

THE SUFFERING BEGINS ON THE ASCENT OF AMA DABLAM, GUIDE ANNE PARMENTER HAS TO PUSH HER CLIENT, AND HERSELF, EVER HIGHER

AMA DABLAM BASE CAMP, Nepal -- In an alpine meadow embraced in the arm-like ridges of Ama Dablam, brightly colored prayer flags and hand-washed underwear flutter in the breeze to mark out subdivisions.

Five teams of climbers are camped here, resting in the mountain's shadow while their bodies learn to survive oxygen starvation. It is their last chance for comfort and privacy before the real suffering begins.

Anne Parmenter, a climber from Old Lyme, slips behind a boulder for her last sponge bath. She borrows a compact mirror from Heidi Blum, the woman she will help guide up the mountain, and takes a rare look at herself. Her bushy red hair freezes before she can finish combing it.

“Cleanliness is next to godliness for women,” Parmenter says cheerfully.

No one will bother to wash higher up the mountain, where every drop of water must be melted from snow. Men and women who have known each other for only days will share cramped tents. Waking up with a full bladder during the frigid nights means filling a “pee bottle” inside the tent.

Parmenter's instruction in the fine art of mountain peeing is, in fact, her first step in helping Blum up the mountain. It sounds funny, but for women, it's serious business. Squatting with a bare bottom is uncomfortable and dangerous on the mountain's icy slopes. Skin quickly freezes in sub-zero windchill. And more than a few climbers have fallen to their deaths with their pants around their ankles.

Parmenter uses a plastic funnel to relieve herself standing up.

“I have no shame. I have my little funnel and I clip it on my harness,” Parmenter says. “I will stand and pee with the boys now.”

But it's not always easy to be just one of the boys.

In 1995, she was abandoned by her three male partners in Argentina on Aconcagua, the highest mountain in the Americas. In 1998, as the only woman in a team on Denali, in Alaska, she was tormented by four Swiss guides who said Parmenter should feel lucky to be the only woman among so many men. “None of the other men stopped them,” Parmenter says. “The jokes progressed to subjects like rape.”

It was on the 1995 climb that Parmenter met Jim Williams, the renowned mountain guide from Jackson, Wyo., who has become her mentor. Williams brought Parmenter onto his team on Aconcagua on the condition that she baby sit a climber who was both stricken with altitude sickness and halfway through a sex change operation.

That climb was the start of an apprenticeship that has brought Parmenter along as an assistant guide on three more of Williams' commercial climbing expeditions -- a return trip to Aconcagua, the ascent of Denali, and now Ama Dablam, her first climb in the Himalayas.

For all her high-altitude athletics, Parmenter is no hulking body builder. Her frame is slender, topped with that crown of red hair. She's quick to smile, but ducks her head and hides her grimace as she trudges up the steep Himalayan foothills.

“She's really strong,” Williams says.

For Williams, having a female guide is a boon to his adventure travel business, which runs expeditions around the world.

“There are very, very few woman guides in America today,” he says.

And with the increase in women interested in climbing big peaks, it's obvious more opportunities will open for female guides.

For, who else would search the dining tent for something that Blum can use as a pee funnel? An empty lemon syrup bottle will do the trick, Parmenter explains. Blum is skeptical, and the shocked Sherpas burst into laughter when the guide holds the makeshift funnel to her fully clothed crotch to show it will work.

The potential for profit has spurred the outdoor clothing industry to lose its embarrassment about the needs of women, too. One manufacturer now makes insulated climbing suits with "whizz zips" for women. It's a big improvement over the heavy wool skirts female climbers were expected to wear a century ago.

While Parmenter and Blum are putting the finishing touches on the makeshift pee funnel, another climber sits in a nearby tent knitting caps embroidered with the mountain's name. Nancy Knoble understands only too well the differences between men and women in the wilderness. And that risking death in the mountains is a celebration of life.

The former Connecticut resident discovered mountaineering at 44. She found a lump in her breast less than a year later. But in 1995, two years after her chemotherapy began, Knoble and two other breast cancer survivors reached the top of Aconcagua. Today, she's part of a team of 17 women who have beaten cancer and are attempting climbs all over the world to raise awareness of the disease.

"I see a metaphor in overcoming or facing cancer and climbing a mountain," Knoble says. "You climb one step at a time and you do it as part of a team. It is the idea of tackling something bigger than yourself."

Parmenter and Knoble met on the slopes of Aconcagua. Crossing paths again on a climb halfway around the world strikes neither as odd.

The climbers leave base camp in twos and threes when the time

comes to move up the mountain. Blum hugs her husband, Ian Riley, goodbye. He stands watching his wife trudge up the mountain's flank with tears in her eyes, Parmenter following close behind. "She will get to the top," he says, "or I will be back here one day doing it with her. Heidi is a determined little bugger."

But it takes more than determination to climb Ama Dablam; luck and good planning are crucial.

In two days, the climbers arrive at the southwest ridge of Ama Dablam, a jagged knife-edge of rock, snow and ice. From base camp it looked sharp enough to draw blood.

What it does draw is climbers. More mountaineers reach the summit of Ama Dablam than any other great Himalayan peak. Almost all of them climb this ridge line to get there.

During the few weeks of good weather each year, the ridge line clogs like a rush-hour highway. But the mountain's two high camps are only big enough for a handful of climbers, and overcrowded ropes can turn strong teams back.

So, when they arrive in Camp One, Parmenter and Williams face a dilemma.

The clear blue skies and empty ropes above them are a window of opportunity that might not open again. In three days they could reach the summit. But, if they climb too high too fast, the climbers' lungs and skulls will fill with bloody fluid. And they will die.

The morning after their arrival in Camp One, Blum pries Frankenstein-size boots onto her small feet. Parmenter helps her strap metal spikes -- crampons -- onto the boots. Half an hour later, they stand like gladiator astronauts on a narrow catwalk of ice 4 miles up into the air.

They kick the sharpened steel spikes into the mountain, hack the snow with ice axes and duck their helmets into the hunks of ice and granite that the peak throws back at them. Each step and every swing is punctuated with desperate, Darth Vader breaths. Beneath

them, valleys and peaks spread out like a photo from space.

Parmenter is thankful when rain clouds roll in a thousand feet below her to block the dizzying view.

She's got distractions enough. The sun is burning her face red even as the icy wind threatens to blacken it with frostbite. The climbing route is a squirrel chase at a snail's pace. Ramps of snow, punctured by granite cliffs, topped with slabs of ice.

Her hands are full just hanging onto the mountain. But she must keep one free in case the clients need handholding.

“Put your ice ax away. You don't need it on the rock,” she screams back to one of the climbers, then turns to check that Blum is properly clipped into the rope.

Parmenter, a veteran of seven marathons, used to think the long runs were a good warmup for the mountains. But here, she just can't seem to find her groove.

Camp Two is perched atop the “yellow tower,” a 100-foot pinnacle of granite that is the most difficult climbing on the route. It would be hard enough at sea level. But in the empty air at 20,000 feet, with a 40-pound pack on her back, it's a desperate vertical crawl to ascend a piece of glorified clothesline.

And Parmenter must, in effect, climb it twice. When she reaches the cliff top, she takes off her own pack, then begins pulling up rope to haul Blum's pack up the cliff. She pulls in slack on yet another rope as Blum ascends, to protect her from falling.

Night falls and the dazed clients huddle in sleeping bags inside a tent lashed to a narrow spire -- a parking space that hangs nearly a mile above base camp. Outside in the icy darkness, Parmenter wrestles with a broken stove to cook a meager dinner.

But altitude and exhaustion are stealing Parmenter's appetite. By the time she and Williams have finished cooking, she doesn't have the energy to raise more than a few spoonfuls to her own mouth.

The next morning, Parmenter leads Blum on to the Gray tower, a crumbling wall of ice and rock and twisted rope. Chunks of falling snow explode on the ducking climbers' helmets. ``Death-blocks'' of loose granite and ice teeter on the ledges above. From the top of the tower, a steep rib of hardened snow rises like a labyrinth of gangplanks to the top of the ridge line and the first glacier hanging below the mountaintop. The wind-lashed tents of Camp Three, the highest camp on the mountain, are nailed to the top of this scaffold of snow.

It takes Parmenter six hours to reach the glacier. She pulls herself up the side of a crack that splits the 50-foot wall of ice like an alley. On top, freezing winds blast her back toward the gaping chasm. She covers her face with her hands and staggers along the edge of the crevasse to the tents of Camp Three.

Blum slumps into the tent. Parmenter helps the exhausted client out of her gear, then wraps her in a sleeping bag. During the night, as the temperature dives far below zero and hurricane-force winds blast the tent, Blum is bursting with diarrhea. Parmenter hands her a Ziploc bag. She cannot leave the tent.