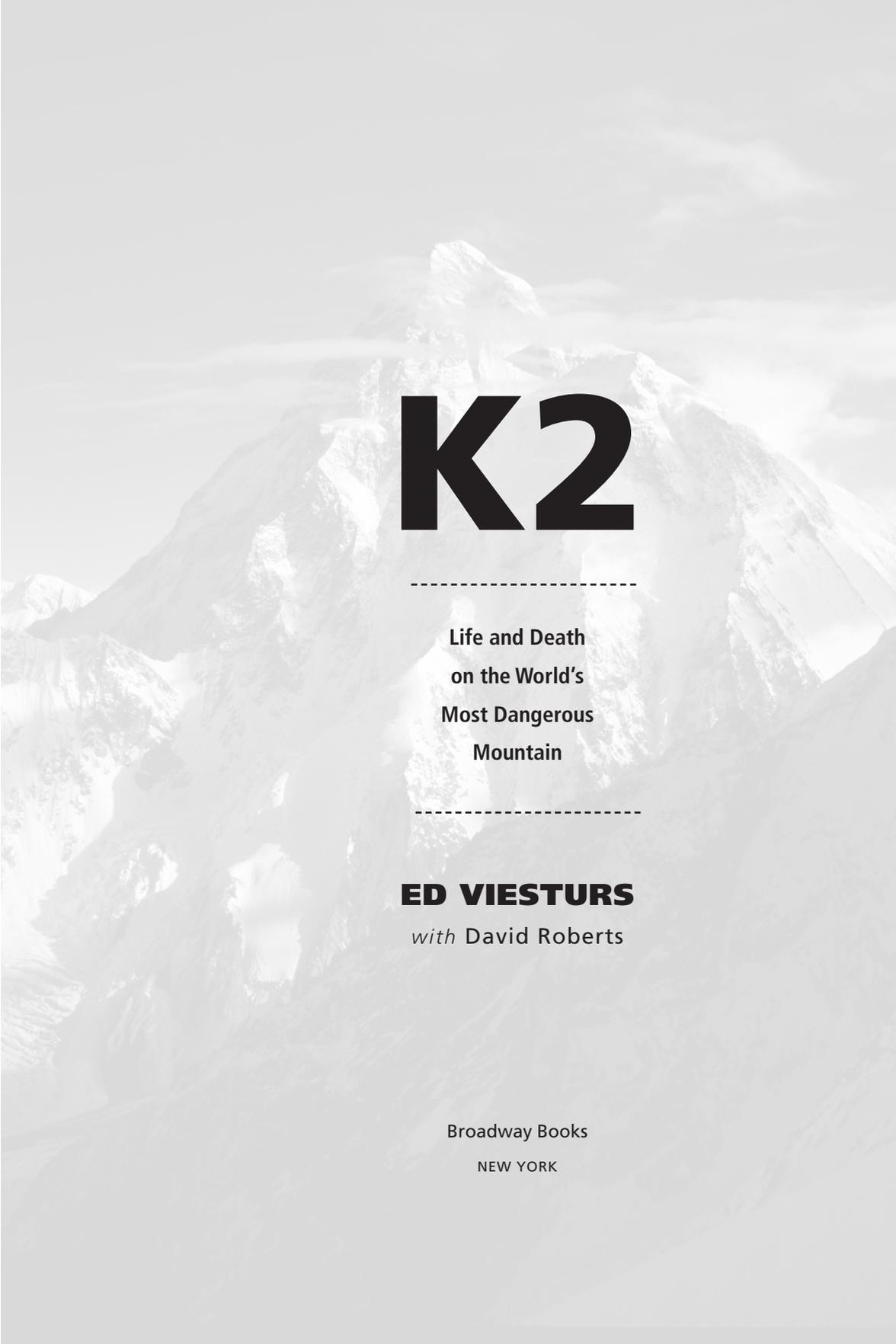


K2

**LIFE AND DEATH ON
THE WORLD'S
MOST DANGEROUS
MOUNTAIN**

**ED VIESTURS
AND DAVID ROBERTS**



K2

Life and Death
on the World's
Most Dangerous
Mountain

ED VIESTURS

with David Roberts

Broadway Books

NEW YORK



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*As always, to my loving wife Paula and our kids—
still and forever the best reasons for coming home.*

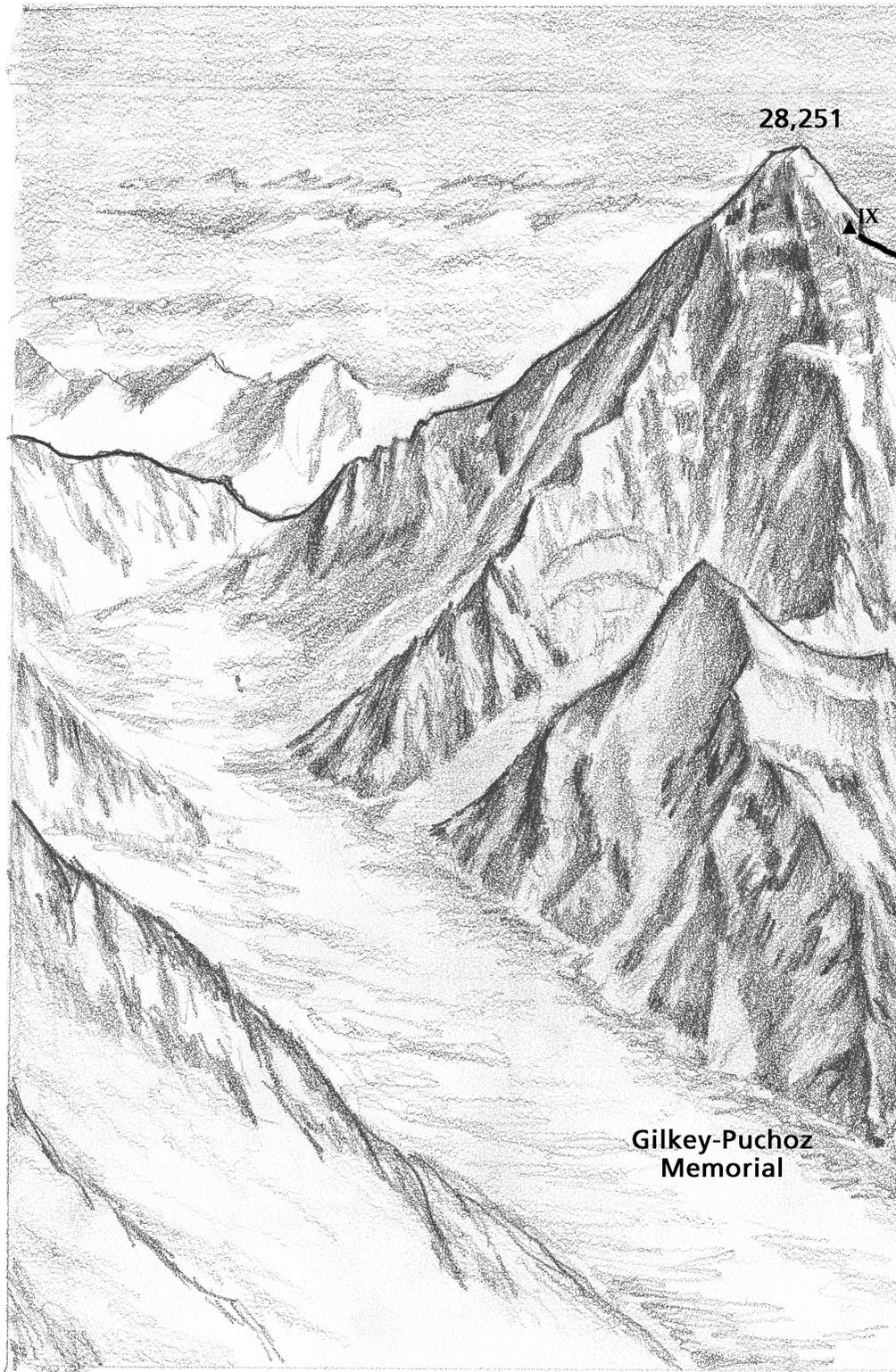
*And also to those who have been inspired and challenged
by the holy grail of mountaineering that is K2.*



Contents

1	THE MOTIVATOR	... 1
2	DECISION	... 35
3	BREAKTHROUGH	... 80
4	THE GREAT MYSTERY	... 126
5	BROTHERHOOD	... 185
6	THE PRICE OF CONQUEST	... 228
7	THE DANGEROUS SUMMER	... 266
	<i>Epilogue: The Holy Grail</i>	... 309
	<i>Acknowledgments</i>	... 327
	<i>Bibliography</i>	... 330
	<i>Index</i>	... 333





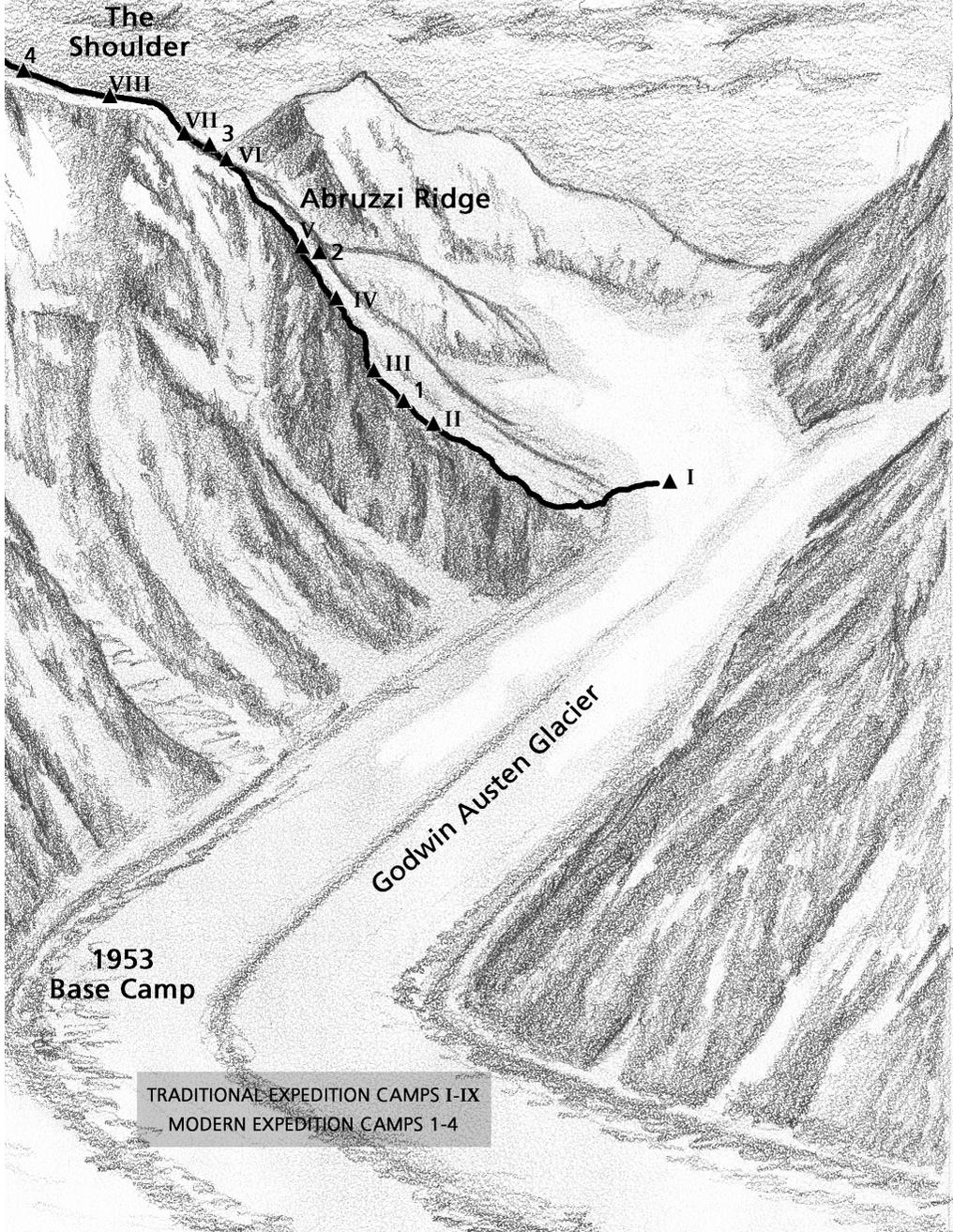
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IX

**Gilkey-Puchoz
Memorial**



K2 from the South



TRADITIONAL EXPEDITION CAMPS I-IX
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THE MOTIVATOR

In the wee hours of the morning of August 1, 2008, some thirty climbers from ten different expeditions set out from their high camps on the Abruzzi Ridge of K2. At 28,251 feet the world's second-tallest mountain, K2, thrusts skyward out of the Karakoram Range of northern Pakistan. After weeks of sitting out bad weather, the mountaineers were poised to go for the summit on a clear and windless day. During the endless storms, morale at base camp had reached rock bottom, and some climbers had thrown in the towel and gone home. But now everybody still on the mountain was jazzed. As they emerged from their cramped tents to clip on crampons and hoist packs, the climbers were riding a manic high. Sometime that day, they thought, they would claim one of the most elusive and glorious prizes in mountaineering. For most of these men and women, K2 was the goal of a lifetime.

Although the various teams were operating independently, they had tried to cobble together a common logistical plan that would help everyone get to the top. The crucial feature of that plan was the fixing of thin nylon ropes—to be used on the way up, in effect, as handrails, and on the way down as lines that could be easily rappelled. Those fixed ropes were intended to ensure the climbers' passage through the Bottleneck, a steep and dangerous couloir of snow and ice that rises from an altitude of 26,400 feet.

The Bottleneck and the sketchy leftward traverse at the top of it form the “crux” of the Abruzzi Ridge. Although climbing the Bottleneck is only moderately difficult, what makes that high gauntlet so nerve-racking is a gigantic serac—a cliff of solid ice—that looms above it. Weighing many tons, poised at a vertical and, in places, an overhanging angle, the serac looks as though it is barely attached to the mountain. Yet in the sixty-nine years since mountaineers first came to grips with this formidable obstacle, the serac had proved remarkably stable. It seemed, indeed, to be a permanent feature of K2's summit pyramid.

Thirty climbers crawling up the same route on the same day would have been business as usual on Mount Everest. On K2—a far more serious mountain, and one that has seen far fewer attempts—such a crowd was unprecedented. Still, as they approached the Bottleneck, thanks to the perfect weather for which they had waited so long, the climbers were awash in optimism. The summit was within their grasp.

And then things started to go subtly wrong. Small mistakes were made. Miscommunications, fueled by the many different languages the climbers spoke, flared into angry words. The slower climbers began to block the way for those who were capable of moving faster. Yet the single event that turned an awkward day into a catastrophe was nobody's fault.

Within the next thirty-six hours, eleven of those mountaineers would die high on the Abruzzi Ridge. The disaster that unfolded on August 1 would end up as the worst single-event tragedy in the mountain's history, and the second worst in the long chronicle of mountaineering in the Himalaya and the Karakoram.

And nobody saw it coming.



Almost sixteen years earlier, on August 16, 1992, with my partners Scott Fischer and Charley Mace, I had left our high camp in the predawn darkness and started trudging up toward the Bottleneck. On that day, I, too, had been full of bursting hope, tempered by the wary alertness that is the obligatory state of mind for any alpinist who wants to stay alive in the great ranges. I had previously climbed Everest and Kangchenjunga, the first- and third-highest peaks in the world, but I knew that K2 was in another league of difficulty and danger.

Like 2008's climbers, Scott, Charley, and I had had to bide our time for interminable weeks before we finally got a crack at the summit. Not only storms but all kinds of logistical snafus and interpersonal conflicts had delayed our final assault again and again. It was not until fifty-seven days after arriving at base camp that we finally set out for the top. On the other hand, on that August day in 1992, the three of us had had the Bottleneck to ourselves. And fixing ropes up the couloir was not part of our plan.

In *No Shortcuts to the Top*, the memoir I wrote about climbing the world's fourteen highest peaks, I devoted a full chapter to my K2 expedition. Even after K2, it took me several years before I began to consider that it might be possible for me to reach the summit of all fourteen 8,000-meter peaks. For one thing, I didn't think there was any way that I could ever afford to go on so many expeditions. For another, climbing all fourteen 8,000ers seemed far too ambitious a goal. The first person to accomplish that feat had been the great Tyrolean mountaineer Reinhold Messner, who knocked off his fourteenth in 1986. And Messner was like a god to me.

Yet with K2, I became the first American to climb the world's three highest mountains. The outdoor magazines ran a few short profiles about me. One of them was titled "Ed Who?" Even after those pieces appeared, I was still relatively unknown to the general public, but with the boost in

confidence they gave me, I finally got up the nerve to start approaching potential sponsors.

K2 was a huge turning point in my life. Yes, it brought me my first modest taste of what you might call “mountaineering celebrity.” But far more important than any faint whiff of fame were the lessons K2 taught me.

In the aftermath of 2008’s disaster, all kinds of armchair “experts” delivered their scathing critiques. Nonclimbers clogging the online chat rooms, in response to sensational newspaper articles, took a macabre delight in the tragedy. This was Everest 1996 all over again, they seemed to think—the melodrama of clueless dilettantes who had no business on the mountain buying their way into a catastrophe at the cost of their own lives, as well as the lives of professional guides entrusted with caring for them. (Hundreds of readers of Jon Krakauer’s bestseller *Into Thin Air* reduced his complicated narrative to that simplistic morality play.) After the August 2008 tragedy, Messner himself sounded off in this vein, decrying the “K2 package deals” that he assumed had lured novices to the mountain and concluding, “Something like this is just pure stupidity.”

Messner was not the only famous mountaineer to criticize the victims of the 2008 disaster. The temptation to second-guess those luckless climbers’ decisions was all but irresistible. Newspapers, magazines, and radio and TV shows called me for my commentary. I was already beginning to think that what had happened on K2 on August 1 was far more complicated than the first tabloid and Internet versions of the story. It would take several weeks for more detailed accounts to trickle down from the slopes of the mountain and find their way to responsible media outlets. And I was not about to cast facile aspersions on climbers who had died on the mountain, or had barely survived it.

In 1992, K2 had not only proved to be a turning point in my life—it had been the scene of what I still regard as the greatest mistake I ever made as a mountaineer. The most important lesson I learned from that beautiful and dangerous peak was a blunt one: *Don’t ever do that again, if you want to stay alive. Listen to your instincts, and follow them.*

Recently, I reread my diary from the K2 trip. I was struck by how dif-



ferent it seemed from the account I had written in *No Shortcuts*. Events and relationships that seemed really important when they were happening barely made it into the chapter I wrote thirteen years after the expedition. Conversely, some of the most dramatic turning points of my weeks on K2 got covered in my diary in only a few deadpan sentences. I wasn't writing the diary, of course, for anybody else to read. At the time, I thought I was simply making a day-by-day record of the most ambitious mountaineering attempt of my life up to that point.

Now I wonder. Any "story" can be told in dozens of different ways. For that very reason, I believe, every time you go back and reexamine an important chapter in your life, you learn something new about it. And the reactions of audiences when I give slide shows, as well as the e-mails I received from folks who read *No Shortcuts to the Top*, gave me many new insights into my own experience.

I have always believed that climbing mountains teaches you lessons. And more than that, I firmly believe that those lessons can be applied to the rest of your life. It's not an easy process, however. Mountaineering literature is full of trite clichés about "conquering an enemy" or "transcending your limits." For at least two centuries, philosophers of the outdoors have insisted that nature is "a school of character."

Would that it were all so simple! The most important lesson I learned from K2 was that by simply putting off making a decision, I made the worst decision of my life: to climb on into a gathering storm. I was lucky to survive our summit push on K2. Scott and Charley didn't agree with me about this. That day, they never seemed to suffer from the nagging doubts—the knot in my gut, as I've always thought of it—I carried with me hour after hour. Yet my partners' comparatively blithe attitude about our climbing on that August 16 doesn't even begin to tempt me to revise my judgment. It's ultimately a personal thing.

K2 is often called the hardest mountain in the world. It's also often called the deadliest. This may not be strictly true: in terms of the ratio of climbers who get to the top compared to those who die on the mountain, Annapurna is more deadly than K2. (I succeeded on Annapurna, in



fact, only on my third try, in 2005, and only after I'd begun to wonder whether it was too dangerous a peak to justify another attempt. It became my nemesis—the last of all the fourteen 8,000ers I was able to climb.)

Even before I went to K2, however, I had started calling it “the holy grail of mountaineering.” It seemed to me to pose the ultimate challenge in high-altitude climbing. To prepare for that challenge, I read everything I could about K2's history.

I've often puzzled over the fact that the public seems so fixated on Mount Everest. At one point in 1998, there were about ten books published in English by climbers who had been involved in the Everest disaster two years earlier—not just Krakauer's *Into Thin Air* but memoirs by such survivors as Beck Weathers, Anatoli Boukreev, Lene Gammelgaard, and Matt Dickinson.

In the chaotic summer of 1986, thirteen climbers died on K2, including several who were among the finest alpinists in the world. That's five more than died in the 1996 “killer storm” on Everest. Yet only one book chronicling the K2 disaster was published in the United Kingdom or the United States—Jim Curran's *K2: Triumph and Tragedy*.

As I did my homework before our 1992 expedition, I couldn't help comparing Everest's history to K2's. The highest mountain in the world has its dramatic stories: Mallory and Irvine disappearing into the clouds in 1924, Hillary and Tenzing's smooth first ascent in 1953, Messner's astonishing solo climb without bottled oxygen in 1980, and the like. But taken as a whole, the saga of Everest seems to me a sprawling, even tedious narrative, especially in recent years, now that guided commercial expeditions throng the mountain each spring and fall and as many as five hundred men and women per season claim their fifteen minutes each on the summit.

The history of K2, in contrast, pivots around a few intense and troubled campaigns, separated from each other by years of inactivity or total failure. As I first read about those campaigns, it struck me that each one had a lot to tell us about the most basic questions mountaineering

raises—the questions of risk, ambition, loyalty to one’s teammates, self-sacrifice, and the price of glory. As of 2009, moreover, K2 still has not developed anything like the guided-client scene on Everest. The world’s second-highest mountain is simply too difficult for beginners.

In focusing on the six most dramatic seasons in the mountain’s history—August 2008, 1938, 1939, 1953, 1954, and 1986—my aim is not just to tell the stories of those campaigns, not just to write chapters of a K2 history, but to muse and probe my way through those episodes as I attempt to glean their lessons. This book might in fact be called “Lessons Learned from K2.” Plenty of mistakes were made during those campaigns, leading to shocking tragedies. But it’s not my intention to sit back and second-guess my predecessors. Instead I want to imagine my way into their company, where I can ponder the what-might-have-been of their dilemmas.

Each of those six campaigns evolved into complicated human predicaments. Faced with adversity, the members of the 1938 and 1953 expeditions drew together, forging brotherhoods so deep that they lasted for decades thereafter. That kind of brotherhood is not only truly admirable but, I think, almost unique to mountaineering. The camaraderie born of shared adventures was one of the chief things that drew me to climbing in the first place.

Faced with other kinds of adversity, however, the 1939 and 1954 teams split into bitter factions, sparking personal animosities so intense that some of the men never spoke to each other again for the rest of their lives. During the 1986 and 2008 seasons, when many separate teams thronged K2 (unlike the single expeditions of ’38, ’39, ’53, and ’54), any semblance of order degenerated into a kind of every-man-for-himself anarchy.

In chapter 2, I retell my own story of K2, bringing in details and events I either neglected or forgot to mention in *No Shortcuts*. During the four years since I wrote that other book, I’ve reflected many times on what went right and what went wrong on K2 in 1992, and—not surprisingly—my take on that turning point in my life has shifted. By reorganizing my



own story in a more straightforward, chronological narrative, I hope to uncover stones I've never looked under before.

There's all too much tragedy in K2's history. But I hope this book serves as a hymn of praise to the great mountain. As well as being dubbed the hardest or the deadliest mountain in the world, K2 is often called the most beautiful. It still seems to me a holy grail—and I am neither the first nor the last of its many worshippers to travel to the ends of the earth for the chance to grasp it in my hands.

A sharp pyramid of black rock, sheer snow gullies and ridges, and ominous hanging glaciers, K2 has a symmetry and grace that make it the most striking of the fourteen 8,000ers. Rising from the Baltoro Glacier in the heart of the Karakoram, K2 is flanked by five other of the world's seventeen highest peaks. That range, in fact, holds the densest constellation of skyscraping mountains anywhere in the world—even denser than the Himalaya around Everest. Yet K2 soars in proud isolation over Broad Peak, Gasherbrum I, Gasherbrum II, and its other formidable neighbors.

When you approach Mount Everest from the south, as do all teams that attempt the classic first-ascent route through the Khumbu Icefall and up to the South Col, the great mountain only gradually comes into view. Most of the way to base camp, Everest is effectively hidden behind the bulk of its satellite peak, 25,790-foot Nuptse. During the multiday trek into base camp, you get only sporadic peekaboo glimpses of its summit. As a result, for climbers the first sight of Everest seldom comes as a stunning, unforgettable moment.

It's just the opposite with K2. As they march up the Baltoro Glacier, most climbers get their first view of the mountain from Concordia, where several glacial streams converge. All at once, after a week's trek from the last village, Askole, K2 springs into sight. Even though it's still a dozen miles away, the sheer, towering presence of the mountain overwhelms you.



Sir Francis Younghusband, the great Victorian explorer, was one of the first Westerners to see K2 from a distance, in 1887. The prospect moved him to an uncharacteristic effusion in his book about the expedition; he later recalled “saying emphatically to myself and to the universe at large: Oh yes! Oh yes! This really is splendid! How splendid! How splendid!”

Reinhold Messner, who climbed K2 in 1979, unabashedly called it “the most beautiful of all the high peaks.” He added: “An artist has made this mountain.”

In 1992, Scott and I got our first view of K2 not from Concordia but days earlier, when we hiked up a wooded hill out of our Paiju camp. All of a sudden, there the mountain was, sticking up into the sky, a perfect white pyramid. “Holy shit, that’s big!” said Scott, and I answered, “Wow, we’re almost there!” That evening, I wrote in my diary, “After breakfast, Scott and I scrambled up the ridges above camp and got some great views of K2. That is one huge mo-fo!”

By the beginning of the summer of 2008, some sixty climbers had assembled at base camp on the south side of K2. Several had tried the mountain before, but for most of the men and women on the Baltoro, it was their first go at K2. After their own first sightings of the magnificent mountain, some of their Internet dispatches had gushed with the same sense of wonder and astonishment that Scott and I had felt in 1992 and that Younghusband had expressed way back in 1887. Nearly all of the climbers were planning to try the Abruzzi Ridge or its variant spur, the Cesen route.

Too many days spent sitting out storms at base camp, however, had taken their toll on the various teams’ morale. By the end of July, more than a few of the climbers had chucked it in and left for home. Others hovered on a teeter-totter of indecision. A sixty-one-year-old Frenchman, Hugues d’Aubarède, decided on July 20 to give up his attempt. No sooner had he started packing his gear than several forecasts arrived predicting a coming spell of excellent weather. According to journalist Matthew Power, the Dutch leader of another team told d’Aubarède, “Just skip your work for another two or three weeks and then you can



summit K2.” Changing his mind, d’Aubarède called his wife in France to tell her he was going to give the mountain one more shot. It would be a fatal decision.

The window of clear, windless weather arrived at the very end of July. In the group of thirty who set out early on August 1 to go for the top, there were no superstars. Many of those climbers, however, had previous experience on the world’s highest mountains. A Norwegian couple, for instance, had climbed Everest together in 2005; they had also reached the north and the south poles the same year. The Dutch leader, who had made it to the top of Everest without bottled oxygen, was on his third expedition to K2. Besides Norway, Holland, and France, the mountaineers came from an assortment of countries, including Korea, Serbia, Singapore, Italy, Germany, Spain, Sweden, Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. There were also several Pakistanis and a number of Sherpa from Nepal.

Nearly all those climbers set out on August 1 from Camp IV, situated on a broad snow ridge known as the Shoulder, at about 26,000 feet. The Shoulder is the last place on the Abruzzi Ridge where you can reasonably pitch a tent. In 1992, Scott, Charley, and I placed our own Camp IV as far along the Shoulder as we could, just below where the snow slope steepens toward the start of the Bottleneck couloir. Last summer’s climbers, however, pitched their tents on the lower, southern end of the Shoulder. The difference may not seem like such a big deal, but we had good reasons for camping where we did. At altitude, in soft snow, it can easily take a full hour to trudge from one end of the Shoulder to the other. That’s an hour we saved over last summer’s climbers. That’s an extra hour added to their grueling summit day on the way up, and at least twenty minutes on the way down.

If there was one guy last summer who really had his act together, it was the Basque mountaineer Alberto Zerain, who started his own summit push from well below the Shoulder, leaving Camp III at 23,600 feet. Operating as a soloist without teammates, Zerain got moving by 10:00 P.M. on July 31, and he climbed the 2,400 feet up to the Shoulder in the as-

tonishing time of only two hours. When he reached the other climbers' Camp IV, he found them still struggling to get ready. According to Freddie Wilkinson, who covered the tragedy for the magazine *Rock and Ice*, "Zerain called out to the others still in their tents, trying to cajole them into hurrying up to leave with him. He received few responses. . . . After an hour of waiting, Zerain finally continued alone."

I must admit that when I first saw photos from last summer, I was shocked. There those guys were, still crossing the Shoulder, and it's already broad daylight! As I said, I'm generally not comfortable criticizing other climbers' decisions. But that late start on summit day meant that the climbers had reduced what was already a small margin of safety by that much more.

It's easy to succumb to high-altitude lassitude. You lose your motivation. It takes longer not only to do something but even to think about doing something.

It's no fun getting off in the middle of the night from a high camp on an 8,000er. You're in this closet-sized tent with your buddy. It's dark, it's cold, there's ice everywhere. You have to brew up a drink—something warm, like a cup of tea. And that seemingly simple task alone can consume an hour of precious time. If your partner has to take a crap, you have to move aside and let him go out and do that. Then you have to put on your boots, your overboots, the rest of your clothes, and your harness. I always sleep with my boots in my sleeping bag, though not on my feet. Lots of climbers don't. So in the morning they have to put on cold boots, which will instantly suck precious warmth from their feet, whose blood circulation is sorely taxed to begin with. That contributes to a bad start.

On my expeditions, I've always been the clock-watcher. I always have a plan. I want to be in control of the time. In a way, that's just part of my nature—I tend to be punctual. The night before, I'll remind my partners, "We need to be out the door by one or one-thirty A.M." Other climbers seem to have the attitude of "Oh, I'll leave when I'm ready." Next thing you know, they've lost two or three hours.

So I have to think that a crucial mistake made by nearly all the



climbers on August 1 was getting off late from Camp IV. That delay was compounded by what happened when the first climbers reached the bottom of the Bottleneck.

As you head up that steep couloir, you're excruciatingly aware of the huge ice cliff hanging over you. It's a monstrous-looking thing, some 400 feet high, and the whole time you're under it, you can't help wondering, *What's holding that damned serac in place?*

In 1992, I nicknamed the ice cliff "the Motivator." It certainly motivated Scott, Charley, and me. It threatens you the whole time. You don't want to stop, you can't take a break, and as you kick steps up the couloir, you're literally holding your breath while you climb as fast as humanly possible. Your muscles almost scream from oxygen deprivation.

The first mountaineer who ever came to grips with the Motivator was the great Fritz Wiessner, in 1939. He was so leery of it that he chose to climb a different route, on the rock bands well to the left of the Bottleneck, even though that forced him onto much more difficult terrain.

Before our 1992 expedition, I'd studied every photo I could find of that serac. Oddly enough, the Motivator looked much the same year after year. It seemed to be pretty stable. It had a fairly smooth face—there weren't big broken chunks that looked ready to plunge with the first gust of wind. And in more than fifty years, no one had ever reported seeing ice calve away from that face.

Since we had the Bottleneck to ourselves in '92, we climbed it as fast as we could. That was a luxury 2008's climbers didn't have. As soon as the guys in the lead reached the bottom of the couloir, the whole procession stalled. The climbers lined up, one after another, but no one could move faster than the slowest man. The climb quickly turned into a traffic jam. On top of that, matters were made much worse by the climbers' common assumption that they needed fixed ropes to get up and down the Bottleneck safely.

Afterward, some of the survivors lashed out at other climbers on the mountain, accusing them of making mistakes that led directly to the tragedy. No one was more critical than Wilco van Rooijen, the forty-year-

old leader of the Dutch Norit K2 expedition. “Everything was going well to Camp IV,” he told the press from his hospital bed, “and on the summit attempt everything went wrong.” To a reporter from Reuters, van Rooijen elaborated: “The biggest mistake we made was that we tried to make agreements. . . . Everybody had his own responsibility and then some people did not do what they promised. With such stupid things lives are endangered.”

Since there were so many different teams on the mountain, their leaders had crafted the “agreements” to which van Rooijen referred. The plan was for nine climbers to string almost 2,000 feet of rope up the Bottleneck and across the leftward traverse that leads to easier ground. On August 1, however, the available supply of rope was at least 300 feet short—causing the leaders to doubt whether there was enough to equip the whole dangerous passage. In addition, as van Rooijen complained to *Men’s Journal* correspondent Matthew Power, several of the nine lead climbers “just didn’t show up.”

Then, to make matters worse, the rope fixers started stringing their lines too low, on the relatively easy ground before the Bottleneck really commences. By the time they got to the most hazardous part of the climb, they were out of rope. “We were astonished,” van Rooijen later told the Associated Press. “We had to move [the fixed ropes]. That took, of course, many, many hours. Some turned back because they didn’t trust it any more.” Speaking to Power, the Dutchman was even more scathing: “We lost many, many hours because of this stupid thing, which we already talked about many, many times at Base Camp.”

I’m sorry, but I just don’t buy it. Van Rooijen claims he couldn’t climb because the ropes had not been fixed in the right places. Well, whose fault was that? Does your success depend on what other people do? Van Rooijen blames the others for the delay. Why didn’t he get out and do something?

Meanwhile, the solo Basque climber, Alberto Zerain, was hours ahead of all the others. He had cruised up the Bottleneck and across the traverse without even thinking about fixed ropes. Zerain would reach the

summit at 3:00 P.M.—the only climber that day, in my opinion, to top out at a reasonable hour.

Some 1,600 feet lower on the mountain, the traffic jam had ground to a halt. According to Power, “A decision was made to cut a lower section of the rope and use it to protect climbers as they made their way across the traverse [leading leftward from the top of the Bottleneck]. A knife was passed down to cut the rope near its bottom anchor, and the rope was pulled back up to the head of the line.”

At around 11:00 A.M., the first fatality occurred. Somewhere in the middle of the traffic jam, a Serbian climber, Dren Mandic, unclipped himself from the fixed rope. Afterward, all kinds of explanations about what Mandic was attempting to do appeared in print and on the Internet. Among other things, he was accused of trying to leapfrog past other climbers. The most accurate account was probably that offered in the public announcement by the Serbian team, mourning the loss of their comrade. In broken English, the team leader reported, “Wishing to replace himself with climber behind him DREN undo his assurance. Fix-rope relocated suddenly. DREN loosed his counterbalance and fell down to 8020 m [26,300 feet] where his body was stopped.”

As he fell, Mandic slammed into the next climber on the fixed rope, Cecilie Skog. (Skog and her husband, Rolf Bae, were the experienced Norwegian couple trying to climb K2 together.) Skog was knocked off her feet but managed to stay attached to the fixed rope. According to Wilco van Rooijen, as reported by Matthew Power,

Still falling, Mandic grabbed wildly at the rope, jerking two other climbers off their feet. He then lost his grip and tumbled down the steep couloir, pinwheeling hundreds of feet back down toward the Shoulder. “Just one moment, and he was gone,” says Wilco.

Uncertain whether their teammate was still alive, two Serbians and a Pakistani porter descended to his body. By the time they got there,

Mandic was dead. According to Power, however, over the radio from base camp, the Serbian team leader ordered that trio to try to haul the body back to Camp IV. As they began the effort, the porter, Jehan Baig—described by Power as “inexperienced”—suddenly slipped and fell. Eyewitnesses claimed that Baig never tried to self-arrest with his ice ax. Instead, he cartwheeled down the slope and plunged out of sight over a cornice.

If Power is correct in his assertion that the body recovery was ordered by the team leader, that directive strikes me as questionable at best. It's hard enough to help a sick or wounded climber descend under his own power from 26,000 feet on an 8,000er; it's virtually impossible to haul a dead body from such a perilous perch back to camp. It's not clear what the ultimate point of that mission would have been, since the body could never have been taken all the way down the mountain. That order, if in fact it was given, cost Jehan Baig his life. It's curious that in his public announcement, the Serbian team leader made no mention of Baig's death. Instead, he wrote, “We muffled our friend's body in the Serbian flag, secured it with pickaxe and put it on 7,900 m [25,900 feet] to the right from direction C4-Bottleneck. Our friend rest near the heaven. Let God bless him.”

It's also unclear how many of the climbers stuck in the traffic jam were even aware that Mandic had fallen to his death. Almost certainly, none of them knew about the second fatal accident down below. In any event, now that the rope salvaged from the bottom of the Bottleneck had been fixed in place on the culminating traverse (the hardest part of the whole route), most of the climbers in the traffic jam kept plodding, ever so slowly, upward.

One of the few in the crowd who had decided to turn around and give up his summit attempt, the American Chris Klinke took an amazing photo of the upper mountain from Camp IV just after noon on August 1. (The shot, which captures in a single image the fiasco that was unfolding on K2 that day, was run splashed across a two-page spread in *Men's Journal*.) The picture is so sharp that you can clearly see twenty-two tiny, in-



sectlike human figures on the route. At the bottom of the photo, well below the Bottleneck, two of them are engaged in the effort to recover Mandic's body, only minutes before Baig would fall to his death. Most of the climbers have finally escaped the Bottleneck and the traverse, but the traffic jam is alive and well: nineteen of the climbers are so tightly bunched that it looks as though each one is on the verge of stepping on the heels of the climber in front of him. Far, far above even the leader of the traffic jam, a solitary climber—Alberto Zerain—rests in the lee of a small serac before starting on to the summit.

In my view, many of those climbers still heading upward ought to have thought a little more seriously about turning back. Turnaround times aren't an ironclad rule on K2, but I believe in them for myself. On our own summit day, Scott and I got moving from Camp IV at 1:30 A.M. Charley, who started a little later, caught up with us, having followed the tracks we'd kicked in the deep snow. I had resolved that if we didn't summit by 2:00 P.M., I'd turn around. As it was, we topped out at noon.

In August 2008, I suspect, summit fever took over in the traffic jam. All those climbers were piled together. They were slow together, and they were late together, and that probably rationalized their decision to continue toward the summit together, so late that the sun would be setting as they topped out. Only a few of them thought better of it and turned around. On a mountain like K2, nobody gives you credit for making the smart decision to give up the summit and go down.

In 1990, an acquaintance of mine, Greg Child, an outstanding Aussie mountaineer transplanted to the United States, climbed K2 by its north ridge, a considerably harder route than the Abruzzi. Recently I reread Greg's account of the climb, published as "A Margin of Luck" in his collection of essays *Mixed Emotions*. Greg has a sardonic, even self-mocking style, so some of the things he writes in that piece may be tongue-in-cheek. Even so, it's clear that he had a desperate time on summit day.

At 27,500 feet, only 750 feet below the top, Greg and his partners Greg Mortimer and Steve Swenson discussed what to do. It was already past 4:00 P.M.



Swenson looks down: “Should we go for it?” A long pause follows. Nothing could be more uncertain.

“Yes!” Mortimer finally shouts, prodding us into action and out of this inertia of doubt.

“This is crazy,” I think to myself. “A storm is moving in and we’re going for the summit, without oxygen, without bivouac gear.” But, I rationalize, this is our last shot at the mountain. If we go down now, we’ll never climb K2. A little more luck is all we need.

That exchange is incredibly similar to the one I had in 1992 with Scott and Charley as heavy snow began to fall. We, too, were above 27,000 feet. I remember asking, “Hey, what do you guys think?” “Whaddya mean?” Scott answered, and Charlie chimed in, “We’re going up!”

In 1990, Greg Child reached the summit only at 8:05 P.M. He didn’t start down until 9:00. That descent in the dark—“staggering, falling in the snow”—turned into what climbers mordantly call “an all-out epic.” Greg started to have hallucinations. Finding an empty oxygen cylinder in a circle of rocks, he fantasized:

I’m seeing an image in my mind of me hunkered among the rocks, warming my hands over a campfire. “That’s right,” I think, “I’ll build a fire down there. When Mortimer arrives we’ll get nice and warm.” I’ve got it all worked out.

Only 300 feet short of the tent, Greg became “completely apathetic” and collapsed. He literally crawled the last stretch to safety.

Man, I thought, as I reread Greg’s essay, *that was scary, to go that long and that late*. I wouldn’t have done that. Greg’s a really strong climber. A weaker mountaineer wouldn’t have survived.

Messner himself is famous for having wild hallucinations on the 8,000ers, especially when he was climbing alone. But I’ve always felt that if I started to hallucinate, I was doing something wrong.



The fourth member of Greg's team in 1990, Phil Ershler, did turn back. And Ershler, as a senior guide at Rainier Mountaineering, Inc. (RMI), had been one of my most important mentors. On our own summit day in 1992, as I carried that knot in my gut and couldn't make up my mind whether to go up or down, I kept thinking, *Well, Ershler turned around.*

As he headed down from the summit in August 2008, Alberto Zerain passed no fewer than eighteen climbers still going for the top. According to *Men's Journal*:

Though he doesn't speak English, [Zerain] claims he tried to tell the others that it was getting too late to continue. "As I descended," he explains, "everyone stopped to ask me how far it was to the summit. Did I tell the people to turn around? No, you can't. There are a lot of people, and they are all going up together. It's the majority against you."

(There's a succinct definition of summit fever!)

Some of the climbers that day may well have pondered turning around. But one of the more experienced, the Italian Marco Confortola, tried to rally them onward. "I started shouting," he later told reporters. "I told them that the first person to reach the summit of K2 [in 1954] did it at 6:00 P.M., so let's move!"

At least one climber in the throng, the Norwegian Rolf Bae, stopped below the top. Only 300 vertical feet short of the prized goal, Bae waited for his wife, Cecilie Skog, and another teammate to tag the summit and return.

Besides Zerain, seventeen others reached the top. Their arrival times ranged from 5:20 P.M. to after 7:00 P.M. For some, this meant that they had been going for twenty hours since leaving camp that morning. They were already pretty worn out.



By the time those summiteers got back to the diagonal snow ramp that leads down to the tricky traverse and the Bottleneck, it was pitch-dark. And most of them were exhausted.

It's at this point that it's hard to figure out just what happened on K2 late on August 1. The various accounts that filtered back from the survivors are so mutually contradictory, you can't stitch them together into a coherent narrative. It seems that the strongest climbers hoped to down-climb in the night all the way to Camp IV. But others, upon realizing how late they would arrive on the summit, apparently planned to bivouac well above the crux traverse and the Bottleneck.

By "planned to bivouac," I don't mean to suggest that this was part of their preconceived agenda. As far as I can tell, none of them carried a bivouac sack, or a half sleeping bag, or even a stove, and by now nearly all of them were without food and water. It may be that they had become so wasted that there seemed no alternative to bivouacking. But one thing is clear: whether that night or the next morning, they were counting on the fixed ropes to get down through the Bottleneck to Camp IV.

The weather was still perfect. But to survive a night in the open above 27,000 feet without shelter, food, or water, you have to hang your life out on a limb. Yet it's amazing how many climbers on K2 seem to take for granted the option of bivouacking on the way down as the price to pay for bagging the summit. On our own 1992 expedition, the ostensible leader of our team, Vladimir Balyberdin, bivouacked above 27,000 feet. Vlad was a tough dude, he had a mild night, and he got away with it. The next night, Chantal Mauduit thought she had no choice but to bivouac at 27,500 feet, but Aleksei Nikiforov, coming down from the top three hours later, roused her out of her apathy and cajoled her into descending with him—probably saving her life.

In 1978, my friend Jim Wickwire was one of the four climbers who became the first Americans to climb K2. Jim and his partner, Lou Reichardt, got to the top at 5:15 P.M. Lou realized the importance of heading down at once, and took off after only a few minutes. But Jim lingered, almost in a trance, taking photographs, changing the film in his

camera, and savoring that indescribable achievement, until he had spent close to an hour on the summit. It's uncannily similar to what happened on Annapurna on the first ascent in 1950: Louis Lachenal was obsessed with getting back to camp, while Maurice Herzog, the team leader, stayed and stayed, caught up in a euphoric vision that would ultimately cost him his toes and fingers.

On K2, Lou made it down to high camp that night, but Jim had to bivouac just below 28,000 feet. He barely survived; by the time he reached base camp, he was suffering from both pneumonia and pleurisy, his vocal cords were paralyzed, and he had incurred some frostbite. He was absolutely wrecked. Porters had to carry him in a litter back to Concordia, and he was eventually helicoptered off the Baltoro.

There's an old joke: "bivouac" is a French word for "mistake." I'm proud of the fact that on all thirty of my expeditions to 8,000-meter peaks, I never once had to bivouac. On several occasions, I turned around short of the summit rather than submit to a night out without shelter. In 1990, if Greg Child, Greg Mortimer, and Steve Swenson had bivouacked instead of calling upon their utmost reserves to get back to camp, they might well have died on the north ridge.

After Zerain and several of the Sherpa, the strongest climbers that day were probably the Norwegian trio: Cecilie Skog; her husband, Rolf Bae; and their teammate Lars Nessa. At dusk, ahead of all the others, they climbed down the ramp and clipped in to the last fixed rope on the near end of the traverse to the Bottleneck.

It was at this precise moment, sometime between 8:00 P.M. and 9:00 P.M., that the geologic fluke that would transform the gathering fiasco into a true catastrophe occurred. As Freddie Wilkinson reconstructed the event in *Rock and Ice*:

Bae [was] in the lead. Skog traversed next and heard the sickening roar of a large avalanche in the darkness. A second later, Skog was wrenched off balance as the rope she was clipped to broke somewhere below. Bae's headlamp disappeared.



Skog called out in the black night for her husband, but got no response.

A huge section of the Motivator, that ferocious but apparently stable ice cliff hanging over the route, had collapsed at the worst possible moment.

Despite the unfathomable shock of having her husband crushed by tons of ice as he traversed just ahead of her, then hearing his body plunge and vanish with the falling debris, Skog kept her wits about her. She carried a thin 165-foot rope in her pack. Now she and Nessa tied that cord to the broken end of a dangling fixed rope and rappelled into the Bottleneck. They downclimbed the couloir in the dark and made their way back to Camp IV in the early morning hours.

When the first bulletins from K2 hit the newspapers and the Internet, the initial scenario made it sound as though the collapsing ice cliff had wiped out most of the climbers who had died on the mountain. But Bae was apparently the sole direct victim of the crashing ice blocks. Far more consequential was the fact that the debris took with it a sizable section of fixed ropes—estimates by the climbers themselves ranged from 600 to 1,500 feet. And this unforeseen event effectively stranded all the climbers above the Norwegians in a cul-de-sac that was, paradoxically, of their own making.

By the time Rolf Bae was killed, several of the other climbers had already decided to bivouac. The Dutch leader, Wilco van Rooijen, later reported that he never saw the serac collapse, and didn't know until much later that it had. At something like 27,200 feet, van Rooijen carved out a seat in the snow slope and settled into it as he anticipated a grim night with neither sleeping bag nor food nor water. Beside him, two other members of the Dutch Norit team prepared their own bivouac seats. They were the Italian, thirty-seven-year-old Marco Confortola, and a thirty-seven-year-old Irishman, Gerard McDonnell. A fun-loving folk musician and oil worker, McDonnell was especially well liked by his teammates. A few days earlier, he had left a farewell note on his online blog upon leaving base camp, a phrase in Gaelic that translates as "That's all

for now, friends. The time is coming.” On reaching the top late on August 1, McDonnell phoned his girlfriend in Alaska. He had become the first Irishman to climb K2.

From a hospital in Islamabad, Confortola recounted his bivouac to a reporter from the British newspaper the *Independent*. “Since Gerard was having a difficult time,” the Italian said, “I made his hole bigger to help him lie down for a little bit. Gerard was very cold. I was also cold and began to shiver on purpose to create heat. I was wasting energy, but I needed to get warm.” The bivouac ledge was perilously exposed. “I made sure not to fall asleep,” Confortola added, “because I could have fallen [off the mountain].”

The three men managed to get through the night, then started down in the morning. Somewhere they came across three Korean climbers, tangled up in a single rope with which they were tied together. “There was a Korean guy hanging upside down,” van Rooijen recalled. “There was a second Korean guy who held him with a rope but he was also in shock and then a third guy was there also, and they were trying to survive but I had also to survive.”

Van Rooijen said that the Koreans declined his offer of help. But Confortola insisted that he and McDonnell spent three hours trying to disentangle the Koreans from their snarled rope and get them started down, to no avail.

At this point, even Confortola’s several accounts of what happened didn’t quite jibe. To the *Independent* reporter, he claimed that “for some strange reason,” McDonnell started “to walk away.” To others, he reported (in Matthew Power’s paraphrase), “Suddenly . . . Gerard turned around and began to climb back up the slope, back toward the Koreans, offering no explanation.” McDonnell’s friends later concluded that he went back up in a final attempt to give aid to the Koreans.

I’m not surprised at these discrepancies. By the time Confortola finally reached base camp, he was so wiped out that his memory could well have been playing tricks on him. And all climbers accept the sad fact that nonclimbing journalists can never seem to get our stories right.

We have all had the experience of thinking that we explained very lucidly to some reporter just what happened on some mountain, only to have a completely garbled version appear in print.

In any event, at this point, while he was still in the Bottleneck couloir, Confortola fell asleep from sheer exhaustion. He awoke to a loud booming noise. He later told the website K2Climb.net, “I saw my friend Gerard’s boots falling among the blocks of ice and snow. That was the worst moment.”

Apparently, a second, smaller serac collapse—a kind of aftershock of the massive initial breakdown of the night before—had engulfed McDonnell and carried him to his death. Later, the grieving Italian remembered his friend: “I used to call him Jesus. The beard, everything, he looked like Christ. He was always smiling. He was a flower.”

By now, chaos reigned among the climbers still trying to negotiate the descent. Van Rooijen bitterly recaptured the scene: “People were running down but didn’t know where to go, so a lot of people were lost on the mountain on the wrong side, wrong route. They were thinking of using my gas [bottled oxygen], my rope. So actually everybody was fighting for himself and I still do not understand why everybody were [sic] leaving each other.”

Had the climbers been members of a single unified team—like the Americans on K2 in 1953, for example—they might have rallied to one another’s aid. But given how many different teams were on the mountain in 2008, with only whatever rudimentary English each one commanded as a common language, it is not surprising that anarchy prevailed.

By this point, van Rooijen and Confortola had separated. Their solo descents took on the nightmarish quality of last-ditch retreats. And both men became effectively lost. Van Rooijen later told *National Geographic Adventure*,

The next morning after I spent the night, it was difficult to come down. I had radio contact with my climbing partners in Camp IV, but . . . [I] didn’t find Camp IV. I was on the wrong side of the



mountain. People at base camp saw me go over the wrong side of the ridge. . . . I had to sit out a whiteout because I couldn't see anything and I knew I couldn't go down any further. So I waited.

And to his brother over a satellite phone from Pakistan, Confortola recalled, "During the descent . . . due to the altitude and the exhaustion, I even fell asleep in the snow, and when I woke up I could not figure out where I was."

Even without a sleepless night in a bivouac, it's easy enough to get lost descending a mountain like K2. Coming down from the summit in '92, Scott started to veer off in the wrong direction, too far east. If I hadn't corrected him, he might have led us completely off the Abruzzi Ridge, into uncharted terrain on the east face.

On the way up, a lot of climbers gaze ahead; they never look down at the way they came. But at some point in the descent, they start wondering, "Now, where was it that I came up this thing?" I've always made it a fundamental principle to keep looking down on the way up, to memorize the landmarks that will guide my descent. It's partly instinct, and it's partly my training as an RMI guide. On Rainier, on Denali, that was hammered home as a crucial thing to do.

The chaos on the morning of August 2 was so total that we don't even know what happened to some of the climbers who died. One of them was the sixty-one-year-old Frenchman, Hugues d'Aubarède, the guy who almost pulled up stakes and went home, before van Rooijen talked him into giving the mountain a last shot. On the summit, d'Aubarède radioed his final message home: "It's minus twenty [degrees Celsius], I'm at 8,811 [meters]. I'm too cold, I'm too happy. Thank you."

Somewhere on the descent, d'Aubarède simply vanished. In all likelihood, he fell off the mountain as he tried to downclimb. Like those of many K2 victims over the decades, his body may never be found.

By the time the disaster had run its course, eleven climbers had died in a single thirty-six-hour period on K2. Besides the Serb Dren Mandic,

the Pakistani porter Jehan Baig, the three Koreans, Rolf Bae, Gerard McDonnell, and Hugues d'Aubarède, the victims included another Pakistani porter who was climbing with the Frenchman, and two veteran Sherpa.

To be sure, a lot of mistakes were made on K2 in August 2008. Too late a start by too many climbers from Camp IV; too many people on the route at the same time, climbing too slowly, which created the traffic jam; the further delay when the team leaders insisted that the fixed ropes in the Bottleneck had to be repositioned; summit fever, which kept so many from turning back short of the summit; too late an hour when all but Zerain topped out; the panic that set in after the serac collapse in the night.

The initial media coverage, however, made it sound as though the collapse of the Motivator was the direct and sole cause of the tragedy, almost like an act of God. But except for Rolf Bae, people didn't die because of the serac collapse. They died because of what that serac collapse created, after all the other ominous conditions surrounding the ascent had come into play.

It's very much like what happened on Everest in 1996. The "killer storm" of May 10–11 wasn't the single direct cause of the tragedy. It was simply the straw that broke the camel's back. That camel had already been overloaded by climbers starting too late, going too slowly, refusing to turn around, and using up their reserves of energy and bottled oxygen.

Even so, I was shocked by the viciousness of the public response to 2008's tragedy. All kinds of nonclimbers riveted by the news from K2 seemed to derive a kind of spiteful glee from the terrible events. After the *New York Times* ran its front-page story about the disaster, scores of folks weighed in online. Something like 90 percent of their comments were derogatory I-told-you-sos. The *Times* article said nothing about "heroes," yet carpers made such comments as "It's long past time to stop calling

these egomaniacs heroes and call them what they are. Selfish, egomaniacs, and stupid.” Another reader wrote in, “Heroes my ass. No one should feel an inch of sympathy for these egg heads.” Yet another proclaimed, “They engaged in marginally suicidal behavior and wound up dead. To me, they were stupid and reckless beyond all limits.”

It was as if mountaineering itself were considered by the public—or at least by a significant sector of the public—to be nothing more than a selfish, idiotic form of Russian roulette. It was also assumed that the climbers on K2 were fat-cat millionaires. Wrote another *Times* respondent, “Because someone is rich enough to travel to the end of the Earth to play chicken with suicide does not make him a hero.”

Call this the Krakauer effect, though you can’t blame it on Jon Krakauer. Since I was involved in the ’96 Everest catastrophe, when our IMAX team temporarily gave up our own summit plans to try to rescue climbers in trouble, I had a front-row seat as the tragedy unfolded. At the time, I was critical of some of the decisions made by both clients and guides that May, and I still feel they made fatal mistakes. But I can’t imagine sitting in some armchair back home and rejoicing that these “clueless dilettantes” got what they were asking for. Sadly, a major vein in the public response to *Into Thin Air* ran along just those lines.

But there’s no viable analogy between Everest in 1996 and K2 in 2008. Not a single one of the eleven climbers who died that August on the world’s second-highest mountain was a true client in the sense that Scott Fischer’s Mountain Madness or Rob Hall’s Adventure Consultants customers were. None of them were paying big bucks to have a commercial guiding company get them up the mountain. They were almost uniformly experienced climbers in their own right. The Pakistani porters may have helped the Europeans carry loads and establish camps, but they were not acting as true guides. And the Sherpa on K2 were not hired hands but climbers going for the top themselves, on an equal footing with their Western counterparts.

Yet in one respect, 2008’s mountaineers allowed themselves to slip closer to the status of clients than nearly anyone had on previous K2

campaigns. This had to do with their dependence on fixed ropes. In the aftermath of the tragedy, too much focus has been put on the collapse of the serac, too little on the whole business of the fixed ropes.

In general in the mountains, it's harder to climb down a pitch than to climb up it. And if you've relied on fixed ropes to get yourself up the Bottleneck and across the traverse—just “jugging” along, with your ascender clipped to the line—it can be terrifying to face having to descend those same passages without fixed ropes. Especially in the dark, after you're really strung out from taking so long to get to the summit.

In 1992, Scott, Charley, and I had no fixed ropes to help us get up and down the Bottleneck. We climbed the couloir; then, on the descent, despite the dangerous accumulation of new snow, we simply faced in, kicked in our crampons, planted our ice tools, and climbed down that steep, 600-foot slope. Even Jim Wickwire in 1978, though near death after his bivouac, summoned the nerve and the technique to climb down the traverse and the Bottleneck unaided by fixed ropes or partners.

No one even thought of fixing ropes all the way through the Bottleneck until about two years ago. How quickly, though, the comfort of fixed ropes gets taken for granted. It even starts to seem to some climbers like a privilege that ought to come with the K2 package, as reflected in Wilco van Rooijen's petulant complaint that some of the designated fixers didn't “show up” and that other climbers placed the ropes in “the wrong places.”

If you're counting on fixed ropes to get you over all the hard places, you're much less likely to carry your own rope, much less any pitons or ice screws. Cecilie Skog and Lars Nessa may have survived because Skog carried her own thin rope, with which the two of them improvised a rappel over the most difficult passage. It doesn't seem as though any of the other “stranded” climbers even thought about rappelling—probably because they didn't carry their own ropes and hardware. It's easy to imagine this scenario, since carrying extra gear for those “just in case” situations is not a priority anymore, while trimming weight and traveling light is. The three Koreans were found tangled up in their climbing rope. Why didn't they untie and try to rappel with it? Perhaps they were simply too



exhausted, too befuddled by hypoxia, their fingers too stiff with cold to manage the operation. We'll never know.

After the tragedy, a member of the Dutch Norit team, Cas van de Gevel, who reached the summit and downclimbed successfully, was quoted in *Outside* magazine as saying, "On the mountain there were no heroes."

Instead, there was full-blown chaos, the every-man-for-himself panic that van Rooijen later so vividly described. The chief reason for that, I believe, is that there was nothing like a unified band of mountaineers on K2. Instead, there were ten different teams with climbers from fifteen different countries. Most of them didn't know each other beforehand, and at base camp they didn't form lasting friendships beyond the boundaries of their own teams.

But there was also something relatively new going on that summer, something that has already played itself out with a vengeance on Everest in recent years. It's a kind of dehumanization, and if it's inevitably the wave of the future, as I think it may be, well, that says something sad about mountaineering. It involves a scenario in which one climber comes across another climber who's in a truly desperate situation. And it's as if the climber who's not in trouble says to himself, *I don't know you. You're not my problem.* And so he leaves the victim to die—or at least to get himself out of his own predicament.

I just don't understand that way of thinking. Six times on 8,000ers, I've given up my own plans to try to help save the lives of others. Sometimes they were partners and good friends, such as Dave Carter on Everest, J.-C. Lafaille on Broad Peak, and Jimmy Chin on Cho Oyu. But others—like Beck Weathers on Everest and Gary Ball and Chantal Mauduit on K2—were strangers to me before we met at base camp. I can't really say what other people should have done in comparable predicaments; I just know what seemed instinctively to me to be the right thing to do. I couldn't live with myself if I'd just walked past someone in bad trouble and left him to save himself.



Van de Gevel was wrong, however. Last summer, there *were* heroes on K2. As seems increasingly to be the case on the world's tallest mountains, they happened to be Sherpa.

From Camp IV, on the afternoon of August 2, several climbers could see the three Koreans at about 27,000 feet, above the traverse and the Bottleneck. They were still moving feebly, though making no downward progress. With them was a Sherpa, Jumic Bhote, who had also summited, and who may have been effectively guiding the Koreans. In Camp IV were Tsering Bhote and Pasang Bhote, Jumic's brother and cousin, respectively.

These two Sherpa performed an incredible feat. They climbed the Bottleneck and the traverse—without fixed ropes, of course. In the lead, Pasang reached the three Koreans, who were almost unconscious, and Jumic. Pasang managed to revive two of the Koreans and his cousin and get them started down the mountain again.

Just as the four climbers reached the top of the Bottleneck, according to Freddie Wilkinson, who reconstructed what happened for *Rock and Ice*, another huge chunk of the Motivator cut loose. It scoured the Bottleneck, sweeping the two Koreans and the two Sherpa with it. As Tsering Bhote watched in horror, all four men plunged to their deaths. Deeply shaken, Tsering managed to descend safely to Camp IV.

Meanwhile, the media were focused on the survival stories of Marco Confortola and Wilco van Rooijen, reporters hanging on every word the Italian and the Dutchman uttered from their hospital beds in Islamabad. Thus this last and most deadly episode of the tragedy, which concealed the genuine heroism of Pasang Bhote and Tsering Bhote, nearly passed beneath the radar.

Sherpa heroism did not end there. Along with Alberto Zerain, the two most competent and experienced climbers on K2 that summer were thirty-four-year-old Chhiring Dorje and thirty-four-year-old Pemba Gyalje. Chhiring had climbed Everest ten times, Pemba six. In the early morning hours of August 1, Pemba had been one of the lead climbers fixing rope up the Bottleneck. Far stronger than the Europeans, he could have left them behind and gone for the top on his own. But on the sum-

mit, he waited until the last European topped out, just to make sure everyone was all right, and only then descended with the stragglers.

Pemba did this not because he was a “hired gun,” which he was not, but just, I suspect, because he was a Sherpa. The best Sherpa have far more endurance at the end of a long summit day. Westerners tend to think, *Boy, that was hard. I’m exhausted.* Sherpa think, *Well, yes, it’s hard, but that’s what it is.*

They’ve worked hard every day since they were kids. They’re used to carrying heavy loads from village to village. Their whole lives are about hardship and struggle.

When climbers such as McDonnell, van Rooijen, and Confortola chose to bivouac, both Chhiring and Pemba decided to climb down toward Camp IV in the dark. Near the top of the Bottleneck, Chhiring ran into another Sherpa, Pasang Lama, who had also reached the summit, but who by now had dropped his ax. If anyone was truly stranded on the mountain, it was Pasang.

“Pasang Lama was worried, but I said don’t worry,” Chhiring later e-mailed Freddie Wilkinson. “We have only two options—one is staying here, which is very dangerous under the serac. The other option is to descend down with one ice ax, which may lead us to Camp IV . . . if we don’t slip.”

So Chhiring cut off a short hank of broken fixed rope, tied Pasang to him in a tight tether, then, facing in, used his ax and his crampons to descend the Bottleneck, with his fellow Sherpa almost dangling from his harness like a haul bag. The two eventually reached Camp IV without mishap.

That’s a pretty astounding deed. But I can just imagine how you might pull it off: kick each foot in solid, plant the ax, then tell the other guy to kick with his own feet and even punch holds with his hands. Don’t move until he’s secure. Still, if Pasang had come off, he probably would have taken Chhiring with him. Talk about selfless!

It’s a Sherpa thing. They’re loyal. It’s their ethos, instilled in them on Everest. They just feel it’s the right thing to do.



But if Chhiring and Pasang could make it down with one ice ax between them, one guy short-rope'd like a dead weight to the other, why couldn't those Europeans have downclimbed the Bottleneck unencumbered?

Pemba Gyalje reached Camp IV by 1:00 A.M. on August 2. In the morning, on learning that a bunch of climbers were still unaccounted for, he simply headed back up the mountain. To do that, after an exhausting summit day of your own—and both Chhiring and Pemba had summited without supplemental oxygen, the first Sherpa to do so on K2—takes incredible fortitude. And, once again, incredible selflessness.

Pemba reached Marco Confortola halfway up the Bottleneck. The Italian was unconscious and probably suffering from severe altitude sickness. With bottled oxygen, Pemba got Confortola going again. But almost as soon as the two men had started down, the third serac collapse—the one that carried the two Koreans and Pasang Bhote and Jumic Bhote to their deaths—nearly took out Confortola and Pemba. The Italian was struck in the back of the head by a chunk of falling ice. He started to fall, but Pemba grabbed him from behind and held him. The Sherpa then shepherded the Italian the rest of the way down to Camp IV. There is no doubt that Confortola would have died had Pemba not rescued him.

This time, as he collapsed in his tent, Pemba was truly worn out. But the next morning, when he learned that Wilco van Rooijen was still missing, he went out again.

Van Rooijen had gotten wildly off route as he made his impulsive and desperate descent. He had wandered to the west not only of the Abruzzi Ridge but of its western variant, the Cesen route, by which the Dutch team had ascended. He may have glancingly intersected the prominent snow ridge called “the Shoulder,” but he missed Camp IV altogether. After a second night out, van Rooijen was truly lost—and near death.

Bizarrely enough, the ring of the Dutchman's sat phone in the darkness gave his team the first inkling of his whereabouts. On August 3, Pemba and Cas van de Gevel found van Rooijen. They led him slowly back to Camp III, which the three men reached only well after dark.



In his interviews with reporters, van Rooijen made scant mention of Pemba's rescue. Recounting his epic to *National Geographic Adventure*, the Dutchman credited instead his own skills: "My mountaineering experience let me be quiet and patient enough to wait for better weather. . . . I took a risk climbing some difficult technical parts to traverse to easier slopes and to easier glaciers. I finally survived."

This is a sad trend in recent mountaineering on the 8,000ers. When something screws up, the Sherpa are the first ones to be blamed. But when a Sherpa performs heroically, as Pemba did in saving the only two climbers who bivouacked above the Motivator and then got off the mountain alive, they barely get credited, and often they are not even named.

I was very gratified, then, when Pemba Gyalje was hailed by *National Geographic Adventure* in December 2008 as its Adventurer of the Year, an award I had won in 2005. The National Geographic Society, or NGS, flew Pemba to Washington, D.C., for the ceremony, and I heard that he really enjoyed it, as he stood beaming and holding aloft his trophy, while the audience in the posh society headquarters gave him a wild standing ovation.

Topping off the encomiums, the American Alpine Club bestowed its most prestigious honor, the David A. Sowles Memorial Award (for heroism in saving the lives of other climbers), on Pemba at its annual meeting in Golden, Colorado, in February 2009.

People often ask me if a disaster like last summer's is bound to happen again on K2. And my answer, sadly, is yes. Too many of the climbers who survive such a fiasco tell themselves, *Well, I got away with it*. And too many others, planning their own future expeditions, think, *Oh, it's not going to happen to me*.

The most those of us who have climbed the world's highest mountains can hope to do is educate others. I also tried to educate myself every step of the way on all of my climbs, realizing I could never learn



enough. But sometimes I wonder if even trying to educate others is a lost cause. Little that we say or do seems to sink in. The appeal of risk seems to outweigh the rewards of discipline on hazardous peaks. To cite an oft-quoted statistic, after the 1996 season, when so many inexperienced clients came to grief on Everest, in 1997 the numbers of applicants willing to pay as much as \$75,000 apiece to get guided up the highest mountain significantly increased.

After *No Shortcuts to the Top* was published in 2006, I got hundreds of letters and e-mails from readers. Very few of them were negative or critical, and many folks wrote to say that they were captivated or even inspired by my story. But the e-mail that probably moved me the most—the one that almost stunned me, it came so out of the blue—didn't arrive until December 2008. That e-mail alone helped reaffirm for me that it was worth writing and talking about the risks and rewards of our glorious but dangerous pastime—that some good may yet come out of sharing with others what the mountains have taught me.

The e-mail was from Chris Klinke, the American on K2 in 2008 who, dismayed by the traffic jam on August 1, turned back. Klinke and I had never met, but he wrote:

Hi Ed,

I wanted to thank you for something that you are not even aware of at this point. But as I was making my decision to turn around just below the Bottleneck I kept remembering a discussion that I had with my teammates at BC. . . .

The thing that helped me make the decision was the discussion we had about your feeling of regret about your summit on K2 because you violated your own personal rules of listening to your gut. . . .

In remembering that conversation with my teammates and your description of that feeling in your book I made the decision to turn around. Despite the fact that there were 24 people heading to the summit, despite the fact that the



weather was amazingly perfect, I felt my gut telling me something entirely different.

Listening to that feeling was a good decision for myself, and I appreciate the fact that I had the ability to get guidance from those on the mountain and those who came before me.

I hope to meet you in the future and I thank you for blazing the trail on so many mountains.

Be Well,

Chris Klinke



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