

DESCEND OR DIE THE CLIMB HAS TAKEN ITS TOLL ON ANNE PARMENTER. NOW SHE MUST GET TO THE BOTTOM QUICKLY

In a tiny tent staked to a small platform of snow 4 miles up into the atmosphere, three exhausted climbers lie silently awake. The thin air, the 15-below-zero temperatures and the howling winds all conspire to cheat them of sleep.

But it's not the hurricane gusts of icy air outside the tent that Anne Parmenter fears. It's the gurgle in her own breath. The fluid she can feel filling her lungs. Here, some 21,000 feet above sea level, where every drop of water is frozen, Parmenter fears she is drowning.

“My God,” she says to herself. “I’ve got high altitude pulmonary edema. Climbers die from this.”

Climbers become so starved for oxygen up here that their bodies absorb fluid from their blood, a desperate attempt to increase the density of oxygen-carrying red blood cells. If that fluid ends up in their lungs, they will drown in a bloody froth.

There is only one cure for the deadly condition. Going down.

But until the sun warms the air and calms the wind, Parmenter is going nowhere.

Not 12 hours earlier, she had stood on the summit of Ama Dablam, a 22,494-foot mountain in the shadow of Mount Everest. Now, more than ever before in her life in the mountains, she knows that the top of a mountain is only halfway through the climb. It won't count if she doesn't live to tell about it.

Parmenter sits wide-eyed in the darkness listening to the wind and the bubble and wheeze of her breath.

When the first rays of the sun warm the tent in the morning, she is

already packing her gear. She allows herself the time to drink a cup of tea for breakfast. But when she blows her nose, she leaves a red flag of blood on the snow.

She doesn't tell her tent-mates of her fear, just grabs her pack and heads for the giant crevasse that will lead her back to the rich, life-giving air at the bottom of the mountain.

“I'm starting down,” she says.

Heidi Blum, the climber Parmenter had come to Nepal to lead, heads down with her. A day earlier, numb toes and a fear of frostbite had convinced Blum to give up reaching the summit of the mountain she had come so far to climb. Now she can't wait to get down.

The team had allowed 10 days to climb from base camp to the summit. But they shaved several days from their schedule to take advantage of good weather, empty ropes and firm snow. Parmenter's bloody cough is the price for climbing too high too fast.

In two days, she'll be back in base camp. With luck, her cough will clear up there.

But the motherly mountain that had once embraced her with open arms is fickle. Since Parmenter stepped on the summit, the peak has seemed to want her dead.

The bridge of hardened snow spanning a crevasse collapses as she crosses it. The mountain spits out half a dozen of the ice screws and snow stakes that anchor ropes to the climbing route.

The sidewalk of snow that led her to the upper mountain was as hard as concrete on her way up. Now it's crumbling beneath her feet. Massive chunks of the narrow ridge line break away. The icy wreckage falls thousands of feet into the void on either side of the snowy skyway.

The clouds and crowds that waited in the valley while her team

was headed to the summit are now climbing up the mountain's flanks.

Despite the mountain's anger, climbers are filling the route. On their way down, Parmenter and her climbing partners pass 12 other climbers on their way up. Among them are three members of her own expedition who have yet to reach the summit. They're headed to Camp Three. But Parmenter has only a few seconds to spare for them. She warns them of the perils above and wishes them luck. Then she coughs and continues down the ropes.

A half-mile from Camp One, the traffic comes to a standstill. Nancy Knoble and her team are anchoring their own ropes to the mountain. But the rope Parmenter climbed four days earlier is now buried in rock-hard snow. So she waits for a chance to use the other team's rope.

“Don't push me,” Knoble shouts as Parmenter makes her way by.

Parmenter tries to keep her fear to herself but, her lungs won't keep her secret when she stops at Camp One for the night.

“Who's coughing like that?” shouts Jim Williams, the expedition's leader.

His stethoscope shows that any fluid Parmenter felt in her lungs is clearing up. But she's got a bad case of bronchitis. A cold she caught days earlier has settled deep in her lungs. It's impossible to shake any illness at altitudes this high. Even cuts don't heal in thin air.

Parmenter still needs to get off the mountain fast.

The snowstorm the mountain throws at the climbers the next morning isn't about to slow her down.

Blum is also anxious to get down. The fear is exhausting, and she is tired of guarding against missteps that could send her plummeting down the mountainside. It seems to get harder rather than easier as she descends.

On the snow-slickened cliffs at the base of the southwest ridge line, the climbers lose their footing. Parmenter careens like a sled 30 feet down the slope onto the top of a small bluff. Blum screams as she tumbles into a heap of boulders.

The badly shaken climbers can't move safely on the slickened boulder field. Williams and two Sherpas string ropes down the cliffs to the fallen climbers and anchor other ropes to lead them down the mountain.

The Sherpas offer to carry the loads of the descending climbers. But, despite her stricken lungs, the leg she's injured in her fall and the dangerously slick path, Parmenter refuses to let them carry any of her gear.

“I got it up there,” she says. “I'll get it back down.”

Blum has no problem giving up her load to move faster. “I've never been so happy to get off a mountain,” she tearfully tells friends when she arrives in base camp.

But she hasn't abandoned her guide. Notes drawn on the snow-capped boulders along the trail help coax Parmenter down the mountain. Parmenter smiles as she sees the word “Bath,” drawn into the fresh snow with an arrow pointing down.

A receiving line of friends greets the climbers on the last hill above base camp. Parmenter reluctantly lets one of them carry her huge pack the last few hundred yards. Then she tries to take the loads from the Sherpas.

The next day, as seven more climbers hack their way to the top of Ama Dablam, Parmenter races to get out from underneath it. She won't wait for the rest of her team to return. She breaks down her tent and packs her climbing gear into duffel bags. By noon she has started the long journey home.

Blum and her husband also depart. They want to shop for handmade rugs and pashmina shawls in Katmandu before flying on to Sydney, Australia, the next stop on their round-the-world trip.

Two days later, Ama Dablam slams the door shut behind them. The crevasse that led to Camp Three rips open. A tidal wave of ice and snow tears loose from the glacier and tumbles a mile down the mountainside.

Nancy Knoble and her team, preparing for a summit bid in Camp Two, are forced from the mountain by the avalanche. As they retreat, the mountain drops another roaring slide just to be certain they've got the message. Ama Dablam will allow no one else to reach her summit this year.

But, as the climbers who remain on the mountain run for their lives, Parmenter glances over her shoulder nearly 20 miles away. From the hill where she had her first forbidding glimpse of the mountain, Ama Dablam now looks like an old friend. Beyond, stand Mount Everest, and Lhotse, and a hundred other mountains she doesn't know the names of.

“I'm coming back.”