



# ***DON'T LEAVE ME HERE TO DIE***

FORM: CREATIVE ARTICLE  
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## DON'T LEAVE ME HERE TO DIE

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Four hours from the summit of Everest, Cathy O'Dowd came across a stricken climber. She faced a brutal choice: to risk her own life in a doomed rescue - or to push on to the top. Here she explains why she left the barely breathing body

I stared at the body, blinking in disbelief. We were in the shadow of the First Step, so the light was dull. The body lay about 10 metres from where I stood and was angled away from me. It jerked - a horrible movement, like a puppet being pulled savagely by its strings.

We had been on a well-organised and, so far, successful trail towards the summit of Everest, worrying only about ourselves. Now a stranger lay across our path, moaning. Lhakpa shouted down at me and waved me to move on, to follow him up onto the Step. I looked back at the raggedly jerking figure.

Each team or solo climber did, or should, arrive at the mountain self-sufficient. Anyone who turned up assuming they could borrow food, clothing or tentage would receive short shrift. Similarly, you could not climb yourself to a standstill then expect other teams to risk their lives to save you.

Saving someone was not straightforward. There was no emergency number to call, no mountain rescue to whom the problem could be handed over. We would not be able to walk away, feeling we had done our civic duty and that "the experts" were now in charge. Anyone who becomes immobile on a mountain as large and remote as Everest is probably going to die. On this side of the mountain, we would have to get the victim all the way back to base camp before we could contemplate trying to find a helicopter. If they had to be carried, that would require a number of teams, dozens of people, and at least three days climbing.

Whoever it was on the rocks in front of me was so badly incapacitated that they had spent the night out on the mountain rather than crawl down. Life lay in keeping moving, as that generated body heat and, with every metre of descent, moved you into thicker air. I suspected we had virtually no chance of saving this climber.

We stood to throw away an entire expedition: the money, the time, the thousands of vertical feet of physical and mental effort. We had sponsors who expected us to go for the summit. We had personal ambitions that pointed in the same direction. We were only 240 vertical metres from the top, only four or five hours in climbing time. We were so close to fulfilling everything we had set out to do.

Should we throw it all away for some rescue attempt that was doomed? The body was lying in a ghastly inverted V. It looked as if the climber's spine might be broken. If they couldn't walk they were probably condemned. Why waste time, stand around getting cold and demoralised, when the attempt was futile? Why not just turn away and climb on? This all ran through my head in the space of a few seconds. But all the debates, the issues, the logical analysis were useless. I simply could not do it. I could not put the summit of a mountain ahead of a human life. I would not want to live with myself if I could. However hopeless this person's situation might be, I had to try. I walked back to Ian, who was standing with Jangbu, watching Lhakpa climbing the First Step.

"That body's alive. I'm going to have a look." It took him a moment to understand what I was talking about. "We can't just leave," I insisted.





He nodded and I stepped down from the trail and walked across the loose shale towards the body. I thought it might be one of the Russian team. The person was lying with their harness clipped to a line of fixed rope, stomach uppermost, head and legs dangling down on either side. I knelt down cautiously next to the body and saw it was a woman.

"Don't leave me," she said. Her skin was milky white, and totally smooth. It was a sign of severe frostbite and it made her look like a porcelain doll. Her eyes stared up at me, unfocusing, pupils huge dark voids. "Don't leave me," she murmured again.

I felt sick. With her long, dark hair, she looked like me. For a shocked second, I felt as if I was glimpsing a possible future for myself. The fact that she was conscious both encouraged and appalled me. It might be possible to save her - or we might yet have to leave her.

"I need to fetch the rest of my team," I said to her. "We have several people here. We will try and help you. I will come back, I promise."

"Why are you doing this to me?" she asked.

Ian and Jangbu came back with me. Lhakpa, Pemba and Ci Luo, seeing the turn events had taken, began to descend towards us. The woman had no visible trauma injuries and her bizarre position turned out to be the result of complete muscular limpness. She was as helpless as a rag doll. It looked as if someone had clipped her harness to the end of a fixed rope, presumably so she would not slip down the slope, and had then left her to go for help. Next to her was an orange bottle of oxygen, of Russian make, and a mask. The bottle was empty.

While Ian and Jangbu pulled her straight, I collected her down gloves, which had been thrown to one side. Her jacket was over her shoulders but her arms were not in the sleeves. Our bodies can react bizarrely to trauma. A fairly common occurrence with severe hypothermia is a sensation of extreme warmth. The victim may start tearing off clothing; it looked as if she had done this.

The men tried to replace her clothing. Her hands were swollen masses, her arms limp. She had no motor control. As Ian tried to get her arms into her sleeves, she gave no resistance and no assistance. Jangbu was trying to give her hot juice from his thermos. Then they each grabbed her under one arm and tried to pull her into a sitting position against a boulder. She was a dead weight. The two strong men took several heaves to get her sitting, and then both doubled over, gasping for breath. It showed us what it would take to try to actually carry her anywhere, let alone carry her or drag her for days down the mountain.

We had no capacity for giving her oxygen. Her mask would not fit our bottles. We carried spare bottles but no spare masks. For the oxygen to have any effect, she would have to be put on high flow, and stay on for hours. A few whiffs would have no effect. One of us would have to go off oxygen permanently to give her a mask, which would exhaust our spare supplies very quickly. Until we established that we had a real chance of saving her, the risk was too great.

We had no means of communication with the outside world. Pemba tried calling base camp, but their set was not switched on.

"I am an American. I am an American," the climber suddenly said.

American? But the American team was below us, a full day behind. My mind wandered back to what I had seen the day before: two tiny figures at the foot of the First Step, one still, one moving around.

Could she be Fran, the bubbly American woman who had sat in our ABC kitchen tent one night, passing the hours while she waited for her husband, the Russian climber, Serguei? That might make sense. She and Serguei were climbing as a twosome. They had no Sherpas, no oxygen. They would not be in radio contact with others on the mountain. But that did not explain how she came to have an oxygen bottle lying next to her. Nor did it explain where he had gone. Three Uzbek climbers were approaching.





"Will you help us?" I asked. "This woman is dying. We might be able to carry her down. Would you help?"

The leader of the three looked down at me reluctantly. "We tried to help yesterday. We left her with oxygen. She is too far gone to help."

He spoke into his radio, presumably talking to his base camp. However, they did stay, watching Ian and Jangbu to see what decision they took. Ian had the climber by both shoulders and was speaking directly at her, his face only inches from hers. "You have to help us. If you can help us, we can try and move you down the mountain. If you don't you are going to die." He was staring into her face, looking for some reaction. There was nothing. She knew we were there, but she was not mentally coherent. It was difficult to know what was left in her head.

I noticed her other crampon a few feet below us and took a tentative step down the slope to retrieve it, but immediately thought better of it. The slope was covered in loose rock shards, like a million smashed dinner plates. They were slipping away under my feet, rolling down the slope towards the Rongbuk glacier 4,300 metres below us. It was like trying to move across ball-bearings. I could see how a climber, having lost their balance, would not be able to stop the downward momentum. Had that happened to Serguei?

Ian and Jangbu had been trying to pull the woman into an upright position. Ian thought that if she could take some of her weight on her feet, even if she could not actually walk, it might be possible to move her down the mountain with a climber at each shoulder. However, her legs simply crumpled under her weight, as useless as strands of spaghetti.

We had been with Fran for nearly an hour, standing still in temperatures of around -30 C. Perched perilously on the steep, unstable slope, I could not even stamp my feet for warmth. I was beginning to feel profoundly cold. My fingers were almost totally numb. I had full-body shivers and my teeth were chattering behind my oxygen mask.

The decision to leave Fran came upon us without much discussion. The Uzbek climbers and Lhakpa had long been of that opinion. What hope I had faded in the face of her incoherence, her physical incapacity. Now Ian and Jangbu straightened up and turned away. She had stopped talking and seemed to have sunk into unconsciousness. The thought of going on was intolerable. I had lost the will to reach the summit. Besides the physical drain of the cold, I was emotionally shattered. I had never encountered anything like this. I had passed bodies, I had had friends not come back, but I had never watched anyone die. Nor had I had to decide to leave them.

It was harder for me because she was female. It is not that I thought women immune to the risk, but it was such a male-dominated environment. Everywhere you turned, everyone you talked to was male. I climb because I enjoy it. I climb for the pleasure of the activity, of the surroundings. There was no pleasure left. I wanted to be down, to be off the mountain, to have both feet on flat ground.

After abandoning that attempt, O'Dowd went on, in 1999, to become the first woman to reach the summit from both south and north. Francys (Fran) Arsentiev died after O'Dowd's group left her. It later emerged that Fran had made it to the top, becoming the first American woman to do so without oxygen. Her husband Serguei also died on the mountain.

