



Descending

The Tavern—Beating out the words (authoring resource)

Suddenly, we heard a commotion and saw a scuffle break out ahead of us. Violent, almost animalistic screaming came from within the entrance to the cave. This was unlike the scream one might expect from a human, because the sound came on the inbreath—somebody was attempting to cry for help, whilst fighting to get breath into their lungs.

Everyone ahead of me in the queue to enter the cave took a step back. We watched, pensive and all instinctively mimicking the struggle for breath.

One person, then a second and a third hurriedly climbed out the manhole—regurgitated from the earth—as though fired from some peculiar underground cannon.

Transfixed by the unfolding scene, we tried to make sense of the commotion before us.

Finally, a fourth person scrambled out gasping for air as though they had just broken the surface of the sea after becoming trapped underwater. This person half-hobbled, half-crawled on shaky legs away from the entrance hole to a nearby mound of rock and plopped down, hanging their head between their knees.

“What happened to that guy?” I asked Jaimi. “He looks like he’s seen a ghost.”

“I’ll go and ask him,” Jaimi replied. “Though I know this is his first caving experience, so maybe something spooked him?”

With that parting comment Jaimi walked over and crouched down next to the man, talking quietly with him and gently rubbing his back. I turned back to the cave entrance and saw the three other people quietly descending back down. None of them were smiling and tension rippled through the group like a spark of electricity.

When Jaimi returned, she explained that he had panicked at being in the cave, demanding that he get back to the surface. The three people behind him had to back up and climb out first to let him get to the surface.

“It got a bit frantic as the guy started kicking and fighting the person behind him in his desperation to get out.” Jaimi explained. “That’s shocking behaviour in my opinion, and we won’t be inviting him back anytime soon”.

For the first time I felt a tension in my stomach and a small knot of doubt formed inside me. Swallowing the doubt and forcing a smile on my face I reminded myself that I was an experienced hiker, climber

and mountaineer—and these skills would help me face the challenges ahead.

We inched forwards as more people disappeared down the into the gaping maw, until it was Jaimi's turn.

"Wish me luck" she said. "See you down below buddy!"

I watched as Jaimi sat down on the edge of the entrance hole, with her legs dangling down into the darkness of the unknown. She put on her caving helmet, pulled the chinstrap tight and switched on the head torch.

I peered down into the black void below and stared, transfixed, as Jaimi leant forwards and put her hands around a large piece of rock to her side. She took several sharp, but deep breaths, then carefully lowered herself down to a ledge.

Within seconds she was gone, swallowed into the earth.

Out in the open the cave descent would have been described as a challenging scramble, but lowering into a dark void felt like an entirely different experience. I felt another ripple in my stomach, far stronger than before, and noticed my heart beating hard against my chest. I let doubt creep into my thoughts and wondered if I was about to make a big mistake.

The outdoor experiences I was heavily relying on, slipped away from me like a shadow dissolving on entering a darkened room.

I heard Jaimi call up from below, a distant sound floating up from the depths of the cave. Her voice was faint with a slight echo and lacked the confidence and strength of a few minutes ago. My inner voice warned me with every nerve in my being against following Jaimi into that cave.

Tuning out those silent screams of foreboding, I gritted my teeth and told myself it was now my turn. Glancing over to the guy who had scrambled out just a few minutes earlier, I felt a profound, overwhelming need to join him on the nearby rock.

I pushed the thought away and mimicked the movements I watched Jaimi perform moments before. An emotionless automaton, I sat on the edge, put my helmet on and activated the head torch. Taking a deep breath, I savoured the fresh morning air one last time before starting to climb down into the nothingness.

The surface handhold was warm to the touch, but reaching down for the next hold I felt a chill. My fingers experienced a cold and greasy sensation as I gripped a handhold below my waist. I felt my earlier confidence drain from me as I took a step down into the mouth of the cave.

Two more steps down and all warmth from the sun had evaporated.

On advice from Jaimi I was wearing three layers of clothing, but the coldness in the cave sliced straight through to my skin like a knife cutting through butter. I shuddered and felt unwelcome goosebumps pop up on my skin.

Climbing further down I eased myself around a slight twist in the rock. Instantly, all light from the surface vanished, leaving just a weak light from my head torch. Every fibre in my body was urging me back to the surface, like a helium balloon released to the sky. It took every ounce of strength to force myself downwards.

The hard knot had now settled in my stomach, which started to ache. With this dull pain came the realisation that all my training and previous outdoor experience was not sufficient to prepare for the mental challenges ahead.

The entrance to the cave had been the size of a decent manhole cover, but climbing downwards the space steadily narrowed as though the sides of the cave were trying to squeeze the air from me.

The hand and footholds were large and easy but the sharp cold and absolute darkness, save for the narrow beam of my head torch, were draining all my energy and mental reserves.

"You're doing great." I heard a welcoming shout from below as Jaimi called up.

"Another twenty feet down and you'll be here with me. Watch your hands and feet as there is some water on the rock below you"

Grunting in reply, I carefully moved downwards. My internal voice was in full flow telling me to admit defeat and get straight back to the surface. It took another burst of mental reserve to ignore its agitated tone and climb down to the tunnel where Jaimi was waiting. In the haste of scrambling down, my foot slid on a greasy rock.

The sound, and urgent realisation, chilled me to the core.

Grabbing and hugging a hold with my hands I pushed my face and body hard into the side of the cave where I remained, paralysed. My clothes were now wet through and the warmth of the morning sun was a distant memory.

Taking a shallow breath, I tried not to inhale the damp, mouldy smells that saturated the stale air.

Suddenly I felt a warm hand on my lower back. The space opened up slightly at the bottom of the climb and I stepped down onto a soft, muddy surface with Jaimi standing at my side.

We were like two commuters on a packed train stuck in a tunnel, pressing uncomfortably together.

"Well done. You made it down in one piece!" said Jaimi, with a comforting

chuckle. "Are you ready to now enter the cave?"

"Enter the cave?" I said incredulously. "I thought that had started five minutes ago when I climbed through the manhole."

I could not tell if Jaimi was joking or not and my sense of humour had evaporated with the precipitous drop in temperature.

"Sorry," Jaimi replied, "that was just the descent to the start of the cave. This is where it starts to get difficult. Our adventure really begins now."

"Do you see down there?" directing her head torch to the ground.

A small shaft was illuminated in the side of the cave. It had the dimensions of a coffin.

"This is where we're going next. It's a tight squeeze for a while, but does open in about an hour. This is where the real caving experience begins".

"An hour?!" My thoughts hissed in reply—I strangled them in my throat, only managing a nod in reply.

With that parting comment Jaimi crouched down, stretched her hands forwards, like a diver on a board in a swimming pool, and slithered into the tunnel. I watched with growing horror as the cave seemed to swallow her up, with her body and then feet disappearing into the small tunnel.

I gulped as I felt my confidence ebb. Looking upwards, I started to reach for the holds which would take me back to the surface. Suddenly I heard a heavy scrape above me. My narrow head torch beam caught the feet and legs of the person who had descended after me.

There was no easy escape route and more importantly I could not let Jaimi, my caving buddy, down by not following her into the tunnel. I had willingly chosen to come caving with her and needed to see it through. If I hated it today, at least I would look back and say I had tried.

With a supreme effort I ignored the growing warning voices in my head and the hard knot in my stomach, dropped down onto my hands and knees and followed Jaimi into the narrow tunnel.

My body was completely enveloped in the tight tunnel—my arms stretched uncomfortably in front of me, pinned by the narrow restraints of rock.

The floor was muddy and damp. My nails sank into the soft earth as I pulled myself forwards, like a new army recruit on a muddy assault course, slithering along a few inches at a time. The sheer effort of the movement in this confined space took my mind away from the cold, dark tomb.

My head torch beam picked up the soles of Jaimi's mud-caked boots

as she moved forwards. So I focused on the pattern of her shoes to take my mind away from the suffocation I was a mere lapse of thought away from.

Grunts of exertion echoed up the passage from people behind me. Far from being reassured by the noises of my fellow cavers, they represented impenetrable obstacles in my escape from this stifling space. There was no way they could move backwards to let me out of this extended coffin. My only option was to crawl and squirm further into the depths of the Earth.

Suddenly Jaimi stopped moving and I crawled up so close that my nose was almost touching the sole of her left boot. The next breath was the musk of the caked-on mud. The walls of the cave started to close in.

“Wait up, guys!” Jaimi shouted. Her voice had a distant quality to it, as though she was calling from far away. “The person up ahead of me has got stuck. I’m going to try and talk him through—it’s a very tight spot.”

A painfully long, anguished cry filled the air and sent a sharp buzz of terror ripping through me. All the nearby cavers could just about make out Jaimi’s voice as she directed calming, practical words to this poor person.

Then a second cry, bordering on a primal scream, vibrated through the tunnel. The noise filled the air and wormed its way into all the cavers stuck in the tunnel. The scream continued until there was no air left in their lungs and then, with the briefest of pauses started again.

My head and body reacted to these cries, shocking my muscles into an all-over spasm. I had to get out of this space right now.

I fought against the rapidly rising sting of terror within me. Building like a volcano ready to erupt, it’s queasy hold raged through me. My inner voice went into overdrive demanding that I get to the surface at all costs. Beads of sweat sprang up all over my body and I began to shake uncontrollably.

“Help!” I gasped. “I need to get out of here. I need to get out!”

I repeated my plea.

“Help. Hey, you behind me. Can you hear me? I’m sorry but I need to get back the surface now!”

“Sorry mate. That’s impossible,” came the reply, “there are three people behind me, and we can’t crawl backwards. We’re stuck here until the guy gets himself out of the jam. The only way is forwards and it’s about fifty minutes crawl until we get to a space wide enough to turn around.”

His words, practical and impersonal, sent me into a further panic. He clearly didn’t understand. I had to get out of this crypt very fast and by any means possible. I tried to inch myself backwards but this was nearly

impossible and I was halted by an angry shout from the person behind me.

“Hey! Didn’t you hear me mate? We are not going backwards. Wait where you are. Chill!”

I was a trapped animal, with no ability to fight or flight. I felt a wave of nausea claw through me and I strained for breath in an attempt to stop myself from throwing up. No way forwards. No way back. Rammed into a coffin-sized space I had foolishly chosen to enter.

I gritted my teeth and sank my chin into the soft mud.

And there I lay for what felt like hours, paralysed, suffocating, with nought by the sound of my pounding heart in head and chest and the wretched urge to vomit filling my every moment.

When the man in front managed to free himself, a collective intake of breath pulsed back along the queue as we started to move once again. Jaimi effortlessly snaked her way forwards, navigating the tight section of the tunnel with nothing more than a slight hindrance of her progress.

Then it was me.

This clenched fist of a shaft already pinned me, but here was a jagged narrowing of the aperture—a serrated crest of rock that seemed impossible to traverse. I felt the frigid stone pinning my chest; pressing against my lungs attempts to expand. And I reached through, feeling around for some form of purchase to pull myself past the ridge.

My head slipped through well enough, however I found myself needing to twist my shoulders to get one past the narrowing. With one arm and shoulder through, the other side followed—any error here and I would be wedged into the hole by my chest.

I inched onwards, expelling every drop of air from my lungs, to keep my chest as small as possible. Clearing my ribs and abdomen, I was only one pull away from being able to inhale again. My head throbbed and vision began to fade. And then my hips made contact with the jagged knife of stone.

I squirmed, as Jaimi had done moments before, yanking forwards with a desperate, primal need to breathe. This burst of strength brought my hips forwards and allowed the ridge to dig deep into my flesh, hooking under the curve of my right hip.

I felt the agonising squeeze of the rock bear down like the jaws of some massive predator—and as my lungs spasmed uselessly against crush, a cold realisation came to me. I was completely jammed—unable to move, to breathe or cry for help. The acceptance of my fate rattled around for a while and then the darkness took hold for one final moment.