

Touching the Void Study Guide

Touching the Void by Joe Simpson (mountaineer)

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.

Contents

Touching the Void Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Beneath the Mountain Lakes.....	4
Tempting Fate.....	5
Storm at the Summit.....	7
On the Edge.....	8
Disaster.....	9
The Final Choice.....	11
Shadows in the Ice.....	13
Silent Witness.....	14
In the Far Distance.....	15
Mind Games.....	16
A Land Without Pity.....	18
Time Running Out.....	19
Tears in the Night, Epilogue.....	21
Characters.....	23
Objects/Places.....	26
Themes.....	28
Style.....	30
Quotes.....	32
Topics for Discussion.....	34

Plot Summary

Joe Simpson describes crawling out of his tent early one morning from his campsite on the Cordillera Huayhuash in the Peruvian Andes. He is camping with Simon, a man with a rather reckless spirit that Joe admires. The third of their party is a man named Richard. He is an explorer of sorts and his purpose is to remain with the gear while Joe and Simon are out climbing. As Joe and Simon make several practice runs on smaller climbs, Joe is pleased that the two of them are well-matched.

They make their final preparations and set off on their climb. They encounter several minor problems but make relatively good time on the ascent. They take turns leading the way with the other serving as the belay point. They are roped together on a one hundred, fifty foot rope. They reach the summit on time and Joe notes that he feels the familiar sense of anticlimax. They begin the descent and Joe falls, breaking his leg and ankle. It takes Simon some time to traverse the distance between them, catching up. When he does, he notes the seriousness of the situation at a glance. He says that he sees in Simon's eyes that he does not expect Joe to make it off the mountain. Joe says that the look is distant, as the look one gives a condemned animal that cannot be helped. Despite that, they do not discuss the issue and Joe resolutely begins his way down the mountain. They soon hit upon a way to cover distance more quickly by creating a belay point for Simon—a seat of sorts out of snow that will hold his weight. From this point, Joe is lowered on a rope. At the end of the rope, Joe builds a new belay point while Simon catches up.

On one of the descents, Joe falls off an outcropping and into space. For more than an hour, Simon holds his position, hoping that Joe will begin to climb the rope. He does not feel anything to indicate that is happening and a snow storm combined with the distance prevents conversation. Joe hangs there, expecting he is going to die at any moment. He accepts that it will happen, then is suddenly falling. He believes Simon has fallen and is now plummeting toward the edge but later discovers that the rope has actually been cut. Simon, deciding he cannot help Joe by dying himself, makes the decision to cut the rope. They each spend the night then Simon, believing Joe has died, completes the descent. The next day, Joe pulls himself from the crevasse where he has miraculously landed on a ledge and begins the agonizing journey to base camp. His days pass in a haze of pain and falling but he continues.

As he nears the camp, he fears that Simon and Richard might have already left but finds his way near the tent and summons Simon by yelling. Joe says he does not blame Simon for his decision to cut the rope, nor for believing that he had died in the fall. They spend the remainder of the night in the camp and make the two-day trek by mule to a Peruvian town where they rent a truck to make their way to Lima. Joe undergoes a series of surgeries on his leg and within ten weeks is again ready to climb.

Beneath the Mountain Lakes

Beneath the Mountain Lakes Summary and Analysis

Joe Simpson describes crawling out of his tent early one morning from his campsite on the Cordillera Huayhuash in the Peruvian Andes. He is camping with Simon, a man with a rather reckless spirit that Joe admires. The third of their party is a man named Richard. He is an explorer of sorts and his purpose is to remain with the gear while Joe and Simon are out climbing. As Joe and Simon make several practice runs on smaller climbs, Joe is pleased that the two of them are well-matched. There is some concern about the weather but they finally decide that the daily rainfall is actually nothing more than a normal weather pattern.

They plan to climb the South Ridge of Seria Norte but discover the cliffs are not suitable for climbing. Two additional attempts fail and Joe notes the score is "mountains three, climbers nil." They finally set off for their destination, the West Face of the Siula Grande, called Serapo. It has not been climbed before. They pack their gear with the intention of being gone four or five days. They do not take a tent but plan to sleep in "snow holes." Richard accompanies them part of the way until the going gets rough.

Simon and Joe stop to carefully examine the face of the mountain they are about to climb. Joe says that it is important for them to know where the major crevasses are so they do not head for a path that is impossible to ascend.

Joe goes into detailed descriptions of the area and some readers may find these somewhat tedious. There are some interesting facts, such as the way the South Ridge of Seria Norte is "a series of cornices protruding almost vertically from the ridge," and that "to have touched the bottom cornice with an ice axe" would prompt their collapse.

Richard takes their photos just as they are parting. He jokes that the pictures could be worth a lot of money as "obituary photos" and the three of them laugh at that. While they are optimistic, they are also aware of the dangers. One of the biggest facing them on this climb is that there are no other climbers and there is not likely to be a rescue if they become trapped.

Tempting Fate

Tempting Fate Summary and Analysis

At five a.m. the following morning, Joe's hands are so cold that he has "hot aches." He says his only consolation is that once he is over this session of aches, he will not have them again on this trip. Simon begins the ascent up the ice field. When Simon plants his ice pick for the first time, Joe says "this was it." Simon climbs to the end of their rope, one hundred, fifty feet above Joe. He issues a "cheery shout" and Joe begins the climb. Joe says that by two thousand feet, the monotony of the climb has set in and they wonder when they will clear the ice field. When they are above it, Joe catches up to Simon to discover that he has started lunch, including a hot drink over a small stove and chocolate bars. They are now fighting time with only some six hours to climb a wide hanging gully and dig a cave for their camp that night.

As Joe leads on the next part of the climb, he can hear Simon shouting about the falling debris making direct and painful contact. When Joe reaches the end of the rope, Simon begins his climb. As he passes Joe, he says it is now his turn. During Simon's climb, they discover there are cornices above them that they realize could collapse. They hurry past, though Joe notes he does not want to rush into a mistake. Then a rock rushes at Joe and he yells a warning down to Simon who pulls his sack over his head and avoids a major hit.

With only an hour and a half of daylight left, they are still some distance from where they plan to camp. It is after ten o'clock when Joe finds his way to the area where they plan to camp and Simon snaps about the time. They expect to have to find a place to dig a snow cave to sleep in but they find a cave already made. Joe says he is nervous about the spot but that there is "no use harping about it" because there is nowhere else to sleep. As they settle in to camp, Simon asks Joe which he prefers—turkey or moussaka and Joe notes that they are both "disgusting." Simon cheerfully says, "You're right, turkey it is."

As Joe is climbing over a particularly rough spot, he says he puts himself into a routine of "now the hammer, look at your foot, can't see them, kick hard, and again, on up ...". He says that Simon might as well have not been there because Joe is concentrating solely on the climb. He seems to be thoroughly enjoying himself though the reader will soon learn that Joe has had a harrowing experience during a climb.

Joe recounts the story of a climb at Les Petits Drus. He is climbing with Ian Whittaker and the two make their camp beneath a large overhang. They fix a safety rope, clip themselves in and are just settling down when the ground under them gives way and they are both falling. They are caught by the safety lines though Ian is almost hanged in the process. They first giggle hysterically then realize how serious it is. They hang there twelve hours until their shouts for help are heard and they are picked off the face of the cliff by a rescue chopper. Joe says that Ian returned to the Alps the following year but

his "desire to climb had been destroyed." Joe says he was "lucky or stupid," but that he got over the dread—except when it came to camps.

Storm at the Summit

Storm at the Summit Summary and Analysis

They head out the next morning and Joe again wonders at their good fortune at having found the natural cave. They soon encounter another patch of bad terrain, slowing their climb, but both are optimistic that they will reach the top. Joe is elated at the thought that he is going to climb a mountain no one else has managed. They reach a section of rock and at one point Simon's climbing gear, which they call "friends," lets go and Joe says that for a moment Simon remains "poised" but is only holding onto loose rocks. Then he falls, but Joe catches him easily. Joe takes over the lead when Simon says he is "knackered." Joe is tired by the time he reaches a spot where he will have to knock away icicles. He reaches up and hits at them with his hammer, causing them to cascade down on the two men. Joe has a split lip and a cracked tooth. He tells Simon he "didn't think" and Simon says he noticed. Joe's mouth is still bleeding when they stop for lunch.

Joe leads off with about two hours of daylight left. He flounders and is suddenly afraid, but he is annoyed with himself for allowing it to show in his voice. Simon easily traverses the slope that gives Joe the trouble. They next encounter deep powdered snow and Simon has to dig a trench in search of firmer footing. They deal with a sudden storm before finding a place to settle in for the night with their last freeze-dried meal. They have three hundred feet left to the summit and are at about twenty thousand feet.

Joe starts out the next morning and he is trying to choose a route. He is concerned because he says it is possible to get into a position that he cannot back out of. They reach the summit but there is a storm blowing in and they are soon caught in white-out conditions. Simon climbs toward what they believe to be a ridge that will offer some safety but it gives way beneath him. When Joe joins him, they see that the ridge actually has cracks across it, meaning that it remains unsafe.

At one point, Joe says he takes a careful look at their precarious position and cannot believe what they are doing. He seems to be worried about the fact that they are so totally exposed. When they reach the final ridge and Simon makes the few final feet to the summit, Joe takes photos. He says that it is an anticlimax but that the feeling is typical. He wonders if he is climbing the mountain for pleasure or if it is his ego driving him to such lengths. Though he has had all these thoughts, it is during the storm, when Simon heads off to the ridge and Joe can no longer see him that, for the first time, he has a "twinge of anxiety." He will later attribute this to a sort of second sense he has about situations such as this—his ability to sense danger before it happens.

On the Edge

On the Edge Summary and Analysis

When Joe realizes that Simon is headed straight down, he shouts for him to stop. They are a rope-length apart and cannot hear each other but Simon waits for Joe to come closer. Joe suddenly loses his foothold and slides down but stops when he crashes into Simon. He snaps that they cannot possibly make it down the way they are going then apologizes for "freaking out." By the time it is dark, they are cold and battling the dropping temperatures. Joe notes that Simon uses a rather questionable tactic to round a rock wall by jumping into the loose snow on the other side. Joe says it could easily have been loose rock but that they were both too tired to care by then.

Simon has problems with his light and has frostbite when he is done working on it. Joe digs a snow cave, is dissatisfied with the first effort and digs another. The next morning, Joe says he forgets how close they came to falling and allows himself to enjoy the moment. They use the last of the gas for the morning routine, eat and prepare to head down. They encounter another dangerous stretch of snow and at one point Joe slides almost off the edge. He says that when he gets back on safer ground, he is frightened and Simon is scared as well.

Temperatures are wearing thin and Simon is angry when Joe begins digging a new cave because the one he has started has too many holes to ward off the wind. Joe feels Simon is being petulant and ignores him. Later, Joe thinks of two Japanese climbers who fell to their deaths at Croz Spur in the French Alps. Simon and his partner, Jon, were climbing near the two Japanese climbers when one of them fell, taking the other down with him. Miraculously, one of the men survives the fall but they both plunge on down the ice into another crevasse and the survivor is also killed. Joe notes Simon was quiet when he returned to their base camp at Chaminax but was back to normal the following day.

As they are getting ready to resume their descent, Joe remembers that Simon had frostbite the night before and looks at his hands with concern. He says it is amazing that he was more concerned about Simon's ability to continue as an effective climbing partner than about his health.

Disaster

Disaster Summary and Analysis

Progress is slow and then Joe finds a series of crevasses filled with powdered snow. Each time he steps into one, he sinks deeply and has to claw his way back out. Then he realizes he has been walking along a huge cornice rather than finding a series of smaller ones and he is suddenly concerned it might give way. When he finishes that part of the climb, he encounters an ice wall that will not hold their ice screws. He selects another route and cautiously lowers himself onto the wall using the crampons of his shoes and an ice axe to hold himself here. Just as he is driving his other ice hammer into the ice, he hears a crack and the ice gives way. In a split second, he is falling. When he hits the ground at the bottom, he hears the bones break in his right leg and screams. He knows Simon will not be able to catch him and that they will both be dragged off the mountain, but then he stops. He says he tries to believe his leg is not broken because he knows a broken leg with only two climbers in these conditions is a death sentence.

Joe takes stock of his situation. He is at some nineteen thousand feet, there are no rescue operators who will come to help and he and Simon are alone. He knows Simon will have no choice but to go on alone. When Simon catches up, Joe is on his feet. Simon asks what happened and Joe says he has broken his leg. He says Simon has the "detached" look one gives an animal that cannot be helped. Joe goes into detail about his feelings. He says he knows he cannot show any weakness in front of Simon. He says he feels he is holding something very fragile—Simon's presence. If he talks about it or questions Simon's plans, he will lose it. Joe says he and Simon seem to have come to a tacit agreement not to talk about the situation but to take some time to work it out, each for himself.

Simon says that he realizes the situation and comes to terms with the fact that he is going to have to leave Joe on the mountain. He says it would be easier if Joe were to fall because he is not certain he can leave him while he is still trying to make his way down. He also says he knows he can make it down on his own.

They reach a point where they are to have a sharper descent and Simon digs himself a "seat" with the idea that he will lower Joe down, then follow himself. In just a few minutes, Joe is down some one hundred fifty feet. He says that he is suddenly more optimistic than since before he fell, except that the weather is quickly deteriorating. He reaches the end of the rope and Simon begins his own descent and they repeat the process. They then traverse a short distance and prepare for another descent. Simon's hand are "gone" with cold again and they consider building a snow cave and waiting but decide to make as much downward progress as possible, even though the day is gone and darkness is near.

Typical of Joe's attitude, he is now impatient to be off the mountain. He says he knows they will not make it back down in the six hours they had planned and that he is tired of the "grinding" concentration required. They are making progress very slowly, have no gas left and few rations. He says the two men do not talk when they stop to rest because there is nothing left to say. Joe says that he had been nervous of being in the lead but then reaches a point where he is no longer worried. When he lands in a crevasse and sinks to his neck, floundering his way back to the surface, he finds Simon is watching and laughing.

As the two men take in the situation, Joe fears Simon will be willing to leave him but seems to know that there is no other option. Simon is looking at the situation from the opposite point of view. It is interesting that there seems to be a line between Simon and Joe—Joe as the victim and Simon as his lifeline. It is the same from Simon's point of view and they both know that he can make the descent without Joe but that Joe is almost certainly lost without Simon. It is also interesting that once Joe begins to feel more optimistic, he says that they both lose the sense of dread. There is no indication whether Simon voices that as well or if it is merely a case of Joe putting his own emotions onto Simon.

The Final Choice

The Final Choice Summary and Analysis

Joe begins the next line of descent which is much steeper. He says he drops so quickly that he is in agony and his leg is continually snagged and jarred. He screams out in pain but Simon does not slow the descent and Joe feels Simon is probably barely in control. He says the "blame must lie somewhere" and curses at Simon for it. He later admits that Simon does know of the pain but that the descent had to be made as quickly as possible. On the next descent, he tells Simon to slow down some but says that he goes faster than before. As Joe is digging the fifth seat for their second line of descent, he hits ice. He says that it takes some minutes to realize that he needs to insert an ice screw and even longer to rouse his body to the task. They decide to abseil because they cannot tell what they will be lowering Joe into. When Joe catches up to Simon, he is on a ledge and Simon helps him make a safe landing.

They continue in this fashion and Joe is pleased that they are making an "orderly descent." Then Joe begins to realize that the slope has become abruptly steeper and that he is approaching a drop off. He yells for Simon who cannot hear, tries to bury his axe and his good leg into the snow to slow his descent but cannot get a grip through the deep powder. Joe flies off the cliff and is hanging in mid-air. He wonders how Simon was able to hold him. It is a serious drop and there is no way for Simon to pull him back up. He considers climbing the rope but his hands are almost useless with the cold. Joe says that he knows there is no way out of this situation and he wonders how long it will take to die. He does not try to beat the feeling back into his hands but allows them to dangle at his side. He says he is grateful for the lack of pain, especially considering the past hours. He rants out loud, cursing his fall and the fact that he and Simon are going to die on this mountain.

Simon says he noticed Joe's grimace of pain as he slid away that final time. He says he now knew Joe's climbing days were over but was worried about his hands. He has several fingers blackened with frostbite and cannot really tell how deep the damage goes. For more than an hour, Simon tries to find some way out of the predicament. He hopes to feel Joe climbing back up the rope but does not. There is a small avalanche that almost sweeps Simon off his seat but he holds on. He is digging in with his feet but feels the seat disintegrating beneath him and knows he is going to be pulled off the mountain. He says he has no option left except to cut the rope. He finds his knife in his rucksack and puts the blade to the rope. With Joe's weight on the other end, the rope "explodes" at the touch. He says he is relieved that he is alive and can feel no guilt at his action. He forces himself to begin digging a snow cave to protect himself from the storm. He says he has no choice but to find shelter and to search for Joe the next morning. He is near unconsciousness himself and continues to force himself awake again to dig some more.

As Simon settles in to try to sleep, he goes back over the events. He considers that they are near the base of the mountain and that Joe might have survived a short fall to the glacier. Simon says Joe might be digging his own snow cave but feels this is not true.

Simon spends a long, near-sleepless night. It has been hours since he had any fluids and he has a thirst that the snow will not appease. He wakes the next morning with a new resolve. He says he knows what he has to do and that "it would kill me." He says he is no longer afraid and that he is past the guilt and pain. The day is brilliant and he steps out onto the snow. He will soon overcome his sense of hopelessness and make his way safely down the mountain.

At one point, Joe says that the two men change from climbing partners to rescuer and victim, and endure the change. Then he says he starts to thank Simon for his sacrifice because they are both aware Simon could descend without Joe, but stops himself. He says that to have said the words would have emphasized his dependence on Simon. It is interesting that he is dependant on Simon but not willing to put it to words. Later, Simon says he believes they have only another four times of lowering to go until they reach the glacier at the base of the climb. Joe says he knows Simon is guessing but that it makes him feel better. Joe also notes that Simon's anxiety is reflected in his eyes and that the fast trip down has cost him considerably—he has little feeling in his hands and has worked tirelessly.

Simon says he is also proud of their descent. He notes that Joe has simply started digging the seat for Simon at each belay point and wonders if he would have done the same. When he is faced with the situation of Joe hanging onto his rope, he ponders the possibilities. It is only after his seat is disintegrating and he knows that he is soon going to be dragged off the mountain that he comes to the decision to cut his own rope. As he is trying to sleep, he notes his "detachment." He says that he feels the need to prosecute himself. He goes back over the facts but does not come to any conclusion. He says he did the right thing and that is why he is alive, but he comes back to the question, "What of Joe?" He will later say that he comes to a decision and has "purged the guilt and pain," indicating he is not at all as confident in his decision as he wants to believe.

It is interesting that Joe mentions his dependence on Simon and that Simon notes he could make it down the mountain without Joe. Both cover those thoughts after Joe's fall. However, Simon admits to a loneliness after he cuts the rope. It seems that even though Joe was much more dependent on Simon, Simon himself did not want to be alone either.

Shadows in the Ice

Shadows in the Ice Summary and Analysis

Joe describes the fall and says the rope lashes against his face, his stomach revolts at the quick descent and he is pelted by objects falling with him. He cannot catch his breath for a moment, then relaxes and finds he can breathe. His broken leg is wedged beneath him but he is on a ledge and fears he will fall further into the crevasse. He has one remaining ice screw and works to attach that to the ice wall next to him in order to secure his position. Now Joe has survived the fall, he wonders about Simon. His first thought is that he will be rescued in the morning if he can only wait for Simon. His next is that Simon himself might be dead but he says he cannot face that thought. He then realizes that if Simon is alive, he will think that Joe is dead. He cites the irony of having survived the fall to land in these conditions.

The rope is above Joe and outside the crevasse and he begins pulling, expecting to find Simon still at the other end. He hopes this will be his salvation, that even if Simon is dead, his body will be an anchor he can use to climb out. When he sees the frayed end, he knows the rope was cut. He says he should have known and that the entire trip down the mountain was a futile effort. He says that truthfully, Simon should have left him when he broke his leg.

Joe considers trying to climb out, saying that at least a fall will mean a swift death, and makes one brief attempt but falls back onto the ledge and does not have the nerve to try again. When it is daylight, he begins to yell for Simon but after some time gives up and knows Simon has gone on without him. He gets through the day and that evening uses the ice screw to abseil down the ledge with the rope he has. He says he cannot stand the thought of another night on the ledge and that if he has to drop at the bottom of the rope, he will at least be free of the ledge.

As Joe is hanging and realizes he is about to fall, he says he hopes someone finds them and that it is known that they climbed the West Face. It is interesting that Joe believes he and Simon will die together and it never occurs to him that Simon will save himself. When he does realize the rope was cut, he does not curse Simon for the action. Instead, he says he should have known that is what would happen. He rants for awhile, then comes to a calm acceptance. It is interesting that Joe does not consider that Simon will come back to rescue him.

Silent Witness

Silent Witness Summary and Analysis

As Simon makes his own descent, he comes to the crevasse where he believes Joe fell to his death. He says that the horror of the ordeal strikes him anew and he feels as if he has just cut the rope again. He says he might as well have put a gun to Joe's head and pulled the trigger. Simon says that the events of the previous day have receded somewhat and he wishes they were back in full. He says that, faced with the fact he is almost clear of the mountain, he needs to remember the full hopelessness of the situation in order to justify his survival. Instead, he has "the stark blackness of the crevasse to accuse me." As he finishes the descent, he says to himself that he is relieved that the crevasse made it impossible for him to see Joe's body and acknowledges he is too weak to continue the search anyway. He is glad to know Joe is already dead because a rescue would have been impossible and Joe would have been left to die a slow, lonely death.

Intuition takes over and Simon finishes the climb down. He does not feel guilty anymore but feels a deep sense of sadness and loss. He continues to a boulder where water pools up as the sun melts snow and stops to drink. He remembers that Joe had called this "bomb alley" because they had been pelted with small rocks falling from the cliffs above. His hands are still cold though he has taken off his jacket, thermal top and over-pants. He makes it to the camp and Richard meets him with food, tea and medicine. Simon says he considered lying about the ordeal and saying that Joe simply fell rather than admitting he had cut the rope. He says that in the end he simply could not bring himself to do that and tells the truth. Richard continues to cook and to offer cups of hot tea. That evening, a storm comes in and they move inside the tent where Simon sees Joe's possessions shoved into a corner. He says he knows what the conditions would be on the mountain under the brunt of the storm.

Simon knows he is going to face accusers once he returns to tell the story of what happened to Joe. He says no one will believe the conditions could have been serious enough to prompt the action and that they will say he could have tried something else. It is interesting that Joe says he calls out for Simon and Simon calls out for Joe at least once, but that they do not hear each other.

Simon knows he will face criticism for his action and considers telling a different story. He says he cannot bear the thought of facing Joe's parents with the truth. Then he considers that if he is berated for his action, it is no more than he deserves. It seems likely Simon is facing "survivor guilt" and though he says he made the only decision available to him, he continues to question whether it was warranted and right.

In the Far Distance

In the Far Distance Summary and Analysis

Joe begins to lower himself down a slope that turns abruptly steeper. He is paralyzed with fear and has to force himself to continue downward. He manages to turn so he can look down, expecting to see nothing but a void, but finds there is a layer of snow not fifteen feet below. He is relieved, then disappointed, to find it is not really a floor, but a dome. He lowers himself onto it, finds that it holds his weight initially and heads toward what he believes is safer ground. On his stomach, he wiggles his way across the ice, taking ten minutes to cross the distance as he stops at every sound of falling snow. He finds a slope that would have been a short climb with two good legs but wonders if he will be able to get up it. He notes the angle is not overly steep until near the top. He begins the ascent, stopping to make places for his feet, hopping up with his weight momentarily on his broken leg while using the axe as a hand hold, then repeating the process. He says he avoids looking up or down so he will not be reminded of the slow progress he is making. When he reaches the top, he pokes his hole out of a small opening and says anyone looking would have thought of a gopher. He is amazed at the view but takes only a minute to look before hauling himself out of the crevasse.

He relaxes for some time but then realizes he is still six miles from base camp and some two hundred feet above the glacier. He begins setting goals that effectively stage the remainder of his descent. He looks back and sees the rope disappearing into the crevasse and knows Simon would have assumed he was dead, therefore there would be no rescue effort.

Joe sees a beam of sunlight and it fills him with strength. He suddenly believes he will make it out of the crevasse and that he will survive. The thoughts invigorate him. He says he is also proud of himself for deciding to leave the ice bridge where his only future would have been death. He was afraid to make that decision, but did it anyway. He is now going to be climbing upward and wonders if he should cut the rope. He says that if he were to fall, it would not keep him from crashing into the floor and that he's swung "like a pendulum" into the lower cavern. He decides to keep the rope tied, needing the security it offers, though it seems to be an emotional security at best.

Joe knows there is no one to hear his cries and curses as he fights his way out of the crevasse but says the silence behind him inhibits his vocalizations anyway. He fights off a sense of dread, that the crevasse has been waiting centuries for a victim. After escaping the crevasse, Joe considers the distance to camp and says, "This is ridiculous." He says it quietly as if someone might hear him and know that he is beaten.

Mind Games

Mind Games Summary and Analysis

Joe slides abruptly down a slope coming to rest in a pile of snow and in screams of agony for his broken leg. He then sees footprints—Simon's—and sets out after them. He is crawling and it takes some time to figure out a method that does not send him into an agony of pain. He says he hears a voice urging him onward and another that follows random thoughts. He does whatever the first voice says and sometimes catches himself in a reverie, singing a popular song to the sounds of his crawling along. He realizes he is making painfully slow time and sometimes makes excuses for stopping to rest.

Then the storm begins to overtake him. He crawls furiously, knowing he is going to lose Simon's footprints in the new snow. When he can see them no more, he lays down, defeated. He says he wants to give up but the voice that has been urging him forward will not stop. He is warm from the strenuous crawling and can sleep, allowing the snow to cover him like a husky. He tumbles into a shallow crevasse, burrows into it for shelter and begins trying to remove his crampons from his boots. He cries out with impotent fury because his fingers will not work and his leg hurts when he leans forward. He finally sleeps, off and on, throughout the night.

Simon is starting to deal with the guilt. He knows he will face criticism but that he can handle that if he can come to terms with the events on his own. He wonders if he murdered Joe then moves on, searching for peace. He takes a bath in the cold mountain stream, eats what Richard prepares, takes medicine to improve circulation and an antibiotic and sorts through Joe's things. He packs a bag to send to Joe's parents, puts Joe's climbing gear with his own things and burns Joe's clothing.

Joe says it is comforting to encounter the footprints. Joe is not certain of the way to go at this point and says Simon will have chosen the most direct and safest path. He sets out to follow the tracks.

Joe continually berates himself for his "childish" actions. He has childish dreams during the night and he sobs out his frustrations on several occasions. It is almost as if, looking back on the ordeal, he cannot believe he was weak enough to give in to those impulses. It seems very similar to what Simon says the day after he cuts the rope. The horror of the night before has receded and he needs it back in order to justify his action. Simon, writing from the distance of time and miles, seems to have forgotten at least some of the true intensity of the ordeal.

There is no real indication of why Simon burns Joe's clothing. Richard points out that some girls and small children living in a shack nearby could likely use the clothing but Simon burns them anyway. He seems to find some solace in the chore of sorting through Joe's things and knows he has to come to terms with what has happened. At

the end of the day, he knows he can never erase the guilt, but has begun the process of dealing with it.

A Land Without Pity

A Land Without Pity Summary and Analysis

Joe awakes to a nightmare, remembers he is not in the crevasse and begins reciting Shakespeare he thought he had forgotten long ago. He realizes he will not reach the base camp today but says he had already planned it out in his subconscious so it comes as no surprise. The land in front of him lies in undulating waves of fresh snow, the day is warm and he is ready to move though he is very thirsty and hungry. He says he believes he can go on without food but does not want to think about the impending dehydration. He says he simply cannot eat enough snow to stave off the thirst.

Joe becomes lost, unable to recall which way he is supposed to go. He makes a choice, is forced to return and crosses back over his own tracks several times before finding an ice bridge he believes to be the correct path. When he reaches the rocks, he promises himself a rest but the insistent voice in his head "rudely" forces him to move. He creates a splint of sorts from the straps of his crampons and a foam mat and begins a clumsy hopping across the rocky moraines. Finally, he finds a trickle of water, creates a small pool and drinks the gritty liquid. The little pool does not fill again and Joe moves on. He sets his sights on the boulder where Simon stopped to drink—bomb alley—and continues to hobble that direction until well past dark, without a light and with no real idea whether he is making any progress at all. Finally, he falls again, cannot get up and crawling into his sleeping bag, falls asleep.

After the night in the snow, Joe's leg hurts badly. But when he is up and moving, he convinces himself it is not as bad as it had been the day before. He considers that perhaps he had not broken his leg after all, but that he merely strained it and that it is now beginning to heal. Then he puts his weight on it and collapses. He lies in the snow, daydreaming and eating snow until the insistent voice urges him to get up. He says he forces the pace, trying to salve his guilt at having lain down for so long. As he begins the rough hopping across the moraines, he falls often. He says he screams in pain at first, then stops screaming. He says it makes no difference either way because the purpose of a scream is for someone else to hear the agony and the moraines do not care.

To keep himself going, Joe selects a particular point, gives himself an hour to reach it, then works to beat the clock. He says he sometimes has to rush the final few minutes but that beating the time becomes important. Only once does he fail and he sobs out his annoyance.

Time Running Out

Time Running Out Summary and Analysis

Richard heads out to arrange for Spinoza to bring the donkeys for their return trip. Simon does not want to leave but says he will go the following morning, and is relieved that the decision is made. He knows he will have to call Joe's parents, explain Joe's death at the embassy and handle other details. As they are preparing to dismantle the camp, Richard and Simon have to stop to look for Simon's money belt which Simon hid under a rock before he left for the climb. He says Joe also had money but that he cannot remember where it was hidden. The thought makes them both laugh out loud and Simon is amazed at the spontaneous laughter. They look for the money for several hours but do not find it.

The two girls from the nearby camp appear and Simon says they stare at him for a long time. Then they talk to Richard who says the girls "want to know what we are going to give them." Simon is angered that they do not seem to care about Joe and tells them to "piss off."

Joe's condition deteriorates badly during the night so that he can barely move. He says that if he has water, he has a chance; and that if he does not make it to camp that day, he will not make it. The thought that Simon and Richard might break camp before he arrives galvanizes him into action. The resolve quickly dissipates and he is falling each time he stands. He finds it again and reaches "bomb alley" at one o'clock—an hour past the time he set for himself. He drinks his fill, leaves the spot with the intention of reaching the upper lake in the next few hours, and encounters the footprints of Simon and Richard. Again, the tracks give him hope. The next hours of his journey are a haze of pain. He drowns, wakes himself up muttering arguments, asks many questions but does not answer them, and drinks whenever he can. He imagines Simon and Richard are nearby, just out of sight but ready to help if he calls out. He imagines they are embarrassed by his condition, which makes him ashamed. He is eventually so worn out that he can no longer stand, pees in his pants but it dries, sleeps for an hour and begins to crawl the remainder of the distance to camp. He knows he has two more hours of daylight left but hesitates to hurry onward for fear that the tents will be gone. He does not want to see that, if it is true.

Simon is not ready to return to civilization. He says he knows Richard wants to leave and that he has to have his visa renewed within five days, but Simon has put off the trip. Richard believes Simon is unwilling to leave because he is somehow holding onto the hope that Joe will return. Simon seems only to be concerned about the reception that awaits him. Once the decision is made, he is relieved.

As Joe nears the camp, he is faced with the knowledge that Simon and Richard might have already broken camp and left. He cannot imagine that could happen and say he did not face the torturous descent only to be abandoned again, and this time for good.

He reasons it would be impossible for them to have left him, ignoring the fact that Simon believes him to be dead and that it has been days since Simon's own return. At some point, Joe forgets he is headed into their base camp. He says only that he is moving forward and is unaware of any particular destination at all. He becomes completely disoriented but continues to crawl forward. Sometimes he thinks he is back on the ice and sometimes among the rocks. When a cactus spine slices into his leg, he wonders what happened.

Tears in the Night, Epilogue

Tears in the Night, Epilogue Summary and Analysis

Joe continues on his way, not certain if he is even headed in the right direction but somehow sensing the correct path. He pulls himself up onto a boulder and encounters a repugnant stench. It is shit and he suddenly wonders why he is sitting in shit until he realizes he is at the spot near the camp they used for a toilet. He cries out, admits he is completely done without help, then sees the lights come on within the tent. Then Simon is hefting Joe by the chest, dragging him to the tent and helping him drink hot tea.

Simon examines Joe's leg and discovers his heel is also broken. Joe says it does not seem to matter because now he can rest. Simon insists they have to leave for Lima immediately so Joe can get attention at a hospital. He begs for a day to recover but Simon is adamant. They have to search for Joe's money belt but eventually find it. They travel two days to Cajatambo where they rent a pickup truck. Joe says the trip is a blur of pain. Without the ability to steer the mule he is riding, the creature runs Joe into trees and other obstacles. They stop to administer pills but Simon insists they push onward. At Cajatambo, Simon has to argue his way into the pickup rental and then fights off the people who want a free ride to Lima. Joe does share the pickup bed with a man who has been in an accident and has both legs crushed. The old man cannot afford "a good hospital" like Joe's destination and Simon gives the man's son their remaining stock of antibiotics and painkillers before the two drive off into the night. It is two days before the hospital gets confirmation of Joe's insurance and prepares to operate. As he is being wheeled into the operating room, he announces he does not want the surgery but is ignored by the staff who do not understand English.

In a postscript added to the book, Joe says that just ten weeks after the final of three operations on his knee, he is at the Tupodam having decided to turn back from climbing the mountain. He says he simply decided he was not ready. He considers the beauty of the mountain and the fact that two of his friends lie buried on two separate mountains, but that he is still able to see the beauty.

In another section, Joe says Simon himself has written about the experience and says he knows he did what he had to do, despite the "second-hand critics" and "armchair adventurers" who criticize his action. Seventeen years after the event, Joe and Simon return to the Peruvian Andes with a film crew to re-enact the events of that 1985 trip. He says he feels weepy and nervous as they go over the details.

Their first meeting is strained and Joe says he sees the same look in Simon's eyes that he sees right after the fall—the look accepting that Joe will die. As they share their stories, Joe says there is an intimacy they never shared before and will never share again. He soon tells Richard he is thankful for having gotten him off the mountain, that he does not blame him for doing what he had to do and that he understands that Simon would have believed him to be dead.

Richard is apprehensive of Joe's pain and unsure what to do but he makes porridge with milk and sugar and then egg sandwiches and helps Joe eat as Simon begins to force Joe to take painkillers, antibiotics and other medicines. As Simon prepares to remove Joe's pants to examine his leg, Joe is apprehensive but Richard is terrified. Richard holds Joe's leg as Simon removes the boot and they gawp at the size of his leg. He says there is a "hugely distended stump" where the knee had been but the leg is the same size from thigh to ankle. There are no signs of infection though it is badly, bruised.

Characters

Joe Simpson

The author. Joe is on a climbing expedition with his climbing partner Simon Yates. They are in the Peruvian Andes trying to reach the summit of Siula Grande via the West Face, which has never been climbed before. Joe is optimistic and they reach the summit with only a few minor difficulties. It is on the way down that Joe falls, breaking his leg and heel when he impacts the bottom. When he realizes he has broken the bone and cannot support his weight on his leg, he knows he is in serious trouble. He believes he is going to die because that is what happens to a person with an injury such as his in the current conditions. Simon knows it as well, though neither of them voice it. Joe stands, unwilling to show signs of weakness and the two men begin their descent rather than giving up. They make it some distance and Joe congratulates himself on the progress. However, he soon plummets off a cliff and dangles at the end of a rope for some time. Then the rope is cut and Joe falls into a crevasse but lands almost unscathed on a ledge. When Joe realizes Simon has not also fallen, he knows Simon will believe he is dead.

The next days are a harrowing haze of pain, falls and determination. Joe alternately gives up on his own ability to make it down the mountain and draws determination to make it. He describes his journey, including the fact that he has an insistent voice telling him what to do. He says he tries to ignore it sometimes but it "rudely" urges him onward. In the acknowledgments, Joe says thank you to his parents for their support after his ordeal, including their understanding that he wants to continue climbing. Ten weeks after his last surgery on his leg, he manages a short climb. Seventeen years later, he is still shaken when he stands at the base of a mountain in the Peruvian Andes where Simon comes to his rescue.

Simon Yates

The man with Joe Simpson on the climb. There is no real indication of how the two connect to make the climb. Simon mentions that he considers making up some story about Joe's death upon his return to camp, partly because he cannot stand the thought of facing Joe's parents with the truth. Simon himself cuts the rope when Joe is dangling over a ledge. Joe's weight is about to drag Simon off the edge as well and Simon suddenly hits on the idea of cutting the rope to stop his own plummet. He spends the night in a snow cave, wakes the next morning fully expecting to die that day but gets past the fatalism and successfully makes it off the mountain. When Simon is looking back at the mountain, he says that it has all been futile, that their climb was for nothing. He apparently gets past that mindset as well and later continues climbing. Simon, in a book of his own, thanks Joe for his honest appraisal of the events. Simon himself is alternately guilty and worried about the reaction of other people who will question whether he had to cut the rope. Simon rushes to Joe's side when Joe makes it near the



camp. Simon insists Joe go directly to the hospital in Lima for his leg and it is Simon who returns to the spot with Joe seventeen years later for a re-enactment.

Richard Hawking

An explorer of sorts who agrees to wait at the base camp while Simon and Joe make their climbs. Joe notes that the job is a lonely one but it will be nice to have someone watch their gear while they are gone for several days at a time.

Ian Whittaker

The man climbing in the French Alps when the ground where they are planning to sleep gives way and leaves them dangling by their safety lines. Twelve hours later, they are rescued by a helicopter. Ian returns to the Alps the following year but his love of climbing is gone.

The Japanese Climbers

Two men near Simon on the Croz Spur - a spot high in the Mont Blanc range of the French Alps. The men are roped together and fall to their deaths as Simon and Jon watch, helpless to do anything. These two men are on Joe's mind after he and Simon begin their treacherous descent.

Jon Sylvester

The man who is Simon's climbing partner in the French Alps when they see the two Japanese climbers fall to their deaths.

Rob

A climber left alone to die after an accident. Joe thinks of him as he waits for Simon to catch up after his fall. He says the difference is that Rob was unconscious and dying whereas Joe only has a broken leg.

Toni Kruz

A man referred to briefly by Joe when he is hanging on the rope after having broken his leg during a fall. Joe says Toni struggled for life and the rescuers watched him die.

Miri Smidt

The person in Chamonix who gives Joe his black and white woolly Czechoslovakian hat with the bobble missing. Simon knows Joe really liked the hat and he puts it in the bag to send to Joe's parents.

Team Doctor

The team doctor for the filming crew plays the part of Richard Hawking, the man who camped with Joe and Simon, because Richard was not present for the filming.



Objects/Places

Cordillera Huayhuash

A place in the Peruvian Andes where the author and his party are at the beginning of the story.

Siula Grande

The goal of Simpson and Simon. The West Face is unclimbed as they prepare to tackle it.

Cerro Sarapo

A peak in the Peruvian Andes that blocks the view of Siula Grande from base camp.

Des Petits Drus

Where Joe and Ian run into trouble during a climb.

Croz Spur

A spot high in the Mont Blanc range of the French Alps. It is here that Simon and Jon see a pair of Japanese climbers fall to their deaths.

Chamonix

Where Simon and Jon have their base camp as they climb the Croz Spur.

Cajatambo

The Peruvian city where Simon hires a driver and a truck to transport Joe to Lima.

Lima

The city where Joe undergoes surgery on his leg.

Crampons

Steel spikes that fasten to the boots to aid in climbing in ice and snow.

Piton

A metal spike with an eye that is driven into rocks for use as a belay point.

Belay

A stationary point or an anchor for climbing.

Themes

Determination

There are an array of points at which the determination of Joe and Simon are evident. The most important is their drive to get off the mountain but the theme begins before that—with their decision to make the climb. They have selected a mountain that has not been climbed before and that is known for this fact. They meet the challenges and reach the summit, though they have several issues along the way. After Joe breaks his leg, the determination of both men goes to another level. At this point, they do not voice their determination but resolutely go about the business of accomplishing the goal—to reach the bottom. They each know that a broken bone in their current situation is likely fatal, simply because there are no rescue options. Instead of leaving Joe, Simon begins working out a way for them to descend together. Joe is in excruciating pain but he continues to make the effort as well. It is Simon who later says that Joe did not have to dig the seats for the belay points while waiting for Simon to catch up to him each time, but does. It is a sign of Joe's determination that he continues to struggle. When it comes to the point that Joe is alone and Simon already believes him dead, Joe continues to fight though he is alternately optimistic and filled with the idea that he cannot possibly survive. Joe describes a "voice" that urges him onward—sometimes rudely. That voice is likely his determination to survive. It is interesting that Joe's own determination continues to prod him onward when he says he wants to give up.

Dependency on Another

Joe and Simon are climbing partners dependent on each other for their safe ascent and descent of the mountain. They work together as a team during their climb and that dependency continues after Joe breaks his leg. It is then that Joe says he is absolutely dependent on Simon. He says Simon's presence is "fragile," and that he is afraid talking about it will damage it. When Simon realizes the extent of Joe's injury, he is at first of the opinion that Joe will not be able to descend the mountain at all. Then they devise a method of descent that is difficult for Joe, but acceptable considering the lack of alternatives. Joe never gives voice to his dependency on Simon, however, but will later offer his thanks for his putting himself at risk. It is noteworthy that after Simon cuts the rope and is alone, he comments on the loneliness. He says it weighs on him and there is a point at which he is no longer able to remain optimistic of his own survival. Joe manages to drag himself along, employing a variety of methods, until he reaches a point near the camp. When he is near the camp, he yells out for Simon who eventually hears the cries and comes. Joe gives in to the need to have someone care for him at that point. He allows Simon to carry him to the tent and then gives in to Simon's insistence that they leave immediately for Lima where Joe can have medical attention.

Acceptance of Another's Decision

It is impossible that Joe and Simon could have expected they would be faced with the exact life-or-death situation in which they find themselves. They must have expected they might face serious problems or even death, but Joe says he believed it was a situation in the distant future rather than something they would face immediately. When it happens that Simon comes to the decision to cut the rope, Joe is not expecting it. When his rope gives way and he finds himself falling, he believes Simon has lost his hold and that he has plunged to his death as well. Joe later pulls on the rope and finds it has been cut. He does not blame Simon but seems to simply accept that Simon has done what was necessary in order to save himself. There are other instances of this kind of acceptance. As Joe and Simon are making their way up the mountain and then begin the descent, they alternately take the lead and offer support at a belay point. In the lead, they select their own paths, making judgment calls as to which would be best. They each allow the other to lead without overt criticisms though they at times snap at each other. When they are descending at a rapid rate, Joe is being bounced around pitifully. He says he has to blame someone and so blames Simon, but later admits Simon was doing what was necessary to get them down the mountain as quickly as possible.

Style

Perspective

The book is written in the first person, most of the time from Joe's point of view and sometimes from Simon's. It is important to note that the sections written from Simon's point of view are actually written by Joe. Joe has written those sections in first person as if he were Simon. As a prologue to the book, Joe includes excerpts from Simon's book that offers approval of Joe's book as being "true" to the story.

The perspective expressed seems true to the story. The emotions expressed are complicated. Joe says in the prologue that he and Simon know what happened on the mountain and they are both satisfied with their actions.

Tone

The book is written in straight-forward language and should be easily understood by any adequate reader. The one exception is that there are a number of climbing terms not commonly known. In some cases, the meaning of those words is apparent from the context. For example, the word "abseil" is used to denote a descent using a double rope fastened to a solid point. However, the word "serac" is sometimes used and most readers will not be able to determine exactly what is meant by that word. There is a glossary at the back of the book with several terms used throughout the book and those definitions are helpful. The serac, according to the glossary, is an unstable ice cliff or pinnacle. For the most part, the climbing terms are explained so it is easy to keep track of the story line. While the climbing terms are used fairly frequently, most readers will not find their use distracting and may even come to understand the significance of a particular description before it is explained.

Structure

The book is divided into thirteen chapters. There is also a prologue, a section entitled "Ten Years Later," and another from seventeen years later. The prologue tells of a brief climbing trip just ten weeks after Joe's last surgery. He wants to make a climb but gives in to the pain in his leg. The next is looking back after ten years. At that point, Simon has written a book of his own and this section includes statements from Simon's writing declaring that Joe's version on the event is accurate. The final section is after seventeen years when a crew of film makers are shooting a re-enactment of the climb and of Joe's harrowing experience.

The early chapters are solely from Joe's perspective. There are later sections written from Simon's point of view and these are in italics. It is important for the reader to know that these words are also written by Joe, though Simon says they are accurate.

The chapters are named and each name gives a clue as to the upcoming events. For example, the chapter title "The Final Choice" foretells Simon's decision to cut the rope. Others, such as "Storm at the Summit" is about a storm near the peak of the mountain.

Quotes

"There is a peculiar anonymity about being in tents. Once the zip is closed and the outside world barred from sight, all sense of location disappears," Chapter 1, p. 15.

"Forty-six people were crammed into a ramshackle vehicle designed to carry twenty-two, and we were not fortified by the sight of so many wayside shrines to dead bus drivers and their passengers. The engine was held together with nylon string and a flat tyre was changed with a pick-axe," Chapter 1, p. 17.

"It took us some time to realise that the whole pedestal had detached itself from the pillar and dropped straight off the mountain face. There was a good deal of nervous swearing and hysterical giggling as, gradually, we became aware of the seriousness of our position," Chapter 2, p. 38 (as Ian and Joe dangle from their safety lines).

"For the first time in the last four days the tense concentration in my body relaxed. The anxious struggles of the previous night had been forgotten, and the memory of how close we had come to falling to our deaths had faded. I gave myself time to enjoy where I was, and to congratulate myself," Chapter 4, p. 65 (Joe, upon waking on the first morning of their descent).

"Dying had seemed so far away and yet now everything was tinged with it. I shook my head to stop the tears, but the taint was still there," Chapter 5, p. 73.

"It seemed such an obvious and unavoidable fact. It was academic really. I knew I was done for. It would make no difference in the long run," Chapter 5, p. 79 (Joe considering the likelihood of a fatal fall after his leg is broken).

"I realized then that he had been fully aware of the pain he had been putting me through, and this concern was a quiet way of saying, it's all right. I wasn't being a bastard. It just had to be done," Chapter 6, p. 92.

"A lot of people would have died before getting it together to do that! I was still alive because I had held everything together right up to that last moment. It had been executed calmly," Chapter 6, p. 105 (Simon reflecting on cutting the rope).

"I stepped from the wreckage of the cave and started to climb down. I was about to die; I knew it, and they knew it," Chapter 6, p. 106 (Simon on the morning after Joe's fall).

"I stared at the mountain rising over me. Empty. It was a pointless thing to have done—climb up it, across it, and down it. Stupid! It was beautiful, immaculate, but it left me empty. I had been on it too long, and it had taken everything," Chapter 8, p. 117 (Simon).

"It would be a long time before cold and exhaustion overtook me on the ice bridge, and the idea of waiting alone and maddened for so long had forced me to this choice: abseil until I could find a way out, or die in the process. I would meet it rather than wait for it to come to me," Chapter 9, p. 130 (Joe).

"There was no question of crawling. Walking was also out, so it would have to be hopping," Chapter 11, p. 161 (Joe upon reaching the rocks at the base of the mountain).

"It occurred to me then that I was nearer to death than when I had been alone. The minute I knew help was at hand something had collapsed inside me. Whatever had been holding me together had gone," Chapter 13, p. 195 (Joe on the morning after reaching camp).

Topics for Discussion

Describe the partnership between Simon and Joe. What is Richard's purpose on the expedition?

Describe the trip up the mountain. What is it that makes them continue their ascent?

Describe the moments at the summit. What is Joe's state of mind as they begin their descent?

Describe the scene in which Joe breaks his leg. What is his immediate reaction? What is Simon's?

How do they begin their descent? Does it work out for them? What goes wrong?

What is the situation in which Simon cuts the rope? Describe the range of emotions for both men. What are Joe's feelings when he arrives at the camp and Simon comes to him?

Simon considers telling a lie about what happened to Joe but does not. What does he say about potential reactions? What does Simon do when he and Joe are back in the camp?

What is Joe's reaction to Simon's decision to cut the rope?

Why does Joe want to slow his pace as he nears base camp? What is his reaction when he sees that the tents are still there?