

TOUCH THE TOP OF THE WORLD

by Erik Weihenmayer

INTRODUCTION

MCKINLEY'S KAHILTNA GLACIER

For thousands of years, a massive tongue of the Kahiltna Glacier, forty miles long and a mile thick, has been inching its way down the western flanks of Mount McKinley, splintering, cracking, collapsing, and shearing off as if it were alive. Below fourteen thousand feet, giant gaping chasms bisect each other in chaotic patterns, but snowfall blows across the openings and freezes, so that deep crevasses are hidden from sight by a snow cover of only a few inches in places.

On a past training climb, I had made the mistake of bragging to my teammates that I could sense when we were over a hidden crevasse by the soft tremulous feel of the snow and the slightly hollow thunk made by my boot steps. So, they had decided to test my claim by pushing me forward and making me lead across the notoriously suspect snowfield below our fourteen-thousand-foot camp.

"This'll teach you to brag, Super Blind Guy," Jeff, a close friend and one of my teammates, called out as he and the others crept along behind, keeping taut the 150-foot climbing rope connecting us. The tension in the rope assured me they would be ready to hurl their bodies face-first into the snow, their chests driving in the pick of their axes, hopefully arresting me, if I were to plunge through. The dry bitter wind roared across the surface of the glacier, rattling through my GORE-TEX. The wind scoured the top layer of snow into a frozen crust, and I could hear the biting metal squeak of my crampons as they clawed into the ice.

I stepped cautiously, listening as I slowly brought down the full weight of each step, forcing myself to breathe in rhythm. What were the chances of me stumbling upon a hidden crevasse, I thought, in this place, at this moment? I probed a trekking pole in front of me. Initially, it held, but suddenly it popped through the Styrofoam snow into emptiness, with me swooning forward, the pole sliding through to the handle. Then I heard it, the terrifying noise that climbers dread, the slit of a knife across the glacier and increasing to a loud zipper. I had heard this noise before, the sound of ice fracturing, breaking apart and zigzagging across the frozen ground, but I had never been so near. The snow around me collapsed with a whoomp. The muscles in my legs turned to putty and the rope stretched tighter as the team braced. I felt the lurch of my body and the snow beneath me dropping away, and I knew at once I had broken through. I could feel the air all around me, filling the space under my feet, along my legs, and against my face. Jeff yelled something, but his voice quickly faded in the rushing snow and gear that came with me. A moment later, I was confused because I was still standing. "It was a false shelf! You only dropped a few feet," Chris, our leader, yelled urgently.

"Huh?"

"What are you doing standing there, waiting for it to collapse again?"

I forced my legs to move, mumbling, "False shelves! I never said I could feel false shelves." The lower shelf I moved across was softer than the first, sagging and creaking below me. I tried not to think of the bottomless cavern beneath the thin bridge. I climbed a jagged little ice hump, swinging my ax above it, biting in and pulling myself over what I assumed was the fracture line, and breathed out deeply, chuckling grimly because I knew everyone else now had to cross.

Later at our fourteen-thousand-foot camp, Sam, my primary training partner, said he could finally see the brilliant white ramparts of the West Buttress leading to the top of Mount McKinley, a mile and a half above us. It had taken us a week to get here, but besides the crevasse danger, it had only been a grueling slog up moderate snow slopes. Tomorrow, the real climbing would begin. Sam took my finger and brought it up the route we would climb, stopping at prominent landmarks like the sixty-degree headwall, Washbern's Thumb, and Pig Hill. He pointed out the second tallest peak, Mount Foraker. Then, I tried to point toward McKinley's summit. I pointed my finger a little higher than Foraker. "No. Higher!" Sam laughed. I raised my finger. "Still higher." I continued to point higher and higher. Finally, I pointed so high, I imagined I was pointing at the sun. "There!" Sam said, his voice softer and deeper now, "There's the summit of McKinley!" That is when I felt the stubborn fear washing over me, beginning in the pit of my belly and slowly seeping

into my fingertips, making them tingle.

All my life, fear had nearly paralyzed me. Rock climbing outside of Phoenix had definitely provided a healthy dose of fear, my one hand palming a precarious finger lock while my other hand scanned across the rock face, desperately searching for the next hold. For me, the fear of climbing blind does not come when I am hanging securely from a fat hold or after latching on to the next. The greatest fear is in the reaching, at that moment when I have committed my body and soul to finding the next hold, when I am hoping, predicting, praying I will find what I am seeking. But it isn't all fear. Despite the pain and frustration of going blind, the death of loved ones, the loss of my eyes to glaucoma, none of it had been enough to stamp out the hope. A delicate strand of hope balanced by fear, each keeping the other in its place. It was on the top of one of those rock faces when Sam suggested we try something a little bigger, "Maybe Mount McKinley." I had immediately said yes, and the decision had been like another reach into the darkness, the greatest reach of my life.

That afternoon in the blazing heat, we built snow walls around our campsite. I knew about McKinley's legendary cold, but no one had told me about the heat, reflecting like a mirror off the snow and burning my eyeballs through the leather flaps of my glacier glasses. Then the wind, chilled by the glacier, whipped past me, taking much of my body's warmth with it. "Windburn on top of sunburn. Get used to it," Chris laughed, observing Sam and me constructing snow fortresses out of the glacier. Sam cut blocks of blue ice from the floor while I placed them in a rectangle around the site to block the wind. Soon the walls were as tall as me. Then I cut steps into our fort while Sam packed the small gaps in the walls with snow. Finally the site was ready for the tent. I held one side and threw the other into the wind, which caught it and unfurled it. I laid it on the ground and oriented it by feeling the loops and pockets on the corners through my layers of gloves.

Months before on a training climb on Mount Rainier, a teammate assigned me to set up a tent on the Muir snowfield, on which wind and cold seemed to be the only constants. I was beginning to shiver as I knelt in the snow with the tent laid out in front of me. Through my thick gloves I couldn't feel the delicate sleeves of the fabric. I fumbled with it, clumsily trying to jam the pole through. Then I took my glove off so I could actually touch it. My hands were my eyes, but three frustrating layers of material over them made me feel blind. Only for a second, I thought. Just enough time to get the pole started in the sleeve. But sharp splinters of sleet pricked my bare skin and it went instantly numb. I stuffed my lifeless hand back inside the glove and beat it against my knee. When it came back to life, the pain was so intense I almost vomited from nausea. Not wanting to give up, I whipped off the other glove, but this hand too went numb before it even touched the tent fabric. Sam and Jeff approached. They had finished with the other tents and without saying a word started working on mine. The pain in my hands was nothing compared with my frustration and embarrassment, like a balloon expanding in my chest. I knelt in the snow, listening to the tent lifting up under the pressure of the poles, and I made a promise to myself. The things I could not do, I would let go; but the things I could do, I would learn to do well.

Afterwards in Phoenix, when the temperature was hovering above a hundred degrees, I took the tent to a field near the school where I taught and, with my thick gloves on, worked on setting it up and breaking it down and setting it up again. I heard cars slowing down on the nearby road, to gape, I imagined, at the lunatic in the blazing heat, in a tank top and mountaineering gloves, kneeling over a tent. But I refused to be the weak link of the team. I wanted them to put their lives in my hands, as I would put mine in theirs. I would carry my share. I would contribute as any other team member. I would not be carried up the mountain and spiked on top like a football. If I were to reach the summit, I would reach it with dignity.

That evening on McKinley, we sat on ice benches around the tents we'd set up and our gas stove. I could feel the sun quickly dropping away beneath the peaks, plunging the temperature fifty degrees in minutes. Near eight p.m., climbers all over the mountain awaited Base Camp Annie's weather report over the two-way radio. Instead of the report, however, our radio crackled the news of two Taiwanese climbers who were trapped at nineteen thousand feet. That morning, they had left for the summit with high expectations but had pushed too hard and too fast in a whiteout and were forced to bivvy on the Football Field, a hundred-yard shelf of snow just beneath the summit ridge. Now, many hours later, they lay huddled together, freezing to

death in the frigid night air. One of them croaked their position to a rescue party. “Sit tight,” a ranger responded. “The winds are too high for the Black Hawk.” We all sat transfixed, drawn to the desperate events unfolding. An hour later, the same voice, although weaker, crackled over the radio. It was almost a whisper. “My friend, he has stopped breathing.”

Sam and I headed dejectedly for our tent. Sitting inside, Sam asked, “What separates us from them? I mean from the guys who die?” Neither of us spoke for a long time.

A year before, we had been no different. Sam and I, in preparation for McKinley, had tried to climb Humphrey’s Peak in Arizona, a moderate climb that takes the average hiker only a few hours to summit. But minutes from the parking lot, Sam had hesitated. “What if you get hurt up there?” he said. “How would I get you down?” I had only added to his doubts by leaving a glove in the car. Sam had gone ballistic, seizing the opportunity to reassess our prospects. “If this had been McKinley,” he said angrily, “that might have meant your hand.” So we had turned back, and I fumed with anger. “You don’t understand,” he tried again. “When we get up there, I’m the one who has to get us down.” And I understood that Sam was not so much questioning me, but his own ability to lead a blind person safely through the mountains.

A week later, when our tempers had cooled, Sam suggested that we try again, this time on Long’s Peak, a rough fourteener in the Colorado Rockies. Gauging from our failure on Humphrey’s, I didn’t think we had any chance of succeeding on a much higher and more difficult peak, one often considered the most grueling in Colorado. And on top of everything, we would be trying it in January. I agreed anyway. On the first day we climbed slowly as I followed the sound of Sam’s footsteps over icy boulder fields and up steep snow ridges. We were stopped five hundred feet from the summit by high winds. Retreating back to our high camp, we spent a traumatic night feeling the winds buffeting the tent walls, threatening to rip the tent from its stakes and tumble us down the mountain. The next morning the tent was buried in three feet of fresh snow. We descended slowly, stopping every few seconds to brace against the incredible force of the wind, now over a hundred miles per hour, which constantly picked me up and slammed me back against the rocks and snow. Eventually, I could no longer follow the sound of Sam’s footsteps over the howling gale. I couldn’t even make out his shouts, only a few feet away. With numb hands, Sam struggled to tie a piece of webbing from my pack to his own and, for the next seven hours, I followed him down by the tension of the webbing. Paying close attention to my footing on the steep slope, I was often blown off balance, but Sam was always there so that we could brace our bodies together against the force of the wind. When we finally reached the parking lot late that afternoon, we were dehydrated and exhausted. We had failed to make the summit. My eyelids had frozen together and Sam had lost a snowshoe in the deep powder, but we both knew, emphatically, that if we could make it through that, we could make it through anything.



Plume

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