

*Modern-day rock climber Tara and Ice-Age Atzl seem to have a mysterious connection across time, a connection that may save more than one life.*

## The Crease

by

Jeanne Panek



**Y**osemite Area,  
11,000 BC

“One more hour.  
We’ll check out The  
Crease then we’ll  
go back.”

The gruff voice  
came from inside a  
fur hood, but the  
howling wind  
grabbed the words

and carried them away across the ice field. Atzl barely

heard what his father said, except for the words that made him grip his spear in sudden dread. The Crease.

The Crease was where ice broke open to make the deadliest landscape in their territory. Because it was so dangerous, animals were trapped there and made for easy food. If hunters survived the Crease to retrieve their prey, they might finally have a meal. But was it worth the risk? Atzl's stomach growled. Another day without a kill was not a welcome thought. The huge expanse of snow and ice they'd covered stretched to the horizon behind them, and they hadn't seen an animal in over two days.

Atzl trotted easily with his spear resting on his shoulder. His feet made no sound, padded by hide boots, wrapped in sinew string to give him purchase on the snow. Now he slowed, thinking about The Crease and weary with gnawing hunger.

Then he saw the bears. He pointed. His father nodded. Finally. His clan didn't hunt bears. A short-faced bear was as big as his father and was an intimidating foe. But bears ate the same thing his clan did. Musk ox, deer, even

mammoth. So, hunters followed them and took advantage of bear kills.

These two bears, one large and one small so probably mother and cub, were heading toward the soaring dome of rock so rounded and gray it was called the Old Woman. She was bent over, it was said, looking for her lost sons. The dome rose high above the ice. Atzl looked up with awe. It was said that the greatest clan leader of all time had climbed to its top. Atzl intended to do the same one day.

A huge crack had made a narrow passageway through the Old Woman, with a soaring, smooth face on one side and an unstable jumble of wildly leaning rock monoliths on the other. The bears trotted right into it. Atzl knew that the passageway had only one exit. If he and his father followed, they'd have to dodge the lethal rocks falling from the broken side. If they were lucky enough to get through that, they'd be going directly into the jaws of the deadly Crease.



*Yosemite Valley, 2019 AD*

Tara was the last one on the climbing team to tie in. She threaded the rope through her harness and wove it back through the figure eight knot that secured her to the rope. They had only two pitches to go, about 300 feet more in total, before the team topped out on one of the most beautiful rock faces in Yosemite Valley. She cinched her daypack tight against her back. Above her, three of her teammates had already made it up the pitch, moving with the grace that the climbing team demanded. Tara was last because she was the team's slowest.

Her climbing coach always hounded her for it. "Get going Tara. Speed. Efficiency. Don't dawdle or you'll run out of energy. Worse yet, the weather gods will get us all."

She always retorted, "Slow is steady, and steady wins." But saying it didn't win her any marks with the coach.

The wind was howling. It was summer and she was wearing shorts. But there was suddenly a cold nip to the wind, unusual even here, a thousand feet off the ground.

The view from the cliff's ledge made Tara's heart soar. Breathtaking. They were training in Yosemite National Park, the birthplace of climbing in America. From here she could look across the deep, tree-lined valley to El Capitan, the monolith famous for the heroic efforts of famous climbers like Alex Honnold, Tommy Caldwell, and so many more.

One day, that hero might be me, she thought.

She shaded her eyes against the sun and squinted up Yosemite Valley to where Half Dome was guarding the upper reaches like a stooped old woman. The broad U-shape of the Valley below was the best evidence that Yosemite had been carved out by huge glaciers. At least that's what the Ranger had said yesterday. Like giant ice slugs with rocks frozen in them acting like teeth, she'd said, glaciers had scoured the valley for hundreds of thousands of years before the climate warmed and the ice melted. Half Dome, at the head of the valley, had been "exfoliating" for millions of years, eroding layers from the top like an onion, and leaving the smooth dome shape. Then, according to the ranger, the glaciers came

and cut underneath the formation, loosening an existing vertical crack in the dome, opening it up and leaving that characteristic smooth face on one side and shattered rock on the other. The glaciers had carried away the rock debris over time. Tara harrumphed. She wasn't sure she believed it.

It seemed ridiculous to her that the valley was once filled with ice. Now it was hot, dry, lined with tall pines, with a road on either side of a broad, snaking river at the bottom. The ranger had said that glacier water melted into the cracks in the walls of the valley, then froze in the winter, expanding and widening the cracks until huge blocks of rock were loosed. Then the moving, icy glacier plucked those huge blocks off the faces with its sheer weight and rolled over them, turning rocks the size of buildings into debris. Even though the glaciers were gone, freeze-thaw action still was happening every year, she'd said. Winter ice expanded cracks in the cliff faces, summer melted the ice and let loose huge blocks of rock.

Tara's route went up the crack in front of her, this was her highway to the top. She might be the team's worst

climber, but she knew how to climb a crack. She slotted her hand in and made a fist. She put a foot in and turned it. Expanding her body inside the crack to secure herself, like water freezing into ice and pushing the crack apart. She looked up and saw big angular blocks above her. Below, she saw scattered boulders on the valley floor. She looked up again. Her bright orange rope snaked past some of those huge square formations. She made a silent wish that, despite freeze-thaw, they'd stay in place at least long enough for her to climb past them.

She was about halfway up the crack when she heard whimpering above. On the shoulder of the rock face, a small ledge stuck out. Two paws and a nose suddenly appeared over the lip of the ledge, peering down at her, watching her climb up the crack.

A bear? Yes, but a very small bear. A cub. What was a cub doing on a ledge a thousand feet off the ground?



Atzl and his father trotted through the narrow passageway in the Old Woman, as ever on snow, following the bears. The vertical wall rose on one side, with the broad black stripe marking the boundary between the Gray Wall and the White Wall. The colors of the rock were said to symbolize the stages of the woman's life – white youth, the black loss of her sons, and gray old age. On the other side rose the tall, precarious mass of loose rock. Atzl heard a sudden whining above them, something dropping fast. He spun around just as there was a loud *whumpf* and a huge boulder blasted into the ice behind them, shaking the ground, throwing snow into the air and leaving a crater the size of a mammoth. That was close, Atzl thought, but nothing compared to what lies ahead.

He and his father ran on breathlessly. With relief they escaped the passage but only to arrive, finally, at The Crease.

The Crease was a treacherous, broken landscape of ice between the Old Woman and distant rock domes to the north. To the west, the ice plunged down off the high

plateau and then squeezed between impossibly steep rock cliffs. The ice did end in that direction, but it was a day's dangerous walk from here.

The Crease was lethal. Cracks everywhere in the ice made this the most perilous place in their hunting grounds. Some crevasses lay wide open like mouths, deep blue and bottomless, while others hid under a soft layer of snow which you could break through and fall in. If you fell into one of the crevasses, you would slide down to the bottom, lost forever. You would die. If you got past these, you still had to avoid the icefalls where huge ice blocks broke underfoot, toppling onto yet more ice far below. If you were on one when it fell, you would die. Atzl had lost a clansman who was skinning a carcass near the edge when the block gave way and he pitched over the edge with it. Just moving across the broken landscape was dangerous. If you broke a leg here and couldn't move, cold would get you. You would die. The Crease always made Atzl shudder.

But, because it was lethal, carcasses could sometimes be found there. Despite the risks, the clan had fashioned

ladders out of sinew and bone and anchored them in the ice. The most daring of the clansmen moved across crevasses and through the icefalls on these ladders to fetch the food. Atzl was one of them, the youngest to brave The Crease. They said he was lucky, but he knew he wasn't. He just moved carefully and listened for icefall with all his senses.

Atzl scanned the broken ice landscape for the bears. They had gone straight into the middle of The Crease. It was only then that Atzl saw a deer fleeing ahead of the bears. Deer, then bears, then humans... a chain of life moving into The Crease. Atzl turned to his father for instructions. The man nodded. They would follow.

At least one link in the chain would probably not survive the day.



Tara climbed up the crack until she was at the same height as the bear cub, which was now twenty feet to her right.

A seam traversed the rock between her and the ledge where the cub was stranded, a white dike of quartz barely a finger wide. Long ago a crack in the rock had run with mineral-rich water, and those minerals crystalized to fill in the gap. While wind, water and time wore away at the rock face, the quartz vein was tougher and weathered more slowly, eventually protruding to form the continuous finger-width dike of white rock that Tara planned to walk across. That's enough for my feet, thought Tara, if I can just hold onto something with my hands. Just above her, she saw another dike parallel to the one at her feet. She meant to climb across those dikes to the cub, spanning an otherwise empty expanse of vertical wall with a thousand foot drop below her.

A growl above made Tara snap her head up. Pacing back and forth at the rim of the wall, a hundred feet above her head, was a very large and very angry bear.

Great, Mom's here, thought Tara.



The deer started trotting. The bears kept pace behind, right onto the top of an icefall. The hunters followed, but more slowly. Atzl felt uneasy. They were too close to the edge. Their weight might trigger the ice to crack and fall. All Atzl's senses were alert. Then he heard that telltale *whoomph* that means a sudden release in ice and snow. He grabbed his father and they leaped back just as the ice cracked under their feet.

The hunters landed in a heap of furs, adrenaline and spears. They were safe. The crack shot past, gained speed, and tore through the ice towards the bears. It raced between the mother and the cub, and then the ice gave way. The cub teetered for a full second before it and the unmoored piece of ice dropped out of sight.

Atzl turned to his father, grinning wildly. All he could think was FOOD. A cub separated from its mother was helpless. They couldn't fight an adult short-faced bear, but they could kill a cub. They would eat tonight.



Above Tara, her coach was sure to be complaining about her slowness holding back the whole team. She grinned as she wondered what he would think when she showed up with a bear cub in her backpack.

Tara traversed the small dike carefully. Despite the long drop below her feet, Tara moved with confidence.

The whimpering intensified as she finally reached the stranded cub. Even though it was only the size of a housecat, she was suddenly worried it might scratch or bite her. But it dove for her pack instead, apparently smelling food. It scrambled in as soon as she opened it, immediately seizing her sandwich. Tara barely removed the plastic bag in time before the cub started eating. Tara cinched the pack most of the way closed, then traversed delicately back to the crack and finished the pitch.

Her frantic team was buzzing when she got to them. “There’s a bear above us that’s spitting mad! How are we going to finish the climb?” With another 100 feet to go to the top, they were stranded unless they could get past the angry bear. The coach had never, ever, had to deal with something like this.

“Let me go first,” Tara offered. “I have something that will calm her.” She jerked her chin towards the pack. The cub’s nose poked out.

“Awwww, it’s sooooo cute!” cried one of the girls. The coach’s jaw went slack at the sight and his face went white.

“No, Tara, you’re not one of the team leads,” he said. “You’re slow. You aren’t leading this.”

A loud growl split the air above.

Tara smiled. “Anyone else want to volunteer?” she asked.

When there was complete silence, she said, “I guess it’s me. And, slow is steady. Steady is what wins.”

The coach shook his head, forced to concede the point.

“OK, Tara,” he said. “Go.”

Tara beamed. Despite the extra weight, she climbed with grace and precision, slowly and confidently up the vertical face. It was the best she had ever climbed. When she was still 30 feet below the level of the mother bear, the

vertical wall ended. From here it was much less steep, a hike on boulders and wide ledges the rest of the way to the top. The cub could handle the climb from here on its own.

She let the cub out of her pack. It still had peanut butter on its nose and Tara laughed. It sprinted up and away from her, searching for its Mom. The two found each other. The mother bear stared at Tara for a long moment, before she nuzzled her cub and they both ambled off.



Atzl move slowly and carefully in a wide circle around the enormous mother bear to the ice's edge and peered over to search for the fallen cub. There was no sign of it. His father joined him at the edge and grunted his question. Where was the cub? Atzl looked back at the mother and noticed she had pinned the deer between her huge paws. The deer flailed, then went still. The bear started feeding. That's when Atzl saw her tiny cub wriggle in next to her to feed. What? He shook his head, confused. He was sure he'd seen the cub go over the edge. Yet, there it was.

The mother bear raised her head and stared at Atzl. The wind stopped and the air went completely still, like a held breath. Then, a gust of warm wind swept up from nowhere, along The Crease, and swirled around Atzl, bringing with it the smell of pines in the hot sun even though there wasn't a tree in sight. Warm wind? Atzl marveled. Atzl breathed it in, feeling suddenly hopeful. Maybe soon the ice will begin to melt, he thought.

After only a few minutes of feeding, the mother looked at Atzl again, nudged her cub, and they both trotted off, leaving their unfinished kill behind, almost as if they left it there as a gift.



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**Jeanne Panek's** creative writing has appeared in Muse and a variety of other places, linking adventure with nature to inspire the explorer in everyone, especially kids. She's a member of the Society of Children Book Writers and Illustrators. When she's not writing or teaching, she climbs, skis, and rescues people with her mountain search and rescue team. More at [www.jeannepanek.com](http://www.jeannepanek.com).

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