
CROSSING GLACIERS

G. Elizabeth Kretchmer

We were in Paradise, that place on Mount Rainier aptly named for its famous panoramic vistas and wildflower meadows. The sky was clear, the air was warm, and our new relationship was budding like a springtime forest. John and I set out for an easy day hike, dressed in lightweight clothes and carrying a skimpy supply of water, snacks, and a trail map. Neither of us realized that there was more to Paradise beneath the surface. It was, after all, situated on an active volcano covered by a network of deadly glaciers.

I started out in the lead. Like an anxious mare not fully broken, I always had to get there first, no matter where *there* was and no matter who I had to brush aside. I was twenty-eight—that age when you’re still young enough to think you’re hot shit. The problem was this: John had the same notion about himself. So unlike other hikers we encountered, enjoying the landscape at a leisurely pace, John and I practically raced each other up the mountain.

After a while, I stopped beneath a towering hemlock for a handful of what we called GORP--trail mix made of granola, oats, raisins, and peanuts.

“Go on,” John said, trail map in hand. “We don’t have time to stop. Long trail ahead.”

A while later, I paused to inspect some early summer wildflowers brave enough to poke through the hard soil. “Look,” I said.

John checked his sports watch, then placed his hand on the small of my back and gave me a gentle nudge. “Mm-hmm. Nice. Let’s move on. We’ve got several miles to go.”

Although I resented that nudge, I moved on, determined to keep my pace quick so John couldn’t complain, or more importantly, tell me what to do.

Then we came around a bend, saw the snowfield and stopped.

It was a thick, crusty behemoth lazily sprawling across our path. To my right, at a roughly 45 degree slope, it extended up and over a ridge. To my left, it sloped at an equally steep grade down the mountainside. The snowfield was smooth, except for occasional undulations that reminded me of waves frozen mid-crest. While I had seen a sign back at the ranger station about snow covered trails, this was not just snow on the trail. This was major.

“Go on,” John said, as he once again placed his hand on my back and, almost imperceptibly, pushed me.

“Wait a minute,” I said, shifting so his hand would fall. “Just wait.” I studied the infinitely slick surface and knew at once it couldn’t be crossed. Wearing simple gym shoes, we were barely prepared for a hike on solid ground—certainly not for a glacial traverse. “I don’t think so.”

“You’ll be fine.”

I couldn’t imagine how two people looking at the same thing could reach such opposite conclusions. I was certain that I’d slip and slide to my death. John was confident it could be done, quite easily as a matter of fact. As I prepared to launch an argument to turn back, a foreign desire bubbled inside me, like magma building up in Rainier’s volcanic bowels. There was a slim chance John was right, and I needed to try to cross the snowfield as much as I needed to try our this new relationship on the heels of a failed first marriage.

I stepped out onto the blue-white surface. An abrupt chill rose up my bare arms and through my thin cotton tank top. But there was just enough crust to give me traction. I glanced back at John;

he nodded and grinned. I took a deep breath and advanced another step, and then another, moving closer to where the path narrowed and tilted and let out from the forest's shadows and into the bright sunlight.

Right, left. Right, left. I was careful to make sure each foot was securely planted. I moved a little faster. So far so good. The wind was stronger on the ice, but I was feeling stronger too. Then, when I reached the line where shadow gave way to sunshine, I notice—through my worn-rubber soles—how the ground's texture had abruptly changed. The snow's surface was now washed with a micro-thin layer of wet, slippery glacial melt.

I stopped again.

The wind blew. I braced against it while trying to balance heel to toe on a path so narrow that my two feet could no longer fit side by side.

"I told you we should be wearing hiking boots," I said. I had mentioned this to John back at the ranger station. I knew I should have listened to my gut.

"We'll be fine," he said, as he had also said before we started out. "It's just another day in Paradise." This was a favorite expression of his in any sort of outdoor setting. Though it was especially apropos on this day, it was also especially maddening. "Keep going."

I took a deep breath and stood poised on this frozen balance beam like the gymnast I never was. John and I were out there, traversing a tilted, glossy path, exposed to everything and protected by nothing. Along with hiking boots, we should have had crampons, ice axes, trekking or ski poles. I looked down the slope, fanned out beneath us, perfectly smooth and slick, an angled expanse without a single boulder, shrub, or tree. I couldn't see where it ended, and this I knew meant there was a drop-off down there, several stories tall. A single false move was all it would take; there was nothing to stop a freefall. I felt dizzy.

"You'll be fine," John said, when I reached out into thin air to steady myself.

I inched ahead, trying to maintain not only my balance but also my dignity. Although I had not yet slipped on the ice, I felt I was slipping in John's eyes; perhaps he was discovering that I wasn't the woman he'd thought I was. Perhaps he had spotted that dyad of vulnerabilities—panic and fear—poking out from my tough demeanor like the bra straps sliding down my shoulders from beneath my tank top.

If I moved at a careful pace, I told myself, I could do it. After all, this patch of snow and ice wasn't that wide—maybe 100 yards or so from one side to the other. By now, we'd crossed about a third of it, and John was right there behind me. I'd be fine, right?

No necessarily, because we weren't roped together and were otherwise ill-equipped. There was little John could do if I were to lose my grip.

"I can't do this!" I twisted around, not daring to turn my feet to face him fully. "This is crazy!"

He laughed, as a parent might laugh at a wobbly toddler. Lovingly incredulous.

"We shouldn't be out here like this. What kind of place is this, anyway? Shouldn't they have posted a sign somewhere alerting hikers to how dangerous this is? Look at it." I pointed downslope. "If I slip, that's it. I'm history."

John took a deep breath and then he pressed his lips into a forced smile.

"We should have the right gear," I said. "We should at least have ski poles." With a ski pole, I could have poked into the uphill slope for stability. Or maybe arrested a fall if I slipped. Or at least stabbed him for making me come out here in the first place.

"So what do you want to do?" he asked. "Turn back?"

What I heard him really asking, of course, was whether I wanted to quit. Give up. Surrender to a measly little trail despite the other hikers' footprints stamped into the surface, scoffing at me. Go back to the lodge and face him for the rest of the weekend with a big "F" for failure stamped on my forehead.

“No. I don’t want to turn back.” I liked to think of myself as an honest woman, but that was a big fat lie.

“Well then, move along. You can do it.” He looked up at the sky and slight creases surfaced on his forehead beneath the bill of his 49ers baseball cap. I followed his gaze to see clouds moving in. The sun had also shifted closer to the ridgelines in the west.

I thought once more of my ski poles back home, nestled together in the corner of my farmhouse basement. I thought about their sharp tips and how John had taught me to plant those tips when I learned to ski a few months back. I shifted to face the uphill slope, turning my back to my doom. I spread my bare fingers and plunged each of them into the snow.

It was like digging into a tray of ice. But the makeshift ski pole tips seemed to work. I sidestepped along, little by little, hunched over like Quasimodo on the slanted trail. I plunged my fingers into the uphill slope at about thigh-height and then pulled them back out after each step. Plunge, step, pull. Plunge, step, pull. I suspected my fingers would soon succumb to frostbite and I’d have to have them amputated when we got home. I’d probably become a panhandler on the corner of 4th and Yamhill in downtown Portland, holding out my fingerless hands for spare change. Bit at least I would make it across the snowfield, alive. Plunge, step, pull. Plunge, step—

Slip. Slip!

My heart raced. With my fingers still dug into the ice, my uphill foot searched for something solid, reliable, trustworthy. My foot was failing and fingers were turning blue. I discovered what scared stiff really meant.

“Let me lead,” John said.

Still dug in, I tried to play that option out in my mind. If he led, we’d probably get across the snowfield and back to safety a hell of a lot faster. But he seemed almost cavalier, and I worried his speed might make us more inclined to slip. More importantly, as foolish as it now sounds, I was sure that if I let him take the lead, I’d somehow lose his respect. This was back in the 1980’s when women were still

a minority in the business world, when we fought hard for equality, pressing up against that stupid glass ceiling day after day. John and I were peers at the same firm. At the time we had equal standing on the organization chart. If I let him lead, I was sure things between us would somehow change back at the office. I was not about to let that happen.

“If only we could just call for a helicopter to swoop in, drop a rope and lift me out of here. I mean, they do it all the time for stranded climbers.”

He shook his head. “Well, we can’t.”

I scanned the sky anyway.

By then, the sun had drifted further west and shadows were moving across the ice toward us. We still had miles of hiking to complete the trail loop, with minimal food and water and no flashlights. My back ached. I set on knee down on the trail where my foot had been unable to hold steady. My frozen fingers were still embedded in the uphill slope like petrified fossils. I was contorted in a strange position more suitable to the game of Twister than hiking. I must have looked pathetic.

John groaned. “Let me lead,” he said again.

Three simple words that carried so much weight. To *let* him lead meant to grant permission. To let *him* lead meant to allow him down the trail in front of me. And then there was the final word. To let him *lead*, let him develop and implement a solution to a problem. Perspiration drizzled between my breasts even as another gust of wind aroused goose bumps on my arms.

I couldn’t envision how I might let him take the lead even if I wanted to. There wasn’t exactly a passing lane. If he had stepped around on me on my downhill side, he might slip and fall to his death. Or, if he tried to step around my uphill side, he could bump me off balance. I saw it happening. His foot would skim the ice, and then fall into a full-on body slide, my arms chafing, his voice chasing after me, until I’d finally careen off the edge and crash onto a jumble of rocks far below, body splayed, blood splattered.

“No, that won’t work,” I said.

He stepped forward and embraced me. I knew what this meant. He agreed with me, it was over. I sighed into his neck, willing my tears to stay put and cherishing this final instant of calm before certain death. I closed my eyes.

Joan began to shuffle his feet.

I had no time to ask what he was doing. My feet had no choice but to follow his, like a ballroom dancer following her partner, as we pivoted on the ice. Within seconds, John had deftly shifted into the lead position. He released me from his embrace, took one step away and reached out his hand.

“Are you coming or not?” There he stood, ahead of me, grinning.

I was furious. I felt he had tricked me into giving up the lead, humiliated me with his deceit. Like many high level managers in the business world, he had slithered into this position. I vowed to myself I would never forgive him. I was tempted to tell him, no, I wasn’t coming. But fortunately I had another vision. In this one, John simply turned his back on me and hiked down the trail alone, leaving me out there to perish. Would he really do that? I didn’t think so, but I reached for his hand anyway.

Step by aggravating step he led me down the icy path, squeezing my left hand tightly as I continued to plunge my right hand into the uphill slope for security. I hobbled behind him in that ridiculous position, cursing him like a madwoman, although I was far more upset with myself. When we finally reached the solid subalpine forest trail, free of snow and risk, he stopped and let go.

I didn’t know what that gesture meant but had no energy left to analyze it. Tears streamed down my cheeks as my worries and defenses melted away. For a moment, I actually sobbed like a child, and John waited patiently, a few feet from me, until I could collect myself. I fished for a crumpled piece of Kleenex in my pocket and blew my nose. He raised his eyebrows, I nodded, and he led the way down the trail where the forest floor was already consumed by

darkness. I followed him all the way back to the lodge, replaying images in my mind: the slick snow, his slick maneuver, my ineptitude.

Sometimes I reflect on that day, especially whenever a fresh snow blankets the Cascade Range. I ask myself what became of that tough-minded twenty-eight year old woman on the edge of the glacier. I imagine what might have happened had I stood my ground and insisted we turn back. We would have slowed down to study the courageous wildflowers. We would have had a lovely dinner with a bottle of Washington wine. We might even have had rollicking good sex. I might have lost a little pride by turning back, but nothing compared with what actually happened on the ice. I would have maintained some self-respect, knowing John had acknowledged my opinion. Giving in to him on that trail seems like a hindsight symbol of the independence I would eventually give up in our marriage, the sense of security that comes from being in charge of one's own life and making one's own decisions.

On the other hand, perhaps crossing that glacier with John taught me about humility. Maybe, once in a while it's all right to let another person push you beyond your comfort zone, fix your problems and make the difficult decisions.

Whichever way I choose to view that day, there's one thing I've learned for sure. Relationships are a lot like glaciers. They surge forward, they retreat when climates change. They flow smoothly but crack suddenly. For all the power they carry, they are inexplicably fragile. They slant this way and that; they can be slippery and full of surprises. They can easily throw us off balance, and sometimes it only takes one wrong move to end it all.

Crossing glaciers and navigating relationships both demand courage, perseverance, good fortune and probably a bit of insanity, too. Perhaps the only difference, now that I think of it, is that only one of them requires a good set of boots.