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Mr. Palshaw

English IV

23 January 2019

Haste

The man looked up from the ground, previously entranced by his metronomic pace and the steady tension-and-release of his chest. He filled himself with crisp cold December air and slowly let it out, decelerating his fast-paced rhythm. Having fought gravity's pull on the deep-green backpack clipped around him with an uncomfortable forward hunch, the man straightened his back and paused his ascent, tightening his nostrils as the evergreen air filled him with oxygen-rich relief.

While tilting his light-grey cap back to diminish the shadow it formed on his kind blue eyes, a lengthy ridged rock caught the man's attention and he made his way towards it, the dried plants beneath him crackling from the breaking of gentle frost. He neared the edge of the rock and began walking its ridge, a gymnast walking a beam. Confidence quickly overtook the need to flail his arms for balance and he brought them closer into his body. The afternoon sunlight struck his scruffy orange beard, failing to ward off the cold but causing his bright salmon jacket to glow with an intense neon hue. He curled his fingers into a fist on either hand and rubbed his thumb against them for warmth, instantly regretting the decision as his dry knuckles cracked sharply from the tension. He clenched his thighs, suddenly aware that the light forest-green pants that he had chosen to wear were too thin to resist the breeze that passed by.

The man carefully crept forward along the rock's ridge until shuffling from up the mountain caught his attention and he gazed in its direction, trying to pinpoint the noise. Like a racoon caught off guard, he kept his body moving while his head remained fixed, his squinted eyes scanning the area above with urgency. Then his eyes widened, his pupils zoomed in with DSLR precision as he finally caught sight of what had made the noise--he finally saw the towering brown-haired grizzly.

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The man stood still. The bear was eyed a nearby red berry bush unsuspectingly. The man felt his beard fill with drops of sweat as his heart began to race intensely enough to feel its pulse in his ears. Pondering what to do without being able to think, he stood on the rock's ridge knowing he had to escape yet unable to take action. The bear, its figure muscular and its fur weathered, still hadn't noticed the man as it approached the berry bush with intense focus. The man remained fixed on the creature--he could hear the wind whistling in his ears and noticed the echo of birds chirping in the distance. Entranced for a moment but lucid the next, he tensed his left thigh and raised his foot as he swiveled gently on his right, his back now down the mountain but his eyes fixed up above. He reached his foot backward, tapping it around in search of stable footing. Tap tap...success: he planted his foot firmly without making a sound. He repeated his careful procedure, this time using his other foot to move himself off the ridged rock and onto hard ground. He stepped back again, silence. Even the ants marching dutifully across the ground didn't notice. But like before, confidence began to seep into him and his steps became faster. The ants felt the disturbance with their antennae. The bear munched on juicy red berries berries he had grappled off the bush.

Accelerating his pace, the man desperately tried to get out of harm's way. Eyes still fixed on the giant grizzly, he recognized a whiff of his sweat leave his body as a gentle breeze whisked it up the mountain. He continued his descent, ants scurrying away from his heavy feet. After a few more steps, the bear's head became blocked by the incline of the slope and the man let out a deep sigh, breaking his gaze with the figure to watch his step. The next instant, the man looked up with lightning speed as he heard a twig snap from up the mountain. He felt a tweak in his neck but adrenaline took care of the pain. The bear's hump was on the move, but luckily traveling further up the mountain instead of down it. The man pulled in a heavy breath of air, searching for something to calm his racing heart. He took another step back. Then another. Then a third. As he placed his right foot down, he felt an uneven pressure under his shoe--thin, long, cylindrical. He squinted his eyes in prayer, but it was too late, his weight had already shifted. SNAP.

He stood still, hunched like the bear had been. Above him he noticed the brown clump of hair begin to grow, getting taller and taller, taller and taller until its head emerged into his line of sight. Man and beast locked eyes, and the man's heart became as still as he was, skipping a beat before it resumed the hammering within his chest. He bit the skin of his chapped bottom lip. The bear's nose twitched as it smelled the man, the breeze finally delivering his musty scent to its textured nose. The man stood petrified while the bear began thumping its giant paws down the mountain snapping twigs left and right, cracking frost with its weight. The man twitched out of his trance and eyed a nearby rock like he had just spotted his rescue. With a swift leap driven by his muscular thighs and propelling arms he jumped to its ridge, now elevated two feet above the ground but still dwarfed by the animal that was quickly encroaching. He raised both his hands

and yelled with Spartan power, his throat burning from inside as the sun lit his jacket a flaming red. The bear sized him up, regaining its stance on its two hind legs a few feet from the rock. The man roared with desperation, doing everything in his power to scare the bear off, to survive. The beast didn't blink.

But suddenly the man noticed the bear's ears twitch sharply and saw its chiseled expression become washed away with a touch of concern. He just began to feel the cold shower of relief descending down his body as something unimaginably sharp pierced the left side of his chest from behind him. Whatever it was continued forward uninterrupted, grazing the bear's fur before flying into the mountainside and producing a small cloud of dust. As the grizzly dropped to all fours for cover, the man collapsed from atop the rock onto the hard ground, his side burning with pain as the sound of a gunshot finally struck his ears.