

Breathe

By Joe Brown

Ye know it's wrong! Ye're doing it wrong. Ye take a tumble now ye're both dead. But what are the options man for christ sake she's gonnae die man. She's actually gonnae die unless ye get somebody. So ye keep running, almost headlong, down the steep, rocky ridge. Legs pumping fae side to side. Stepping and jumping. Concentration man. Concentrate and don't bloody panic. Keep the heid man. Watch the rocks. Bloody rocks. All wet. Greasy. Yer eyes darting, side to side, looking for the best bits; footholds; the next step: wee flat one, bounce aff that, another wee flat, step here, bounce, the quick, double-take, shimey-shammey steps causing most problems. The knees just no up tae this at all, no way. Ye feel them, waver and almost go every other step. The left worst, definitely. Always yer weakest side, the left. Christ but she's bad man. She's in a bad way; she really is. Ye keep seeing it - her face - clear as ye like. God almighty man her wee face; all smashed and cut like that. And her leg. Her leg. The strange angle of it; the image there in yer mind; broken for sure. Ye feel sick, almost buckle. Christ! Cool yer jets man. Ye drop the pace tae something controllable; let the breathing settle. Nice and steady man. Just keep it steady.

Reaching a steep scramble, 20ft, maybe less, ye swing intae it, facing the stone, working the arms and hands and feet, down and down from hold tae step tae hold; sliding bits; scraping; jumping back the last six - maybe ten - foot and falling back on yer arse. Eejit! But ye're still intact. Ye're no hurt. It's ok and ye pick yerself up, drawing a big breath, eye the crag just negotiated before ye turn and pick up the pace again. The going definitely better now. The way less steep and so ye lengthen the stride, feeling a bit stronger. Ye see out the corner of yer eye, the torn sleeve of yer jacket, flapping every swing of the arm. Disnae matter but. The good Gore Tex tae, so what! Ye don't care. Not important; not now. Ye don't even look at it; not directly. Ye're just aware of it. This flash of white that wisnae there before. It makes it real though - not caring or looking - this is actually real.

Oh Christ! Ye look at yer watch. It's just after three. When did ye leave her? When had she fallen; how long since ...? Christ. Ye don't even know. That's important surely? They'll ask that for sure. One wee fact ye don't even know. Ye stop, look again at yer watch then back towards the crags, the gully poking out behind. Forty minutes? Aye, forty minutes since ye left her. Two-twenty ye'd tell them. Ye left her about two-twenty. Christ but ye left her! Unconscious. Not moving. Ye feel guilty. Ye cannae help it, ye just do, but then what can ye dae? What else? Ye were doing it right, definitely. She'd still been breathing. Ye were nae use up there. Nae use at all. Get help. That was the right thing tae do. That's all ye knew; get the rescue boys and get her sorted; that was the only thing to do.

Ye were almost down aff the slopes. Almost at the easy stuff. A wee, winding path that ducked and weaved its way along the burn, out the glen to the road. Just get to the road! No more than a mile. Ye pick the pace up till ye're moving quite quickly; then ye fall. No warning. Ye trip and ye're down. Nae outstretched hands. Momentum connects ye tae rocks and pain; breath leaving ye; pain filling ye. Ye lie there, just the way ye've fallen, wrapped against stone. The left ribs crushed hard against it. No moving despite the pain. Stay still. God the pain man christ ..., everywhere. Trying ... tae breathe. Ye cannae breathe. All breath torn fae ye. Just winded perhaps. Aye. Ye're maybe just winded is all. Relax man. Nothing's broken; ye're just winded. Relax. Try'n breath. But no, it was worse. No air at all. The lungs empty and ye wanting to scream because of the pain. Yell a bit. But no air. No air for that. Oh ... man god almighty, sharp ...! Ye roll on tae yer back; gasp a wee mouthful. Hot. Breath burning. ...breathing tea. Black tea. Like breathing ... hot, black tea. Chest...for sure. A rib perhaps. Ye push air back; force it out; but less. Less out than in, then gulp more, a reflex gulp, it burning like the last and tighter. The chest tight. Relax. Ye're ok. Ye'll be... It's ok. The way she'd... she'd fallen. ...been behind. Seen it god almig - couldnae get tae her but. Ye'd just... She just tripped. Ye see it again. A stupid trip. Her toe, caught on her heel then aff the edge. Straight aff and down. Ye feel sick. The guts hollow and sink. Seeing it, there again, her falling, rolling, smashing down. Ye're gonnae be sick. Sit up. Ye sit up - nausea fading. Need up. Ye have tae get up. Get moving. Need tae stand and get. Ye half roll onto the right, push up onto

yer knees. Yer hand reaching round the side; pressing ribs. Pain from the left slicing across the back. Ye cough, a hard, dry cough. The taste of blood. Ye wipe yer hand across yer tongue. A trail of red, streaked slaber. And the heart man; ye can feel it. Feel it moving; rubbing against lung or rib. Not sore but, just weird; a weird feeling. Ye stand, more weight on the right leg. Yer left knee untested; numb. Trying tae cough; wanting a good cough; but the lungs all wrong. Wee airless puffs and gasps. Ye take a few steps. The knee easing a bit then almost normal; a dull ache just. Tolerable. Walking slow. Steady. Deliberate. Breathing the worst bit. Shallow sips and puffs was it. A few more steps. Steps measured against breaths. Step to a breath. Step to a breath. Step-breathe. Step-breathe. Wee Lesley man-step-breathe-don't let her down ya-step-fool-breathe. Step-breathe. Step-breathe.

Ye mind that book. The book ye read. The guy who'd crawled for miles, his leg broken, over snow and ice and crevasses. Bit at a time, that was it. Just pick wee bits, wee targets, that's how he'd done it. A clump of rock for instance. Step-breathe. That clump of rocks there. Fifty metres at a guess, no more. Step-breathe. She had to live man god she had tae no die. Yer mate's daughter. Wee Lesley man. Yer best mate's wee lassie. Maybe sixty metres, it seemed closer but ye can never tell. The pain becoming familiar. Ye've the measure of it now. Know each breath how far tae take it. How hard ye can fill and stretch the ribs before a limit's reached and the pain ... a slice through the back. Her last year at the Uni tae. Oh god, hing in there pet. Yer sweating. A bad kind of sweat! Ye hadn't noticed before but ye run yer hand across yer neck and ower yer face and find them soaked. And ye're cold tae. Ye feel quite cold. Wee shivers now and then, grabbing ye in waves. Three more steps. Another step. The rock; ye touch it. Where next? Don't pause, just pick; where next? Ye take a step. Wait! Wait till ye've picked. Pick then move – where? Ye look ahead, the sight no quite right. The vision drifting a bit. Maybe a mist coming? Ye shake the heid, rub the eyes. The brow of the next rise? Maybe the foot? The foot. Moving again. A step. A breath. Step-breathe. Step-breathe. -breathe. Slowing. Ye know it. The breathing getting harder. Less out each time than in, and sweating. A clammy sweat. The heart pounding and feeling a bit dizzy now. But keep going. Just fix yer eyes: fix on the brow. Just tae the brow and on from there.

Wee Leslie man god he loved her tae – like a daughter tae him. His other wee daughter. God hen, help's coming love. Help's coming. Coughing hard; all yer body coughing; trying tae, but no air. Ye stop. It's wrong. Something's ... not the brow! Ye're looking at the brow. That's wrong; ye'd picked the foot before, ye were sure. Why the brow? Ye bend forward, hands on thighs supporting, looking at the brow of the next rise. Ye should be looking at the foot! Ye slump against a clump of heather. The foot for sure, that had been settled. But ye're looking at the brow. Feeling a bit lost. How no the brow? Ye don't know. What's the problem? Ye cannae answer. Ye close yer eyes; roll yer face into the earth; cough into it. A relief; an unexpected relief. Ye feel better; supported. The heather soft, holding ye. Firm, like a friend's hug. A wee rest. Ye'll have a wee rest perhaps. Try'n catch yer breath. Let the sweat dry then start again. Ye'll do that. Ye're tired. A wee sleep then ye'll head for the foot; and then the brow. And two-twenty, ye'd mind tell them. But a wee rest just. Yer face pushed hard against scrub; through thin breaths, the damp spring heather, the scent reminding ye of purple.