

RETRACING THE STEPS OF AN ICON'S SON



RUGERO ARENA (BOTH)

# FINDING TOM BALLARD

BY MICHAEL LEVY

The drone had crashed, but Alex Txikon was certain of what he'd seen: the video had shown two motionless bodies. The broad-shouldered Basque alpinist, his beard frosted with ice, hadn't had time to take a picture before the feed cut out, but the image was burned into his mind. "I recognized their rucksacks, their gloves, their heads, their bodies," Txikon says. Located within a maze of diagonal rock bands and snow at 5,800 meters, the two bodies were roped together, not 10 feet apart. The upper one was still hanging on a fixed line leading up and out of sight. The lower figure, also attached to the line, was contorted on the slope below his partner.

The men were the 42-year old Italian climber Daniele Nardi and 30-year-old Tom Ballard of the U.K. They had arrived in Pakistan at the end of December 2018, and had been toiling away trying to make the third winter ascent of the 8,126-meter Nanga Parbat via the legendary and unfinished Mummery Spur.

Ballard and Nardi's disappearance made headlines around the world, largely because of Ballard's lineage: He was climbing royalty, the son of Alison Hargreaves, a climber whom Reinhold Messner says was "the greatest alpinist ever as a woman." After attempting to become the first person to solo the six great North Faces of the Alps in a single season and nearly succeeding, Hargreaves died while descending K2 in a storm in 1995 along with six others. Ballard was just a child. That day remains one of the deadliest days in the mountain's history, and her death, too, created a media storm.

Growing up in the shadow of a famous mother, Ballard might have been expected to chart a different course. But he followed in Hargreaves' path, eerily so, first reenacting her North Faces project and then venturing into the Greater Ranges. Just like his mother, Ballard made a name for himself by climbing solo.

Nanga Parbat was a major leap—maybe too big—for Ballard. Nardi had already tried the Mummery Spur several times and finishing it was a fixation of his. It was surprising to no one that he returned in 2018. But Ballard's participation in the expedition had raised eyebrows. It was his first time on an 8,000-meter peak, and he'd never even been above 6,000 meters. 8,000-meter peaks in winter are crucibles of 100-mile-per-hour winds and temperatures that will freeze spit before it hits the ground—most of the 14 8,000ers have been climbed in winter only once.

Adding to the magnitude of the challenge, the Mummery Spur is notoriously avalanche-prone. Like a dragon's spine, the spiky rock



protrusion that comprises the Mummery splits Nanga's west face from the bottom all the way up to a plateau below the summit pyramid—a beautiful line, without question. Reinhold Messner and his brother, Günther, are the only people to have been on the route besides Nardi, Ballard and Nardi's 2013 partner, Elisabeth Revol. In 1970, Reinhold and Günther descended via the Mummery after Günther began suffering altitude sickness. He died near the base. "It is the most dangerous route on Nanga Parbat," Messner says. "We were forced to go down there. We went down wherever it was possible, but we were just hoping that we'd have a chance to survive. I would never try to climb it from the bottom to the top."

Simone Moro, who made the first winter ascent of Nanga Parbat, in 2016, and is the only person to have made the first winter ascent of four unique 8,000-meter peaks, frames it even more bleakly: "Climbing Mummery is a game of Russian roulette."

Moro adds of Ballard, "To go to an 8,000-meter peak for the first time in winter, on a new route, and that route the Mummery Spur? That's not the obvious way to start a high-altitude career. That was a very hardcore beginning." The Mummery Spur has its apologists who think Nardi's



Above: Ballard and Nardi's route up the Mummery Spur, Nanga Parbat, 2019. They were to perish, in unknown circumstances, while attempting the first ascent. Shown are (1) their high point and (2) where their bodies were found. Left: Daniele Nardi on Nanga Parbat. Right: Ballard shovels out a snow cave on Nanga Parbat.

envisioned route was reasonably safe, but they are few and far between.

Ballard and Nardi started their ascent in January 2019, most of their time spent wading through snow and trying to stay warm. Reading in the tent, where it was frequently below zero, "I would barely make it through a chapter before my fingers became too cold to turn the pages," Ballard wrote in a blog post for his sponsor Montane. They waited out blustery days in base camp, dry-tooling on erratic boulders to maintain fitness. On sunny high-pressure days they started up the Mummery, establishing first Camp I, then Camp II and finally Camp III at 5,700 meters. Camp III was sheltered in a crevasse, but still lashed by "bloomin awful" wind, Ballard wrote.

Ballard and Nardi made multiple forays up to Camp II and Camp III, but were hindered by questionable conditions. "Always the threat of avalanches made us turn back without spending the night," Ballard wrote. Each time they went back up, they found their tents buried by recent slides. "We even turned back from [Camp I] because we didn't have a good feeling. Well-founded as a huge avalanche engulfed our line of ascent shortly after."

On the afternoon of February 24, Nardi placed a routine phone call from his Thuraya satellite phone to update one of his sponsors in Italy. The GPS data from that call put Nardi and Ballard at 6,300 meters. He said that they were descending to 6,000 meters—where they had set up a portaledge for Camp IV—to shelter from a storm that was pummeling the mountain. Later, at about 6:30 p.m., Nardi called his wife to check in. He made one final

call to base camp to say the two were going to try to descend further, to Camp III at 5,700 meters. It was the last contact anyone ever had with either of the two men.

When family and support staff could not reach them in the following days, an international rescue effort began. Poor visibility and political turmoil on the border between India and Pakistan prevented any headway for the first week. On March 3, with still no sign of Ballard or Nardi, the Basque climber Alex Txikon and several of his teammates, who were simultaneously trying to make the first winter ascent of K2, helicoptered over to Nanga Parbat to search for the missing men. As Ballard and Nardi had, the searchers endured many small avalanches as they swept the climbers' route. They sheltered beneath seracs, but were unnerved by the unstable and volatile conditions. Two days later, on March 5, Txikon spotted Ballard and Nardi's bodies with the drone.

LOST IN THE MEDIA FRENZY after Ballard and Nardi's deaths was a series of simple questions: What was Ballard doing there, on such an inhospitable, dangerous route, that he may not have had the requisite experience for? What had compelled him to continue even after seeing the severe objective risks firsthand? It was out of character for the young Brit, whom partners describe as safety-conscious. One of them, Marco Berti, notes that on long routes in Europe Ballard would even place pitons on third-class ramps. And

even as a free soloist who regularly climbed ropeless up to 5.12c—*Master of Disaster*, San Nicolò, Trentino, Italy, being one example—Ballard stayed within his limits, his peers say.

Ballard was one of the most prolific solo alpinists of his time, but he was a media-shy personality who played things close to the

## WHAT WAS HE DOING ON SUCH AN INHOSPITABLE ROUTE, THAT HE MAY NOT HAVE HAD THE REQUISITE EXPERIENCE FOR?

vest—understanding his larger motivations in the mountains is a complex task. To get at any sort of answer, it's necessary to go back, not just to Ballard's experience in the mountains, but his mother's. On the one hand he disavowed that his mother's legacy was the driving force in his climbing: "I think a lot of people believe that by climbing I am trying to get closer to my mother," Ballard once said in an interview with the British Mountaineering



Council. "This is not the case. I climb solely for me." Yet the standard-setting climbs they each achieved, and the Shakespearean parallel between Ballard's life and his mother's, belie this declaration.

It is in the tension created by his attempt to follow in his mother's footsteps, but not to be defined by them, that the tragedy of Tom Ballard on the Mummery Spur lies.

AS HE GREW UP, Ballard more and more resembled his late mother: though his eyes were frozen-water blue compared to his mom's hazel, his round cheeks, often pink from windburn, and his sturdy neck were all Alison Hargreaves. In his early 20s he had shoulder-length hair. Later he sported a wispy soul patch.

Stefania Pederiva, Ballard's girlfriend of five years, says Ballard was good at anything he tried. Climbing and skiing, of course. But also things like sculpture and photography.

Ballard's favorite book was *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, by T.E. Lawrence, the basis for the film "Lawrence of Arabia." He had read the 600-plus-page tome dozens of times. The sprawling epic, somewhere between autobiography and novel, with an epigraph full of mysticism, tells the story of Lawrence's role as emissary for the British government during the Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Empire during World War I.

"I tried to read it, but could never get through it," Pederiva says. "But I think Tom liked it because the story, it's the way he



Tom Ballard's mother, Alison Hargreaves, on a new line on Kangtega, Nepal, climbed with Jeff Lowe, Mark Twight and Tom Frost in 1986. Hargreaves was among the most acclaimed and recognizable female alpinists in the world at the time of her death on K2 in 1995.



#### CLIMBING IN THE BLOOD

One of Ballard's favorite refrains was that he had climbed the Eiger before he was born. In summer 1988, five-and-a-half months pregnant with him, 26-year-old Alison Hargreaves of England climbed the 1938 *Heckmair Route* on the North Face with Steve Aisthorpe. A few months later, on October 15, Hargreaves was belaying her husband, Jim Ballard, at a local crag, Cromford Black Rocks, when she “felt the

Twight and Tom Frost.

After Tom and Kate were born, Hargreaves kept on climbing. The family lived in the pastoral Derbyshire county, a landscape of sinusoidal hills broken up by the Peak District's scraggly gritstone bluffs. Tom attended the village school where he “enjoyed the usual things of a normal boy,” Jim Ballard says. Playdates with other kids. Sledding in the snow. Legos. But between periods of conventional domesticity, the whole family hit the road for months at a time to support Hargreaves in the Alps.

In the summer of 1993—with Tom, 4, and Kate, 2—Hargreaves set out to become the first person, man or woman, to solo the six great North Faces of the Alps (the Eiger, the Petit Dru, Cima Grande di Lavaredo, and the Matterhorn) in a single calendar season. Tom, Kate, Alison, and Jim packed into their Land Rover and drove off, weaving between Switzerland, Italy and France. It was a new take on what Gaston Rébuffat had achieved in the 1950s, when he became the first person to climb the six faces. He wrote a book about the project called *Etoiles et Tempêtes* (1954)—in English, *Starlight and Storm*.

Hargreaves claimed success—largely at the behest of Jim, who was also her manager, and a domineering one at that—and wrote a book, *A Hard Day's Summer*, about the climbs, but in reality came up just shy of her stated goal. She did not climb the Eiger North Face, but rather the Northeast Face, via the less demanding *Lauper* snow route. Most sources, at the time and still to this day, credit her for being the first person to solo the six great North Faces in a single season despite this discrepancy. But there were misgivings and doubts raised over pints in pubs by serious alpinists of the day about whether Hargreaves had been completely forthcoming and honest in her claims and how she presented them.

On her descent from the Eiger's summit, Hargreaves found equipment strewn across the ice and snow, as she related in her book. An ice screw, an ice axe, a glove, unidentifiable fragments of other pieces of gear. At the bottom of the debris field was a body. A Spanish alpinist had fallen and died—a reminder of the ever-present dangers her chosen vocation entailed. Throughout her life, Hargreaves was dogged by accusations of irresponsibility for engaging in a deadly sport while being a mother to two young children—an obvious double standard, as male alpinists seldom drew such criticism.

Nearly soloing the six North Faces was a career-making performance and garnered



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MARK TWIGHT, MURDO MACLEOD

Hargreaves a new kind of celebrity. The family moved to Scotland, settling in Fort William, near Ben Nevis, the tallest mountain in the U.K. Building off the momentum from that summer, Hargreaves decided to go big: Everest. And she would try it without supplemental oxygen, something that had only been accomplished before by one woman, Lydia Bradey of New Zealand. Like Tom nearly 24 years later, Hargreaves didn't have experience above 8,000 meters, nor even 7,000 meters. With the whole family in tow, she traveled to Nepal in the summer of 1994, and made three separate attempts on the mountain, reaching almost 28,000 feet on the second, but turned back when frostbite seemed imminent.

She returned in 1995, without her family and with an even bolder plan: She would try to solo Everest without supplemental oxygen and unsupported. No help at all, not even fixed ropes or using others' tents. The only other person to have climbed it in this way was the inimitable Reinhold Messner, who was also the first person to climb all 14 of the world's 8,000-meter peaks.

But Hargreaves pulled it off, “even declining cups of tea,” wrote Alison Osius, then an editor for *Climbing* magazine (and now an editor at *Rock and Ice*), in a profile of Hargreaves. Hargreaves wanted to neutralize any question of whether she had done anything less than what she claimed, as she had been accused of with the six North Faces. Everest was an undisputed success for her.

Later in the summer of 1995, Hargreaves went to climb K2. As the window for summit attempts began, climbers from her and others' expeditions deemed the mountain too dangerous. Hargreaves vacillated between pushing on or calling it quits. She launched a summit bid in the wee hours of August 13. She reached the top at 6:45 pm that evening—late to be that high.

The New Zealander Peter Hillary had abandoned his own attempt earlier in the day when he saw ominous clouds on the horizon. They enveloped K2 around the time Hargreaves reached the top. While descending, she and six others, including the American Rob Slater, who famously quipped “Summit or death, either way I win!” died in a violent storm. Hargreaves was blown off the mountain by 100-mile-per-hour winds. A body glimpsed at 7,100 meters on the mountain the following day was presumed to be hers, though never confirmed. Alison Hargreaves was 33.

As the story was unfolding in real time, Jim Ballard called the office of *Climbing* magazine, trying to get the latest news about his wife. In her profile of Hargreaves, Osius wrote of Jim, “He spoke quietly so as not to be heard by the children, yahooping in the background.”

Kate was 4 years old, Tom was 6.

What do most people remember from when they were 6? Learning to ride a bicycle for the first time? The smell of Mom's perfume or Dad's cologne? Playing with friends in the schoolyard?



Left: Ballard on *Low G Man*, a D14 at Bus del Quai, Italy. He sent the route on his second try, without using figure 4s, and with his mother's old ice tools. Right: Tom Ballard, with his father, Jim, packing up before heading off to solo the North Face of the Piz Badille. The pair lived out of their white van for the better part of seven years.

Tom was left with only vague memories and remembered “hardly anything” about his mother as he grew up, he said in an interview with Robert Chalmers in *Newsweek* in 2015. Just that she was “kind, generous and yet very determined.” In the wake of her death, the same debate raged in newspapers across Britain that had followed her since she climbed the Eiger pregnant with Tom: Had she been wrong to climb K2 as a mother? *The Sunday Times* published an article titled “K2 Is Not For Mothers,” the *Daily Express* another, “Was Brave Alison Such a Responsible Mother?” But Tom never begrudged his mother or harbored any resentment toward her for going to the mountains and never returning. “Because I understood,” he explained to Chalmers. “I understood absolutely why she did what she did. I would prefer that she died doing something that was her passion.”

#### PILLARS OF WISDOM

Fourteen years later, in the winter of 2009, Ballard, now 20, approached the Eiger North Face for the first time since he had “climbed” it in utero. He planned to make the first solo ascent of the *Scottish Pillars* (5.10- A3), a rarely repeated route from 1970 on the left side of the North Face. In Scotland, Ballard had developed a penchant for soloing, with and without a rope, on both rock and winter routes.

That season, living with his father and Kate in a barn in Alpigen, Grindelwald, near the base of the mountain, Ballard sussed out the beginning of the route. Nasty weather limited his progress, but eventually he climbed the whole thing piecemeal, reaching the top in late spring 2009. In repeating it, he realized two things: that he could free climb the *Scottish Pillars*, and that there was potential

for a separate independent line beside it.

Before summer was over, he had done both. He named his free variation to the *Scottish Pillars*, which he climbed solo, *Solitaire*. He freed the other completely new line rope-solo, too. He named this new route *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (ED 5.12b). More than a cheeky pun on the “pillars” forming the line, naming the route after his favorite book was a statement about his intentions: He would accomplish his dreams, soberly and with “open eyes.”

Jim says he and Alison had promised “whatever happened to either of us, that we would always make sure to bring our children up to have an adventurous life.” Over the next seven years, Tom and Jim lived together out of a white Volkswagen van, traveling around Europe, chasing conditions in the Alps. They led a modest life—brewing pots of tea in the morning via a method they had learned from a Sherpa in Nepal, playing card games, mending broken gear, napping, reading.

And climbing. Always climbing.

#### THE SILENCE OF FORGETFULNESS

**Tom’s first climb**, at 5 years old, in 1993, was a low fifth-class route at the Calanques, a limestone area on the Mediterranean in France where Gaston Rébuffat had cut his teeth climbing. Tom’s mother didn’t want him to climb that day—she thought he was still too young—but when she wandered away for a moment he asked his father. Jim acquiesced. Tom padded up the sharp slab barefoot. “She came back less than amused,” Jim says of Hargreaves.

Tom was a precocious climber from the start. Once, when he was 8 or 9 years old, he was out climbing with his father on a mild Scottish morning. Jim said, “Right, well, you’ve done this, why don’t we go over there and do that climb?” Tom told his father that, in fact, he’d already soloed the other climb another time.

Though curious and a voracious reader—particularly about climbing history—Tom disliked school. A lackluster student, he attended school sporadically from the age of 14 onward, going skiing when the snow was good and climbing when the air was crisp. He enjoyed bouldering, when he could grab his pad and hike around, unencumbered by the need to find a partner. Perhaps the least-known piece of Tom’s career was his love for bouldering. Between 2002 and 2007, he did over 1,000 new boulder problems in Scotland, finding them, cleaning them, sending them. Alone, as usual. He even produced a small bouldering guide to Glen Nevis.



Solo near the start of the *Comici-Dimai* (5.10+), Cima Grande di Lavaredo in the Italian Dolomites. Ballard’s 2014 ascent kicked off his “Starlight and Storm” project, where he would become the first person to climb, solo, all of the Alps’ six great North Faces in a single winter.

His sister, Kate, says, “He was always off exploring. He was quiet, yes. Serious about what he did, yes. But fun, with a childlike humor.” That underlying seriousness, even from a young age, was a defining characteristic. Virtually everyone who knew Ballard sooner or later uses that word—“quiet”—to describe him.

Marcin Tomaszewski, with whom Ballard joined forces in 2017 to establish *Titanic* (VI 5.10c A3 WI 4 M5), a route on the Eiger next to *Solitaire* and *Seven Pillars*, says, “Tom was very quiet. He didn’t speak much, but he did a lot. He had a lot of energy, he was like a volcano before an eruption. He was patient and at the same time very active. It was hard to know more about him. ... I felt sadness in him.”

Marco Berti, a longtime Italian alpinist who was friendly with Ballard and knew his mother as well, also noticed this sadness and traced it back to Ballard’s childhood and the trauma of losing his mother. He thought that when things became controversial or difficult for him, Ballard “ran away, buried into that loneliness that he had accepted from an early age and that he had always welcomed: his preferred climbing partner.” Or perhaps, as Gaston Rébuffat put it in *Starlight and Storm*, in the mountains, Ballard was “surrounded by the silence of forgetfulness.”

#### GAINING STRENGTH

After those first successes on the Eiger with *Solitaire* and *Seven Pillars*, Ballard made the Alps his personal playground. He remained in Grindelwald with his father and sister for three years in total, repeating other area classics and other lines on the Eiger, like the

*Mittellegi Ridge* and the *Southwest Flank*.

In 2012, Tom and his father packed into the van again. Kate stayed behind—she had learned enough German to qualify as a snowboard instructor. Over the next four years, Tom and Jim drove all over Europe, but spent the most time in the Dolomites, in Trentino, Italy.

Rising like minarets from rolling green foothills polka-dotted with millions of yellow buttercups, the Dolomites in late spring and summer at first blush appear to offer nothing but possibility to the hungry alpinist looking to leave a mark. Upon closer inspection, the friable rock is enough to deter many wide-eyed suitors. Not Tom Ballard, though. He climbed all around the Fassa Valley (Val di Fassa), a secluded enclave of seven villages with 10,000 denizens, and one of the last bastions of the Ladin language. Guarded by the mighty Marmolada to the east, the Sella group to the north, and the rose-hued Catinaccio massif to the west, the region was the ideal canvas for Ballard—not blank, but far from full.

There will never be a full accounting of the number of routes Ballard did because he did not keep detailed route logs. But if he *had* kept track, the results would be staggering. After Ballard’s first summer in the Dolomites, the Italian climber Luisa Iovane—who in 1986 became the first woman to climb 5.13b—asked him how many big alpine routes he had done that season. Sixty-six, Ballard told her. Iovane responded, “You know, Tom, a summer of climbing for you, a fucking lifetime of climbing for everyone else.” He climbed his 200th unique route in the Dolomites—to say nothing

RUGGERO ARENA

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Ballard, on the snowfield in the lower left of the photo, races up the North Face of the Piz Badile. He climbed the 2,750-foot *Cassin Route* in one and a half days, encountering sections as difficult as M7. Ballard said the Piz Badile was the hardest of the classic North Faces.



of the rest of Europe—in 2014, and climbed hundreds more in the years following. He climbed at least half of these routes free solo.

Ballard flew under the radar even as he built up a virtually unparalleled resume. Heinz Mariacher, the legendary shoe designer for La Sportiva and now Scarpa, knew Ballard well. He corroborated Ballard's exploits and also explained the lack of outside attention: "Tom soloed many routes in the Dolomites, and mostly just climbed on walls in the surroundings without having a real plan about how to become famous. ... Nobody is impressed about a risky solo climb on some unknown wall, while famous walls are always good for headlines. He did lots of scary stuff on loose Dolomite rock, on walls that are not as famous as the Tre Cime. But some of them are far harder and more challenging."

Ballard also elevated his skill at dry tooling, something he'd always been good at. In summer 2012, he made the second ascent of the hardest dry-tooling route in the world, *Ironman*, a D14+ established earlier that same year in Eptingen, Switzerland, by German climber Robert Jasper.

Ballard's strength was on roofs. Liam Foster, a leading American mixed climber and friend, says, "Tom's shoulders and core were so strong that everything was in perfect control." He eschewed the use of figure 4s, not for philosophical reasons, but just because he was better suited to pure power. But dry tooling was not an end in itself for Ballard. "He was definitely always first and foremost an alpinist," says Foster. "He saw a lot of the dry tooling as just training for the mountains."

#### STARLIGHT AND STORM

By 2015, Tom and Jim were living fulltime in the Dolomites. They had a semi-permanent campsite in a trailer-park-cum-camping area in Val di Fassa. It had one common mess tent—a military-green tarp stretched over a wooden and metal frame; blue barrels, milk crates and plastic containers of cooking and climbing supplies stacked within; a folding table and camp chairs the only furniture. A strand of Tibetan prayer flags fluttered over everything.

Jim's pension was just enough for him and Tom to live on. They didn't need much: so long as they could afford food and gas and tolls to drive to Tom's climbs, they were good. Tom's climbing gear was woefully out of style. He clanked up routes with hexes and early-generation Friends. He wore a red Ferrino helmet that floated atop his head. He used homemade pitons that Jim crafted from scrap

metal. For a long time he had even used his mother's old ice tools.

Up to this point, Tom had never sought much attention for his ascents. "He wanted a low profile," Jim says. But one day in 2015 Tom decided it was time to look for sponsors, to bankroll the big trips of which he dreamed. He already had an idea to dangle as bait: He would solo the six great North Faces of the Alps in a single winter. It would be a new take on his mother's feat, and a far more perilous one. Jim reckoned it would "probably be impossible." Tom called the project *Starlight and Storm*, a nod to Rébuffat.

He landed his first semi-sponsor, a sock company, and on December 21, 2014, he started *Starlight and Storm*. It nearly ended

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the next day.

The first face he climbed was the Cima Grande di Lavaredo—the sheerest of the North Faces and the one with the most technical rock climbing of the bunch—via the 1,500-foot *Comici-Dimai*, a 5.10+ he had done once before, onsight and free solo in the summer of 2011. On the afternoon of the 2014 winter solstice, Ballard rope-soloed up the orange face in gusty conditions, freeing much of it in his fingerless gloves and pulling on gear when necessary. He reached the top in darkness. That's when things got bad: He had forgotten his headlamp and was not confident in his ability to find the descent. Ballard committed to an open bivy, sleeping on his rope beneath a small overhang. During the night he got frostbite on his toes. He descended the next morning, uncertain if he would be able to carry on with *Starlight and Storm*. Luckily for him, the frostbite was not severe.

Next he turned his attention to the Piz Badile and its 2,750-foot *Cassin Route*. The first ascent is a storied one: In July 1937, Italians Ricardo Cassin, Luigino Esposito and Vittorio Ratti started up the unclimbed North Face of the Piz Badile at the same time as another Italian party of two, Mario Molteni and Giuseppe Valsecchi. The latter were in rough shape by the end of the day, and joined forces with Cassin's team at a shared bivouac. All five summited together on the third day, but as they began descending the easier South Ridge, things took a terrible turn. As Rébuffat wrote in *Starlight and Storm*, "Almost immediately, Molteni died of exhaustion." The other four continued on, now descending amid "whirling snow and gusts of icy wind." Stranded in the storm, as Rébuffat recalled, "Valsecchi, who had not seen his friend's death, looked round for Molteni. He realized what had happened and burst into tears; then he too sank down and died." Cassin, Esposito and Ratti survived.

Ballard began postholing toward the Piz Badile in the predawn hours of January 6, 2015, and at 8 in the morning was on the wall. He climbed for over 11 hours, scratching about on pitches up to M7, the hardest mixed terrain he would encounter on any of the North Faces. He bivied on the same ledge where Cassin and his four companions spent their second night back in 1937. Ballard topped out the next day, January 7, after four rope-stretching 70-meter pitches and a final snow slog on the north ridge. The one and a half days on the Piz Badile was the longest he would spend on any of the six faces.

After that he did the Matterhorn, via the *Schmidt Route* on February 10, summiting in just 2 hours 59 minutes. This he considered the easiest of the faces.

Next up was the Grandes Jorasses, via the *Colton-Macintyre*, a route he'd never been on. Before his death, Ueli Steck set the speed record on the route in 2008, also climbing it onsight, reaching the summit in just 2 hours 21 minutes. Ballard wasn't quite as fast as Steck, but wasn't far off: On March 8, he raced up the *Colton-Macintyre* in 3 hours 20 minutes. The WI 6 crux was "more than 90°, an overhang," he said in an interview with planetmountain.com.

For the penultimate summit, Ballard climbed the Petit Dru via the *Allain-Leininger* route, on March 14 in 8 hours. All winter long, aside from some gear provided by provisional low-level sponsorships, Ballard was still using his handmade or second-hand gear.

"He borrowed a rope to climb the Petit Dru," Jim says. "He didn't have one long

enough for the descent raps.”

With one week left in winter, Ballard just had the Eiger left. On March 19, he soloed the North Face in just 5 hours 30 minutes via the *Heckmair Route*, onsight, climbing free solo except for the Hinterstoisser Traverse, where he pulled on fixed ropes. Upon reaching the summit, as he later said in the *Further Faster* podcast, “A huge weight, like a big lump of concrete, was lifted off my shoulders. I suddenly felt so much better.” Ironically, since Hargreaves did not technically climb all six faces in the summer of 1993, it is likely that Ballard, by climbing them in one winter, was the first to climb the sextet in a single calendar season.

On the descent from the Eiger, going “slowly and carefully,” he began noticing shards of orange plastic scattered in the snow. A bit farther on he found a glove. Then lower still, a body. A skier—whom Ballard had seen on the summit—had somersaulted and hit his head on some rocks. The blow killed him and shattered his orange helmet. Ballard had never seen a body. “That kind of put a dark cloud over what I’d done,” he said in the podcast.

The similarities to his mother’s experience while descending the Eiger over 20 years earlier struck him. “Almost the same thing happened to us both. It’s very sad, but kind of amazing, this *deja vu* almost,” he said.

While he acknowledged circumstantial similarities like that, in interviews Ballard denied that climbing the six North Faces had anything to do with his mother.

He even said this to those closest to him. “I think a big motivation, why he climbed, was partly his mother’s death,” Pederiva, his girlfriend, says, “but even to me, he always said it was not.”

Yet there was a dissonance between his words and actions. In other interviews, he conceded as much. “When I was young, growing up at school, I always said I would climb these mountains for her,” Ballard said in an interview with *The Telegraph*. “But then I realized that was a little bit silly because she had already climbed them herself. I was only doing it for myself—every day I go out there is for me. Unconsciously, she is one of the reasons why I wanted to do it—but only one of the reasons.”

Marco Berti, Ballard’s friend, adds further insight: “Every day I’d tell Tom, ‘You must be Tom Ballard, not the son of Alison Hargreaves. After you become the great Tom Ballard the mountaineer, than you can talk more freely about your mother.’ He agreed, but it was difficult for him not to follow her. It was very difficult for him to live outside of the history of his mother.”

## FROM PRINCE TO KING

**Ballard’s life changed** in many ways after *Starlight and Storm*.

He moved out of the van and campground, and got his own place in Val di Fassa just a short drive from the home of his girlfriend, Stefania Pederiva, daughter of a local climbing guide and developer, Bruno Pederiva. They had begun dating in 2014. “He became more of a man, and wanted to be more independent,” Pederiva says. “He wanted to be a bit more separate from his father, to do his own things.” Ballard and Pederiva climbed many new routes together, including a trio of long multipitches in the Catinaccio massif: *Scarlet Fever*, *Baptism of Fire* and, Pederiva’s favorite, *Beauty and the Beast*.

Companies sent Ballard free gear. Even beyond the climbing community, people started to take notice. A reporter for *The Guardian* dubbed him “the King of the Alps.”

## “IT WAS VERY DIFFICULT FOR HIM TO LIVE OUTSIDE OF THE HISTORY OF HIS MOTHER.”

The reporting tended to frame Ballard’s accomplishments in relation to his mother’s. Yet in this post-*Starlight and Storm* period his pursuits diverged from hers.

He dabbled in the Ice Climbing World Cup circuit starting in 2015, though never enjoyed great success. His best finish, coming after his only semi-finals appearance, was 14th, at Rabenstein, Switzerland, in 2018. His close friend Anna Wells, whom he met at his first World Cup, in Bozeman in late 2015, said of his middling results in competitions, “I think that’s a really good testament to his personality and lack of ego that he didn’t really care and kept going.” He still refused to figure 4.

Around that time, Ballard began equipping a massive horizontal roof at the Marmolada in the Dolomites for dry tooling. He named the cave Tomorrow’s World.

In February 2016, Ballard made the first ascent of a link-up of three other hard routes he had already done in the cave to establish *A Line Above the Sky*. This new route had 150 feet of horizontal climbing, with massive

reaches and powerful lockoffs. Unlike many “D” routes, which often feature a glut of drilled holes for picks and front points, Ballard’s link-up was nearly all natural with minimal enhancements. He suggested the grade of D15—a new level of difficulty in the sport, making it the world’s hardest dry-tooling route.

Liam Foster, who later repeated *A Line Above the Sky*, says, “It’s the best dry-tooling route I’ve ever climbed. It’s very aesthetic.”

Having established that breakthrough line, completed *Starlight and Storm*, and done lifetimes’ worth of climbing in less than 10 years, Ballard needed new horizons.

## ALISON’S LAST MOUNTAIN

**Following Alison Hargreaves’ death in 1995**, Tom asked his father if he could “go see his mom’s last mountain,” Jim says. After he repeated his young son’s words at a press conference, offers came left and right from storytellers and filmmakers who wanted to send Jim and his children to K2. Jim accepted one.

Tom turned 7 on the trip to Pakistan. At the K2 hotel, where Jim and the kids stayed in Skardu, the staff gave him a polo stick and ball as presents. “In the subsequent years when I talked to Tom, there’s so little he remembers,” Jim says.

Kate likewise says she doesn’t remember much from the months after her mother’s death. “I was 4. I don’t know. I cried. I still cry,” she says. The trip to K2 was “our way of saying goodbye to her final resting place on earth.”

In 2017, Tom and Kate returned to Pakistan together for the first time since that trip, this time on an expedition. Kate would trek, while Tom would climb. Joining the Italian alpinist Daniele Nardi and several of his friends, they eyed up several objectives in the Karakoram, including the unclimbed Link Sar (7,041 meters). It was on this trip that Tom met American climber Graham Zimmerman. Zimmerman and his team were also hoping to make the first ascent of Link Sar. “It was interesting with Tom, because it was one of his first trips to the big mountains,” Zimmerman says.

Ballard and Nardi failed on Link Sar—and were lucky that was all. Before abandoning their attempt, Ballard wrote in a trip report on UKClimbing.com, they had “survived falling seracs by a whisker.” (Zimmerman, Steve Swenson, Chris Wright and Mark Richey made the first ascent of Link Sar in summer 2019.)

As consolation, with a third teammate, Italian climber Michele Focchi, Ballard and Nardi opened a 1,000-meter rock route,

*Welcome to the Jungle*, on a spire they dubbed Scimitara Rossa. From the top of their route, the trio saw another summit, approximately 5,600 meters high. The Italians named the unclimbed mountain Alison Peak as a tribute to Hargreaves. Though Ballard did not choose the name, it reified Berti's observation of Ballard's inability to be "Tom Ballard" and not Hargreaves' son: no matter how unrelated a climbing achievement of his might be to those his mother, he was unable to escape the orbital pull of her career.

Throughout the expedition, Nardi and Ballard got along well. Ballard learned from Nardi, who had climbed five 8,000-meter peaks and had already tried Nanga Parbat in winter four times.

A year later, Nardi called Ballard to woo him for the Mummery Spur on Nanga Parbat in winter. Ballard was intrigued by the line and, according to Jim, "thought it was maybe time to see what winter in the Himalayas on a big peak was all about."

As Zimmerman observes, Ballard had no experience even at 6,000 or 7,000 meters. Going straight to an 8,000er was like skipping several grades in school—feasible for the preternaturally gifted, but even then not without its pitfalls.

To Jim Ballard and others, it was surprising that Tom was going to Nanga and not K2. "I think Tom resisted K2 much longer than he should have, because he felt that everyone would think he was only going there because his mother died there," Jim says.

Yet even while he avoided K2, in the 2015 interview with Chalmers, Ballard said, "It has always been my dream. To stand on the top of that mountain. I don't know when I'll do it. But I will. Eventually." For a spell in 2010, well before Starlight and Storm, Ballard flirted with the idea of a K2 attempt, but that expedition never materialized. The plan then—as it remained, according to Marco Berti—was Tom to a T: He wanted to solo K2 in winter. Nanga Parbat was a step in that direction.

In the last conversation Jim had with his son face-to-face, he asked him whether he thought going to Nanga Parbat "was sort of a watershed moment."

Tom didn't understand. Jim explained: Did Tom think that if he did well on the Mummery in winter, whether he reached the summit or not, it might be an inflection point in his career? That he might be tempted to concentrate on climbing big things in the Himalayas instead of technical solo routes in the Alps?

"That's probably what I'm thinking," Tom said.

## TOM BALLARD, DREAMER BY DAY

We'll never know the decisions that led Ballard to push too far on Nanga Parbat.

In the estimation of Alex Txikon, who found the bodies of Ballard and Nardi, "They were probably really cold and exhausted. It was high wind. It was late. If you haven't got the possibility for warmth, any small mistake—you're dead."

Simone Moro disagrees. Based on the climbers' proximity to each other, the fact that they were still dangling on the ropes, and his familiarity with the route after observing it for months from Nanga Parbat base camp, Moro believes they were hit by a block of falling ice. "The real danger of the Mummery is not classic avalanches," Moro says, "but big parts of seracs falling from above—left and right of the Mummery Spur are huge hanging seracs."

## PEDERIVA TOLD HIM SHE HAD A BAD FEELING AND DIDN'T WANT HIM TO GO—SOMETHING SHE HAD NEVER ASKED BEFORE.

Ballard's and Nardi's bodies remain on Nanga Parbat. Nardi's family expressed their wish that the bodies not be recovered. Ballard himself would probably have it no other way. In the *Telegraph* article, he said of his mother's remains on K2, "I think we would rather that she is not found. It is where she was evidently most comfortable so we would just prefer that she stays there."

Some have wondered if the pressure of sponsorships played a role in Ballard's decision-making. But in appraisals from his family, friends and partners, it is clear that even after he accepted financial support, he climbed for himself.

"Tom didn't do alpinism to be famous," Pederiva says.

Zimmerman agrees. "My impression of Tom was that he really didn't give a shit about all that stuff," he says. "He took support because

this stuff is really expensive and he needed it to pursue his goals, but in terms of his drive as a climber and an alpinist, it struck me as quite pure."

Others have posited that Nardi persuaded a reluctant Ballard to attempt the Mummery Spur. But Berti, who knew Ballard better than most, disagrees, as does Moro. "I don't think Tom was a guy who was easily convinced. I think at the end of the day he wanted to try that route, too," Moro says.

Reinhold Messner, too, struggles to understand what motivated Ballard to try the Mummery in the first place. "Maybe he was seeking to do something great in the Himalayas. Maybe he was too good for everything at home. I don't know."

Two days before Ballard and Nardi died, Pederiva messaged with Ballard for the last time, asking him to come home. In the weeks leading up to the expedition, she had told him she had a bad feeling and didn't want him to go—something she had never asked him before. On February 22, Pederiva sent him a message: "Not happy you're climbing. It's dangerous," to which Ballard replied, "If you don't like [it] leave me." It was their final communication.

The only book Ballard took with him to Nanga Parbat was *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, which he read to escape the monotony of tent-bound days. Once more, Ballard's favorite quote from *Seven Pillars* is perhaps useful in parsing his reasons for soldiering on in the face of the Mummery Spur's dangers.

Obfuscated by all the fanciful and aspirational language in T.E. Lawrence's phrasing is an admonitory undercurrent: "Dreamers of the day are dangerous men," Lawrence wrote; or, interpreted less hopefully, ambition to realize your dreams can blind you to the danger necessary to achieve them. Tom Ballard's hunger to achieve his dreams—to live by his mother's accomplishments, but also to transcend them and eclipse her overpowering legacy—was nothing if not dangerous.

"I'm acutely aware that I am in my mother's shadow," Ballard once said. "People are always going to say Alison Hargreaves died on K2, blah blah blah and oh, by the way, her son Tom does this too. I think that maybe will change. In time." Trying the Mummery Spur in winter? It was just one more way to raise the bar *and* pay homage.

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