

From *Touching the Void*

Joe and Simon are mountain-climbing in the Andes, when Joe has a terrible accident. Here are two accounts by Joe and Simon of what happened. Joe's account

I hit the slope at the base of the cliff before I saw it coming. I was facing into the slope and both knees locked as I struck it. I felt a shattering blow in my knee, felt bones splitting, and screamed. The impact catapulted me over backwards and down the slope of the East Face. I slid, head-first, on my back. The rushing speed of it confused me. I thought of the drop below but felt nothing. Since we were roped together, Simon would be ripped off the mountain. He couldn't hold me. I screamed again as I jerked to a sudden violent stop.

Everything was still, silent. My thoughts raced madly. Then pain flooded down my thigh – a fierce burning fire coming down the inside of my thigh, seeming to ball in my groin, building and building until I cried out at it, and breathing came in ragged gasps. My leg! My leg!

I hung, head down, on my back, left leg tangled in the rope above me and my right leg hanging slackly to one side. I lifted my head from the snow and stared, up across my chest, at a grotesque distortion in the right knee, twisting the leg into a strange zig-zag. I didn't connect it with the pain which burnt in my groin. That had nothing to do with my knee. I kicked my left leg free of the rope and swung round until I was hanging against the snow on my chest, feet down. The pain eased. I kicked my left foot into the slope and stood up.

A wave of nausea surged over me. I pressed my face into the snow, and the sharp col seemed to calm me. Something terrible, something dark with dread occurred to me, and as I thought about it, I felt the dark thought break into panic: "I've broken my leg, that's it. I'm dead. Everyone said it ... if there's just two of you a broken ankle could turn into a death sentence ... if it's broken ... if ... It doesn't hurt so much, maybe I've just ripped something."

I kicked my right leg against the slope, feeling sure it wasn't broken. My knee exploded. Bone grated, and the fireball rushed from groin to knee. I screamed. I looked down at the knee and could see it was broken, yet I tried not to believe what I was seeing. It wasn't just broken, it was ruptured, twisted, crushed, and I could see the kink in the joint and knew what had happened. The impact had driven my lower leg up through the knee joint.

I dug my axes into the snow, and pounded my good leg deeply into the soft slope until I felt sure it wouldn't slip. The effort brought back the nausea and I felt my head spin giddily to the point of fainting. I moved and a searing spasm of pain cleared away the faintness. I could see the summit of Seria Norte away to the west. I was not far below it. The sight drove home how desperately things had changed. We were above 19,000 feet, still on the ridge, and very much alone. I looked south at the small rise I had hoped to scale quickly and it seemed to grow with every second that I stared. I would never get over it. Simon would not be able to get me up it. He would leave me. He had no choice. I held my breath, thinking about it. Left here? Alone. For an age I felt overwhelmed at the notion of being left; I felt like screaming, and I felt like swearing, but stayed silent. If I said a word, I would panic. I could feel myself teetering on the edge of it.

Comment [K1]: 'In media res' – in the middle of the action – to create a sense of tension and excitement – possibly that mountain climbing is unpredictable – sense of helplessness too

Comment [K2]: Triad emphasises pain, very violent verbs and actions

Comment [K3]: Image of helplessness, exacerbated by the commas that intensify how bad the situation is – again list like

Comment [K4]: Odd sense of calm when confronted by a deadly situation

Comment [K5]: Modal verb - inevitable

Comment [K6]: Short definite sentence – sense of hopelessness

Comment [K7]: Sense of panic – especially in contrast to the still and silent mountain – mountain seems unhelpful, implacable, oblivious to these men – nature won't help

Comment [K8]: Repetition and exclamation marks suggest pain

Comment [K9]: A sense that he is trying to deny the truth because broken = dead

Comment [K10]: Short, definite assertion

Comment [K11]: These active verbs and short sentences suggest the problem isn't bad

Comment [K12]: Paragraph break is important – because it suggests progress

Comment [K13]: Image suggests the man is really powerless – and that the positive previous paragraph was misleading

Comment [K14]: The environment is threatening

Comment [K15]: Sinister, threatening connotations, repetition – contrasts to the previous 'calm' – tension because we don't know

Comment [K16]: Short sentence – pain, but factual

Comment [K17]: Good, logical steps to recovery

Comment [K18]: Use of technical names & jargon – an expert

Comment [K19]: The bitter irony at having got so close

Comment [K20]: Obvious sense of isolation and exposure

Comment [K21]: Sense of hopelessness 'growing'

Comment [K22]: Calm, rational statements of fact

Comment [K23]: Fear of being abandoned but knows there's no alternative

Simon's account

'Joe had disappeared behind a rise in the ridge and began moving faster than I could go. I was glad we had put the steep section behind us at last. I felt tired and was grateful to be able to follow Joe's tracks instead of being in front.

I rested a while when I saw that Joe had stopped moving. Obviously he had found an obstacle and I thought I would wait until he started moving again. When the rope moved again I trudged forward after it, slowly.

Suddenly there was a sharp tug as the rope lashed out taut across the slope. I was pulled forward several feet as I pushed my axes into the snow and braced myself for another jerk. Nothing happened. I knew that Joe had fallen, but I couldn't see him, so I stayed put. I waited for about ten minutes until the tautened rope went slack on the snow and I felt sure that Joe had got his weight off me. I began to move along his footsteps cautiously, half expecting something else to happen. I kept tensed up and ready to dig my axe in at the first sign of trouble.

As I crested the rise, I could see down a slope to where the rope disappeared over the edge of a drop. I approached slowly, wondering what had happened. When I reached the top of the drop I saw Joe below me. He had one foot dug in and was leaning against the slope with his face buried in the snow. I asked him what had happened and he looked at me in surprise. I knew he was injured, but the significance didn't hit me at first.

He told me very calmly that he had broken his leg. He looked pathetic, and my immediate thought came without any emotion. You've had it, matey. You're dead ... no two ways about it! I think he knew it too. I could see it in his face. It was all totally rational. I knew where we were, I took in everything around me instantly, and knew he was dead. It never occurred to me that I might also die. I accepted without question that I could get off the mountain alone. I had no doubt about that.

Below him I could see thousands of feet of open face falling into the eastern glacier bay. I watched him quite dispassionately. I couldn't help him, and it occurred to me that in all likelihood he would fall to his death. I wasn't disturbed by the thought. In a way I hoped he would fall. I had no idea how I might help him. I could get down. If I tried to get him down I might die with him. It didn't frighten me. It just seemed a waste. It would be pointless. I kept staring at him, expecting him to fall....'

Joe Simpson

Organising Principles:

The violence and pain that Joe suffered

Responses of Shock, confusion & disorientation and panic

The isolated and dangerous environment / weather

The helplessness and insignificance of the men in comparison to the mountain

Trying to deny that it is happening – fear and the bitter irony of getting so close

The calm cold logic that people can face death with

Comment [K24]: The sudden switch in tone and perspective creates dramatic tension because now we know more than Joe, we are waiting for him to find out – also a sense of doom because we know the future

Comment [K25]: These positive statements reinforce Joe's ignorance and create sympathy as we know it will get worse

Comment [K26]: This slowness contrasts with the pace of the previous section highlighting the violence of what happened to Joe, it also creates tension by delaying the moment when Joe starts to fall. Also gives a different perspective on the climb - tiredness

Comment [K27]: Use of suddenly to indicate violence and sudden change in mood

Comment [K28]: Simon's understatement of the situation again creates sympathy for him

Comment [K29]: Suggesting tension and Simon's nervousness

Comment [K30]: Calm factual tone – long list here of ideas, modal verbs indicating certainty

Comment [K31]: Frank discussion about death – suggests again calmness and logic