

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. Simon would be ripped off the mountain. He couldn't hold this. I screamed again as I jerked to a sudden violent stop.

Comment [S1]: Passage instantly draws the reader into the midst of the action therefore creating tension and suspense. Reader does not know what is happening.

Comment [S2]: Visual imagery of pain portrayed to the reader. Helplessness.

Comment [S3]: Very visual, reader is able to imagine and sympathise with the pain Joe is feeling. Cringes.

Comment [S4]: Disorientation, hints at the scope of the dangerous situation-Joe is helpless and can not stop himself.

Comment [S5]: Certain tone. Acceptance and realisation that he can not be saved. Tension increases.

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 my breathing came in ragged gasps. My leg! ... My leg!

Comment [S6]: Overwhelming and unstoppable, he has to tolerate it.

Comment [S7]: Tension also builds.

Comment [S8]: Panicked and desperate. Sharp and agonising pain. Joe seems hysterical.

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 zigzag. I didn't connect it with the pain which burnt 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.

Comment [S9]: Reader realises he is severely injured.

Comment [S10]: Unnatural image therefore painful.

Comment [S11]: Still confused and disoriented.

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.'

Comment [S12]: Stinging pain reminds him to be rational and focus on survival.

Comment [S13]: Chaotic thoughts racing through his mind. Restricts his ability to think rationally.

Comment [S14]: Seems calm. Accepted his predicament.

Comment [S15]: Caesuras show how he isn't sure what to think. In denial and trying to convince himself his leg isn't broken.

Comment [S16]: Relatively minor injury manages to threaten his life. Emphasises the dangerous and hostile environment.

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. ...

Comment [S17]: A hyperbole. Graphically and dramatically describes his injury. Attention to detail makes the reader focus in on the pain.

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 [S18]:** Visual imagery.
- Comment [S19]:** Far away therefore suggesting that his efforts are fruitless. No escape.
- Comment [S20]:** Isolated. Figures make the reader focus on the imminent danger.
- Comment [S21]:** His efforts are hopeless. The goal is still far away.
- Comment [S22]:** Certain tone portrays his calm acceptance. He knows attempts to save him will fail. 'Never' is absolute. Blunt sentence suggests despair and hopelessness.
- Comment [S23]:** Fright and fear. Joe is also scared, emphasises his helplessness.
- Comment [S24]:** Rising panic. The short sentences have an added effect and emphasises how he is trying to calm himself.

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 breaking trail*.

- Comment [S25]:** Element of dramatic irony. Reader knows something bad will happen and we feel sympathy as Simon doesn't know yet. Unsuspecting. There is a delay in what happens to Joe, Simon's account is relayed instead and we want to know what happens to Joe.

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.

- Comment [S26]:** Calm. Loss of tension. Doesn't elaborate on Joe's falling but feels relieved and tired.
- Comment [S27]:** Anticlimax. Bathos. Simon doesn't rush to save Joe which is against the reader's expectations.
- Comment [S28]:** Unsurprised and not affected. Unaware of Joe's predicament.

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 axes in at the first sign of trouble.

- Comment [S29]:** Increase of tension and suspense.
- Comment [S30]:** Calm. Reader instilled with a calm cold acceptance that Joe will die. Again, Simon seems unpanicked. No stress, not very caring.

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.

- Comment [S31]:** Increase in tension. Eader envisions that he might also be in danger like Joe. Suspense.
- Comment [S32]:** Close to falling. An adrenaline rush and intense atmosphere creates tension in reader.

He told me very calmly that he had broken his leg. He looked pathetic, and my immediate thought came without any emotion. ... 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.

- Comment [S33]:** Lack of emotion. No desperation r concern evident. Simon is plainly not as worried about Joe as the reader expects.
- Comment [S34]:** Calm and controlled
- Comment [S35]:** Absence of shock, only scorn.
- Comment [S36]:** Unusual and apathetic. No hyperboles, exclamations. Contrasts to Joe's account.
- Comment [S37]:** Said in a simple and easy manner. No panic or exaggerations. No regret or further elaborations. Very brief and blunt (to the point)
- Comment [S38]:** Cold and harsh logic. Contrasting with Joe who is seeking reassurance whilst Simon has already accepted Joe's death and how he can not change events.
- Comment [S39]:** His sense are telling him to abandon Joe and ensure his own safety.

... 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 knew I couldn't leave him while he was still fighting for it, but 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

Comment [S40]: Dangerous environment is stressed and the impossibility of living.

Comment [S41]: Cold dismissal and lack of sympathy for Joe's pain. Although it seems harsh Simon is actually being very realistic. Death was inescapable. The hostile environment has an effect on morality and personality. Effects our decisions.

Comment [S42]: He could be relieved of this burden. No guilt and worries.

Comment [S43]: Short sentences. Factual and emotionless. Simon is portrayed as rational and logical. Not surprised or concerned Joe might die.

Comment [S44]: Foreshadowing.