

All rights reserved. No part of this short story may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by an information storage and retrieval system - except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews - without permission in writing from the publisher.

Trapped in a deep crevasse, cursing himself for trusting a snow bridge, a Himalayan climber gathers in his mind the strength to climb out. Regretting leaving his wife and newborn child, he goes through the motions of a fierce struggle to reach the top, only to fall into a state of shock.

His legs felt numb, but that could be the intense cold down here. He blacked out on impact, had no idea how long he'd been trapped in the jaws of the crevasse. Violet ice pressed against his back and belly. He had a strong sense of hurting inside, deep and very serious. But he could be hallucinating in the thin air and this could all be confusion.

Wedging between these Himalayan ice walls at an impossible angle on his side could have crushed his vital organs against his spine. Would he ever be able to climb again, he wondered, his brain somehow detached from his plight.

Staring into glistening ice made him aware that he had both his arms raised over his head, and his mittens placed flat against the glassy wall on either side as though trying to pry the crevasse apart.

His ax dangled from his left wrist at an angle, its head jammed between the ice and his stomach. He tugged his right hand and it parted from the freezing wall minus the mitten. Stuck mitten. He touched the goggles that had fallen around his neck, then tore his hand from his left mitten and gripped the ax shaft. As he yanked the tool free from under him, his freezing fingers tightened around it.

This ice of the Gyabrag glacier had locked onto his mittens. Ice, a very viscous liquid, a fluid in slow motion, consumed all in its path and had begun to swallow him. It would have flowed around his stuck mittens and hands if he'd kept them above his head. But first the dank air down in the glacier's bowels where he'd tumbled would conduct away his body heat, cooling his blood to zero, solidifying his every muscle and tissue. He'd soon be as frozen in time as the calcified skeleton of a dinosaur.

When his body turned rock hard, the Gyabrag would envelop it. Ice would flow into his eye sockets, around the brain that stood him in good stead for most of his time on Earth. The frigid glass would creep around these powerful legs and feet, the pride of his life. Flowing ice crystals would grip the muscles in these well-trained arms. The hairs on his head would become fibers in the vast composite of this creeping glacier.

He should never have left Alice. She pleaded with him not to come, not to go climbing right after she gave birth to David. Pigheaded, he'd ignored her intuition that something would go wrong. And it had.

Imprisoned in this ice, he must have already moved down with it toward base camp. Five hundred years from now, the Gyabrag might spit him out, lower on the mountain massif where ice met earth and water. Some man of the future could find a sock with the bones of a foot in it, a glove with fragments of fingers, or a whole body preserved in a block of nature's glass. The man of the future would ponder this adventurer's strange possessions, hand and body coverings, and how he came to die like this. He would appear to be a foolish trekker who had wandered onto the glacier, not a climber of purpose and expedition leader.

Above though far from his reach the crevasse's rim outlined a strip of blue sky, the royal blue of high altitude. A puffy cloud drifted over, a small one. Continuing to gaze upward, he looked through a skylight into a faraway world, one in which he could hear the whistling of the wind a short while ago, no matter how gentle. No wind down in this Himalayan tomb. Shattering silence, so quiet that his thoughts seemed to echo from the ice. But he could hear the muscles and ribs of his chest creaking and detect a faint wheezing sound as air flowed in and out of his lungs.

Pain from the gnawing injury inside him began to swamp his nervous system. This couldn't be imaginary. His intestines twisted as much with agony as they would if he'd downed a full beaker of acid. He had little future left, yet maybe he could turn the outcome around. He would. He'd beat this ice and get back to Alice and David.

Now he sounded more like the forceful mountaineer who'd risen to the peak of Himalayan climbing. No, he wouldn't allow the insidious ice of the Gyabrag to encase him. He'd fight back as long as his heart showed the slightest twitch or throb.

Again, he glanced upward. He thought he saw someone moving, dark against the rim of the crevasse, the color of their garb and their shape suffused in silhouette. It could be Natalie staring down. But he'd seen her on the far side of the snow bridge when it collapsed, and the movement he now detected must be on the near side, the side from which he fell.

It could be Vance, his American friend, but if so, Vance would throw down a rope. No, Vance's body flashed past him when he came to a slamming stop down here.

A tall figure appeared on the crevasse's rim, and a long arm extended down. Fingers beckoned him to grasp them. Someone's, but he couldn't figure out who'd offered help. And then a man shouted, "Wake up you dumb shit." Wrong again, it didn't sound like help.

The man repeated the insult, yet he could have heard a mocking echo. He tried to yell back, but no sound came out of his mouth.

Famous British mountaineer, hell, he'd fumbled and made a serious error of judgment. He stood to join the ranks of climbers who died sooner than later because they gave crossing a snow bridge little thought. He treated the mountain without respect when he knew only too well that the mountain decided whether a climber would fall.

The more he thought about Natalie the angrier he became. Leading, she'd slid over the snow bridge on the seat of her pants, cracking it.

His hands had gone dead. He had to move to keep his heart pumping, couldn't count on rescue coming from anyone, let alone her.

Vicious cramps gripped his guts, but he willed the pain away. A mind of steel such as his could overcome the most savage of physical distress. Lord, he had to stop being so bloody conceited. Ego like that had driven him to ignore Alice, to come to the Himalayas again and climb, simply to bag another peak.

He needed Alice so much that her presence seemed to be all around him, and he could somehow see her nursing David to her breast. If only he could run his fingers through her soft hair, brush her lips with his and kiss. Bloody fool, he shouldn't have overlooked such tenderness.

Ice pegs and a hammer hung from his belt, but he didn't have a rope in his backpack. Uninjured, and with a rope, he would have found it a breeze to climb the vertical ice standing between him and freedom.

He cut a handhold three feet above with his ax, frosty chips bouncing off his head into the void below. Each time he swung the ax and dug in its adze blade, he could hear the clang of metal striking ice.

A much louder bang rang out, not of his making. The glacier on the move, relieving pressure and talking back, and it drove in the peril of his position. Crevasses broke open without warning. Waves of stress in the ice mass sometimes snapped them shut again, forever enclosing, crushing anything or anyone within.

He sank his ax into the ice above, tugged hard on the shaft, lunged up with his free hand and stuck his fingers into the handhold. Dreading what would happen, he lifted his body from the bulges that squeezed him in.

Now that he hung in a vertical position, his insides were expanding to agonizing normal dimensions. Breath hissed through his lips, puffed out in front of him. He saw a hideous void between his boots, but he wouldn't give in. He couldn't, and he'd climb out inch-by-inch.

He hacked another handhold, pulled his body up with his ax and kicked in the toes of his crampons, his front points. Bowels wrenching inside him, he clutched the ice wall and groaned. Then a rope slapped him in the face and he seized it.

Again the arm and hand reached down into the crevasse from the rim, beckoning him upward. But the man who threw the rope vanished, maybe to belay it around an ax away from the crevasse's brink. The fellow didn't reappear, though, and didn't look like coming back. No rescue team would be hauling this shattered climber out of the crevasse.

He tugged the rope. It stretched a bit, yet appeared firm enough. So he snatched the hammer and a couple of pegs from his belt, shoving them into his parka pocket. Hitting hard with his ax, kicking, he climbed the rope in spurts.

The ax twisted in the ice, then his grip on the rope slipped and he plunged between the walls, rope burning through his fingers, ripping into his skin. He heard someone scream. Him, as he crashed back onto the bulges, breaking his fall. Bloody hands clinging to the rope, he lifted himself clear and swung on its end with legs and arms thrashing. His ax clanked against the ice, useless.

Terror bounced back at him from the walls. Blood dripped from his lips. He hurt so much that this second fall must have torn him into two pieces, yet he still had his head, arms and legs with him.

A mocking voice yelled, "Climb you silly bugger." Infuriated, but energized, he scrambled for the sky and sunshine.

Panting, he retraced his climb, drew his wounded body up. He chopped fresh handholds in the ice, swung the ax, stuck in its pick and slammed in his front points. He had to get back to Alice and David.

Senses on overload, he tried to hammer in an ice peg so he could hook a Karabiner into it and rest. Chest heaving, eyes half-closed, he struck the peg at an angle, sending it shooting into the abyss. Every cell in his body burned like fire.

Fading now, his grasp on the rope and the ax shaft slackened and he slid down a yard. And then fury at the unfairness of everything took over. He rammed in his ax-pick. Brain-searing pain shot through him. He chopped, kicked, spat blood, fighting for what life he had left.

He saw daylight within reach and thought he heard the wind howling across the glacier an arm's length overhead. No more need to chop handholds. Clenching his teeth, he thrust upward, grasping the crevasse's frigid rim. He had both his bloody hands on the ice, the bones of raw fingertips biting in. A moment later, he heaved his torso up over the jagged edge.

But he couldn't see the sky. No sky.

Gray ice flashed past him, as if it sped upward. He hadn't reached the rim. Falling fast, he kept tumbling, limp as a rag doll into the crevasse.

No man above and no rope, he hadn't climbed out. Weakening, he'd suffered a nightmare of hope. Lost his grip then plummeted.

On his side, upside down, plunging into the pit of oblivion and about to crater, Jesus Christ.

Ice rammed into his pack, slammed it into his spine. His head jerked back, bending his neck to an impossible angle. No pain, he didn't feel pain. He couldn't breathe, but he knew the blood gushed out of him.

Pepper

Crevasse

In between now and eternity, no longer fighting death, mind and spirit floating free, then darkness closed in—total darkness. “Alice, I’m frightened, I need you. I need you and David.”

“Alice, forgive me ...”

* * * *