PHILLIPPE POULET

LE MINIMALISTE

BY MICHAEL WEJCHERT

FEROCIOUS HIMALAYAN WIND buffeted the two climbers engulfed on the massive face. Spindrift poured down from the summit as, on October 11, 1992, Pierre Béghin and Jean-Christophe Lafaille fought their way down the South Face of Annapurna, retreating in storm. At 8,200 feet, the South Face is one of the biggest mountain walls in the world, and certainly among the most perilous. The two had gotten within 700 meters of the 8,091-meter summit when the storm rolled in.

As the two French climbers crouched at a stance, Béghin—at 41, one of the finest alpinists in the world—shouted through the wind to the 27-year-old Lafaille, who was pounding in a piton to supplement a cam Béghin had placed for a rappel.

"Don't bother with the pin," Béghin said. "We must conserve gear if we are to have enough to get down." The lone cam, Béghin assured Lafaille, would be sufficient.

Lafaille removed the piton and waited for his partner to rappel from the rigid-stem Friend. But as Béghin weighted the rope, the cam popped. For a second, the pair locked eyes.

"I saw Pierre shoot backward," Lafaille wrote in *Alpinist*, in 2006: "his head turned toward me, his arms powerless. He was bundled up in his hood, but his eyes pierced me. Pierre knew, in that second, that all was over."

Béghin fell into the tempest, the rack and ropes snaking down with him, with little to no chance he would survive. Without gear, trapped on the biggest climb of his life, Lafaille would surely die in the storm as well.

Lafaille remains one of the best all-around climbers of all time. He is one of the few people to free solo 5.13c. A regular at Céüse, he imagined and bolted *Biographie*, which would later be freed as *Realization*, the world's first 5.15 by Chris Sharma.

BY THAT YEAR, Annapurna's South Face had already claimed the lives of some of the world's finest climbers. During the wall's first ascent—a large British siege in 1970—Ian Clough was killed by a collapsing serac on the lower slopes. In 1982, Alex MacIntyre, a feisty Brit who'd ratcheted Himalayan alpine-style climbing to risky new levels, was struck by a rock while attempting a new route in alpine-style on the face with the French climber Rene Ghilini. The blow killed him instantly. MacIntyre had been the bright light of his generation, and his death was the first rattling blow for the new "night-naked" breed of Himalayan climbers.

Two years after MacIntyre's death, a team from Catalonia finished his route: Nils Bohigas and Enrich Lucas struggled to the top over nine days. The face had become a grim benchmark for alpinism, with hard climbing and severe objective hazard at high altitude. A new route on the face seemed like a project for the next generation.

Yet if anyone could pair bold alpine-style tactics with difficult climbing, it was the French, who exported the world's best climbers from the Petri dish of Chamonix and the new sport crags of Buoux and Céüse. Throughout the 1980s and mid 1990s as the rest of the world whined about ethics, the French embraced strategic use of helicopters, bolts, cable-cars, and the eager eyes of sponsorship cameras. In 2019, however, as climbs are tweeted in real time and the best alpinists train on overhanging clip-ups, those ethical grumblings now appear antiquated. Sport climbers like Patrick Edlinger dominated the first climbing competitions, Christophe Profit soloed alpine north faces and Catherine Destivelle did both. Before anyone else, the French realized how to produce professional climbers.

Even among this pantheon, a few mountaineers stood out. Pierre Béghin was one. His career had begun in the mid-1970s with impressive winter ascents in the Alps, where an ability to suffer—often on first winter ascents like the Boccalatte Pillar on Mont Blanc, or the Bonatti Vaucher on the Pointe Whymper—mattered more than the climbing moves themselves. In the 1980s, he transitioned his skillset to 8,000-meter peaks, often by daring new routes, and often solo. Béghin opened a new route alone on the West Face of Manasulu in 1981. He soloed Kangchenjunga, the world's third-highest mountain, and the South Face of Makalu, another 8,000-meter monster. He and Christophe Profit completed a traverse of K2 in 1991.

"Béghin was ambitious, maybe even ruthless," Stephen Venables would write in an obituary, "and he knew how to get the limelight; but he was also charming, witty and generous."

By 1992 Béghin had solidified his reputation as France's high-altitude maestro. The difficult South Face of Annapurna seemed a perfect project for him.

Just as K2 belonged to the Italians, Nanga Parbat to the Germans, and Everest to the British, Annapurna was the *objet de désir* of the postwar French. It pulled at the heartstrings of generations who'd grown up reading about the first ascent, in 1950, by Louis Lachenal and Maurice Herzog. Herzog's account of the expedition, *Annapurna*, is the most widely circulated mountaineering book of all time. The expedition—the first to ascend an 8,000-meter peak—left the two French climbers without fingers and toes. Lachenal, a professional guide, later died after skiing into a crevasse above Chamonix in 1955. Before the accident, he'd taken bitter stock, aware that his life in the mountains would never regain the poetic balance he had once sought. Herzog, on the other hand, had secured exclusive book rights before the trip. He forced expedition members to fork over their diaries for heavy editing and penned Annapurna—the sole legal account of the climb. Herzog remained famous for the rest of his life, even becoming mayor of Chamonix. In private, the remainder of the team, including Gaston Rébuffat and Lional Terray, seethed as their versions of events faded into obscurity. It hardly mattered. Annapurna holds a sway for French alpinists, even 70 years later.

BORN IN 1965 IN GAP, FRANCE, Jean-Christophe Lafaille was an anomaly in the high-stakes climbing scene of the 1980s. Although a baby when Gaston Rébuffat (climbing's answer to the pilot-poet Antoine St. Exupery) made his mark in the Alps, he grew up with a keen, introspective eye for nature. He read stories of Walter Bonatti, Terray and Rébuffat. Both Jean-Christophe's father and grandfather were amateur mountaineers, and young Jean-Christophe devoured mountaineering literature. In time it became clear he had a knack for the sport. And he was in the right place at the right time.

Being raised in Gap meant that Lafaille grew up smack-dab in the middle of France's finest limestone cliffs: "Every morning, I breakfasted facing Céüse," he wrote in *Alpinist*. Had he been born 20 years earlier, he could have done nothing but stare, but his adolescence coincided with the sport-climbing revolution, and soon a tousle-headed Jean-Christophe and a band of other youngsters equipped routes with pitons, nuts and bolts on the cliffs by their homes. By the 1980s, the pitons and nuts were abandoned, and so were the old notions of difficulty. France now had sport climbing.

PHILLIPPE POULET (BOTH PAGES)

In April 1995 Lafaille solo enchained 10 of the most famous peaks in the Alps, including the North Faces of the Grandes Jorasses, the Eiger and, seen in this photo, the Matterhorn. His "Grande Voyage," included nearly 70,000 feet of elevation gain and over 80 miles of ski travel in 15 days.

In the 1980s, it wasn't rare for a scantily-clad grimpeur to be on the cover of a magazine like *Paris Match*. Gone were the nostalgic images of Rébuffat—guide de l'haute montange—dressed in wool, sucking on a pipe. Honed young men and women arced across glossy spreads carrying little, wearing less. The public went gaga over soloists such as Patrick Edlinger. But through the sport-climbing revolution, Lafaille hauled the philosophical approach of his forbears up some of the hardest climbs in the world, marrying new techniques with a traditional, poetic yearning. Although he was just five foot three inches, what Lafaille lacked in height, he made up for in tenacity, vision and raw talent.

In 1987, in one of the earliest solos of the grade, Lafaille free-soloed *Reve de Gosse*, an 8a+ (5.13c) at the Roche des Arnauds in Gap. In 1989, he imagined and bolted a route he named *Biographie*, at Céüse. Fourteen years later, the route was freed by Chris Sharma, who renamed it *Realization*: the world's first 5.15.

Unlike many of his contemporaries, Lafaille never looked at sport climbing as the end of the progression. While training for overhanging limestone, he ran hills and slept outside to prepare for alpine bivouacs. In 1986, he completed a year of military service with the Groupe Militaire de Haute Montagne, France's elite mountaineering troops, and set his sights on the mountains Rébuffat and Bonatti had cut their teeth on 20 years earlier. In 2006, he reflected in *Alpinist* that his early sport-climbing experience reminded him of a quote by Exupery, the pilot/philosopher who had written *The Little Prince*: "At the same time as I build your muscles, I am building you a soul."

In 1990, Lafaille switched gears. Though he'd completed a school baccalaureate, he became a mountain guide—always a feat in the competitive proving ground of the French Alps—and began picking his way up climbs "almost designed to raise his profile," as Ed Douglas noted in *The Guardian* about Lafaille. Nearly all were completed alone.

When Christophe Profit completed his winter "trilogy" in 1987, linking the north faces of the Grandes Jorasses, Eiger and Matterhorn in a single marathon push, he set the tone for a new wave of alpine soloing. Profit's feat was mind-blowing. But it had

also relied on helicopter support, omitting the descents and travel to and from the mountains. In a 1993 interview for *Climbing* magazine with Mark Twight, an American alpinist who lived in Chamonix during Lafaille's time and climbed a little bit with him, Lafaille observed, "The leading clique among French climbers lacks ideas and initiative, whether they are alpine climbers or sport climbers. All the other leading alpinists began copying [Profit]."

In contrast, Lafaille's solos—multiday affairs involving free climbing at a high level and difficult, scary, self-belayed aid, left ample time for reflection and suffering. In fact, they seemed calculated to produce both.

The capstone achievement for these two years of climbing alone was the first winter solo of Chemin des Etoiles, a 3,000-foot 6b A3 on the north face of the Grandes Jorasses, the most imposing of the alpine faces above Chamonix. "He'd come to Chamonix and do something and just disappear," Twight told me this fall. "He was always outside that scene; I never sensed that he cared that much about being a part of it. But his talent was so great he made some of the more renowned locals look pretty bad."

The French climbing media couldn't ignore the talented youngster. Neither could Pierre Béghin.

BOTH ALPINISTS WERE honored during a ceremony of the Fédération Française de la Montagne in 1992. Béghin had just climbed K2 with Profit via a new route, and Lafaille was awarded for his solo climbing. Though the two had never climbed together, Béghin asked Lafaille to join him on an attempt on the south face of Annapurna. For the 41-year-old, the route would be a pinnacle achievement in an already brilliant Himalayan career. Lafaille had not planned on going to the greater ranges until 1993, believing he'd need another year of training first. But Béghin's invitation was too good to refuse. Lafaille agreed immediately.

Pierre Béghin's proposed route up Annapurna rose in a direct line up the left-hand side of the South Face. The lower two-thirds of the route promised relatively straightforward climbing punctuated by small mixed steps. Tucked in a corner, it was also exposed to constant rockfall and avalanches. At 7,100 meters loomed a difficult headwall of compact rock and thin ice.

The pair arrived in Kathmandu, Nepal, in early fall of 1992. They started up on September 29 to acclimatize, fixing 150 meters of rope on the lower part of the face.

One of the last photos of Pierre Béghin, on the South Face of Annapurna in 1992. Béghin, perhaps the best alpinist of his era, would die when a rappel anchor failed during a retreat in a storm. Lafaille, alone, had to descend the immense wall with minimal gear and a broken arm.

J.C. LAFAILLE

PIERRE WAS ALMOST CERTAINLY DEAD. LAFAILLE WAS ALONE ON THE BIGGEST CLIMB OF HIS LIFE, WITH NO TECHNICAL GEAR EXCEPT ICE AXES, A SLING, AND TWO CARABINERS.

On October 8, the two set off up the South Face in earnest in a spell of decent weather. The hazards were enormous, especially the rockfall.

"It was an impressive bombardment," Lafaille told Twight in 1993. "I've never encountered, or even heard of, anything like it."

As Lafaille and Béghin labored up the initial snowslopes, their packs heavy with food, fuel and bivouac gear, MacIntyre's death by rockfall preyed on their minds. They hoped to avoid a similar fate by climbing the lower part of the face in the dark, finding sheltered bivouacs during the day.

By the third day of climbing, the pair arrived at the rock band at 7,000 meters. Ice bands snaked through compact, brittle rock. An overhang barred entry to the upper face, and the climbers resorted to aid. Both were surprised to find quality ice through the headwall, which was steep, sustained and exhausting. They climbed seven technical pitches of rock and ice with difficulties that would later be graded M6.

That third evening, Lafaille and Béghin searched in vain for a place to pitch their teeny two-person tent. From photos, they'd surmised there was a ledge at around 7,300 meters. They were wrong, and spent a night suspended from their harnesses. The stove wouldn't light in the wind and they perched on a 70-degree ice slope without food and water.

Still, they carried on in the morning, their fourth day on Annapurna. They were nearly off of the headwall and after that it was only 150 meters of easy snow slope to the top.

Annapurna's 10,000-foot South Face. A: The 1970 British Route. B: Line taken by taken by Béghin and Lafaille. Their highpoint was somwhere around the steep rock band at about three-quarters height. In 2013 Ueli Steck claimed the route's first ascent. The line was repeated soon after by Stéphane Benoist and Yannick Graziani. C: The 1982 Japanese Route. D: 1981 Polish Route.

Right: Lafaille loved big walls, climbing *Sea of Dreams* and *Zenyatta Mondatta* on El Cap. In the Alps, he applied his techinical mastery to a new A4/A5 on the West Face of the Dru above Chamonix. He estabilished the Alp's hardest technical wall over nine days in winter in 2001. By then he was a media celebrity and being photographed from a helicopter was business as usual.

STÉPHANE BENOIST, PHILLIPPE POULET

But when the storm moved in, continuing was out of the question. They'd be lucky to descend without being caught in an avalanche or hit by rockfall.

Alpinism is, above all, a struggle for control. Each move up a mountain is stacked onto a previous one. On their fourth day, Lafaille and Béghin were so depleted from their bad bivouac, so high up this delicate ladder of their own design, that control became nearly impossible to maintain. And as the storm intensified, any semblance of it was whisked away. They'd need to rappel off single anchors if they were to have enough gear to get down. To survive, they'd have to take massive chances.

After several rappels on tied-off ice screws and Friends, the pair struggled down to around 7,200 meters. Despite the storm's intensity, they were nearly off the headwall. A few more rappels would get them within striking distance of easier terrain. Still, the wind and spindrift threatened to rip them off the mountain.

Lafaille later wrote that "the wind blew as through the turbine of a Boeing 747. We were lost … in the heart of one of the most difficult Himalayan walls."

As he fixed the last rappel of his life, Béghin handed one of his ice tools to Lafaille: he was too tired and frustrated to clip it to his own harness, and Jean-Christophe was down to one tool after using one of his to back up a previous anchor. Lafaille drove in the axe and balanced in his crampons on a steep slab of ice, trusting his years of soloing over Béghin's one-piece anchor. The climbers switched packs. Béghin now carried the technical gear to keep building anchors while Lafaille took the tent and stove. "The pack and the axe doubtless later saved my life," Lafaille wrote in the 1993 *American Alpine Journal*.

Though he always thought Béghin knew his fate, when Lafaille watched from his stance as his climbing partner skidded away, he thought he would self-arrest. He was sure: despite the steepness of the terrain, Béghin would self-arrest. As his mentor fell out of sight, Jean-Christophe listened, terrified, for shouts. There was only the howling of the wind. He slumped in the snow for half an hour, stunned. Pierre was almost certainly dead. Lafaille was alone on the biggest climb of his life, with no technical gear except ice axes, a sling, and two carabiners.

IN 1961, WALTER BONATTI AND six other climbers became trapped in a snowstorm on the central pillar of Freney on Mount Blanc. Four climbers died in the ensuing disaster. As he recovered in the hospital, Bonatti insisted that his physical and mental conditioning were the variables that kept him alive while those around him died of exhaustion and exposure.

"I was a survivor," Bonatti recalled in *The Mountains of My Life*, "simply because I had not wanted, nor been able, to let myself die."

Lafaille had forced himself into supreme fitness for Annapurna. Like Bonatti, he leaned on his base of solo climbing to calm his mind at the onset of disaster. Lafaille's solo forays into difficult alpine terrain and his technical ability had steeled him. If anyone

Lafaille's miraculous survival on Annappurna made national headlines in France.

PHILIPPE POULET

could get off Annapurna alive, it was he.

He cleared his head, forcing himself to think of other mountaineers presented with overwhelming situations: Joe Simpson's epic descent from Suila Grande, Doug Scott's crawl off the Ogre in Pakistan. Bonatti, Simpson, and Scott had all relied on the willpower and the clear-headedness that comes after decades of self-imposed danger. This background Lafaille, too, had in spades: it was his edge on Annapurna.

"I thought about [them], and figured, those guys gave all they had, and then gave more. They fought and fought and did not give up. I should at least do the same—give everything I have," Lafaille later told Twight for *Climbing*.

In the gloom of the storm, he shut the accident out, focusing instead on decisions. Continuing up, while far easier than picking his way down, was impossible in the storm. Lafaille chose to try to down climb to the last bivouac site, about 200 meters lower, where he and Béghin had left 20 meters of rope.

He wove his way through mixed terrain, focusing on each meter as it presented itself, searching in vain for any sign of Béghin. Jean-Christophe reached the team's bivouac at 7,000 meters as darkness fell.

Though Béghin had disappeared with the technical climbing equipment, Lafaille did have the team's little blue tent. He set it up and crawled inside. The storm raged for another day and a half. He waited, huddled in the tent, despondent. By October 13 he had been on Annapurna's south face for six days. Before Béghin's death, both men had been at their absolute physical limit. Now, Lafaille was simply wasting away.

MUCH LATER, IN 2013, when Stéphane Benoist and Yannick Graziani, two of the world's best high-altitude alpinists, climbed Lafaille and Béghin's intended line on Annapurna, they reached the summit after eight trying days. (Two weeks earlier, Ueli Steck made a disputed solo ascent of the same line, claiming a lightning-fast time of 28 hours. Regardless of the validity of Steck's ascent, Graziani and Benoist are now the only two climbers alive who have been on the headwall.)

By the time Graziani and Benoist reached the summit, Benoist had frostbitten his feet and was suffering from pneumonia, in addition to pulmonary and cerebral edema. The pair rappelled down the same terrain Lafaille had descended alone. A helicopter picked up the ailing Benoist at advanced base camp. Despite two decades of advancements in equipment and the supreme skill of both men, the climb took 10 days and nearly cost Benoist his life.

Benoist—like his counterpart Lafaille twenty-one years earlier—endured lasting physical scars from Annapurna. All of his toes would end up being amputated, as would the tips of his right fingers and the very ends of his left fingers.

"Lafaille's descent is totally astounding," Benoist says. "It felt hard enough to rappel down with a rope and partner!"

On his seventh day, Lafaille worked his way down when breaks in the weather allowed. With the 20-meter line recovered from the headwall bivy, he rappelled the technical sections and down-climbed as much as he could. He used everything available for anchors: tent stakes hammered into cracks, Béghin's ice axe.

Lafaille angled for the 150 meters of fixed rope the pair had left at 6,600 meters.

BACK IN FRANCE, LAFAILLE'S THEN-WIFE, VERONIQUE, WAS INFORMED THAT HER HUSBAND WAS DEAD.

From there, he should be able to rappel the remaining 1,000 meters to safety. At around 6,800 meters, Lafaille lost a crampon. Still, he hopped down the snow slope, willing himself to remain calm. Miraculously, he found the missing crampon in the snow above the fixed ropes.

He reached the ropes and began rappelling, riding the euphoria of survival, though 1,000 meters of terrain yawned between him and the bergschrund. As he allowed himself to hope, a volley of rockfall whistled down the face. A stone slammed into him, shattering the ulna and radius in his right forearm. He collapsed in pain, then cut his purple Gore-Tex suit with a penknife as the arm swelled and the break bulged out of the fabric. He slithered into the pole-less tent, using a platform he and Béghin had excavated on the way up.

"Bivying that night, I plunged into a cold, cataleptic sleep, then woke with a start. Some small, furtive lights flickered below; I imagined tourists taking pictures of themselves in front of the distant lodges. The brief flashes seemed to contain all the warmth of human life, a world that appeared unattainable and entirely foreign in the darkness that surrounded me. A profound gap had opened between us," he wrote in *Alpinist* in 2006.

Lafaille's poise was unraveling. The loss of a partner, the physical pain of a serious injury, and 5,000 feet of strenuous retreat after days spent at high altitude were killing him.

He spent the day drinking and recovering at the bivouac, waiting for the sun to leave the face. Rocks cascaded past him. That afternoon, he continued down, climbing into the night.

"An unbearable loneliness tore through me. I thought about letting go, about joining Pierre." Helicopters flew over the South Face, hoping to catch a glimpse of the climbers, now known to be missing. Back in France, Lafaille's then-wife, Veronique, was informed that her husband was dead. On October 15, the eighth day on Annapurna, Lafaille finally made it to the bergschrund. He collapsed for a half-hour, discarding his climbing equipment, then staggered toward advanced base camp. Unable to open the frozen tent he and Béghin had stashed there, he devoured a small amount of food from a Slovenian expedition. (Though the Slovenians had seen Lafaille as he struggled down the South Face's lower slopes, they'd deemed a rescue attempt on the face—awash with rockfall and avalanches—too dangerous.) He continued down the moraine. Hours later, a porter ran toward him with food and a kettle of tea. Moored again to the rest of the world, he wept.

WHEN HE TOSSED HIS EQUIPMENT AWAY in Annapurna's bergschrund, Lafaille swore he'd never climb again.

"Pierre's death and my solitary descent forced me to leave the remnants of my adolescence behind," Lafaille wrote in *Alpinist*. The nightmarish five days alone revisited him. He could not talk about Pierre's death. "The harmony of man in nature, as depicted in Rébuffat's photos, is not the only experience, that the game of confrontation and uncertainty I found (and continue to find) so exhilarating sometimes ends in total loss."

During the winter of 1992, Lafaille underwent several operations on his arm. He eased back to the mountains, working as guide and an instructor for L'école National du Ski et Alpinisme. He began to think about projects in the Alps and the Himalaya.

Jean-Christophe had always soloed, but his reasons grew less sublime. Soloing always allowed freedom of movement and unparalleled speed, which translated to safety. But now it held a more morbid advantage. Were he alone, Lafaille would not have to look into anyone else's eyes as the person fell.

"Pierre became the image of death for him. He never shook it," says Lafaille's second wife.

A year after Annapurna, Lafaille climbed Cho Oyu, his first 8,000-meter peak. The following year, he soloed a new route on Shishapangma, 8,027 meters and the world's 14th-highest mountain. In April, 1995, he enchained 10 of the north faces of the Alps in 15 days. Lafaille raced between peaks on foot and ski, eschewing motorized transport. He flew up the Eiger in six and a half hours, a blistering pace, especially considering he had nine more mountains to climb. That same afternoon, Lafaille climbed the Mönch. He continued, often in rotten weather, up eight more north faces, ending on the Grandes Jorasses: 90 total miles of cross-country travel between mountains. With the feat, he set the bar for other, unsupported alpine enchainments, such as Ueli Steck's link-up of the 82 4,000 meter mountains in the alps in 2015.

In October of the same year, Lafaille returned to the face that had nearly killed him. This time he was to climb alone, intending to make the first solo ascent of the *Bonington Route*, which had claimed the life of Ian Clough 25 years earlier. Although he pushed himself to 7,600 meters, Lafaille was beaten back by storms. As in 1992, he retreated down the massive face alone.

"As I waited for the Sherpas to join me for the walk home, I gazed out at Pierre's line. Sorrow and disappointment weighted on me," he later wrote.

Lafaille racked up other 8,000 meter peaks: an amazing solo enchainment of Gasherbrum I and II in 1996, Manaslu's North Face in 2000, the Southeast Spur of K2 in 2001. But Annapurna still held sway over him.

In 1998, Lafaille attempted the Bonington route once again, this time with the Italian brothers Mario and Salvatore Panzeri. A young Sherpa was killed in an avalanche, and the team left Nepal wracked with guilt. Lafaille swore he would never again try Annapurna.

AS HE GRAPPLED WITH ANNAPURNA, Jean-Christophe courted Katia Sinigaglia, who would become his second wife—he and Veronique divorced in 1997. The two went skiing in Chamonix on New Year's Day, 1998. Jean-Christophe, who never skied at resorts, "happened" to show up.

"I asked him to dinner at my house that night. And he never left!" Katia remembers. "His simplicity, his kindness, his gentleness, and his humility attracted me to him. He was so different from the other alpinists in Chamonix. He was interested in my passions, too."

A shrewd woman with a background in PR, Katia devoted herself to managing Jean-Christophe's climbs.

"There was Lafaille, but there was also the Lafaille couple," Yann Geizendanner, Lafaille's longtime meteorologist, told *The Guardian* in 2006. "If Katia had not existed Jean-Christophe could never have been able to do what he did."

Katia proposed that he tick off all 14 of the 8,000-meter peaks. After all, he was going to the Himalayas anyway. In 1999, only five alpinists had ticked off all 14, and none were French. Finances from book deals and lectures would help support Lafaille's growing family (Katia and Jean-Christophe had a son, Tom, in 2001, in addition to a child each from previous marriages) and ensure security in the pressure cooker of high-altitude mountaineering.

"The window was closing, in a way," Mark Twight told me this year.

With his second wife, Katia. With a background in PR, Katia managed Lafaille's climbs, and proposed that he climb all 14 8,000-meter peaks.

PASCAL TOURNAIRE

The decision to pursue all the 8,000ers meant that Annapurna was back on the table. As he wrote in TK, "I began to feel that I had to rid myself of the burden this mountain had become; I was afraid that if I didn't, the past would be more and more painful to bear."

In 2002, the American mountaineer Ed Viesturs invited Lafaille on an expedition to the mountain; it would be Lafaille's fourth attempt at the summit. Viesturs' had attempted it in 2000. They were joined by the Basque climber Alberto Iñurrategi and the Finnish mountaineer Viekka Gustafsson. Katia accompanied the group to base camp. The four climbers wanted to repeat an east-to-west traverse of the mountain, a committing and futuristic line established by Erhard Loretan and Norbert Joos in 1984.

The weather was iffy from the start. Geizendanner, the meteorologist who, by now, Katia and Jean-Christophe trusted completely, told the climbers to go for it. Viesturs wasn't so certain, and he and Gustafsson turned around. Jean-Christophe and Iñurrategi bet on Geizendanner's forecast and headed up the east ridge. After a bivouac at 7,950 meters, they faced a final, steep couloir to the summit. After 10 years, Annapurna was within reach. The pair exchanged glances.

"I knew that we were equally determined," wrote Lafaille in *Alpinist*.

At 10 a.m. on May 16, the two alpinists reached the summit. Lafaille wrote in tk: "I shouted with joy and liberation. I sat with my feet hanging over the South Face, spending several minutes absorbed in thought about Pierre. I cried a little as I looked down the abyss. Those 30 minutes were worth the 10 years I'd dedicated to Annapurna."

Though he'd summited with Iñurrategi, it was with Viesturs that Lafaille felt most connected, and the two decided to climb together again.

"He was technically the most talented

Upper left: Lafaille in 2002 atop his white whale, Annapurna. Upper right: On an ascent of Marc Twight and Andy Parkin's difficult *Beyond Good and Evil* (V WI 5/6 5c A1/A2) on the Aiguille des Pélerins, Chamonix, France. Lower left: K2 in 2001. Lafaille completed 11 of the 14 8,000ers before his death.

J.C. LAFAILLE COLLECTION (2), J.F. HAGENMULLER

all-around climber in the world. He could climb anything," Viesturs said after Lafaille's death. The number of climbers with such an all-around résumé remains miniscule. The training volume required to climb 5.14, the mental headspace needed to solo 5.13, the endurance and willpower needed to complete projects on 8,000-meter peaks: most climbers are specialists in one discipline. Voytek Kurtyka, the Polish alpinist best known for his ascent of Gasherbrum IV's "Shining Wall," soloed 5.13 in Poland throughout the 1990s. But, perhaps because of his Annapurna solo, his hard sends on rock (including a near-onsight of El Cap) and speed climbs in the Alps, Ueli Steck seems to be the climber most on par with Lafaille: a virtuoso obsessed with honing his skill in every aspect of the sport.

But Lafaille appeared to avoid the monomaniacal pratfalls of other top-tier alpinists. Nearly everyone I talked to—those who knew him intimately and those who met him in passing—mention his humility and curiosity. The adventure writer David Roberts, who profiled Lafaille for *National Geographic Adventure* in 2003 and who has interviewed many—if not all—of Lafaille's contemporaries, was struck by how differently Lafaille presented himself from other alpinists. "I find the single-minded passion that Lafaille's ascents bespeak hard to reconcile with the shy family man seated opposite me," Roberts wrote. "His politeness caught me off guard" Roberts told me this year. "He charmed me and won me over." But family life and Lafaille's outward shyness hadn't tempered his drive. If anything, unweighting himself from the burden of Annapurna freed him to pursue an even loftier agenda.

The next year, Viesturs and Lafaille set off on two 8,000-meter peaks together: Nanga Parbat and Broad Peak. On Nanga Parbat, Lafaille planned to solo an ambitious new route up the Diamir face, which joins the regular Nanga Parbat route at around 7,000 meters. There he'd link up with Viesturs to attempt the summit together from Camp III.

Jean-Christophe wasn't the only alpinist gunning for the Diamir: the Italian climber Simone Moro had envisioned a similar line, and he and Lafaille agreed to team up and simul-solo together. Over two days, they climbed new terrain to the top of the Diamir face, rendezvousing with Viesturs at Camp III. Moro, who did not feel acclimatized, returned to base camp, while Lafaille summited with Viesturs. He named the new route *TOM*, after his son.

Broad Peak did not go smoothly. The success on Nanga Parbat notwithstanding, injury and illness dogged Lafaille throughout 2003. That January, he'd taken a leader fall drytooling in Vail, Colorado, breaking a collarbone and sustaining severe head trauma. Lafaille even suffered a bout of giardia on Nanga Parbat before climbing *TOM*, staggering back to base camp only with the help of Viesturs. Still, he managed the summit of Broad Peak after only four days on the mountain: a fast ascent and his third 8,000er that season after Dhauligiri and Nanga Parbat. The elation was fleeting. On the descent, he contracted pulmonary edema, again struggling back to a base camp with heavy assistance.

Lafaille's hat trick had been impressive: reminiscent of the Polish climber Jerzy Kukuczka's expedition-hopping tactics in the 1980s, when he and Reinhold Messner raced to become the first to climb the 8,000ers. Kukuczka was a tank, physically and mentally: possessed of a single-mindedness that eventually caught up with him when he died on Lhotse. By the time the accident happened it seemed inevitable. Kukuczka's obsession with completing the peaks clouded the danger he'd been so good at overcoming earlier in his career. As Lafaille raced up the same mountains, detractors began to wonder if he was falling into a similar trap—or being led there.

Lafaille had never fit in in Chamonix. He'd existed on the periphery of a scene that notoriously spurned outsiders. Now that he had risen to the top of the heap, critics were quick to find fault, blaming Katia for pushing her husband into riskier and riskier climbs, noting that before the marriage, Lafaille had never declared an interest in chasing all the 8,000ers.

But this theory that Lafaille—who had continued climbing 8,000-meter peaks even after Béghin's death in 1992—was

Although he was just five foot three inches, what Lafaille lacked in height, he made up for in tenacity, vision and raw talent. Above: An onsight of *Amphibian (*M9), Vail, Colorado, in 2003, old-school in crampons and leashed tools. On this trip he took a leader fall drytooling in Vail, breaking a collarbone and sustaining severe head trauma.

PHILLIPPE POULET (BOTH)

"I ADMIT I HAVE TROUBLE LIVING THE TRANQUIL LIFE OF A FATHER," LAFAILLE WROTE IN 2006.

being thrust up a mountain by his wife and sponsors may be overly handy. It disregards the 20 years of soloing and dangerous alpinism Lafaille had done previously with little regard for sponsorship, at least as compared to his contemporaries.

"The milieu of the French climbing scene is a very critical little world," Katia told me. "We upset the establishment."

"It's easy to look at this stuff from the outside," Twight says. "There's certainly a desire for media attention, to fulfill that image. But you've still got to climb the thing. It's still brutal up there. Sponsorship doesn't make it any less difficult."

Another way to look at it is that a climber of Lafaille's caliber, who'd dispatched 5.14 and Europe's most difficult alpine climbs, could perhaps only find challenges in the greater ranges. But climbing in the high mountains alone was also "a way of exorcising the trauma" as Katia put it to me.

"I admit I have trouble living the tranquil life of a father," Lafaille wrote in 2006. "I need the intense emotion and athletic effort evoked by new ascents and projects."

In 2004, he trained for his most ambitious project yet, a solo ascent of an 8,000-meter peak, in winter. Lafaille's choice of mountain—Shishapangma, which he'd summited in 1993—undermines the criticism that he was racing up 8,000ers simply to tick them off: Why repeat a mountain when three remained on his list? Regardless of motive, the idea seemed crazy to the small clique of Himalayan winter climbers. While expeditions had succeeded in winter, no one had done so alone, without oxygen.

The jetstream, Giezendanner warned, would pose very little time for actual climbing: he'd be blown off the mountain if he got caught out at the wrong time. The numbing cold would allow little chance for recovery. Above all, the altitude and desolate solitude would wear him down.

"In my approach to alpinism," Lafaille countered in a 2005 trip report for *Alpinist*, "I keep one central thought continually in mind: 'Things always appear impossible until you've tried them.'"

On December 11, Jean-Christophe summited Shishapangma, climbing new terrain for the first 1,000 meters before joining the 1982 British route. Any euphoria was short-lived.

"Despite the immense happiness of that moment, I stayed focused on the cold that had settled in my feet and throughout my body, and on the descent that awaited," he continued.

Dinner yum on *Sea of Dreams* in 1999. Upon his return to France, Lafaille used the big-wall skills he'd honed on El Cap to solo a new aid route on the Dru.

Lafaille's retreat likely invoked memories of Annapurna's South Face: when he was nearly on the glacier, his rope became stuck, and he downclimbed the remaining technical terrain to flat ground.

Lafaille's navigation of winter conditions on Shishapangma appeared to do little to impress the climbing establishment. Stéphane Benoist, the alpinist who would climb Lafaille and Béghin's attempted line on Annapurna in 2013, was on the jury for the Piolet d'Or that year, and recalls: "The president of the jury did not consider it a winter ascent, or even an actual climb."

Simone Moro, with whom Lafaille had climbed the Diamir, dismissed the ascent: it had not been completed in true winter, which in the Himalaya is regarded as beginning on December 5; Lafaille had started up the mountain on November 14. According to Katia, Krzysztof Wielicki, one of the greatest Himalayan winter climbers, went a step further, questioning Lafaille's claim entirely. She contends that Moro was bitter after Nanga Parbat, when Lafaille had summited and he had not, and that Wielicki was dubious because, despite his decades of Himalayan winter experience, he could not conceive of such a project.

"These attacks hurt [Jean-Christophe] deeply," she says.

In 2005, when Viesturs summited Annapurna, completing all 14 8,000-meter peaks, Jean-Christophe appears to have envied his friend. "When Ed finished his 8,000-ers, Jean-Christophe said that he wished he had finished his," Katia told the journalist Jason Burke in 2006.

For his next season, Lafaille chose an even more extreme project, this time within the confines of "true" Himalayan winter and on a peak he'd never climbed on: Makalu, perhaps hoping to quiet the doubts his peers had expressed.

IN DECEMBER OF 2005, Jean-Christophe Lafaille said goodbye to his family; he would check in with Katia several times a day on his satellite phone. Increasingly torn between expedition climbing and family life, he said he would miss climbing on their home wall with Tom, who was now age 4.

On December 27, a helicopter landed him at base camp. Three Sherpas would stay with him as support staff. On the mountain—as usual—Lafaille would operate alone.

A constant wind whipped sand around advance base camp, and the Sherpas grew bitter about staying on in such harsh conditions. The language barrier increased the tension. Lafaille concentrated on moving up the mountain. Gusts blew up to 110 miles an hour, and he was often forced to crawl or self-arrest to keep from being blown off. He lost a tent at Makalu La, a col high up on the mountain, and retreated. He and his three companions at advance base endured a bitter two weeks as the wind whipped through chinks in the stone walls surrounding their tents.

As the weather improved, he headed back up the mountain, determined to bid for the summit. On January 26, Lafaille established himself at 7,500 meters. The next morning, swaddled in layer after layer of down clothing, he didn't hear his wristwatch alarm go off and overslept. He called Katia, informing her he'd try for the summit, a thousand meters higher. He felt good; he'd check in again as he progressed. The wind blew at around 30 miles an hour. Lafaille's thermometer registered the temperature inside his tent at -22 Fahrenheit. If the day grew too late or conditions became too inhospitable, he'd turn around, he told Katia.

NO ONE ELSE IN THE WORLD WAS EVEN ACCLIMATIZED ENOUGH TO COME FOR HIM IF SOMETHING WENT WRONG.

Sometime in the early morning, Lafaille set off, a mountaineer at the height of his physical and mental capabilities. Few could claim to have spent so much time alone at high altitude. Rescue, he knew, would be impossible. No one else in the world was even acclimatized enough to come for him if something went wrong.

Later that day, Katia began to worry when her husband did not check in a second time. After several hours, the wait assumed the terrible sense of a vigil. She emailed Ed Viesturs, at home on Bainbridge Island in Seattle. He told her to give her husband time. His own sat phone had broken on his successful climb on Annapurna, and his wife, Paula, had endured a terrible night with no contact.

But as the hours turned into days, only silence resounded from Makalu. There was no need to speculate, no launch of a forlorn rescue effort. Lafaille was gone.

HAD HE SUCCEEDED, Makalu would have been the most physically impressive ascent of the decade. Lafaille was just a thousand meters shy of mastering the entire array of climbing, from his early sport-climbing days to alpine soloing in the deep Himalayan winter. He had survived one of alpinism's most harrowing epics, turning the tragedy into a personal song of redemption. He disappeared at the age of 40: nearly the same age as Béghin when he fell into the void on Annapurna.

Katia is convinced her husband fell into a crevasse soon after exiting his tent. The winds had not been extremely high that morning, and his voice on the phone had sounded strong and willing.

In an email, I ask Katia about her son, Tom, who is now 17. Does he climb like his dad?

"Yes," she replies. "He is young, talented and humble, like his dad. The way he climbs reminds me of him."

Letting Tom pursue the passion that killed his father cannot be easy. But, she says, "his eyes light up when he talks about climbing," and she cannot say no.

Michael Wejchert is a writer and climber. He lives in North Conway, New Hampshire.

PHILLIPPE POULET