**April Fools on Polar Circus**

Janet Roddan

Polar Circus is a long, alpine climb, 457 metres of vertical gain, involving both snow and ice pitches on Cirrus Mountain in the Athabascan Icefields of the Canadian Rockies. Janet Roddan's story relates a female ascent of this route on April Fool's Day, 1988.

The dance with fear fascinates me. Learning to accept fear, to take it in without letting it take over, is one of the challenges of climbing ice. Climbing leads me into myself, through my hidden doors, into corners and attics. The doorway through fear always appears ominous, locked shut, insurmountable, impossible. Fear talks to me, whispers my weakness; it speaks of conditions, of my own mortality—it whispers “hubris.” Fear sharpens my senses. It dances through my body. It tunes me. It wraps its fingers around my heart and squeezes gently. I lean to welcome fear and the edge it brings me, the whispered warnings, the adrenaline. The tango with fear makes me wise.

Two fireflies glimmer in the darkness. The tiny puffs of light float slowly upward and burn deeper into a maze of ice, snow, and rock. Snatches of our conversation drift up. We are on a quest , in search of ice. A note of opera breaks the white silence. We are singing as we approach the climb.

I learn the language; I articulate the right series of moves, body positions, ice axe and crampon placements to dance with a frozen tongue of ice. To talk with the mountain is strong medicine. Ice climbing allows me the privilege of witnessing the world. The couloir leads us into the mountain, up there, to wild, silent places that wait unconcerned with whether we view them or not.

An initial pitch of ice, steep enough to burn our calves, increases the intensity with which we communicate with this frozen world. This pitch is followed by a long, rambling walk, past the Pencil, a once free-standing pillar of ice that now lies broken and crushed in a heap. Then on up the knoll, where we look out from the dark, claustrophobic couloir to see sun on the peaks. We continue to snake along a snowfield and arrive at last at the base of the route proper, six long pitches of undulating ice… varied, interesting, alpine.

Kafka said, “The words of literature are an ice axe to break the sea frozen inside us.” We use our ice axes to shatter our frozen worlds into crystals of ice and fear. One of the strong pulls of ice climbing is the tremendous range of feelings one is forced to endure—tingling, shivering, pain…bubbling, shining elation. We hold on, struggling to control the fear that pounds through our veins and capillaries. But just as fear begins to steal into the soul, a good axe placement thunks into the ice. This solid, physical connection to the world causes the fear to recede…first from the arms, then from the mind…then even more gradually fear's fingers release the heart, which eventually slows and quiets. The intensity is replaced with warm, smooth, flowing beats. The rhythm takes hold, and the dance begins again.

The last two pitches of the climb cascade out of the notch like an enormous wedding gown. Today's brides approach slowly, touched by the mystery and majesty of the place. We are filled with our fear and our audacity. We encourage each other; we push each other. Our vows are strong, but it is April, late in the season for ice climbing. The ice is rotten; the climb is falling down. Time melts and falls away with great chunks of ice as I rail and pound against it. The dance becomes a struggle.

The entire world shrinks to a section of frozen water in front of my face. The ice is dripping wet and soggy. The rhythm has been broken. I force myself to breathe, to generate my own flow, to create my own beat. But nothing feels right. A chasm fifteen feet [4.5 m] wide opens up between Barb, my partner, and me. Impossible to return, I fight. I hit hard to get good placements. A big block of ice disengages itself; my tool is embedded in it. Time stops, and in slow motion I swing onto my other ice axe. I “barndoor” open and the block of ice topples over my shoulder. I look down to see the ice explode beside Barb, who suddenly looks tiny and hunched in her small belay stance.

“I don't know about this, Barb,” I shout down, hoping she will offer an easy way out. A reason to come down. But she calls back, “It depends on how much you want it.” Indeed. How much do I want it? Doubt slides in with spaghetti arms and little shivers that evaporate my courage.

But desire, commitment, and an incredible dislike for down climbing drive me up. One move at a time. Filled with solemn focus, I proceed. The final veil is gently torn away. The great Goddess reveals her face of frozen water. I witness her dark, foreboding pinnacles, her places of silent, quiet peace, her vistas too vast to contain a single glance. Tingling, shivering, we arrive at the summit notch at 4 p.m., a happy marriage of fear, sweat, intelligent strength, and smiles.

The vast mystery that spreads out before us causes us to stop and look and take it in for heartbeats of silence. Endless jagged peaks. The silent contract, the ceremony is almost complete. We rappel down the climb. The ropes pull, snagging a few times just to remind us that it's not over yet. A climb is never over until you are back in the car. And even then, the journey that we are all on keeps going. As we descend, night overtakes us. We turn on our headlamps, tiny pins of light in a blanket of darkness.

The April fools, married with fear and laughter on Polar Circus, return to the car, smiling in the darkness, two tiny fireflies humming and buzzing softly.

Artichuk, Francine, ed. Echoes 12: Fiction, Media, and Non-fiction. Don Mills: Oxford UP, 2002.

**Analysis**: Read over your handout on “How to Analyse an Essay” and create point form notes to demonstrate your analysis of the essay. Please be prepared to submit these notes along with your answers to the following questions.

1. Given the content of the essay why is the title “April Fools on Polar Circus” appropriate?
2. Roddan writes that “the tango with fear makes me wise.” Does it, in your opinion? Provide phrases that illustrate “the tango with fear.” What evidence is there that it makes the climber “wise”?
3. Roddan uses two sets of linked images to tell her story: dance imagery and wedding imagery. Outline the development of these ideas by listing the sentences and phrases that Roddan uses for each image.
4. Although this essay tells a story, it is not an example of short fiction. It is, however, a narrative essay. What characteristics make it narrative? What characteristics make it an essay?