

## **BREAKING BARRIERS ANNE PARMENTER DREAMED OF CLIMBING IN THE HIMALAYAS. NOW THAT SHE'S HERE, WILL SHE BE UP TO THE TASK?**

**PANGBOCHE, NEPAL** -- To the Sherpa, it is a friendly mountain, a woman with outstretched arms. Even her name -- Ama Dablam, mother's jewel purse in English -- implies feminine benevolence.

But climber Anne Parmenter's first view of the mountain freezes her with fear. From a foothill above Namche Bazaar, a Sherpa village 20 miles away, the peak looks more like a predator than a matriarch -- a shark's head slashing through a sea of storm clouds. A giant crevasse stretches across the summit cone like a great, yawning mouth.

It is not until Parmenter, 40, and her team of climbers reach the hilltop monastery of Tengboche, where Ama Dablam shares a vista with the greatest peaks on the planet, that the veil of weather lifts from the peak. Only now, as she stares at the peaks that so few women have conquered, does her quest to stand atop the mountain seem possible.

Hurricane-force winds lash snow plumes off the tops of Everest and Lhotse -- the tallest and fourth tallest mountains in the world. But when the clouds suddenly clear from Ama Dablam, the mountain, which is more than a mile shorter than its famous neighbors, looks kindly.

Most of the climbers walk up the steep stone staircase that rises to the monastery, the most famed Buddhist temple in Nepal and the spiritual beacon of the Khumbu.

But Parmenter won't turn away from the mountains. She warms her hands on a cup of tea, folds her arms and studies the peaks, almost reverently. This is her place of worship.

“I've been looking at pictures of this since I was a little girl,” the Old Lyme resident says as she gazes across the valley at Ama

Dablam, Everest and Lhotse. ``And now I'm really here."

Few women had the opportunity to climb the world's highest peaks when Parmenter was a girl. Mountaineering was mostly a boys' club. Nice girls didn't risk death in the wilderness or sleep in tents with strange men.

But Parmenter's dreams are well-timed today. The adventure travel boom has turned mountaineering into big business. As more women dream of the high peaks, experienced female climbers like Parmenter have become coveted as guides. So, coaching other women up the mountains has become her ticket to the world's highest mountains.

The clients on the expedition have paid upward of \$10,000 for the chance to stand on top of Ama Dablam. But Parmenter is on the trip for little more than the price of her plane fare -- and her help leading Heidi Blum, an American living in Switzerland, to the summit.

Blum is no ordinary client.

For weeks, Parmenter and the rest of the team have heard worrisome rumors about Blum -- or rather about what Blum's powerful father might do to keep his daughter from climbing Ama Dablam.

Richard Blum -- the chairman of the American Himalayan Foundation, honorary consul general of Nepal, husband of California Sen. Dianne Feinstein, and \$100 million shareholder and board member of Northwest Airlines -- has many ways to stop the expedition. The climbers list them in whispered rumors as they hike. Has he really tried to cancel the team's climbing permit? Or confiscate his daughter's passport? Or have the Nepalese government deny her a visa?

Heidi Blum's absence only adds to the intrigue.

``Will she be the Sandi Pitman of this trip?" muses climber Rob Martin, referring to the New York socialite who loaded down

Sherpas with a cappuccino machine, laptop computer and satellite phone during her disastrous 1996 climb of Mount Everest. "I can't wait to meet her."

Blum and her husband, Ian Riley, a body builder who once held the title of Mr. Australia, arrived early in Nepal and are waiting somewhere in the valleys below the mountain for the rest of the climbers to arrive. Like Parmenter, Blum has been looking at Ama Dablam since she was a little girl. But, while Parmenter was searching books for pictures of these mountains, Blum was meeting them in person. She first saw Ama Dablam when she was 4 and has visited it many times since. This will be her second attempt to climb it.

This is the kind of mountain that climbers lust for.

Symmetrical ridge lines, dramatic hanging glaciers and a steep summit head wall make the mountain a standout, even among the world's highest peaks. A supermodel of a mountain. The 22,494-foot beauty has become the most climbed of the Himalaya's great peaks. More than 800 climbers have reached her summit, 67 of them women.

Parmenter believes she's ready to make it 68. In the months before she left for Nepal, she worked out with the field hockey team she coaches at Connecticut College, just like she does every fall. But this season she carried 30 pounds of spine-bruising weights in a flimsy backpack during the lung-bursting treadmill runs. On the rare afternoons when she wasn't training her players, Parmenter held climbing classes for mothers and daughters and Girl Scout troops on a climbing wall she helped the college raise the funds to build.

But, in Tengboche, halfway through the weeklong trek to Ama Dablam base camp, she's no longer worrying about whether she's strong enough. She's just hoping that sickness won't keep her from finding out if she is.

She's still coughing up the smog of Katmandu, the city of mystical beauty and oppressive filth, where the expedition began a week

earlier. Now, on the centuries-old trail that is the only land route to the mountains of the Khumbu, thick clouds of dust scratch her throat. The frigid temperatures that come with nightfall are turning the raspy cough into a nasty cold.

The Himalayan hack, Delhi belly, the Khumbu cough -- sicknesses here take poetic names from the geography. Any of them can end a climb before it begins.

Team member Chris Berry is struggling to recover from giardiasis, a vile intestinal illness caused by drinking polluted water. Even though the rest of the team doesn't know it yet, Ian Riley -- Mr. Australia -- is recovering from food poisoning. Between them, the two climbers have lost 50 pounds in what Berry calls the "Himalayan weight loss plan."

Parmenter is determined not to let a cold hold her back. Despite the infection festering in her lungs, she is usually at the front of the pack of hikers struggling up the steep hills leading into the mountains. When yak trains clog the trail, she tiptoes quickly along the edge of the switchbacks to pass them and escape the choking dust their hooves kick up.

"You are not allowed to stop until you finish," Parmenter says. It's a stick-to-it attitude she learned from running cross country in high school. "If you hurt, you will hurt for the entire run."

As a child in England, she learned to keep quiet when she was ill. Her mother was a nurse, and sick children in the Parmenter family didn't get to play outside. So she vowed never to be sick.

"I had half a day sick my whole time in high school," she says, "and that was when I was sent home."

Parmenter knows she is following in some big footsteps on the steep, stony trail that leads to the highest mountain in the world. Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay, the first men to stand atop Mount Everest, stopped at the Tengboche monastery on their way to making history.

Monuments to dead members of the first American team to summit Everest stand behind the monastery. One of those men, Barry Bishop, made the first ascent of Ama Dablam, and Parmenter lingers at the stack of rocks that mark his passing. Then she turns to the mountains that drew Bishop, Hillary, and now her, to this hill.

It is Ama Dablam that dominates the scene. Hillary was confident that he could reach the top of Everest. But Ama Dablam, he declared, was too steep to climb. Parmenter is now faced with the same daunting vista.

“How can Everest be taller than this?” she wonders as she walks away from the monastery to continue her trek into the mountains. “It's impossible.”

Parmenter has waited all her life to see this mountain. Now she can't seem to get away from it. Sometimes it beckons her closer. Other times it tries to drive her away. When she looks up after tying her shoes, or tips her head back to gulp some water, it's glaring down at her.

She can see Ama Dablam framed in the windows of the sunroom in the Pangboche lodge, where the team stops for the night. Beneath the mountain, a slender blonde woman sits laughing and shoeless in the afternoon light that spills through the windows.

“That must be Heidi,” Parmenter says as she lugs her huge duffel bags to her room.

That night, Blum chats with the rest of the team in a corner of the lodge's crowded cellar. But Parmenter keeps to herself, coughing quietly by the wood stove in the center of the room. She'll wait until the hike up to base camp to get to know her new best friend.