

Gina COLE

## Till

He fell into a blue world. He'd been collecting ice samples with the team, gingerly making his way across the glacier, prodding the snow in front of him with an ice axe to check its solidity before taking a step. The other researchers followed behind him, descending a gentle slope with great caution, their woolen hats bright red against the snow. His axe handle had sunk to halfway, meeting with enough resistance to give him confidence. As he leaned into the snow, his foot sank to the ankle. A deep patch, he thought. But then his foot sank further ... up to the shin, then to his knee, and then he knew he had stepped onto a snow bridge. With a puff of snow, the ice collapsed beneath him, and he dropped into free fall in a rush of blue and white. He landed upright with a hard thud. Snow and ice rained down on his head, leaving him stunned. His left boot was twisted and wedged into a V at the bottom of the crevasse. Pain shot through his foot, ankle, leg. The ankle was broken, he was sure of it. He frantically dug his leg out before the snow's crystalline grip solidified around the boot.

The sheer ice walls around him were dark cobalt, swirling into cathedral of misty cyan over his head and out into a jag of white sunshine. A few metres along the crevasse, out of reach, the orange weave of his high-tensile ropes rested against the ice, and beyond that he saw the silver blade of his ice axe glinting where it had fallen. He yelled into the azure slit of sky. But he had fallen into an echo chamber, and his voice reverberated and bounced back to him in frightening waves. He slumped against the cold surfaces. That was when he saw her.

Through the shooting pain in his leg he felt surprised at the sight of the woman trapped in the ice wall, her frozen expression one of shock. The skin on her face looked pale

as glacial milk. Her skull looked house-shaped: wide towards the top and vertical on the sides, unlike any person he had ever seen. She lay in the hollow of a black rock, suspended in the ice like a forgotten soul in a Stygian canoe. Her ghoulish presence alarmed him. His heart pounded in his chest, although not, he thought for much longer. He wondered how long the glacier had trapped her like human till. Plucked from the upper valley walls and carried into the moving river of ice.

He stifled a whimper of fear and began his safety checks, his analytical brain activating itself like an emergency beacon. Unless his friends found him in this hole and hauled him up, he would die. If he could retrieve his ice axe, and somehow splint his foot, he could haul himself arm over arm, foot-pick over foothold, up the side of the frozen chasm. He moved as far as he could towards the pick, shuffling himself and dragging his injured foot, but the crevasse narrowed and jammed him in and his equipment remained out of reach. He shook himself back to his original position and tried to climb, stamping the crampons of the boot on his good foot into the ice and hauling his hurt foot behind him, but he couldn't find any handholds on the smooth ice. Without his ice axe it was impossible. He was trapped.

The sun inched into a midday glow, turning the sides of the crevasse into lapis lazuli columns and refracting beams of sunshine into the woman's glassed-in rock coffin. The ice magnified her ancient face in front of him. Her body snap-frozen, her mouth open as if caught mid-conversation. Although he was clothed in warm thermal climbing gear, he felt like a mere particle surrounded by frozen pack ice. He yelled out again, trying to gain the attention of the team on the surface. His calls rang against the walls of the crevasse and fell back on him, failing to escape the opening. Surely they had seen him disappear into the hole. But he saw no sign of them. He felt alone with this woman, and the ambient sounds of the ice. He was familiar with the eerie groaning and pinking and the ever-present gurgle and hiss of water echoing throughout the internal plumbing of a glacier. This glacier sounded no different, fizzing and crackling and crunching as it slugged its frozen mass downhill, carrying him along with the ice-

encased woman in her black rock canoe.

His head hurt. He drifted into unconsciousness and then back into the crevasse. The woman in the ice looked as if she was moving behind thick sheets of rippling dirty glass.

'You slip or fall? Trip?' she said.

A shrill cry escaped his lips and separated into dissonant notes and descants, which bounced around the cavern walls and settled onto the ice in a light tinkling echo. With a panicked rush he pushed and jerked his body to attention, and tried to chimney climb away from her. Straining his arms against the bulwark of ice, he roared into the void and tried to hoist his body up. He managed to move half a metre before sliding back to the foot of the wall, where he sat exhausted and dejected. Pain seared his ankle, and he breathed in quick steamy puffs. The woman remained frozen inside the wall, poised in mid-air as if calling to her children.

'Do you have children?'

She did not answer him. He noticed a bag tied onto her back, and a copper axe-head fastened to a wooden handle suspended half a metre away from her in the ice. Ancient leaves and a rodent-like animal, with rabbit ears, whirled in iced suspension around her.

He lay back into the soft duck-down lining of his jacket and looked up at the enticing patch of sky above him. Warm salty tears of frustration flowed down his cheeks as he spotted a jetplane drawing a white line across the blue sky aperture. He followed the invisible airplane as it bisected the sky and took people thousands of miles above him on their way home to their families. In the wake of their atmospheric breath he wanted out of this trap.

He watched the distant vapour trail dissolve into cirrus cloud. Turning away he looked to the woman again, and studied her with his academic lens. She was short in stature. There were animal hides tied around her body, and strips of leather fastened in a criss-cross pattern over her feet. Long strands of hair floated about her face, as though she were adrift in the ice. She didn't look like a Sherpa. She was ancient. He was certain she was from an old time: a time of mammoths, and ice sheets. She had been here for thousands of years! Touching a gloved hand to the ice, his thoughts went barreling back in time to his mother's last day on earth: the

day his life had changed.

He had been sitting in the grandstand with his friends. The score: 23 home side, 24 visitors, and home side had the ball. Then he saw his teacher running over. Up the steps. She saw him. And headed ... straight for him.

‘What are you doing here?’

He should have been in class, not watching the seniors play rugby. But the teacher did not scold him for cutting class yet again. She looked distressed.

‘Didn’t you get the message? Your mother?’

He ran from the field to the house. Sitting at his mother’s bedside holding her hand, his father sat with his head bowed, silent, numb. Her arm felt cold to his touch.

He peered at the woman in the ice. One arm was held across her body as if she was fending off some danger: there was a blade gripped in her hand. He closed his eyes in the cold. After school his mother would always be at the kitchen sink, scouring shiny black seeds out of a ripe papaya or cutting green bele leaves. He’d forgotten that image of her, until now. He’d always tried to hold her in freeze-frame in his mind, her smile or a picture of her on the wall. Now forgotten memories arose from within him, splintering his constructed recollection of her into shards. He saw her delicate hand holding the knife and cutting into the soft amber flesh of a yellow-skinned papaya, its sweet odour heavy in the air. A smile rose into her eyes as she arranged the glistening wedges on a green plate in front of him and sat at the table to watch him eat. He would have been five or six years old. They played the counting game.

‘One, two, three, four – and if you eat this one how many are left?’ ‘Three.’

‘And if I cut this one in half, how many are there now?’

‘Four.’

He liked her constant counting: counting days, counting time, counting his socks or books, counting the stars. And then there was nothing. Her death didn’t fit the mathematical equation. Father plus mother plus grandfather plus brother plus him equals five: minus mother equals four, right? But after she died he counted

zero. Zero stuck fast until time buffeted the worst of the wreckage from his heart.

He was left bobbing in grief's wake, flotsam. He was directionless, floating, washed out. His laziness had brought him here. He would sleep in, and cut school, and his father and grandfather would click their tongues and say, 'If his mother could see him sleeping his future away, she'd have something to say about it.' After her death, he could not forgive himself. When it counted, he wasn't there. He trudged around high school, sat in dark classrooms, and fell asleep with boredom. Then one day in science class, as he sat back with his usual detachment and watched his classmates measuring chemicals, lighting the Bunsen burners, following instructions for a new experiment, he had glimpsed his future. He'd watched entranced as blue copper sulphate crystals emerged at the base of a glass Petri dish. A simple experiment but it startled him: the unexplained materialisation, the perfect gleaming symmetry, the magic. This one simple occurrence moved the world for him again. The garish colours of the periodic table fastened to the wall of the old classroom with yellowing tape came alive for him. He started to see the numeric patterns and trends of valence and atomic radii in the lines of purple and blue and orange and green.

Here there was only blue and white, and her. He heard a rushing sound, the sound of water whooshing into a tube. He'd heard this sound in the spiralling pipe slides at Waterworld. Cold water trickled into the bottom of the V and eddied around his boot. He heard loud gurgling noises, and then a spout of water burst through the wall in front of him and blasted him in the face. Its icy coldness shocked him. He hauled himself up as fast as he could to get away from the rising flood, but it kept filling up below him. He shivered and shook his head and tried to wipe the cold water away with his gloved hand. He could hear blocks of ice around him, crunching against each other as the glacier began to move. He and the woman were moving with it.

'Welcome to the ride,' she said. 'You're not real. You're not real.'

He tried to grab onto reality in his mind. The truth was that his mother had recognised his ability and had nurtured

it with the sliced papaya, the endless counting, the numbers. In his last year of school, he'd worked at those numbers, in maths and science. He'd achieved success in these two subjects but failed in others. At the end of high school, he joined the other students in his year clamouring to escape the suffocating coup culture of Fiji. They hawked their prodigious intellects around the universities with no embargoes on Fijian students. Most ended up in Kyung Hee University in Korea and the University of Santiago de Cuba, vying for scholarships to study law and administration and information technology and medicine so they could pursue high-flying jobs in Asia. They knew the junta expected they would return home to work.

'I'm going to Sapporo,' he told his father when he received the news from Japan. 'I want to get out. I want to be free. This is no life.'

'I know,' said his father.

He remembered the apprehension he'd felt as his father and grandfather made arrangements for him to travel to Hokkaido. How he'd gathered with the men of the family around the kava bowl to talk about his journey and how proud his mother would have been. They tried to settle his nerves about travelling so far from home. They gave him dried papaya strips for the journey, wrapped in a cloudy plastic bag that crackled in his pocket. He tried to sleep for most of the forty-eight-hour trip from Nadi to Sapporo. He woke to change planes at Auckland, Seoul and Tokyo. The transit lounges had large windows, from which he'd study the weather and the sky and the clouds of foreign lands. On his arrival in Sapporo the university housed him in a concrete dormitory. He stared out of his bedroom window at a plaza below, paved with uneven flagstones. The heavy fragrance of snowbell trees in bloom at the perimeter of the plaza reminded him of the scent of frangipani flowers in his home town. Flashy green bush warblers zipped in and out of the white flowers, welcoming him with their melodic whistle.

Eating soup from a noodle shop in the plaza became part of the rhythm of his life in Sapporo as he waited for the academic year to start. He found a data entry job in a lab on campus, working for a Japanese postdoctoral fellow in a team

led by the foremost expert in Chinese glaciology in the world. His skill with numbers was soon noticed and he was asked to work on statistical analysis. Crunching figures into geospatial metadata, he worked long hours mapping glacial profiles on the Tibetan Plateau. Eventually, number patterns always revealed themselves to him. Gaps and trends emerged from his work. His boss, Hotaka, a young enthusiastic researcher with shaggy black hair and a face tanned ruddy brown from many hours in the sun on Tibetan glaciers, grew more and more pleased with his work. He felt surprised when Hotaka asked him out with the team one night to drink sake.

‘I want you to come with us on the next trip to Tibet,’ said Hotaka.

He integrated well into the postdoc team. He drank sake with them late into the night as they planned the field trip. He would lose count of how many shots of sake he drank, and he lost count of how many nights he spent in this fashion. He spent the days at his work station entering data into the computer or learning Mandarin and Japanese characters. He laughed at the Mandarin and Japanese characters for ‘glacier’. They looked to him like a drunken man careering towards a fence or trying to climb a ladder in comic missteps.

## 冰川 冰河

Here there was no ladder. No comedy either. Further into the crevasse a fountain of water burst into the air and then gurgled away to nothing. A few icy drops splashed his face. Terror invaded his mind. The ice lurched and chomped around him. The woman had edged closer to him as the ice marched downhill. He unhooked a carabiner from the harness on his waist. With the clip gate open, he chipped at the ice, trying to cut through to the woman’s hand and her prehistoric flint knife. But the thick ice defeated him.

He knew that if he was not rescued, no one would find him until his body melted out with the woman at the terminal face of the glacier, where all entrained

dropstones eventually emerged and sank into the melt-water sediment. He made the calculation with the surety of his numeric abilities. Taking into account known variables and rates of movement in the glacier, it would take sixty- three years for his body to melt out. Far from his beginnings, along with all the other glacial till and sediment picked up and carried by forces beyond their control. But then, he deserved it. After all, where had he been when his mother lay dying? Her life had ended alone, without fuss or fanfare, lying on a bed. He focused his eyes on the scrap of sky overhead, urging a familiar face to appear, willing that the drifting snow on the glacier would not cover the crevasse over before a rescue party saved him. He could survive another forty- eight hours, not much more.

The crack of sky turned dark in the afternoon, and the woman's face grew dim in the fading light. Popping and cracking noises grew louder, as if the impending darkness had roused the moving ice into a breathing nocturnal monster. He flapped his arms and clapped his hands to his body as the temperature fell. He hoped the stagnant air in the crevasse would provide some insulation from sharp drops in the outside temperature and shield him from the bitter winds above. He huddled into himself, facing away from her, battling sleep. But he couldn't stop his eyes closing, and he drifted off.

A loud crack jolted him awake. He kept still, alert. The gap over him remained open. Distant stars glittered in the shred of sky like a strip of sequins on a woman's black evening dress. With a sudden jolt the ice began to heave. It tilted and tossed him about in a terrifying quake. He cried out in the blackness, flailing and gripping at the icy surfaces but finding no purchase. A block of ice fell on his head and knocked him unconscious.

Warm apricot light encapsulated him as he ate papaya in a steamy tent, the acidic flesh soft in his mouth.

He started awake into a cold reality, with the sun shining into his eyes. His head ached and his vision was blurred. His mouth felt furry and swollen with thirst, and his stomach cramped with hunger. He dug at the snow next to him and brought a handful of cold white to his mouth. The crystals tasted of strange minerals, but he was too thirsty to care. He turned to the woman, and a startled sound came out of his

mouth. Her rock canoe jutted out of a broken column of blue next to him. Her upper body had come free of the ice. Her hair hung in bedraggled clumps, obscuring one side of her face. He scrambled and kicked away from her in a seated push as fast as he could dig his one boot into the ice. Breathing in rapid shallow huffs, he heard her speak.

‘Wondered when you would wake up.’ He began to laugh hysterically.

‘Why, hello... Tilly,’ he said. ‘Funny boy, huh?’

Her mouth retained the shape of an open syllable. The milky hue of her skin had dried into deep caramel in patches that had melted free, stretching across her bones like the flesh of smoked barracuda. Sunlight shone through the hole in the snow bridge and onto her face. A drop of water trickled down her cheek, as if she wept. It trailed along her chin and into her fur garment. Long, shaggy fur with a burnt-ochre hue, unlike any animal pelt he’d ever seen except in pictures of one extinct animal, the woolly mammoth.

Her hand poked out of the ice, fingers curled over the wooden haft of the flint knife. The glacier that had for so long enveloped her in a frozen blanket had eased its deadly hold. He hesitated. She was after all an ancestor. Someone’s lineage might return to her – many people’s lineage, maybe millions – and so he acted with respect for her possible rank in the ancestral tree, parallel with his own grandmother of the nth degree.

Her hand felt as cold as a china plate, inert. He pried the flint knife from her grasp and held it up to the sunlight. Someone long ago had burnished the haft to golden honey. A thin sinew wrapped around and around it to secure a flint blade. The blade was chiselled and flaked to a point in the shape of a leaf, and the edges glowed transparent grey. Now he had it in his hands he didn’t know what to do with it. A hunting knife: no good for picking at hard ice. If he tried to stab it into the ice it would shatter into pieces. Instead, he used the sharp bevelled edge of the knife to hack off a sample of fur at the fringe of the woman’s outer garment. As he cut the material, a pouch flopped out of her clothing. He caught it in one hand: a wet suede rectangle, with dark ochre stitching. Inside the pouch he

could see an assortment of seeds: thousands of round dots in differing shades of brown and black. Some an oversized version of the mustard seed his mother sprinkled into curry, others long and striped like sunflower seeds, and some cylindrical and pointed. His stomach grumbled with hunger, and he wondered if he should eat one.

‘Try them. They’re good for you,’ she said. ‘Okay. I will,’ he said.

He took the flint knife and used it to cut into one of the flat seeds, exposing the inner kernel, deep vermilion and black. He cupped the stripped germ in the palm of his glove and inspected it. He brought it up to his nose, sniffed it and nibbled at the edge. To his surprise, it tasted like a sunflower seed. He imagined fields of giant sunflowers waving in the sunshine millions of years ago. He separated some of the round seeds into his hand, dipped his tongue in, and chewed slowly. A tingling sensation numbed his mouth with the same heat as pepper or chilli. He rolled the pouch in the mammoth fur with the flint knife and placed it into his jacket pocket. Armed with the seeds he thought he might last a few more hours.

He could no longer see his orange ropes or the ice axe, now buried in the shifting ice. He turned his attention to the copper axe-head still frozen in suspension near the woman. He unclipped another carabiner from his harness and tried to scrape a groove into the ice. He managed to make a slight scratch, but it felt like trying to dig a rock out of a mountain with a needle.

Was that her voice he heard?

He looked up and saw Hotaka’s miniature face under a red hat peeking over the edge of the crevasse. He dropped the carabiner and waved and shouted at him.

‘I’m here, I’m here!’ he yelled.

‘I can hear you,’ said Hotaka, and then disappeared.

He wanted Hotaka to come back. He yelled up at the sky until his throat hurt. He leaned against the ice wall and ate a handful of snow. He waited and waited, for hours. But Hotaka did not return. He told himself it didn’t matter. Now they knew he had fallen into the crevasse, and they would rescue him in no time. He looked at the woman.

'They've found me,' he said to her, and immediately felt stupid. 'Oh?' she said, mouth agape. 'This river will not stop.'

The afternoon passed and the night arrived, and still Hotaka did not return. No cause for alarm. They had encountered a logistical difficulty with the rescue: the altitude, the equipment, lots of difficult calculations to deal with, he reasoned. Clapping his arms onto his body to keep warm, he steeled himself for another night. He ate more seeds and chewed more snow. The next day Hotaka did not reappear.

'I knew they wouldn't come back. They never do,' she said. 'Please ... I've been here for two days.'

On the morning of the third day, he struggled to remain awake. If he fell asleep now he would perish. A snowstorm in the night had covered over the gap above him except for one peephole of sunlight sparkling like a lone star at twilight.

They would never find him now. He had eaten most of the seeds.

He looked at her in the dusk light.

'Told you before; this river will not stop. Are you ready?'

And then he heard the rushing sound of water once again. One of the ice walls ruptured, and filled the crevasse with such force that he was swept up into a fountain. Up, up, up into the cavern, bursting through the soft snow bridge. Out of the crevasse one metre into the sky. The geyser dumped him unceremoniously on the snowy slopes next to the hole and subsided. There followed a rapid draining of the water in the crevasse, complete with a toilet flush sound effect. He lay stunned and sodden, looking across the hole at a group of astonished people, including Hotaka and some of his teammates. He gasped for air, winded. He could see his leg, and he fainted at the sight of blood and a fractured bone poking through his ankle.

He woke to a lot of shouting and a hand placing an oxygen mask onto his face while a man strapped the fracture. But he didn't feel any pain, just an aching sadness for the woman. As he lapsed into unconsciousness he vowed he would not leave her behind.

Sixty-three years later, at the age of eighty-one, he took a two-hour flight on a military plane to the Tibetan Plateau dock, followed by a thirty-minute flight in a Zero army helicopter to the glacier. Over the years he had continued

monitoring the glacier and its movements. The prow of the rock canoe had begun to surface on top of the glacier near the terminal face, as he'd calculated so long ago. The researchers at Hokkaido University had asked him and his old team to be present as they dug her out of the ice. Only he and Hotaka attended the dig.

She had provided well for them. Among the 174 remaining seeds the ice woman had given him were several ancient species of dinkel wheat that he had cultivated for the seed banks. They produced a strain of high-protein wheat much sought after among healthfood fanatics. As he approached the site, the crampons fastened to his boots crunched on the ice and reverberated through his feet, and he felt a dull ache at the site of the old ankle injury. He'd thought more and more of his mother as he'd grown older. Now he recalled her laugh, as he beheld the woman rising up out of the glacier.

'Well I'll be ... you came back.'

'I didn't want to leave you here alone in the cold.'

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