

The Slip

By Amy Wolter

A Short Story

Blurb:

Overwhelmed with grief, Issy heads to the snow-capped mountains in the high country for solitude and to feel closer to her husband, but nature had other plans.

I squinted through the steam of my billy brewed coffee and gazed to distant mountain ranges from the top of Mount Nelse in the Victorian high country. The pleasure of the silence enveloped me like a warm hug, the kind only possible in the remotest of places.

My snowboard sat patiently on the untouched crystal-like snow, willing me for one last back-country downhill adventure before the demands of the valley sent me back. In the distance my tent, just an orange speck, lay covered in a fresh layer of snow from the late-night storm now pounding its way towards New Zealand. As the storm boomed overhead the silent phone went unheard – another symptom of the valley below - loneliness.

Desperate to feel something other than my internal implosion, I slid the thermos into my pack and clicked my boots into the snowboard and my muscles groaned from the cold or overuse. Maybe a bit of both. Without another thought, I jumped to standing and I let gravity take over. In an instant, wind rushed past my cheeks as I made my turns, snow sprayed to the side, the happy moment securing itself into my memory.

Further down, the tree-line approached fast, but the joyous moment was lost with a jolt when the ground shook and the snow let out an almighty groan, my heart leapt and adrenaline filled my body as my mind tried to make sense of what was going on. Layers and layers of fresh snow gave way and began to churn dragging me under its force! I reached for the handle on my pack, inflating the lifesaving avalanche air-bag which held me above the surface but my snowboard was being sucked down, the opposing forces creating unbearable pressure on my body until I felt a crack as my left ankle gave way. I screamed in pain as the avalanche came to a stop, my head buried just below the surface – the soundproof ways of the mountain silenced my calls.

As the mountain settled, I looked up to see sunlight through the snow. I brushed away a thin layer that covered my helmet and face and shook off the rest as I gulped the fresh air. I could see now that my board was wedged deep in the snow locking me in, my ankle pulsated with pain shooting up my leg that was twisted in an unbearable position. I reached for my shoulder pocket and felt for the emergency beacon. I pushed the button and prayed.

The sun moved slowly across the sky as I tried to manage the pain radiating from my ankle. I looked around and noticed the avalanche had revealed a cross-section of alpine scrub. There were burrows and tunnels buried deep which appeared warm and dry and I envied whoever called this place home. My search for peace had taken a bitter turn as my safe space had tried to hurt me and I wondered whether it was worth my own life – inner conflict unable to reconcile the feeling that part of me hoped that it would.

In the days prior, the advice from the valley below had been not to go, ‘You’ll be killed up there’, one had said. I hadn’t cared. This was the only place where I felt close to my husband – gone ten days now.

The hands on my watch indicated lunch had come and gone and I wondered how long a rescue team would take – did this beacon even work? The ice around my ankle had done well to stifle the pain, but it meant couldn’t feel anything from the waist down and my mind was beginning to play tricks on me. A movement here – a flash there. Sounds moved around me with the wind rolling off the surrounding snowy hills playing tricks on me. My ears pricked up as I convinced myself a helicopter was nearby but then nothing. Then more rustling in the bushes and I panicked, what was going on around me?

‘Hello? Who’s there?’

‘Ben? Is that you?’

‘I’ve been up here looking for you,’ I called wasting energy as my voice was deadened by the soundproof snow.

My heart pounded in my chest, I was frozen – where was my rescue? I sighed... they hadn’t found Ben either and with that dismal thought my heart sped in a panic.

Another flash in the trees to my left and my arms sprang to life brushing away snow in a fruitless attempt to free myself, but the snowboard remained too deep and my ankle too fragile. The pain returned lashing at me again, my husband’s voice in my head calling me, *don’t let the mountain take you*. I wanted it too and I cried knowing it wouldn’t.

‘I hate you!’ I cried to the trees and the snow and the rocks.

‘You take him and not me! Why?’

Tears rolled down my cheeks and froze as they hit the cold air.

A sudden noise from the bushes nearby startled me. A small rat like creature emerged eyeing me with curiosity and sniffed around the site of the avalanche supposedly wondering why her warm underground home had become exposed to the elements. I wiped my eyes and chipped away at my frozen tears in time to notice her pompom like cuteness as she busily pottered around. She approached with me with caution and although I know I was imagining it - a caring eye, like she instinctively knew I was in trouble, so I tell her about my husband and she listens.

‘We married only last winter – in the little church down below with our friends around.’ I pointed to the valley in the distance the little rat looked over.

‘We were destined for a life of adventure. We had planned this winter to live up in the snow and run a little business, maybe a café or something, you know, so we could be amongst it. But the snow fell early and it fell hard and he was a storm chaser. It was a weakness – he followed and the mountain swallowed him up. I guess someone will find his body in the spring,’ I said as the patient little rat hung around listening to the story.

Our eyes moved to the sky as the hum of helicopter rotors could be heard in the distance, but it was only when the trees blew in the manufactured breeze that I breathed a sigh of relief, thankful this day was well and truly done.

The chopper vibrated above us as a rescue worker was winched down. My pompom friend scurried back to her home, under the snow and shrubs and observed from a safe distance, and I felt grateful to her for staying with me in my moment of need.

The rescue worker unclipped herself and pointed in the direction of the scurrying furball, ‘It’s a broad-toothed rat, they’re endangered you know, looks like she might have to redecorate because of the slip. How about you, any injuries?’

‘Yep – my ankle’s probably broken,’ I sighed.

‘Alrighty, let’s get you outta here before you become endangered yourself,’ the rescuer said with a wink as she dug. ‘Sorry we took so long - we were out on a job not far from here – a skier found that storm chaser who was lost ten days ago.’

I let out a groan as tears flooded my face once more.

‘Sorry, darl, I know it hurts, just connecting the winch and we’ll be heading off in a sec,’ the rescuer said, staying focused as she slid me onto a stretcher and connected the line hanging from the idling chopper.

‘It’s not that...,’ I mumbled with tears still streaming.

‘Shh now,’ the rescuer interrupted placing her hand on my shoulder as the winch began tugging at the line. ‘Just relax and we’ll have you more comfortable in a moment.

The smell of the aircraft diesel overpowered my senses as the winch came to a halt and the rescuer shifted me into position with a thud inside the cabin.

‘Alrighty, we’re clear to go,’ the rescuer called over to the pilot, ‘let’s get these two intrepid adventurers back to their families.’

As the chopper accelerated towards the nearest major hospital, I adjusted myself on the stretcher avoiding the motionless body lying next to me and closed my eyes.

‘Issy?’ a tiny voice called over the sound of the engine from the direction of the stretcher next to me.

I turned towards the sound momentarily losing the ability to speak, unable to comprehend the life in his eyes.

‘Just try to rest Ben,’ the rescue worker instructed.

‘Ben...’ I whispered as I forgot about my ankle and reached over, embracing him awkwardly. He reached for my cheeks and kissed me and I drank him up, ten long days of grief melted away like the warm sun on a snowy slope in spring.

The confusion on the face of the rescuer was unmistakable and we laughed holding each other close.

‘He is my family,’ I said vowing to never let Ben out of my sight again.