

Partway up K2's black pyramid, 23,000 feet above sea level, I become aware of how slowly I'm climbing, and I don't like it. I don't like the self-doubt it awakens. Now is not the time. My chest heaves as I force frigid air into my lungs twice, then tilt my head down to search for the next logical place to put my clunky boot. Strapped to my boots are crampons, which add to their clunkiness—twelve metal spikes meant to aid my travel on steep ice. When I look down between my legs, I see the striated flow of the Baltoro and Godwin Austen Glaciers, reaching toward Pakistan's desolate plains. I trace the line where the glaciers converge 7,600 feet below me. Just beyond their meeting point, the earth rises sharply in a twisted mass of rock and ice to this precarious point where I now hang, suspended by the artificial safety of rope and metal, on the side of the second highest mountain in the world.

I scan the rock at my feet again for options. It's black and slick from melting snow and looks more like a cobble of rock remnants than a solid mountain. The best I can hope for is a chunky protrusion deep enough to support my crampon's one-inch-long steel front points. I find a small bump of wet stone and trust the narrow points with my body weight. A little at first. Then a committing amount. As my foot moves to the protrusion, I simultaneously slide the ascension device in my right hand higher up the climbing rope. On a 28,251-foot-tall mountain I've just gained four inches. In ten minutes. I consider that maybe I am beyond my limit. In this moment, I do not feel capable of delivering what this deadly mountain demands, and the potential that I am disrespecting her with my impotence smacks in my throat and twists my lips.

*Why am I doing this?*

I've carried this question with me to every mountain I've climbed since Everest; searching for the answer both haunts me and pushes me forward.

In retrospect, my decision to climb K2 feels haphazard. Climbing the second highest mountain in the world didn't start as a distant hypothetical idea or as a childhood dream that percolated into reality. Summiting K2 fell into my consciousness on an icy weekend in 2014 while hiking in the Cascade mountains near my Seattle home.

It was the kind of February day that provokes even the most intrepid Pacific Northwesterners to shield themselves with Gore-Tex and retreat to anyplace warm and dry—the kind of day where we wonder aloud if we will ever feel the sun's warmth again, if we'll ever wear tank tops again. Instead of sheltering myself that day, however, I'd intentionally put myself face-to-face with Mother Nature to hike Mailbox Peak. While I carefully descended a steep, rocky trail encased in an inch of new ice, my boots searched for traction underneath me, moving in cartoonish slides and skids as I hiked down. I'd forgotten to bring a trekking pole, which would have created an additional point of contact with the ground, bringing more stabilization to the situation. Without it, I devised a cumbersome method of sliding downward from tree to tree, using each burly trunk to catch my fall before sliding into the next. The trees were mostly Douglas fir, their long, straight trunks rising toward the gray sky with sways and groans—audible protests against the weight of the ice wrapped around their highest branches. Rime ice, it's called, created when water droplets in the air touch a frozen surface and become locked to it, frozen instantly. The firs' motion occasionally sent showers of ice pellets down on me, each time bouncing off my jacket and scattering to the frozen ground like tiny crystals.

I don't recall exactly when during my icy descent K2 crept into my consciousness that day. I just know that it landed there, not as a question to be contemplated but as a fact. I knew that I would attempt K2 just as clearly as I knew that I would slide into the next tree. But at that point in 2014, I still hadn't done enough research to understand that for every four people who attempt to summit the world's second highest mountain, one will die, or that for women, the stats are even grimmer: of the first six to reach the summit, three lost their lives on descent.

Most of what I knew about K2 consisted of details from a 2008 *Seattle Times* article that described the deaths of eleven climbers in a tragic accident. When I read and reread the article from my patio that summer, I wondered what it was like for those climbers to realize they were stuck in the dark at 27,000 feet on a precarious slope in Pakistan without the means to safely descend. I was a neophyte climber in 2008, and though their perseverance and strength fascinated me, I didn't want a personal experience with such a deadly mountain. Yet I'd folded the article into quarters, slid it into a manila folder labeled *Mountains*, and tucked it away in a desk drawer. K2 would remain dormant in my consciousness after that, like a seed waiting for the right conditions to sprout and take root.

Something about that wintry descent in 2014, on a mountain I'd hiked for years, cultivated that seed. In the following months, I casually studied K2's routes, history, and risks. Studying a mountain brings it to life for me, gives it character, forging a relationship between us and making me feel like I am getting to know it and its challenges. Most importantly, studying my next climbing objective allows me to determine whether my ability and ambition are aligned with the mountain. As I devoured books and blogs during the summer of 2014, a persona of K2 quickly formed. It's not fun and approachable Mount Rainier, easily summited in a day or two if you're up for it. It's not austere and icy Denali, which demands a slow, steady uphill slog. Not even close. Although K2 is 778 feet shorter than Mount Everest, it is not even in the same league as the highest mountain in the world in terms of danger or difficulty.

K2 is 28,251 feet of unforgiving rock and ice on the Pakistan-China border that dares humans to fuck with it. It is treacherous exposure. It is unrelenting steepness from the first step beyond advanced base camp. It is untrustworthy rock holds and unpredictable storms that snatch climbers off the mountain in the blink of an eye. Unlike on Everest, there is no tent at base camp acting as an emergency room; there are no commercial helicopters available to whisk injured climbers to safety. I knew that K2 would ask more of me than I could imagine. But still, that tiny seed nudged me to devise a hypothetical timeline of mountains to climb and skills to attain to meet K2's demands.

My timeline for climbing K2 was private. In my circle of mountaineering friends, we dreamed of and discussed the possibility of climbing Mount Everest and other Himalayan peaks, but our public ambition stopped there. I was also uneasy when it came to sharing mountaineering goals because I didn't want to risk the embarrassment of reeling it back in once it was out there. And I'd rather privately plan and surprise my fellow climbers with success than disappoint all of us with failure.

It was 2015 when I summoned enough courage to share my plans with a climbing partner while we slogged up Mailbox Peak, the same mountain where K2 had first planted itself into my awareness a year earlier. It wasn't icy this time, but the steep, meandering trail was slick with mud and loose rock that had dislodged itself in a recent rain-storm. My climbing partner was updating me on the first solo winter summit of Denali. I liked these training hikes together because his stories distracted me from the hours of uphill torture and my back-pack's unforgiving weight. We were so comfortable with each other from years of climbing and training together that we could also let our

conversations pause and move together in quiet mindlessness for hours, communicating only with grunts and hand gestures.

“You see he tied a tree trunk to his waist so he wouldn’t fall in a crevasse?”

“Yeah, seems brutal,” I said, economizing my words and breath as I struggled up the rocky hillside, trying to imagine climbing a mountain with a tree trunk strung to my waist.

“He’s tried like four times.”

“Intense.”

When he and I had summited Denali together three years prior, we’d experienced the summer version of North America’s tallest mountain, which pinned us down for six days in an endless white expanse of blowing snow at 17,200 feet before conditions became safe enough to venture from our tents and climb higher. I tried to comprehend the brutality of a Denali January.

“No way I’d do that in winter,” he confirmed. “You think you’ll ever climb Everest?”

“I don’t know, maybe. I feel like I need to summit another Himalayan peak first,” I said, giving him a glimpse into my plans.

I didn’t tell him that technically this hike was training for climbing my first Himalayan peak—that I’d stuffed fifteen extra pounds of lead bricks in my backpack.

He shifted the conversation. “Jesus, what do you do after summiting Denali in winter?”

“K2.”

“Yeah, right,” he said with a huff.

I kept trudging up the steep mud behind him in silence—until he planted his trekking pole, stopped, whipped his head around, and looked at me with wide eyes and raised eyebrows. I looked up at him, deadpan, and shrugged my shoulders casually. We shared the type of bond that develops from mutual struggle toward a common goal. He knew me well enough to correctly interpret my silence as a plan. But he mercifully said nothing, not forcing me to justify or explain my scheme.

I hadn’t told anyone about my future climbing objectives even though I had carefully constructed a two-year climbing plan in a pink notebook with shimmery purple ink and butterfly stickers. Connecting the dots between each goal seemed straightforward within the safe realm of my notebook’s lines, but verbalizing my plan—especially to male climbing partners—stymied me. I wanted to shield myself from their doubt, which I knew would follow. I wasn’t ready for their curious stares and raised eyebrows, wanting to prolong the comfort of secrecy. I wasn’t ready to defend myself, to prove that I knew what I was doing, that I wasn’t reckless. I didn’t know whether the goal of climbing K2 positioned my ambition above my ability. Maybe it did—but that was how I’d started climbing big mountains in the beginning: blind ambition. And a lot of defiance.