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# The Tragic Mountain

Nine women died climbing Peak Lenin;  
Arlene Blum turned back and survived.

by Arlene Blum

Last summer's international expedition to the Russian Pamirs began as a lavish "sports camp" in the Alai Valley beneath Peak Lenin and ended with 13 deaths at the snow-shrouded summit. Among the dead were nine women—eight Russians and one Swiss.

The climbing community reacted to this latest in a series of disasters involving women climbers with harsh criticism of women in mountaineering. The British magazine *Mountain* concluded that the accident reflected badly on the Russian climbing philosophy but "even more unfavorably on the concept of women's equality."

Arlene Blum, an American biochemist who has climbed Mt. Pisco in Peru (19,000'), Mt. Kenya in Africa (17,000') and Mt. McKinley in Alaska (21,300') and gone to 23,700' on Noshaq in Afghanistan, kept a remarkable personal journal of the Russian climb.

"It's hard to refute the notion that women climbers tend to press on imprudently to prove their abilities if you look at the Lenin climb alone," Blum says, "but that climb was a strange experience—as a mountaineering trip and as a women's expedition. When I went back to my diary of the first all-woman ascent of Mt. McKinley, I was struck by how very peculiar the Pamir climb was in contrast."

On the next six pages, we present Arlene Blum's journal of five days from each expedition: the Russian climb with its well-traveled routes, luxurious accommodations and tragic end; and the first all-woman ascent of Mt. McKinley—dead-serious from the start.

## The Journey to Russia

The Aeroflot jet is oppressively crowded, but I feel infinitely alone. I watch the sun set golden over the Atlantic with a feeling of fatality. I am in a space and time machine and do not know where I will come out.

In my purse is a telegram: "Invite you International Alpine Camp Pamir 1974—Sportkomitet USSR." I have only known for a few weeks that I was going to Russia to climb Peak Lenin, a mountain over 23,000' high.

Before I left New York, I called home for messages. There was a letter from Fay, a New Zealand friend. Her all-woman expedition to the Indian Himalayas was hit by an avalanche. Four climbers were killed. Again. I feel completely resigned, empty, an automaton going to an unknown fate.

Why am I flying to Moscow alone? Climbers usually go on expeditions together. I won't meet my climbing companions, Heidi Ludi, Eva Isenschmidt, and Margaret Munkle, until I get to Russia. They are Swiss women from *Rendez-Vous Haute Montagne*, an international women's climbing club I belong to. I have Heidi's warm letters urging me to join them in the Pamirs, but still, I know nothing of their personalities, ambitions or even their climbing ability.

The Russians have invited 180 climbers from ten Western countries to climb in the Pamirs, a range of high, rugged moun-

tains near the Chinese border. Since it's the first time American climbers have been allowed to visit the Pamirs, there has been a great deal of excitement about it in the States. Ten experienced women climbers applied to be members of the American team. We were all turned down, which is why I'm going with the Swiss, but two women without previous expedition experience were invited instead. The men climbers were selected from those who had applied and were quite experienced. I discussed this with a woman friend who had also applied.

"I heard a rumor that when the American leader chose his team, he was very concerned about the American image," she said sweetly. "He wanted to make certain that any women along would be ladies."

## A Typical Day at Lenin Base Camp

The breakfast gong sounds. I yawn and stretch luxuriously on my thick foam mattress. Then I put on my tennis shoes and stroll out between row upon row of identical tents.

The Russians are staging this "sports camp" to raise hard currency for a Himalayan expedition next year. They're charging us \$750 each, and trying hard to give us our money's worth. There are hot showers, volleyball and soccer fields and movies at night. The accommodations are surprisingly—even amusingly—lavish, and, in general, everything lives up to the description in the glossy full-color brochure with the invitation, "Well-known Soviet climber Vitaly Abalakov wishes you to conquer the Pamirs."

The Russians have put flagpoles with our national flags in front of the tents, so the camp has the air of a people's summit meeting. I smile as I pass the British tents. Abalakov and the other Russian "Masters of Sport" have been a bit scandalized by the casualness of the British climbers, especially their way of naming a new leader every day. Two nights ago in the middle of the night the British took down their own flag and raised a pair of lace panties. But when they straggled out at dawn, grinning broadly and ready to salute, another British flag was waving proudly.

In the mess tent, the tables are laden with smoked salmon, hot sweet Russian tea and beluga caviar. I smear a thick slice of dark Russian bread with sweet butter and then pile it high with caviar. Extravagant, but it seems to be plentiful here. (Later, when I priced caviar in Moscow, I found I'd been eating \$30 worth every morning.)

I look for a place to sit and eat. In fact, finding a chair in the crowded mess tent is one of the few serious practical problems of the day. The Austrians and the Germans, who are assigned to the first sitting, like to linger on, so there's never quite enough room for the rest of us. The tent is jammed with climbers chatting in a complex mixture of languages. There are the three elderly Italians—one in his 70s. I don't see the French; they must be making an even better breakfast from the cases of pâté, chestnut paste and pop-top cans of wine they brought along. Heidi and Eva are at a German-speaking table. I feel too sleepy for a German les-



*The luxuries of base camp seemed unreal after the ordeal on the mountain. We sunbathed, swam in the glacial*

*lakes and made ironic jokes about our "holiday camp in the Pamirs." A Dutch friend took this shot of me.*

son. The Americans are here, but I'm shy of sitting with them since I've heard their leader is afraid I'll spoil the American image.

I decide to sit with a group of English-speaking Russians. Elvira Schataeva, the leader of a group of nine Russian women, is talking animatedly about the problems of organizing an all-woman expedition. "Most Russian men just didn't think an all-woman party could climb a 7,000-meter peak," she says. Lenin has not yet been climbed by a group of women and either Elvira's party or ours may be the first.

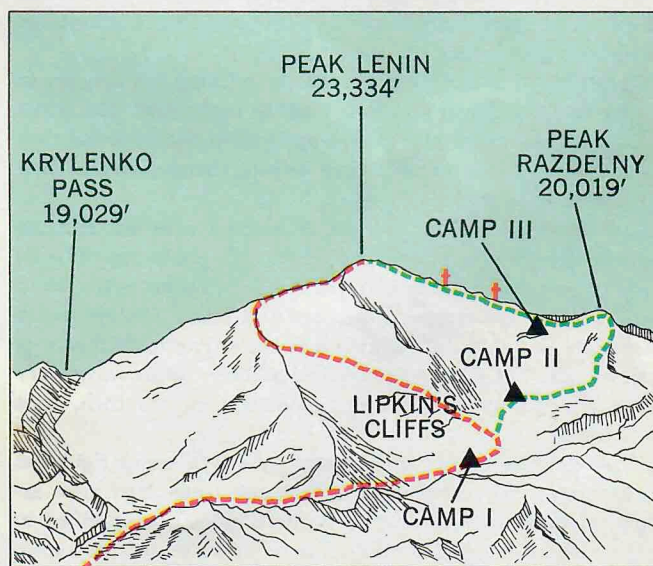
"What route do you plan to take?" I ask.

"We plan to traverse the entire summit of Lenin climbing the East Ridge and descending the Razdelny route."

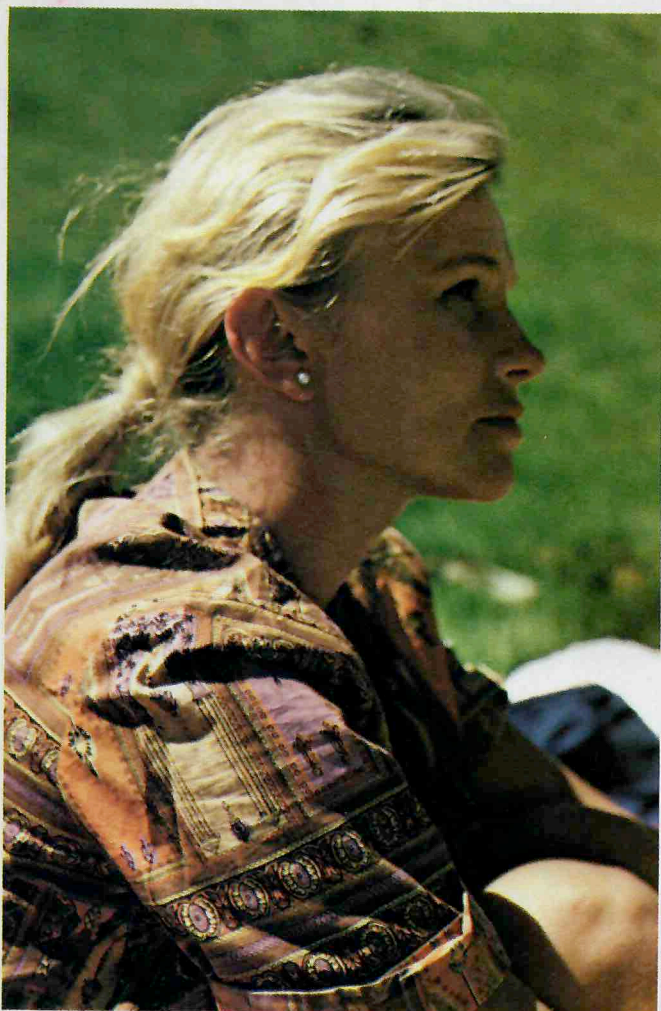
"We were planning to go up by the Razdelny route, but why don't we go together?"

"This is impossible." She doesn't say why, but I sense that the Russians want their women to make the first all-woman ascent without us.

She smiles. "We cannot climb together, but we can celebrate together. We'll have a great party after the climb." She is so confident of success. As we wander out of the mess tent toward the Russian encampment, she says, "Our group is very strong. We have strong collective spirit and will stay together no matter what happens." I wonder a bit as I look at the inadequate



*We tried the Razdelny route (green). The Russian women took the Lipkin (red) and tried to descend by the Razdelny, but were caught by the storm at the cross (I). At the cross (r.), my Swiss partners made an emergency camp and Eva died in the storm.*



*Elvira Schataeva, leader of the Russian women: "Our group is very strong. We have strong collective spirit and will stay together no matter what happens."*

Russian equipment—the heavy cotton tents with button closures, the flimsy wooden tent poles, the clumsy, old-fashioned nailed boots. The light from the icy summit of Peak Lenin shines on Elvira's golden hair.

Today we're to begin carrying loads to Camp I. I'm eager to get started, but Heidi and Eva want to bathe first. The Swiss have brought an inflatable orange-and-yellow bathtub, and they spend a surprising amount of time keeping themselves and their clothes clean.

Our plans for the climb must be cleared with our Russian adviser. We stand in a large tent in front of a photomap of Lenin with the routes marked and painfully translate every word from English to German to Russian and back. The discussion seems interminable. He is dubious of the strength of a party of four women, but finally he acquiesces. Then forms with every detail of our daily plans and our expected time of return, must be filled out.

To Western climbers the Russian approach seems rigid and bureaucratic. We're not used to these overorganized mass ascents. Everything we want to do here has to be specified in detail and approved. The routes are so well-traveled they seem like highways. There are shortwave radios everywhere, spouting forth messages from Abalakov: "The weather is good. The weather will turn bad. Go up. Go down." Half the time the radios don't work, and weather reports aren't reliable, which confuses things further.

Now that our plans have been cleared, our food and gear have to be organized and packed.

An antlike army of climbers has been coming and going between camps on Lenin for several days now, patiently moving supplies up the mountain. At four in the afternoon, our little group finally manages to join their ranks. Big thunderclouds are forming for our daily storms. Our packs are light, so we'll have to make several trips over this terrain. Heidi and Eva and Margaret keep stopping to look at the flowers and chat with climbers coming down the mountain. Things are going so slowly, it seems like we're never going to climb anything. "Stop being an impatient American," I tell myself. I try to join in the conversation, but it's all in German. There's little point in waiting. I carry my load alone.

### A Night at Base Camp

**B**ack at base camp that evening, the climbers are sitting around drinking vodka and telling stories. The Russian women come down dancing and singing spirited folk songs. "We've made our second camp in a snow cave," they tell me.

Far into the night I discuss the merits of women's expeditions with some of the men. Half the groups here have brought no women at all. The British, who have no women among them, say flatly, "Most women climbers aren't first-rate. They're not really serious. They're so eager to succeed and prove their ability that they don't exercise good judgment."

"But attitudes like that are exactly what make it so difficult for women to *gain* experience and judgment."

"Besides, women can never get along with each other."

"That's ridiculous. I climbed McKinley with five other women. We got along well and made the climb without serious problems. There have even been physiological studies that show that women adapt to altitude more readily than men." They shake their heads and smile patronizingly.

Bruce Carson and Fred Stanley come bursting in. "We were caught in an avalanche below Krylenko Pass. We think seven people have been buried."

"Do not worry," the Russians say, "Abalakov, a Grand Master of Sport, is confident that no one has been killed."

But Abalakov is not on the mountain. So we do worry, until some Japanese climbers come down with news that no one has died. Weary, I go back to my tent, turn off the electric light and crawl into my sleeping bag.

### The Summit Day on Peak Lenin

**A** glorious morning. Nine climbers from Switzerland, Germany, Japan and the U.S. are preparing to leave Camp III at 20,000' for the summit. Margaret, who is in her 50s, isn't feeling well and has stayed behind, so Heidi and Eva and I are going on alone. But the Russian advisers tell us, "A storm is coming in. You shouldn't try for the top today."

I wonder if they're saying that because the Russian women have not reached the summit yet either. They must be climbing from the other side along the East Ridge today.

I'm worried about Eva. She has been feeling ill for several days. I've been trying to persuade her to eat and drink more, but neither of the Swiss seems to believe me when I tell them dehydration causes altitude sickness. Yesterday they just lay in the tent all day. When I tried to get them to drink, they said, "Leave us alone."

They want to carry just enough gear for an emergency camp. I feel an emergency camp on the exposed summit ridge will be too



*When we finally reach Camp II, I drop my heavy load and collapse, exhausted. A minute later I look up to see Heidi Ludi (above) stripped to the waist, serenely bathing in melted snow.*

*Summit day (below) dawns crisp and beautiful, but our Russian adviser says we shouldn't try for the top today. I wonder if that's because the Russian women haven't reached the summit yet?*



dangerous. "Let's go light and try to get up and down quickly," I suggest. "If we run out of time we'll have to turn back without reaching the top."

We can't reach a consensus, so I decide to try for the top by myself, going light, with the intent of turning back at two in the afternoon. It seems quite safe: The weather is good, the route straightforward, and a trail from the footsteps of other climbers leads to the summit. Two other people are climbing alone: I can always join them.

I move steadily upward, stopping from time to time to drink some lemonade or eat a candy bar. The going is easy, with spectacular views of the high mountain ranges of Central Asia.

But clouds are forming on the neighboring peaks, and the wind is rising. I have to fight my way against the gusts to the top of a steep section on the ridge. As I move along the level, it begins to snow heavily. I continue upward.

The storm is becoming more violent. Damn it. I have to go down. The summit can't be far above, but to go on alone would be stupid.

The storm has obliterated the tracks behind me, and the whiteout obscures everything. I go down a few hundred feet. The terrain doesn't look right. I retrace my steps hurriedly before they are blown away. I try again to find the right way down. And again. "You may really have blown it this time kid. You're really alone up here at 23,000'."

It clears up a bit. I see the way down. I start down, moving as fast as I can. Ahead of me I can see another figure fighting the storm, coming toward me. It's a Swiss climber. "Geben Sie mir Wasser," he gasps. "Oh, good," I think, as I give him my water, "someone to go down with." He *(continued on page 51)*



# Arctic Summit

Commercial guides refused to take them, male climbers said they'd never make it, but the first all-woman party to attempt Mt. McKinley pushed to the top.

## The Journey to Mt. McKinley, June 1970

**O**ur bush pilot is cramming an incredible number of packs, boxes, snowshoes, ski poles and other paraphernalia into his skiplane. He wants to fly us into our base camp on the Kahiltna Glacier immediately. The weather on Mt. McKinley has just cleared after a ten-day storm and could deteriorate again at any time.

We fly over miles of swamp interlaced with meandering streams. Soon we are among the magnificent peaks of the Alaska range. As I lean out the plane window to take photos, I shiver in the first chill blasts of icy mountain air.

We are going to attempt the first all-woman ascent of Mt. McKinley, the highest mountain in North America and the most arctic of the world's 20,000' mountains. Our plans have been carefully made. We have packed more than enough for the week to a month it may take us to make the ascent and return. We have selected a strong, competent party.

Our leader is Dr. Grace Hoeman, a climber of great note and a physician in Anchorage. Faye Kerr, an Australian, has climbed extensively in New Zealand, Switzerland and Canada. Margaret Clark has come from Christchurch, New Zealand. She has done ice and rock climbs in New Zealand, Europe and Morocco.

The rest of us are from the United States. Dana Isherwood, just returned from her honeymoon trekking in Nepal, is a chemist in Boulder, Colorado. Margaret Young is a physicist and an airplane mechanic from Palo Alto, California, as well as an experienced Alaskan climber. Margaret and I flew up here in her Cessna 180.

Men climbers have predicted that women by themselves will never make it. They say we should have a man or two along in case the going gets rough. On the other hand, we are confident that given reasonably good weather, we will reach the summit.

## A Typical Day at Base Camp

**I**t is hot and beautiful on the glacier. We spend hours melting water and discussing our plans. It will take three carries to move our 800 lbs. of food and equipment to Camp I.

Our contortions are hilarious as we put on our clumsy 65-lb. packs. As I finally get my pack on, all of the boxes fall off into the snow. I collapse on the snow in laughter. Not a promising beginning!

We set off slowly along the glacier. For safety, we are tied together, three to a rope. If one of us were to fall into a hidden crevasse, her two rope mates could help her out.

# Mountain

(continued from page 32)

drinks and then abruptly leaves, heading upward.

Another apparition in the storm—this time running down behind me. It's Jed Williamson, an American. "Did you get to the top?" I ask him. "No." We descend together in silence.

Farther down we find Heidi, Eva and Anya, a German climber, huddled in the snow with the storm raging about them. "We are bivouacking here," Eva says. "Stay with us. We can surely reach the summit tomorrow."

In my faltering German, I say, "I am through with Peak Lenin. I am going down. Come with me. It is too dangerous to stay here without tents or stoves."

"No. We will be safe here. Stay." I try to convince them to leave, but my struggle alone in the storm has left me too tired to argue anything with anybody, especially in German.

I stumble down behind Jed. The wind blows me off my feet. I sit there. Finally I get up. Are we really going the right way?

The snow is up to my thighs and the wind is driving crystals of ice into my face. I am so tired. We seem to have been fighting our way down for an eternity.

We stumble into a break in the ridge. It's the break that leads to high camp. As we step down into the sheltered camp, there's sudden silence and relief from the storm.

I collapse outside the tent too tired to take off my crampons. A Dutch climber, Hans Bruyntjes, helps me. I crawl into my tent but can't sleep. Of the nine climbers who left our camp this morning, only Jed and I have returned. The other seven are somewhere above us on the summit ridge, exposed to the full fury of the storm without tents, stoves or sleeping bags. I pray that they are all right.

## Again, Camp I on Peak Lenin

After the severity of the last few days, the rock and ice down here seem warm and soft. A stream of climbers files by on their way back to the luxuries of base camp. Among them are Molly Higgins and Marty Hoey, the two women on the American team. In spite of their lack of expedition experience, they both reached the summit with their parties before the storm.

Somehow, I do not want to go down to base camp, to leave the mountain for the last time. Things up here are still unresolved for me. Only six climbers came down to camp the morning after our summit attempt. Eva died of exposure on the summit ridge. So senseless. If only I had tried harder to persuade her to come down with me. If only things had been different.

Why, oh, why could the weather not have been like this a couple of days ago?



On August 1, at 17,000 feet, Eva jubilantly broke out firecrackers and a bottle of vodka she'd carried all the way up in her pack to celebrate the Swiss national holiday.



The Russian women have confidence in their old-fashioned rubber boots and heavy cotton tents, but I wonder.

Today when no one is climbing, when it doesn't matter, it is perfectly still and beautiful. If only things had been different.

I keep seeing Eva bending over the flowers. She was such a slight person. She really didn't belong on this mountain. It didn't have to happen. But then I think, "Who are you to say whether she belonged here?"

I sit here piling rocks into unstable configurations, unable to summon energy to do anything more complicated than see if I can add one more rock to the tower without causing it to collapse.

Three Americans—Allen Steck, Christopher Wren and Jock Glidden—come down from a different side of the mountain. They say they reached the top of Lenin yesterday. As the storm raged they had been camped high on the summit ridge. "Our tent pole broke in the storm. We kept our clothes and boots on continuously for several days in case the tent was destroyed.

"When the storm finally ended, we started for the summit. Someone was lying in the snow. It was a body—Elvira Schataeva. We went farther and found another body, then the remnants of a tent and two more bodies."

The Americans think that some of the women were too weak to go farther and the others stayed with them instead of going for help. Their tents must have been blown apart as they huddled there for warmth. We hear that the women radioed the base camp that one woman had died and two others were sick. Then, on the third day of the storm, Elvira and another Russian must have decided to go down—too late.

People are sitting around speculating about why the Russians didn't radio the other climbers on the mountains to form a rescue party. There has been no official announcement of all, but we have heard that Elvira radioed, "Goodbye, we are going to die."

I can't think of anything but the irony of today's warm sunny weather. If only it had come a few days earlier. Everything would have been completely different. Right now we might all be down in base camp celebrating.

My rock tower crumbles. I think of this summer in the Pamirs. About 200 climbers attempted to reach the top of Peak Lenin; 100 succeeded, 13 died.

The sun shines. The top of Lenin seems so close above me I can touch it. ☺

In the lush green valley of Lenin, we left a last memorial to Eva.



# McKinley

(Continued from page 33)

breaker, crampons, outer mittens and my pack.

We leave in the arctic dawn, traversing the steep slopes below Denali Pass. A bitter wind freezes the vapor in my breath to my parka hood, forming a grotesque icicle ruff.

I lift my foot, put it down, breathe deeply, once, twice, three times.

The sky is navy blue; the snow, dazzling white. Each grain of snow is distinct, perfect. Objects are more sharply defined up here than at lower elevations.

I look fondly at my companions with whom I have shared the grinding hard work and beauty of the past weeks. They too are moving slowly, steadily, each lost in her own visions.

Everyone is moving up slowly and steadily except Grace who hurries a dozen steps or so and then stops and pants. We are concerned about her as she has a history of altitude problems, and she does not seem to recover when we rest.

At last, the summit is visible, 800' above. Grace is stumbling badly now, so we suggest she turn back with one of us and attempt the climb another day.

But Grace insists on continuing. She staggers resolutely up. Her two previous attempts to climb McKinley were unsuccessful, and she is determined to reach the summit this time at any cost.

In about 90 minutes we reach the summit ridge. Grace is stumbling but insists she still wants to continue. Margaret Clark and Faye rope Grace closely between them for the last 100' to the summit.

Grace falls in a heap in a hollow about 10' below the summit. She seems unaware of her surroundings. Dana and Faye help her struggle to the top. The peaks of the Alaska range stretch before us like endless waves of a storm-tossed sea, giants little acquainted with man.

We hurriedly take summit photos and start down, taking turns supporting Grace. She stumbles frequently, and at 19,600', on the crest of the ridge of Archdeacon's Tower, falls, almost delirious, moaning, "I'm finished. Let me die."

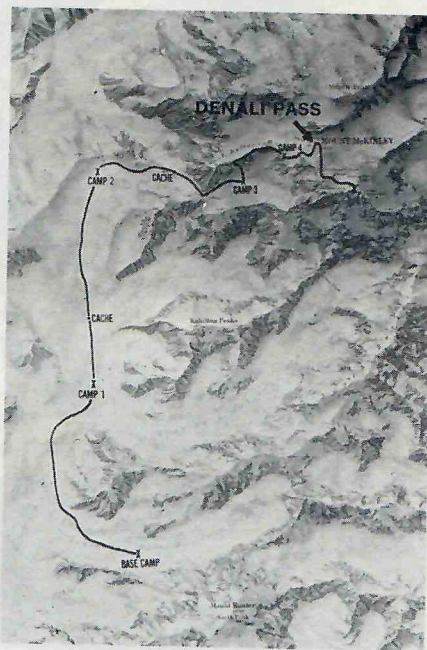
We consult about what to do. We can bivouac here and send for help. But temperatures here are often well below zero, and violent storms erupt without warning. A couple of years ago, seven strong men died up here in a storm. We have only one emergency sleeping bag.

Another possibility is to give Grace Dexedrine and try to make her walk farther. She appears to have used her energy reserves already, though, so this might be dangerous.

Grace says that we should leave her. We are all cold and exhausted, but of course

we cannot leave her. So we improvise a stretcher from a pack frame and a climbing rope. Margaret goes down to camp at 17,300' for help, while the rest of us struggle to tie the rope with our numbed fingers.

Then we try to lower the stretcher sideways down the slope. Too much friction. We try again with Grace head first and two of us on either side of the stretcher.



*Our ascent of McKinley took 3 carries to Camp I, then 2 to a cache. We moved to Camp II, picked up our cache, made a carry to the next cache, moved to Camp III and came back for the cache. After a carry to Camp IV, we moved there for the summit climb. We made it, but had to make an emergency camp at Denali Pass.*

Grace moans that one of the ropes is choking her. We try to fix it, but it is very difficult to tie her securely without hurting her.

We stop frequently to retie things. Most of the time Grace is so quiet that I have to look carefully to see that she is breathing.

It is very hard work, but we do manage to make some downhill progress. At long last Denali Pass comes into view. It is 11 p.m. and getting very cold. The slopes above the pass are steep and glazed with ice. We could not safely lower the stretcher down such slopes. We must bivouac where we are at 18,600'. The weather is good, and there is no wind. It is 18° below.

Someone must stay up here with Grace. Faye Kerr and I reluctantly volunteer, as the others are even colder. We crouch close together, trying to keep warm as the others go down.

I have eaten and drunk very little all day, and I am very cold as I huddle here next to some gray rocks high above the world.

Faye, who does yoga and feels the cold much less than most people, says, "Look at that flaming sunset. Do you think there'll be a weather change?" I hope not, at least until we have gotten Grace down safely.

I stop noticing the grandeur of the scene as I feel my feet beginning to freeze. As usual, my socks have gotten wet inside my vapor barrier boots and now they're beginning to freeze solid.

I concentrate on wiggling my toes, "Wiggle, 2, 3, wiggle, 2, 3. The bear went over the mountain to see what he could see. Wiggle, 2, 3. Don't doze. Wiggle, 2, 3."

The sun drops below the horizon, leaving magenta and orange stripes across the sky. "How beautiful! Wiggle, 2, 3. Stay awake. The sun will rise in half an hour."

## Back to Camp II on McKinley

It is cloudy but calm as we start back down to Camp II below Kahilitna Pass. As we thread our way through the crevasses above Windy Corner, it begins to snow and blow. As we round Windy Corner, the wind drives the snow painfully into our faces.

We continue to our cache site at 12,000' where we take off our snowshoes and put on crampons for the steeper slopes below. We sink into the new snow at every step, first to our ankles, then to our knees. When it is my turn to break the trail, I wallow in snow nearly to my armpits, fighting to make any forward progress at all. We should stop and change back to snowshoes, but our hands are just too cold.

We move carefully from wand to wand, often unable to see from one to the next. It's hard to decide whether the slope right in front of me goes up or down.

As we turn to go down the ridge, the snow is blowing so hard that my face aches and I can barely see. Suddenly, I step through a snow bridge covering a hidden crevasse. Only one leg goes through, but as I pull it out, I see a deep fissure with icy blue walls.

When we reach Camp II, we pitch our tent and then our major concern is to try to keep snow out of it. Each time we go outside, we spend about half an hour with a whisk broom dusting off our clothes and putting piles of snow back outside.

I spend most of my time eating, talking and playing dominoes. Grace seems completely recovered. We knew she was better back up at Camp III when she began eating salami with great relish.

In the evening, I make cheesecake and popcorn. Margaret Clark tells us about the joys of climbing in warm, sunny Morocco as the wind rattles our tent and the snow falls. It is snowing *inside* the tent, too. The moisture from our breath freezes on the tent walls and falls back down on us. But I am content. I trust these strong women and know we will be friends a long time.

—Arlene Blum