

I M P O S I T I O N

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Snowdonia — jagged mountains that fence me into a valley of colours. Rusty autumn

bracken mixes with yellowing grasses and faded pink heather, against a slate grey background. As the mountains rise from the depths of November hues they become more rugged and barren. I stare intently at the mountainside, suddenly realizing it is alive — the white specks, which I thought were rocks, are moving. They are sheep. I am astonished at the great heights they can climb, and their ability to balance, precariously on a precipice — never falling. I lean back against the stone wall behind me, feeling weak and dizzy from looking up.

The dizziness stops. I look down, following the twisting single lane road until it disappears out of sight towards the village. It was nearly three hours ago when I arrived in Bethesda on a rickety old bus that needed to be coaxed up every hill. The Welsh village, with its three narrow, dusty streets and seemingly deserted appearance, was the last place on the route before the mountains took over the road.

I had enquired at the Post Office that was also a shop and someone's backyard, how far it was to the youth hostel. An elderly man with a skinny, sunken face, black hair left to behave at will and large hands cracked from hard work, spoke to me. Either I didn't understand the accent or he spoke in Welsh. After a few minutes of intent listening I managed to make out fifteen miles and something about swollen feet. Thanking him, I left before he could start a new conversation, and followed the road north, out of the village.

Three hours later I found myself halfway up the valley looking back towards Bethesda, now out of sight. To the left of the road a river flows smoothly along a meandering course, similar to its neighbouring tarmacked path, down the valley. A patchwork of fields, separated by an embroidery of stone walls, are trapped between the river and road. A few white houses dot the hilly land on the farther side of the river. I can count three, and one appears uninhabited. Behind the houses the fields are unleashed to run up the mountain until suppressed by boulders and cold air. The stone walls follow too, outlining the fields, but give up as the gradient becomes steeper. There is no apparent movement in the valley — except the river.

I sigh. A tightness in my throat and slight ache in my chest are my body's responses to joy. It is a blissful, silent kind of joy I feel. Happiness that wants to remain quiet and undisturbed. A tear in the corner of my eye is the only release my body allows.

It is here I have come to purge my body and mind of the subway fumes and dirt of London. Here, amid the overpowering forces of nature, I feel safe for the first time since I came to England from Canada. I have never felt comfortable in the smallest of cities and London was a shock. There, surrounded by millions of streets, houses, cars, buses, and nondescript faces, I could barely recall my home. The rugged, windswept and salt-drenched coast of Nova Scotia was as distant to me as the moon above the Thames — obliterated by smog. I had to leave.

I want to travel as my father did; hitching rides, working when money is needed, and

sleeping where I end up. I do this — to a certain extent. There are no restrictions on my freedom but that little voice, constantly reminding me I'm female. Not only am I female — I am small-boned, weak muscled, and cursed with being inquisitive, friendly, and interested in people.

Instead I must be a judge. I must draw conclusions about people, abruptly, to ensure my safety. I must be cautious about where I go, what I do, and when I do it. I must restrict my own movements and constantly be aware of everything around me.

The barriers don't come down quickly. I worry at the sound of a car crawling up the mountain road. I squint into the sun trying to discern the number of people inside. But the cars drive on — nobody asks if I want a ride. Only five cars have passed so far and slowly I relax. I am not a curious sight — dressed in heavy leather hiking boots, tweed knickerbockers, sweater, and a scarf tying my hair back. The weather has been fine and it is common to see walkers hiking from hostel to hostel — all a day's hike apart. I am part of the landscape.

The final few miles are steep and I have to rest frequently. I breathe the fresh air and gaze lovingly at the view of hazy mountains, sky, and valley, slowly darkening to purple as the sun begins to drop away behind the peaks. It gets colder and a breeze blows down from between two mountains, where the road has disappeared, wiping my face clean of the dirt and depression of London.

The hostel is to the right on the other side of the pass, up against a smooth, high rock face. It is a small whitewashed old cottage

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that overlooks the road and a large lake. Beside the hostel there is a stony path that leads to the beginning of the Devil's Ladder — a mountain rising like a giant, jagged staircase to the clouds.

The hostel warden is a tall, thin, friendly man with curly brown hair and a permanent smiling, tooth-filled face. He is an ex-London accountant who gave up his stress-filled life to look after the cottage for a minimal wage. Five other people are staying; three Swedish hikers, wrapped up in

themselves and their pink and lime climbing gear, and a father and daughter. The daughter is about ten, with short blond hair, a chubby face, flattish nose and pouting lower lip. She is bored. Her father wants to read the Times — catch up on stocks, even though he is on vacation. I promise her a game of Scrabble after I shower and eat.

A fire has been lit in the stone fireplace of the common room. The space is almost entirely taken up by a large oak dining

"An instant tightening in those alien hands mocks my weakness and flaunts their strength."

table, scratched from decades of travellers writing their journals on it. The chairs are comfortable, worn-out relics from when the cottage was an Inn. Dried grasses have been stuffed into a couple of old chipped vases, the curtains are ragged, the wallpaper peeling, but the room has a comfortable atmosphere. I set up the tattered Scrabble board and the girl and I start choosing our letters. We play for nearly two hours, quietly whispering the score and trading letters. She tells me she will see her mother tomorrow — it is the last day of her holiday. Eventually the father comes to take her to bed. Laughing, they go up the stairs.

I chat with the warden about his remote life; the busy summers and desolate winters. He is happy here. He shows me his mountain climbing gear and explains how he teaches in the summer and climbs the icy cliffs in the winter. The hooks are attached to brightly coloured bungi cords, that seem thin and unreliable. But he tells me they will support a lot of weight. He offers to take me up tomorrow but I think I would be terrified. He laughs at my lack of courage

and promises to let me try first on a low cliff.

The fire has only a few embers left but the room has become hot and stuffy. The Swedes have gone to bed even though it is just past nine — they will probably start climbing early in the morning. A middle-aged Scottish couple have arrived. Their car is having brake trouble and they had to stop here. Tomorrow they have to go to the village in hope of finding a mechanic.

They are very nice, open people and have offered to give me a lift to the coast the day after tomorrow.

The air in the room is stifling. I ask if anyone wants to go for a walk — there is a full moon tonight. They say they are tired and will go to bed soon, so I will go alone. Murmurs of protest. Shocked — they tell me I shouldn't go. It could be dangerous. I don't see any danger. I won't walk off a cliff, I try to joke with them. But they persist, and the father coming down from

upstairs, agrees with them. I am angry. How can people bring their own fears to a place like this? A little voice inside my head agrees with them — maybe it is dangerous. I am furious with my weakness. I decided to stay in.

As I start to take off my boots the father says he is going out to organize his car for the morning. So he'll be out there if I still want to walk around. I agree and although I feel pushed about, follow him out into the night.

The air is cold and clear. There is a shining layer of silver over the black depths of the lake. The mountains seem to melt into a backdrop of dark sky, shining stars, and brilliant moon. The silence here is full and overflowing; water quietly trickles down the crevices of rocks, the wind is slight but present, and an occasional bleat from far up the mountain is the only recognition of the living.

A car door slams shut, interrupting my senses. Footsteps. The father tells me he is going in now, he has finished packing the car. I turn back to the lake for a last look of peaceful beauty.

A hand appears around my waist — sliding upwards. My skin shrivels in tense outrage as I try to squirm away from a second hand that has wrapped its way round my body. My reflex is to elbow backwards as the rest of me lunges forward. An instant tightening in those alien hands mocks my weakness and flaunts their strength.

Fuck off, I stutter through clenched teeth locked by fear and anger.

What did you expect? he sneers with a hint of surprise.

But the hands drop away and I am gone — running toward the hostel. As I reach the steps I stop to suck in a shaking mouthful of now foul air, trying to calm my breathing. My violated being attempts to compose itself. I enter the hostel. They have all gone to bed — I go as well.

My little voice cries out, telling me it is my own fault. What did I expect? Each shudder of my flesh insists on blaming me. I put myself in a vulnerable position. The barriers go up.