

Cheating the Reaper

By John Burns

So this is how it feels. Dying I mean. It ends here, alone, afraid, crouching on a ledge, struggling for breath, vomiting quietly. A rock, a metre square, lands on the ledge beside me, exploding on impact. The next one won't miss. I don't have long. Close by a twenty meter rock gendarme topples slowly forward like a drunken old man and collapses. And there is the noise. The roar all around me, so loud the mountain trembles and my ribs reverberate. The rope pulls hard at my waist, a reminder that it leads down to Steve's lifeless body. He has already stepped into the darkness, I wait at the threshold. A leaf brushes my face, just the gentlest of touches, looking up I see a tree falling past. Hurlled to its death by the monster it reaches out to me with its finger tips. Through the fog of terror and despair that clouds my brain, a thought struggles to be heard. I am not dead, I realise, not yet. Somehow I have survived the last ten seconds. Perhaps, just maybe, I can survive the next.

I had always thought that birds were dumb, not that I gave the matter any thought, I'm no ornithologist. One of many things I learned that day is that they are smarter than they look. We were descending, the hot sun had thawed the ice making it too unstable. I relaxed; no more hard climbing today and looked out, across a thousand snow capped peaks of the Canadian Rockies. I looked down and noticed, with mild curiosity, that in the forest, a thousand feet below, a line of birds was flying away through the tree tops. There were brown ones, white ones, fat ones and thin ones eagles, sparrows and pigeons, all were leaving the forest at the foot of the climb in a ragged line. They were flying away, I now realise, as fast as their feathers could carry them, because they knew something I didn't. They were sharper than me. They knew that in the snow basin, way above the ice climb, a crack had ripped across the face of the snow pack. A monster was coming, and the birds knew it.

I dreamed ice in those days, lived it, breathed it, and spent long summers waiting for the first kiss of frost to turn the glens sparkling white. I began my climbing in the Northern Corries of the Cairngorms, survived my novice years and endured the endless weekdays waiting for Sundays on *Lochnagar*, *Creag Meagaidh* or *Ben Nevis*. My days in the winter hills were Technicolor, days that lived bright in the memory, shining amongst the grey every day. *Green Gully*, *Zero*, *Emerald*, *The Curtain* these were gifts from the mountain gods on rare bright days when the sunlight seemed to splinter on the ice. The disappointment of damp black winters led Steve and me to look far afield for places where the ice god lived. Canada was the place, we decided, in Canada it would be cold and we would have all the ice we dreamt of. Reality, and global warming, conspired to disappoint and we caught the warmest Canadian winter for twenty years, a fact that had sealed our fate.

I noticed something else unusual as I was watching the birds leave, that sunlit Canadian day, it was going dark. I remember thinking how odd that was, curious, peculiar perhaps, but of no real concern. It was warm, way warmer than it should have been and water was dripping from the surface of the ice as we climbed the lower pitches. We had forgotten to check the avalanche warnings and as we climbed our ice screws melted out. The mountain had tried to tell us but we had not listened. The signs were all there but we couldn't see them, we had tunnel vision. All we could see was the shining ice that had drawn us thousands of miles from Scotland. The seeds of catastrophe are frequently found in a collection of small inconsequential errors. I was watching the birds scatter when Steve called out, as I turned to reply...the mountain exploded.

At moments like these, time becomes distorted and the memory a series of disjointed moments. The monster leapt over the cliff hundreds feet above us and landed on top of us bringing with him tonnes of wet snow, shattered ice, rocks and trees. He vented his wrath on anything that stood in his way and we were very definitely in his way. I was just to the side of the ice fall and Steve was retreating down the climb towards me, one rope clipped to a runner behind him with our second rope as back up, when the monster grabbed him and hurled him from the mountain. I watched in horror as he disappeared into the maelstrom and thousands of tonnes of rock and ice poured down on top of both of us. Moments later I knew he must be going over the cliff below us, I had to stop

him. I'm not a brave man, I knew that if I locked off the belay the shock would hit me and if the belay failed I'd be catapulted into oblivion. I hesitated, transfixed by fear while the battle within me raged. Then something happened, I watched, as though from somewhere far away, as my arm swung across my body and locked off the belay. I had been on a winter climbing course at Glenmore Lodge and they told me to use a body belay, to hold a fall by gradually slowing the climber down in order to protect the belay from a sudden shock. What they hadn't told me is what it feels like to hold a falling climber in the grip of a monster. The moment I locked off the rope I was convulsed with pain, the rope tried to separate my pelvis from my chest. It cut deep into my body cracking my ribs. Just when I could hold on no longer the rope broke and I collapsed on to the ledge, gasping and vomiting, waiting for death.

I learned something then. When it gets really bad, surviving the whole thing feels too much, so I broke it down into small chunks, bite-sized pieces of survival. Just get through the next ten seconds, I thought, then worry about the rest. I was pressed hard against the rock face whilst the monster hurled everything it could at me. Rocks, trees and wet slab thundered down. The certainty of death was replaced by some glimmer of hope. I spotted a peg I'd missed before and stepped out from the meagre shelter afforded by the stance to clip into it, anything to maximise the chance of survival. If you have seen the film "Saving Private Ryan" you'll have some idea of what it was like breaking cover. Remember the scene when they land on the beach and step out into a hail of fire. That's exactly what it was like. As I clipped the peg a rock playfully bounced off my right hand breaking a couple of fingers but, much worse, bringing a temporary paralysis. I will never know how I wasn't killed clipping that peg, in retrospect it was probably a mistake but there was only one mantra going through my mind at the time, "protect the belay."

As quickly as it had arrived the monster departed, its mischief done. The sun came out and the birds returned. It was hard to believe that, moments before, I had been fighting for my life. It was as though nothing had happened apart from the fact that the ice climb we had come up no longer existed, at the foot of the crag was a huge cone of debris. The first rope had broken but the second had held, it pulled at my waist, still attached to Steve's body. It seemed so utterly pointless, so stupid, to have come all this way to die on a piece of ice. I didn't call down to Steve, after all there is no point in shouting at a corpse. I tied a prusik knot around the remaining rope and set down to find the remains of my friend, dreading what I was about to meet. Just beneath small overhang I found him grinning like a baboon, but obviously alive. He had had the presence of mind to roll under the overhang. His lung was punctured, he was bloodied but alive. I will never be more surprised or relieved than I was at that moment. A Park Ranger had been amongst the cars that had stopped on the highway below to watch the spectacle unfold. He called in a helicopter. Twenty minutes later Steve was in hospital and I was standing on a helipad trying to stop shaking.

Every time you tie on, every time you make the first move, you take that chance. If it had ended there, would it have been worth it? The years of climbing in Scotland, seeing the starlight sparkling on the summit of the Ben, the mates, the laughs we had, the good times and the bad, would all have ended there. Somehow we had cheated the Grim Reaper, he had us on his list but we escaped him. I doubt if he was troubled, after all, I'm sure he has pencilled us in for another day. Next time I'm climbing, if I notice it's going dark and, looking down, I see the birds are leaving, I'll know... the Reaper's back.