

My story

What a near-fatal fall taught me about life

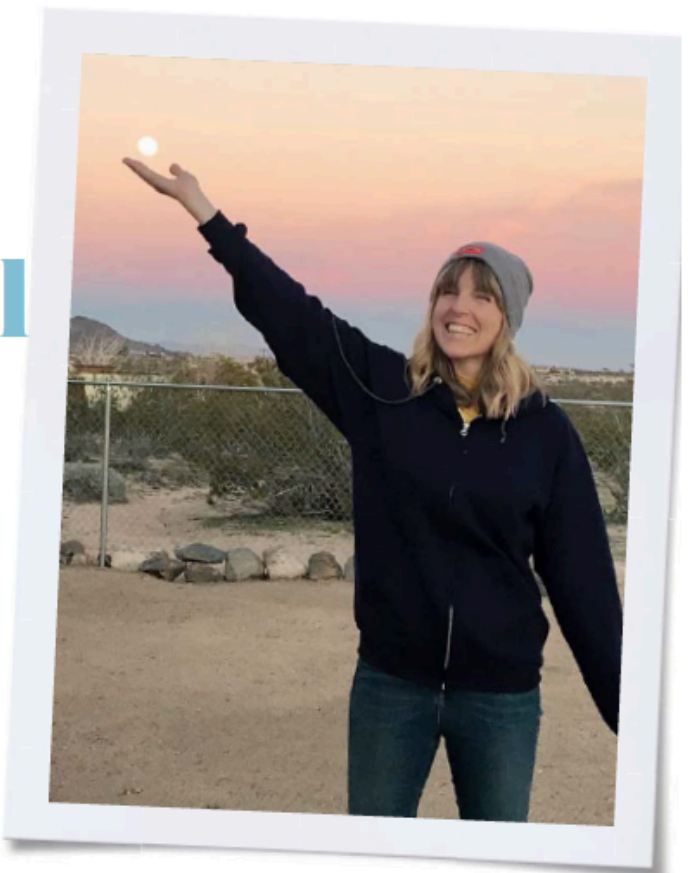
On a hike in the desert, Claire Nelson fell and broke her pelvis. Isolated and alone for days, she looked at death in the face and learned a lot about life.

● I wasn't ready to die at 35. Wholly unprepared for that, in fact. I had just turned the page on a new chapter in my life – moving from London to North America, transporting myself out of the isolated confines of my head and into the great open wilderness – specifically because I needed to find a way to live, rather than merely exist. Instead, I had stumbled towards oblivion.

Not quite three months into my travels, I was out on a hike in California's Joshua Tree National Park (something I'd been doing plenty of) when I slipped off a high boulder, smashing my pelvis to pieces. I couldn't so much as sit up, there was no phone signal, and I hadn't told anyone where I was going. I had also, according to my GPS, taken a wrong turn somewhere and was a mile off the actual trail. It was the perfect recipe for never being found, and I knew that immediately.

It's fair to assume that we all, in moments of contemplation, wonder how we're going to die. The subject makes us uncomfortable but I think we all have an inevitable, almost secretive, curiosity about it. 'When?' is the big question, followed by 'How?'. And it seems I had just received my answer. I would die of dehydration and exposure in the desert. Of all the times I'd considered my end, this was not, suffice to say, a scenario I'd imagined.

And facing death didn't feel quite how I'd expected – there was no sudden film reel of my life flashing before me. No dramatic declarations of regrets and remorse. But I realise looking back that I experienced the classic stages of grief. At the time this hadn't crossed my mind but when I look back I see how staggeringly clearly I shifted



through each gear in turn, locked in my broken body, under the burning weight of the 40-degree sun.

Anger hit me first. I was furious at myself. One of the first things that went through my mind upon realising my predicament was a roar of rage at my own foolishness. The message I left on my camera – an explanation to anyone who might find me too late – was clipped with blame, frustration and fury at myself. "I did a dumb thing ... I've been an idiot ..." But I am stubborn, and I channelled my anger into fierce Denial. I would not allow myself to focus on the fact I may well die out there. No. I would be found. I would make sure of it. I hung onto that like a drowning sailor, even through that first night, lying in the cold, yawning blackness, terrified out of my wits, imagining snakes, predators, every fear escalated in the dark. If I can just get through this night, I told myself, tomorrow someone will find me. I tried not to think about whether that was true.

As the sun rose the next morning, hope returned. But I wasn't found that day. And by the afternoon I arrived at the Bargaining stage. "Please let someone come and find me," I begged into my camera. "Please." I prayed to whatever force might listen, and wished on every shooting star I saw throughout that long, second night in the desert.

In her words

It wasn't until day three that I allowed myself to cry. Now I had reached Depression, and the sadness I felt thinking of the people I loved, and would never see again, crashed over me like a wave. As with anger, I wasn't comfortable with sadness. I realised how much of my life I'd spent trying to protect myself from those uncomfortable emotions – from hurt, failure, resentment, disappointment, heartbreak – bottling them up, trying to deny the difficult bits and only reveal the best, happiest parts of my life to the world. No wonder I had stopped feeling like I was truly living. That realisation made me sadder still.

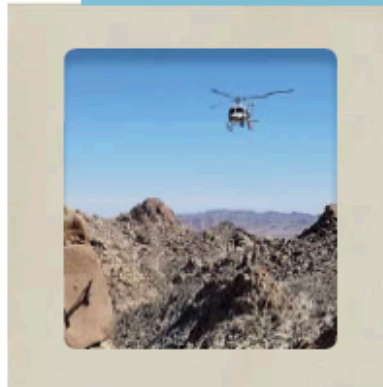
The third night brought a calm about the valley; whether that had any connection to my state of mind is hard to say, but there was a stillness that I had not felt before. And perhaps it was this stillness that made the other desert life feel safe, because now there were small movements in the rocks above me ... desert bats, fluttering in and out of the high crevices. I watched them; either they were unaware I was there, alive and watching them, or they did and had established I was not a threat. I was now just a part of the desert, at one with the rocks that surrounded me. As my bones would be. And the notion that my last moments would be spent out here, in this extraordinary place – a place where I had felt truly happy and free – was not upsetting. In a strange way I felt grateful. It was far sooner than I would ever have liked, but my death would happen out in the wilderness, and that much was a comfort. In that moment I had reached Acceptance. And then I drifted into a quiet sleep.

Although I was still hanging on for my fourth day, I was at my absolute weakest. My mouth was as dry and scratchy as wool, my face sunken, my kidneys burning from dehydration. The battery in my camera died and with it, my hope. Hope is a powerful thing, and once we give up on it body seems to follow mind. I had no fight left, no longer able to hold up my sunshade, instead letting it lie on top of me as I shifted into a fever dream. And I don't know how much longer I would have held on for, had the helicopter not come over that afternoon. The loud-hailer called my name across the valley, snapping me out of my sopor, offering me life.

Having accepted dying, finding out I was going to live came as a shock. I had closed the door on living, locked it up and thrown away the key, and now someone had wrenched it open behind me, spilling light onto the path.

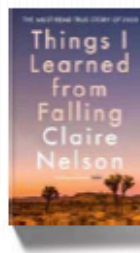
We all die. We know this; it is life's one great certainty. But by the same token, we also all live. And since I was plucked out of the desert it's made me wonder how often I really appreciated that. To say 'life is short' feels meaningless, if we aren't readying ourselves for the cut-off. Can we really appreciate life if we can't wholly acknowledge it

Clockwise from right: Claire recovering in hospital after her ordeal; an image from Claire's camera as she lay injured in the valley of the Joshua Tree National Park; a helicopter flies over the rugged terrain.



will end? I think once we accept that, it becomes easier to let go of the things we are afraid of. Fear is perhaps the most potent abuser of time, and we just don't have enough of that to squander.

Right now the world is dealing with the challenges of a global pandemic, and it's frightening in its uncertainty. But I notice more people describing how not knowing what's going to happen has forced them to stop a moment, and just be. To enjoy even simple pleasures – going for a walk and noticing the little details in the world around them. And that is not unlike how it feels to have looked your own death square in the eye. You come out with clarity, and a greater awareness of those simple things, those little details. Everything becomes a bonus, which is to say: the good and the bad. We can't selectively live and only experience the best bits. We can't appreciate the light if we never have to live through the dark. **AWW**



Things I Learned from Falling by Claire Nelson, Hachette, is out now.