

Hal's Journey: Chapter 1

By Luka Lawford

When Hal was but seven years old, he was convinced by his friend to try and jump over a backyard pool on a tricycle. Using a ramp made of an old door and some heavy milk crates, propelled by momentum from a slide, Hal almost made it across the width of the water. However, the two friends had calculated enough for only the front of the tricycle to cross, and Hal himself slammed into the edge of the pool and flew through the air. Hal's life flashed before his eyes, like a slideshow. He saw things he had done, places he had gone, and adventures he had been on. Hal survived the accident. However, he broke his arm and the matching leg. Hal never touched a bicycle or a tricycle again.

Twenty-two years later, when his life once again flashed before his eyes, Hal saw almost the exact same thing as the last time. This time, it was not Hal's fault. He was simply rock climbing at a team-building event. Hal did not enjoy rock climbing, but he had figured he would be okay. Hal was doing just fine. Fine, that was, until he looked down.

"Yo, Hal! You the man!" yelled Hal's co-worker, Darryl. Hal did not, however, feel at all like "The Man", let alone "The Rock Climber". He felt more like "That Guy Who Fell Off The Climbing Wall And Ruined The Corporate Event." Hal had not fallen off yet, but he thought he was pretty close. Meanwhile, Darryl was waving his arms and generally being a maniac. Darryl was pretty hyper and excitable, and for some reason he thought Hal was the best, or more accurately, "The Man"; Hal was not always appreciative of Darryl's enthusiasm, but it helped keep morale high at work, and Hal figured Darryl was as close to a fan club as Hal would ever get. At the moment, though, Hal wished Darryl would stop distracting him so he could get over a wicked bump in the climbing surface. Hal turned back around and began up the slope.

The problem was, Hal's hands were getting really quite sweaty.

Why did I agree to do this, anyways? thought Hal. He was sweating profusely all over by then, which was not only very nasty and extremely unhygienic, but also affecting his hands' grip on the plastic and rubber climbing surface. Nevertheless, Hal finally got over the top of the bump, and was pretty proud of it.

For some reason, Darryl was jumping around like a chipmunk again, pointing to something above Hal. Hal was pretty disconcerted about this.

Oh no, he thought. *The harness probably snapped*. It then occurred to Hal that he should probably look upwards and assess the situation. Looking skyward, or more precisely roofward, Hal spotted something even worse than an equipment failure.

There was a gigantic bump, even bigger than before, on the wall. It began to curve outwards, gradually at first, and then became larger and larger until the unlucky mountaineer would be forced to climb almost upside-down. Hal almost threw up.

“I can’t do this,” muttered Hal to no one in particular. He began his descent. However, it appeared Darryl had other ideas. He was yelling about Hal having to keep going and not backing out and upholding the “Man-dards” that everyone had come to expect. Hal did not care. He just wanted to stay alive for the entire day. He once again readied himself for a descent.

It then appeared that Darryl was not alone in his viewpoint. Hal’s co-workers had joined in the protest. Hal did not care.

However, he quickly started caring when his boss joined in the general criticism of Hal’s abilities. Hal was a hard worker. There was no reason for his boss to be mad at him for anything. But at the back of his mind, Hal had a feeling he would not be the next in line for a promotion if he backed out of what all the other employees had accomplished so quickly.

Hal looked back up at his next challenge. Judging by the size of the climbing wall, it was most likely the last obstacle before the top.

“Fine,” grunted Hal. “Let’s do this.” He rushed at the protrusion, wanting to get it over with as fast as possible. Hal started off well, scaling the vertical portion with ease. However, the curve was quite drastic when it arrived, and Hal was sure his spine was not designed to bend backwards as far as it was during the transition to horizontal. Hal eventually made it, after what seemed like ages, and found himself hanging upside down like a sloth. Hal’s sweaty palms gripped the fake rocks in a literal death-grip, as Hal was pretty sure falling off would be a bad thing. He slowly hauled himself along the surface, his face pressed up against the rocks. However, Hal did not smell the grit left behind from thousands of other employees’ smelly feet, nor did he hear Darryl’s “The Man” cheer.

Quite simply, Harold A. Wallace was in the zone. He focused on each rock painstakingly, devoting as much attention to one detail as the next. Hal lived and breathed focus as he powered himself along the surface of the wall, finally reaching the next curve. All Hal had to do was scramble up the lip, and then he would probably reach a plateau, or at the very least something remotely resembling the concept of right side up.

Hal used his arms to push himself upwards and onwards. His feet dangled in the air as Hal completed the horizontal portion of the wall and found himself on a vertical area. It was not exactly a park bench, but to Hal, it seemed like a bed. Hal rejoiced as he rested on a surface. He was pretty sure no one else had even been on that section before. Come to think of it, the rocks were few and far between and the rock wall's surface was less textured than before. Nevertheless, Hal felt he had to ensure his co-workers knew he was a pro climber. Hal turned around to wave to his fellow employees. They seemed to still be yelling excitedly. Hal felt a compulsion to take a bow. Hal put one hand out as he bowed his head, the other hand at his waist.

As Hal bowed, he realized he was tipping forwards a little more than he expected. In fact, his head was falling through the air. Hal looked back to see what was going on. As he did, his feet, the only thing holding him to the cliff apart from his harness, slipped off the rocks, which had been conveniently pre-coated in sweat.

Hal screamed as he fell off a cliff both literally and in terms of any respect he might have regained from his co-workers after completing that crazy climb. Hal's senses slowed to a crawl. He looked around him and saw many things. One was Darryl, no doubt having a panic attack. Another was his harness, not looking adequate to take Hal's weight as soon as the rope ran out. But the most prominent thing Hal saw was, once again, that slideshow of events, important and momentous, that had occurred during his twenty-nine years of existence. Hal had a lot of time to think about what he was seeing, considering the pace his mind was working at. Hal observed something quite interesting; the events were the same as when he had been seven. Hal wondered what new things would occur this go around. He saw the tricycle incident, and then the next image was of him winning a respect award in his sixth grade.

Hmm, that's weird, quite a gap, thought Hal. The next thing he saw was his baseball team winning the divisional trophy. Once again, there was a bit of a gap between the two events; Hal was in the tenth grade when his team had become the champions.

The next couple of shots were obligatory events in Hal's high school and university career; graduations, Hal being on the honour roll, and a few other achievements. The next image was of Hal being accepted to his job. Then, Hal's life ceased flashing. He was still falling in slow motion, but was more puzzled than before.

Why aren't there any more? wondered Hal. *Maybe I'm just seeing a preview or something... They're leaving something out, I know it.* But the harder Hal thought about what had happened in the last six or so years of his life, Hal got closer to the inevitable truth.

C'mon, there's gotta be something! thought Hal as he racked his brain madly for anything, something important that happened, just one thing, it was just a memory, why couldn't he remember anything...

But it was not Hal's memory that had failed him. Hal finally opened his eyes and saw the truth. In the last half a decade, Hal had not done anything worthy of remembrance. Not a single minute was something he regretted, was proud of, or even was a minute of triumph on someone else's behalf. For all Hal's memory cared, the last six years barely even existed.

Hal had become a boring person.

The realization hit him almost as hard as the rock-climbing wall did, Hal's rope propelling his side into a fortunately flat section of the wall. Although the wall was not made of real rocks, it might as well have been. Hal was slammed into the bumpy surface, the crowd of co-workers gasping and yelling out as he bounced off and hit the wall again, finally stopping. Hal was dangling perilously from his harness, held only by the waist. Barely staying conscious, Hal was ready to throw up everything he had eaten that month. However, he was saved from that humiliation when his harness slipped a few inches further, the jolt hitting Hal's head against a plastic rock and knocking him out.