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[4400words]

## THE WEEPING WALL

### **Prelude**

To the ant-like tourists who gaped up from the valley floor, I must have looked like some exotic, north-born wasp inching its way up the thousand-foot slab of ice that towered above them. Fifty stories up—feeling anything but exotic in a borrowed blue and yellow wind suit—my limbs quivered with fear and fatigue.

Gingerly, I probed the hoary surface for soft pockets into which I could secure the pick of a thin-bladed ice axe. When both axes felt solid, I eased my left crampon out of the ice, lifted the heavy boot strapped to it, then kicked the front points in a foot further up the face. I tested the purchase. *Iffy, but it'll have to do.* I lifted my other boot, kicked in the front points, then pulled down on both axes and stood up.

Perched on four tapered steel toenails, hanging from two finger-sized picks—no point of contact gripping more than a half-inch of friable ice—I paused. Sucking air into my lungs, I chanted *reeee-* on each in-breath, *-laaax* on the out. I forced myself not to look down.

When terror eased its bowel-wrenching grip on my gut, I swung my axe again. Twang! Ice shards exploded into my face; the pick bounced out. I tried again.

Same thing. Panic nipped at my focus like a small, mean dog. My left arm cramped. *Hang on*, I told myself.

I drove my axe. Twang! Harder. Twang! Harder still. Thwok!

*Whew!* I hung from my right tool and shook the cramp out of my left arm.

When the spasm eased, I reached high and...

...without warning, I was off the ice, yo-yoing on the end of the rope.

Adrenaline ripped through my veins. My heart slammed against my ribs, a trapped animal battering the bars of its cage. My left hand was bare. No tool!

*What? How?*

Ten feet above—mocking my rookie mistake—a red mitten gripped a well-placed axe. I'd broken the cardinal rule of ice climbing and levered my front points off their precious half-inch perch. Just a rope and a harness separated me from the toy cars plying the Banff-Jasper highway below.

I wiped mucus from my mustache and let myself spin slowly as the rope untwisted itself. I burrowed my bare hand under my jacket. Black-bottomed clouds shouldered in front of what watery sunlight filtered through the overcast; the ice took on a sombre, flat grey mien. My bowels clenched.

*Now what?*

I thought of John Lauchlan, my friend and mentor. Back at his cabin, after a couple of bottles of Chianti, his aphoristic injunctions like, "Go big or go home!" had sounded like revealed truth. But, now, dangling from a half-inch, purple and yellow braid, just a few miles north of where he'd fallen to his death two weeks earlier, I felt like lowering off, going home, and settling into a hot bath with four fingers of Scotland's best.

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Below me, a horn summoned the ants back to their heated travel cruiser. Above me, the rope snaked up the face and over a bulge. James would wonder why the rope had stopped moving. A deep chill gripped me.

*Up? Or, down?*

I closed my eyes and willed myself to take twenty deep, slow breaths . . . .

## **Decision**

I'd always thought climbing frozen waterfalls was a cold, foolhardy way to spend winter. All my friends climbed, but I'd had no desire to join them on overblown icicles with names like *Terminator* or *Nemesis*.

Although I ran a mountaineering school in the Rockies, I was pushing forty, twenty pounds overweight, and more than a decade past my athletic prime. I preferred good books and cozy fires to shivering half-frozen on some frigid sliver of near-vertical ice. I skied hard and bouldered on small rock faces but the theory of challenge excited me far more than the further reaches of its practice. An ex-academic with vague aspirations to write, I'd learned to distance myself from the actual; to teach, not do. Failing at anything terrified me.

When I'd left academia, I'd printed up business cards that claimed I was a "Consultant." During a restructuring, the Rocky Mountain YMCA hired me to fit a climbing school into their traditional youth-oriented culture. Although I wasn't a climber, I tried it for a year. I focused on administrivia, helped rock jocks become instructors, and tried to sell enough courses to keep us afloat. I told myself I didn't have time to climb. Or write. In February of our first year, our Head Instructor, John Lauchlan died trying to solo a waterfall called Polar Circus.

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John hadn't looked impressive. Hanging less than 140 pounds of tightly-wound muscle and sinew off a slight, five-foot-eight frame, he'd peered wide-eyed from behind wire-framed coke bottle bottoms. However, he lived his life with an intensity and power I'd but glimpsed, an intensity I'd longed for yet recoiled from. Though ten years my junior, I'd looked up to John.

He was in his late teens when I'd first met him; I was pushing thirty. On the advice of a friend with slightly more climbing experience than I, I'd spent way-too-much money on far-too-stiff French mountaineering boots and gone to a local bouldering spot that provided challenges for hot shots and practice routes for beginners like me.

I'd worked my five-pound Galibiers half way up a gentle slab when—in a voice way out of proportion to his size—a skinny teenager in soiled painter's pants and worn rock shoes yelled, “Yo, bozo! You can't use those holds.”

“What holds?” I asked, flattening against the rock.

“The one's you're standing on,” he said.

“Why?”

“They're disqualified.”

“*What?*”

“They make that route too easy, so we don't use them.”

Though I knew zip about climbing protocol, I knew a lot about gravity. Besides, I outweighed the shaggy-haired punk by fifty pounds. “Screw you,” I said, “I like it easy.”

He looked at me as if I'd wet myself in public, then did a spider imitation up the overhanging lip opposite me. “Mouthy little prick,” I thought, and continued up the slab, careful not to use the most obvious holds.

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Later, a bunch of us car-pooled to the Okotoks bar. John and I got talking about the lesser-known works of Herman Hesse. I'd liked him ever since.

Three days after he died, I stood in a crematorium viewing room in the city. John's waxy-pale body lay naked on a stainless steel dolly. A thin saffron-colored cloth covered his lower half. Mary, his widow, wanted no funeral parlor pretensions; we were to see him as he was—broken and bruised, chest ripped open in a gaping-V during the autopsy, then crudely sewn up with what looked like butcher's string. Perhaps she thought the stark reality would help her grasp the finality she needed. I wondered if she just wanted us to feel as bad as she did.

As I spoke to what was left of John and, I hoped, to his spirit, tears stung my eyes. I thought of our late night soul-searching sessions and how he'd goaded me to follow my path with heart.

"You should write up your leadership stuff," he said one night. "It's good."

Shocked, I laughed and mumbled about needing to be in the right mood.

"Don't worry about screwing up," he said, reading my mind. "Practice what you preach. Just start. It'll come. "

I picked up a climbing magazine, flipped through it, then asked, "Think Louise Falls is ready yet?"

John shook his head and laughed. Like me, he read voraciously and braced his arguments with quotes from philosophers. "*Believe me!*" he declaimed, invoking Nietzsche and waving his water glass of cheap red wine at me, "*The secret of reaping the greatest fruitfulness and the greatest enjoyment from life is to live dangerously!*"

Though I laughed, clinked glasses with him, and made a mental note to use the quote in my next seminar, anxiety gnawed at me. Why, I wondered, when I found it so easy to urge others to follow the path of their own hearts, was I so quick

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to retreat in fear from mine? “It’s different for you,” I said, tossing the magazine on a chair. “You don’t get scared.”

John’s eyes flared. He set his glass on the milk-crate-and-plank contraption that served as a coffee table. “I get scared,” he said. He paused, moved the glass to another spot on the table, then moved it back. He spoke so softly I had to lean in until we were almost nose to nose. Tapping his chest in time with each distinctly spat syllable, he said, “Ev-ry-time-I-climb.” He sighed, then added, “But, I never let it stop me.” He drained his glass, set it softly on the table, and fixed me with his gaze. “Never!”

I shuddered. Georgia O’Keefe had said the same thing about making art.

When the wine ran out, I crunched home over frost-stiff meadow grass. A rising moon spilled luminous white light into the oval-shaped opening in the aspen forest that separated our cabins. I stopped, turned a circle. My breath hung motionless in the air. Later, in bed, I fought off the after-effects of too much wine and wondered if John’s climbing was more art than sport. I tried not to think about the lack of art in my own life.

Now, the empty shell of my friend lay lifeless on a stainless steel slab. Anger built behind my sorrow. At God for snuffing out such fierce intensity. At Mary for forcing me, too, to face this terrible finality. Mostly, though, at John for dying with so much of his own path untrodden.

“You dumb fuck!” I blurted into the empty room. “You really went and did it this time, didn’t you?” Then, overcome, I leaned against the cold steel table and wept. When the tears stopped, I reached down, brushed a lock of John’s soft, brown hair out of his forever-closed eyes, and whispered, “See ya, buddy.”

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Driving back to the mountains, I let the tears flow again and thought about what John's friendship had meant to me. Trite as it sounds, I knew he'd died with integrity, doing what he loved. If it were me dead, people could not say the same. Integrity, not courage, had formed the bedrock of John's power. He'd lived his truth as fully as he knew how. What was I doing? I asked myself. Was I acting out of my own truth? Did I even know what my truth was?

As I neared the Centre, I thought about what I'd say to the shaken climbing staff the next morning. I knew I had to give them—and myself—more than managerial pep talks and quote book platitudes. *But what?*

As I walked into the lodge, I ran into the Executive Director who had been brought into to restructure the Y's programs. Although Wayne had never fully supported the climbing school, he looked worse than I felt. John's death had shaken him. After a few fumbled words of commiseration, he asked, "What now? Will you quit climbing? Will you have to close the school?"

I was stunned. The school had been John's dream. Closing it would be sacrilege. I stared at Wayne. Then, not realizing I'd made a decision, I said, "No. I'm going to take the Complete Ice course that John and James were scheduled to teach. I'll need to take next week off. Is that okay?"

Wayne's eyebrows twitched. He gave me a look that was half way between incredulity and admiration. He nodded his head. "Okay," he said.

### **Preparation**

"There are three basic rules in ice climbing," James Blench told us on Day One. "One, keep your heels down. Two, make sure your tools are securely placed. And, three, keep your heels down!"

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We started at The Junkyard, a gentle flow of ice tucked into a ravine just east of Banff Park. Five men and a woman strapped crampons on to plastic mountaineering boots. Then, mimicking his exaggerated foot-lifting steps, we waddled behind our instructor like newly imprinted ducklings.

When we could walk without tripping, James handed out ice tools, two-foot long hammers with picks shaped like pterodactyl's beaks. Each weighed three pounds and was awkward to swing. To coordinate crampons and tools we climbed a few feet up on an ice face, then worked back and forth across it on our front points. Roped climbing started on gentle slopes about the steepness of stairs. Each degree of steep ups the difficulty. Seventy-five seems vertical. Eighty feels like you're leaning back. By noon, we were scampering up sixty and seventy degree routes and getting cocky.

*Piece of cake*, I told myself.

For lunch, we wolfed tuna sandwiches and chattered like kids while James drove us east along the Trans-Canada highway. A half-hour tramp up Grotto Canyon brought us to twin, thirty-foot high icicles—"His" and "Hers"—formed as water seeped out of cracks in the striated, rusty-yellow limestone. Almost overhanging, they were steeper than anything we'd seen so far. Quiet now, we shuffled from foot to foot while James soloed up *His* and snapped a carabiner into a bolt fixed into the wall above the icicle. He clipped the rope, wrapped both lengths around himself, and lowered off. His thin lips slid back into a sly grin. "Who wants a go?" he said. "Eric?"

Eric, 29, was strong, a rock climber who'd perfected the taciturn, tight-lipped ways of experienced mountaineers. He tied into the rope, nodded at his belayer, then patiently worked his way up the icicle. He struggled only once at a small bulge

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just before the top. He touched the carabiner with his tool, fought off a smile, then leaned back on the rope and let his belayer lower him.

Next up, Carmen, 36. What she gave way in strength she made up for in enthusiasm. But the bulge proved too much. She lowered off.

Fit and eager to show his stuff, Larry, 25, stormed up the first ten feet, then fatigued as the ice steepened. Trying to force his way over the little bulge, he flailed at the ice, fell, threw himself at it again, fell, then—chugging like the little train who thought he could—powered his way to the top. Exhausted, he let himself be lowered.

“Alright!” said James. “Who’s next?”

My gut churned, but not wanting to go last, I said, “Me.”

I swallowed as I tied in. James had stressed that falls on steep ice could be bad. I had visions of spiral fractures from crampons biting into ice and legs twisting around them. But, mostly, looking bad scared me more than falling.

Afternoon sun had warmed the ice. My tools sank into the bright, blue softness with reassuring “thwocks.” Ten feet up, the ice reared back to near vertical. I forced myself up to just below the “little” bulge. It now seemed insurmountable. My forearms cramped. My calves trembled. Hot steel knifed through both shoulders. I risked a glance down, hoping for James’s blessing to lower off, but he just smiled and shouted, “Almost there!”

Clinging to the icicle, I rested my helmet against its wrinkled surface and tried to think about why I was there. After a long pause, I reached up, past the pain and fear, and planted an axe. Then another. I shuffled my front points a few inches up the ice. I rested for three or four breaths, then planted my tools and shuffled my feet again. I don’t know how many times I did this, but I got a rhythm going and,

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suddenly, there was nothing above me but rock. *I was there!* Stunned, I hung from the rope to catch my breath.

“Good climbing!” James yelled. “Want to lower off?”

“No,” I said, shocking myself. “I’ll downclimb it.”

At the base, James tried to shake my hand, but I couldn’t drop my tools. My fingers were rigid claws, cramped so tightly to the shafts that he had to pry them off one by one. Spent, yet relieved, I sat on my pack and watched the others while I massaged feeling back into my fingers. Neither Randy, 28, nor Allen, 30, made it above the bulge. I grinned. *I can do this.*

I strutted through the next two days.

Day Two, we learned to build belay systems.

Day Three, we practiced leading on low-angled pitches.

Day Four dawned, a free gift from the universe. Under the cloudless, curved bowl of a cerulean sky, we headed for our first multi-pitch climb. At the base of Cascade Falls, where the smooth, undulating ice flow rears up into a fierce pillar of frozen kinetic energy, the morning sun splashed a prismatic spray of colour over its crystal blue surface. I trembled in awe and anticipation. I felt privileged just to be in such a wildly beautiful place.

The climb went without a hitch, except when I punched an eighteen-inch wide hole through the ice and discovered only two inches separated me from a torrent of rushing water. I scrambled to the outside edge where the ice thickened and pushed on.

At the top, Eric lifted his water bottle in a toast, “To success.”

“Nothin’ to it,” I said, touching his bottle with mine.

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Albi, our guide, shook his head and chuckled. “We’re not done yet, lads,” he said. “More die going down than going up.”

### **The Climb**

My confidence bubble burst later that night when James flashed a slide of our final objective on the screen. Smearred savagely across the black flank of Cirrus Mountain, the Weeping Wall is a 300-foot-wide slab of rough, drip-formed ice that soars a thousand vertical feet in two steep tiers. Our goal—the bottom tier, 450 feet of sustained Grade 4 or 5 ice—made Cascade (Grade 3) look like a gentle, snow-covered staircase.

“No way,” I wailed silently, “I can’t climb that. I *won’t*.”

After the briefing, I stumbled off to bed, but couldn’t sleep. Visions of vertical ice loomed over me. My mind spun trying to figure a way out of what I now thought was an insane commitment. *But how to do so without losing face?*

Dawn was two hours away when I went to breakfast. I forced granola into my mouth and chewed mechanically. I nodded at Eric, asked how he’d slept. He squeezed his bushy eyebrows together and spat, “Didn’t.” That helped.

After breakfast, I listened numbly as James went over last minute instructions. Then I climbed into the dark cave of the van and claimed the back seat. The doors slammed and we started to move. As I leaned back on cold plastic—no choice now but to surrender—I felt my fear ease off. A spark of excitement took its place. Surprised, yet relaxed, I slept until we parked at the foot of Cirrus Mountain.

The Weeping Wall rose so steeply that, when I looked up at it, my helmet dug sharply into my neck. James pointed out the routes. One team would climb Sniveling Gully. Another would try the moderate left-hand edge of the wall. Farther

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to the right though, where our route lay, the ice steepened so quickly most of it was hidden by the first bulge. “Jee-zus!” Eric muttered. I cinched my helmet strap a couple of notches tighter.

We hefted our packs and crunched up a frozen creek-bed through a resin-scented alpine fir forest. No one talked, but as a weak dawn worked its way through the heavy, grey overcast, my spirits edged upward.

James led. I belayed. Eric sat on his pack and watched. Terror had given way to a stomach-tingling urge to get on with it. Still, my arms shook when it was my turn to climb. Steeper than Cascade but not as strenuous as the icicle in Grotto Canyon, the first pitch went slowly, but without difficulty. I joined James on the belay stance, then brought Eric up. We leaned back on our anchor slings and chatted until James pointed out we were running late.

A third of the way up the second pitch I struggled. The friable ice flaked off in dinner plate sized slabs. Trying to find a better placement, I reached too high, forcing myself up on tiptoes, and breaking the first and third of James’s rules. My front points popped out and down I plunged.

As I spun on the rope, watching tourists scurry in and out of buses, the shock wore off. Deep breathing smoothed the adrenaline spike into the mellow but dangerous drift of noradrenalin suppression. Shivering, limbs stiff, worried it was getting late, I thought of John. I saw see his fierce eyes flash and imagined him saying something like, “Paul Tillich claims that we become truly human *only* at the moment of decision.” Below, a tourist bus pulled out, headed no doubt for happy hour at some fancy hotel bar. I imagined the slow burn of single malt in my belly.

*Climb? Or, go home?*

As I pondered my dilemma, I heard a low, croaking “caw” and turned toward it. A huge raven, coal black against the snow below, floated lazy circles on a rising

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thermal. It's wing tips flared like beckoning fingers. As the ebony trickster drifted past just metres from where I hung, I breathed in the sweet balm of alpine fir in its wake. And, that quick, my mood shifted.

Suddenly, I no longer wanted to trade places with the tourists. I was where I wanted to be. The bands of tension cinching my chest fell away. Excitement rippled up my spine. I heard my own clear voice echo John's advice. *Just start.*

I drove my tool into the face, dug my spare tool out of its holster on the back of my harness, then started up to retrieve my errant mitten. Behind me, the sun dropped below the clouds, flooding the valley with alpenglow. Flashes of fluorescence flickered in the ice.

The rest of that pitch and the next went well. However, Eric and I climbed so slowly that, by the time I hauled myself onto the eighteen-inch wide, snow-covered ledge at the top of the route, dark shadows had sucked most of the light out of the day. We still had to get Eric up, cross 100 feet of down-sloping ledge and make three 150-foot rappels down Sniveling Gully to get off the mountain. Albi's caution about descending resounded in my mind.

James was calm, but I could see by the set of his jaw that our situation was tense. "I'll belay Eric," he said, "You clip into this rope then work your way to the gully and set up a rappel anchor." As I started off, he called, "Put some protection in half way across."

At the top of the gully, I clipped purple slings into fixed bolts that held the deteriorating remains of previous rappel systems. When James pronounced my anchor safe, I backed over the edge and dropped into the gloom. I felt totally alone. A 150 feet down, I set up a new anchor while Eric descended. James came last and pulled the rope down. Then we did it again.

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The gully was dead dark as I descended to the last stance. Worried, the others called up, the pinpricks of their headlamps bobbing below me. “We’re fine,” I shouted. But, shivering from cold and nerves, I took too long to set up the final anchor. “Hurry,” Eric nagged.

When James dropped out of the dark tunnel above us, I was surprised to see him grinning. “Hey guys!” he said, “One more rap and we’re on the ground.” He hugged us both and said, “You guys did great today. Thanks for the climb.”

I swallowed, wiped snot off my nose, and forced out a feeble, “Thank you.” Then I was on the rope, descending into the darkness. A tear froze on my cheek.

When I reached the bottom, the rest of the crew stood forty feet down an easy slope from the mouth of the gully, clapping and cheering. I unclipped, yelled, “Secure!” then started down. My ice axes lay holstered like long-barreled Colts on either side of my harness. My crampons crunched into the ice. My helmet, strap undone now, sat loosely on my head. Spot-lit by headlamps and flashlights, I felt like Kirk Douglas striding back from the OK Coral.

As I came out of the gully, the moonlit bulk of the Wall loomed above me. I paused to let it sink in; *I did it! I climbed the Weeping Wall*. Swelling with pride, barely able to keep from blubbering with joy, I swaggered the last few feet.

My friends crowded round, shook my hand, slapped my back, and handed me tea. I sucked up their praise and warmed my hands on the hot metal mug. Then I sat on my pack, content to savor the glow of triumph and wait for the others to descend. But as I unstrapped my crampons, reality settled over me.

Although I’d relished the challenge of pushing my self-imposed limits, it was clear that climbing would *not* be my arena for living dangerously. Proving myself on another man’s turf, I knew, proved little. The course had, however, helped me grasp the complexity of my own nature. Like the poet, Whitman, I’d discovered that I

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“was large,” that I, too, could “contain multitudes.” Discovering that I could fear a challenge *and* rise to meet it, I’d discovered strengths I would need to lay down my own path with heart. Tired, and a touch melancholic, I leaned back against a tree trunk and began mentally outlining the leadership article I’d been so afraid to tackle. As I did, I caught a whiff of cheap Chianti and thought I heard a familiar voice whisper, “*All-right!* Way to go, buddy!”

When Eric and James arrived, we headed back through the sweet-smelling forest to the van. While the others chattered on about their day or dropped off to sleep, I sat alone and wondered how my life would unfold if I lived it with the intensity and focus I’d put into the past week. As the ghostly moonlit ridge and serrated peak of the mountain that John died on floated by outside, another of his aphorisms came clear to me. “The only failure,” he’d said, “is not to try.”

I pressed my face to the cold glass and tried to imagine the challenges I’d have to face if I was serious about becoming a writer.

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