort that would be required for success. "I want to do it, see if I can manage it." Seeming embarrassed at something deep inside, she cracked a smile and added, "I mean, I hope I don't get avalanched."

"I hope, I really hope we get to do it. Because we need a summit. And once you decide you're going to do a thing, you can't really un-enlist yourself."

A few days after our conversation, Catherine called me from the airport with three or four frantic messages to pass on. She couldn't talk – the stewardess had been motioning for her to get on the plane for several minutes. She had to go. She always had to go, always had to strive towards that next high challenge. I believe that Catherine was content to live her life like a passage from her journal"

"With a lot of hope, awareness that great hurt is possible, and perhaps the courage to take what comes."

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