

Polepole

“Polepole,” he said to me in Swahili as I stared up into his weathered face. I was ready to collapse from exhaustion. It translated as “slowly,” but took on more of a meaning like the old saying, “slow and steady wins the race.” I nodded, repeating the word back to him. And then I took one more step in the dark, frigid night air of Mount Kilimanjaro.

I spent most of my life making cautious, predictable choices. Last fall I decided to change that and booked this trip to challenge myself in a way I’d never done before. Now here I was setting out at midnight on the fourth day of the climb, accompanied only by a guide named Solomon. We were taking on the toughest part of Kili: the eighteen-hour summit hike. I had to keep a decent pace in order to make it to the top and come back down off the ice caps before the afternoon sun had a chance to melt the snow. That’s when the avalanches came. Although I wore a headlamp, its rays did not penetrate more than five feet. Besides the rocky ground, the only other things visible were the backs of Solomon’s scuffed-up Nikes a few steps ahead.

He had taken a sudden turn to the left. As I attempted to follow him, the rubble beneath my boots gave out. My feet slid an inch, then a few more, and I was sure that I would tumble down the mountainside at any moment. I panicked, hyperventilating the oxygen-deficient air, the coldness of it scalding my lungs. I fell onto all fours and clutched the gravel.

Solomon’s hand shot into the glow of my headlamp. I grabbed onto it and managed to muster up enough muscle to rise and plant myself into the ground. He then led me to a more solid piece of earth. “You’re tired. Eat something.”

It was true. For the past hour I'd experienced gnawing hunger pains, but I was afraid to stay still and allow the bitter chill to creep further into my bones. I shook my head no.

Solomon put his hand on my shoulder. "This is not a race, Rachel. You must take a break." I knew he was right.

I unzipped the outer pocket of my backpack and pulled out one of my energy bars. Taking a bite, I almost broke a tooth. It was frozen solid. I covered the end with the wrapping and tucked it deep inside my several layers of clothing. The water in my plastic bottle had also turned to ice, so I buried it alongside the bar and let the heat of my body warm them for a few minutes.

The winds surrounding me were merciless, howling in my ears and pecking away at my raw face. My nose became a running faucet that I couldn't shut off. I'd given up on wiping it. Staring up into the stars, I wondered how many more hours until I reached the top. I considered asking Solomon, but he'd snuck a few yards away to smoke one of his hand-rolled cigarettes. Having grown up in these peaks, he was impervious to the altitude. When he returned, I stayed silent, fearing his answer would only discourage me.

For the next several hours I couldn't see anything but scree, hear anything but whipping air, and feel anything save for the cold and despair that had become a palpable weight on my chest. I felt lost somewhere in time and space, trapped in a numbing monotony that I was sure would go on forever. I'd done a lot of reading on Kilimanjaro prior to the trip, but nothing could have prepared me for this.

Why didn't I pick something more feasible to take on? I questioned myself over and over. After I stumbled and fell onto my knees a second time, I realized I was not going to make it. *Is it*

really that shameful? I thought. Several hikers I'd met at the base camps had turned around during the summit ascent. People did it all the time.

"Wait, stop!" I called out to Solomon. When he looked back there was concern in his eyes. "Solomon, I'm sorry but..." I trailed off, panting. So many thoughts raced through my head: the months I'd spent in preparation jogging several miles each day, my long flight across the Atlantic Ocean to Tanzania, our hike up the base of the mountain together the past four days. I didn't want to quit, but at the same time, I felt too weak to go on. As I debated how to express this to him, the line from an old church song popped into my head. It reminded me that when fear becomes overpowering, I needed to rely on God's strength to finish the course. From somewhere deep within, I felt a spark of hope ignite.

"I need a moment to rest," I finished, surprising myself.

As we continued our hike, I kept those lyrics and other familiar hymns running through my head like a radio. Along with prayer, it helped pass the time, and before long we'd come to a clearing with a little sign in the center that read, "Gilman's point." I'd heard from a fellow hiker that this spot was about two-thirds of the way to the top. If Gilman himself had been there, I would've thrown my arms around him and kissed him! Instead poor Solomon was the sole recipient of my sudden burst of energy. He must have thought me crazy. One minute I was laughing and bear-hugging him, and the next I had perched myself onto a rock and begun to weep. "I know," he said. "You have the headache and the nausea. Drink some more water."

"No, I feel fine," I replied. Yes, I was freezing and short of breath, but we'd passed other hikers along the way who couldn't stop retching from altitude sickness. I knew how lucky I was. I smiled up at him through the tears. "I'm crying because I know I'll make it now."

As we pressed on, the sun appeared over the horizon, making the nearby mounds of ice sparkle. Rays of sunshine, warm and thick, dripped down like honey from a cloudless sky. It became much easier to push forward with all this surrounding beauty.

Soon I spotted another wooden sign off in the distance. As we approached it, I read aloud its simple words printed in English: “Congratulations, you are now at Uhuru Peak, Tanzania. Africa’s highest point. World’s highest free-standing mountain.” I drew in a deep breath of fresh, almost sweet air. I had made it.

Solomon and I exchanged high-fives over mutual grins. As I walked up to the sign to take the obligatory picture, I wondered what the peak’s name signified. “So what does Uhuru mean in Swahili?”

“Freedom.”

I laughed. My shackles of fear and doubt had indeed fallen off. Knowing that God would be there to guide me through even the most difficult circumstances, I could now confidently embrace the rest of my life’s journey. All I had to do was keep putting one foot in front of the other, polepole-style.