

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 cold 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]: Adventurous sounding / impossible title

Comment [n2]: Begins in Immediately-starting in the middle of the action. Creates sudden shock and tension grabbing the reader's attention while mirroring the disorientation and panic he felt. Direct speech and use of personal pronoun 'I' makes it seem more realistic

Comment [K3]: Powerful adjective and verb pair emphasise the force of the collision

Comment [n4]: He was helpless, had no control of what was happening.

Comment [n5]: Speed reinforce the sense of disorientation and panic

Comment [n6]: Short harsh sound reinforces the impression of pain and violence

Comment [n7]: Modal verb 'could not' suggests hopelessness.

Comment [K8]: The suddenness of the ending of the paragraph mirrors the suddenness of his stop

Comment [n9]: Shows that they were isolated and there was no sign of help. Sudden calm here contrasts with the intensity of the previous paragraph captivating attention

Comment [n10]: Metaphor – lots of pain

Comment [K11]: Repetition suggests the intensity of his pain

Comment [n12]: Harsh consonants = pain.

Comment [n13]: Repetition and short sentence of the monosyllabic word shows the urgency and the amount of pain he was feeling.

Comment [n14]: Distorted, unreal

Comment [n15]: The disconnection suggests his shock and that his realisation of the severity of the situation is only gradual – we know it's serious creating a sort of dramatic tension as we wait for Joe to realise what we already know

Comment [n16]: The paragraph break again creates tension as the previous paragraph ends hopefully with an action – only to be over powered by the metaphor of a wave of pain.

Comment [n17]: Repetition of dark and other 'terrible' words create the impression of a kind of ominous fate hanging over the two climbers that is just being realised

Comment [n18]: Short sentences and modal verbs suggest panic and the certainty of death

Comment [n19]: Desperately clinging to hope – again creating tension as we know it's broken – this is repeated in the next paragraph

Comment [K20]: Simple, short sentence and the metaphor suggests the intensity of his pain

Comment [K21]: This triad of hyperbolic words suggests the severity of the damage

Comment [n22]: Short, factual realisation the of truth and the hopelessness of the situation

Comment [n23]: High, dangerous and isolated

Comment [n24]: Short sentences-panic.

Comment [n25]: Hopelessness, despair

Comment [n26]: Desperation to remain calm

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.

Sudden 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...

Comment [n27]: Two narrative perspectives, firstly to tell the story from two different points of view but also to provide two different versions of the struggle and to create tension as we move away from Joe's desperate situation to Simon

Comment [n28]: He was relaxed and pleased – a kind of narrative irony as we know that things are about to go very wrong – once again the disparity between our knowledge of what will happen and his belief that everything is going well creates tension

Comment [n29]: Tired exhausted listlessness contrasts with the dramatic action of the previous account emphasizing its intensity

Comment [K30]: Sudden tone change to create tension – vicious sounding verbs and harsh consonants 'lashed out' emphasise the sudden, surprising, violent nature of the motion of the rope and Joe's shock

Comment [K31]: Short sentence – calm following on from the intense activity before

Comment [n32]: Tension as he doesn't know what has happened for yet

Comment [n33]: For Simon this is just an observation but we know Joe is feeling intense pain and despair – the disparity between the two perspectives reinforces the ironic tension as we know more than Simon and are waiting for him to realise what we know

Comment [n34]: Shocked because of the pain

Comment [n35]: Calm, factual tone suggests the hopelessness of their situation – but also a sense of shock and unreality – and the calm rationality that can take over when facing death

Comment [n36]: Short sentences reinforce this sense of certainty

Comment [n37]: 'knew' and the absence of modal verbs suggests certainty

Comment [n38]: Isolation, danger and inevitable death

Comment [n39]: No emotion at all, didn't care about Joe and just wanted to leave and move on.

Comment [n40]: Wanted to leave, shows that he was a selfish person.

Comment [K41]: Ellipses leaves the reader wondering what happened next

Organising Principles.

- The violence and pain Joe suffered.
- Responses of shock, confusion, desperation.
- Isolated and dangerous environment.
- Sense of helplessness and insignificance of men compared to mountains.
- Attempts to deny the truth.
- Calm, cold logic that people face death with.

Genre: Recount

Audience: very general, but possibly climbers or adventure enthusiasts)

Purpose: To entertain