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RADIO**

The Cairn

By Sophie Hampton

The man is walking up the mountain. His lean body belies his age but the hair on his chest is silvery grey and his skin weathered and brown as a conker. A straw hat shades his eyes and throws a hatched pattern of dappled light on his face. A wake of griffon vultures circles above him; their giant wingspans block the sun and cast fleeting shadows onto the ground. The man slips as he scrabbles up a slope and his boots dislodge a flurry of scree. Pale dust clings to the sweat on his limbs and blood bubbles up from the graze on his shin.

The man pauses and takes off his hat. He struggles to unscrew the lid of his water bottle and flinches at the sight of his thin wrist. He mops at his forehead with a handkerchief as he stares at the white peak in the distance, barely discernable from the high cloud into which it morphs. The man wishes he could wait until June, when the snow and ice have melted and the paths are clear. When he has attempted the climb before, he has been transfixed at the base of the final ascent, unable to cross the glacier. Now he is ill, nothing will stop him.

He walks on. When the terrain is tough, his mind is uncluttered; he focuses on each step, careful not to twist an ankle or miss the red and white *flèches* daubed on rocks. When the path is wide, cushioned with grass, the clamour in the valley echoes inside his head; sounds sear through his skull like the heat from the sun on his skin. The cow bells jingle as loudly as if hung around his neck and cicadas drone as though burrowed

in his ears. The roar of meltwater, which cascades down the cliff at the opposite end of the valley, could not be more thunderous if he stood beneath it.

'Would you mind looking away?' he says to a wild horse as he pees against a tree. He zips up his shorts and something cracks underfoot. 'I do beg your pardon,' he says, when he realises he has trodden on the brittle remains of a sheep, pecked clean by the vultures and baked in the sun. He picks up the skull and holds it to his face. He peers through the eye socket and frames the summit in a circle of blue sky.

'That's where I'm heading,' he says to the pile of bones as he tucks the cranium under his arm.

A cow lows, distressed. As the man comes over a ridge, he sees dozens of vultures perched on a crag. They watch a cow and her newborn. The mother has yet to lick the calf clean; it has scarlet blood on its belly and legs. The scavengers want the afterbirth.

'Away with you,' the man shouts to the birds, flailing his arms.

The vultures chorus a rasping screech.

'Wait,' says the man. 'She'll deliver the placenta when she's ready. If you attack her I'll shoot you all.'

The vultures ignore him and he continues on his way. He throws a warning glance over his shoulder and pats the imaginary gun on his hip.

The man meets a young couple making their way down the mountain.

'Hi,' says the couple.

'Good morning.'

'Are you going to the top?' asks the boy.

'Yes.'

'Have you got crampons and an ice axe?'

'I haven't but I'll be okay.'

'We couldn't get through,' says the girl. 'There's no way you'll make it without proper gear.'

'I will make it,' says the man.

The boy and the girl roll their eyes at one another, as though the man isn't there. The girl notices the skull tucked under the man's arm. She takes her boyfriend's hand and they hurry down the mountain.

The man glimpses a flash of red in the valley above him. He thinks it is a wounded animal but realises that a lone figure walks the path alongside the stream to the peak. He finds his binoculars in his rucksack and trains the powerful lenses upwards. The woman is tall and dark-skinned and wears a red shirt. He remembers the feel of the soft brushed cotton, how she used to ask him to push the sleeves up over her elbows as she washed the dishes, her hands covered in suds.

The woman unlaces her boots and ties them to her rucksack, peels off socks to reveal white feet and slender ankles untouched by the sun. She fords the brook and walks barefoot through a meadow carpeted in gentian; the trampled blue flowers unfurl in her

wake. As the path takes her higher, she weaves through the pines that form the treeline and fill the air with pungent scent. The man estimates she is three or four hours ahead of him.

The light is fading when the woman stops beside a glacial lake. The man stops too, even though the ground is hard and sloping and it is difficult to pitch his tent. After she sets up camp, the woman takes off her shirt, shorts and underwear and plunges under the water, leaving ripples on the surface. She laughs as she emerges; the breeze blows in the wrong direction but the sound echoes in the man's head.

The man watches as the woman dresses. He watches for a long time. She boils water in a pan on a Trangia and opens a sachet and sprinkles in the powder. He knows that each time she stirs the soup, she will tap the spoon twice against the inside of the saucepan and lick it clean; that when she eats a bar of mint cake, her lips will tingle and her breath will be cold.

After she has rinsed the pots, the woman lies on her back on a towel as the sun sinks behind the mountain. When she crawls into her tent, she ties the door open; she will watch with awe as the moon rises and casts a shimmering path of light across the tarn.

The man reaches the lake at lunchtime. He washes dust from his hands and face and when the water is still he studies his reflection, shocked at how gaunt he has become. He looks for evidence of the woman's stay, an apple core or a burnt match. When he sees a patch of flattened grass, he lies on his back and feels the solid ground beneath him.

The man strides up the escarpment even though with each step a pain shoots through his thigh. The wind is with him now and buffets him forwards. As he walks along the bottom of a rock face, he hears the rumble of rockfall and a cascade of stones rains down the cliff. The man imagines walking through the blossom blowing off a tree.

The sun is high and the man's spent limbs scorched a ruddy brown when he stops at a cave hewn into the rock. He steps from dazzling light into shadow and inhales the chilled damp air. He switches on his torch: water trickles down the walls and renders the granite as lustrous as obsidian; the floor glitters silver and gold. The foil survival blankets, discarded on the ground, crackle when he sits down to rest.

An hour later, the man leaves the cave. He pulls himself onto a narrow ledge and inches along it; at the bottom of the sheer face is a snowfield. He has no confidence and no fear. A landslide has dislodged a large boulder which blocks his way and as the man contemplates the impasse, a flash of red in the distance catches his eye; further up the mountain, the woman moves steadily along a winding path. The man splays himself around the boulder and uses his fingertips to grip cracks in the rough stone: the rucksack on his back dangles over a ravine. He looks for the woman but she is no longer in sight.

The man climbs and the air grows thin and cold. He puts on a fleece and wears trousers over his shorts. He walks through damp clouds and deepening snow. The lakes are filled with plates of broken ice.

As he trudges onwards, his feet become numb which deadens the pain. He trips on a rock concealed beneath the snow and slides downwards. He digs in his heels to stop himself and lies still for a few minutes, wheezing as he gasps for breath.

He has reached the final ascent.

The man will not see the woman again. He knows that she climbed no higher, that away from the path there are chasms which plunge tens of metres deep into the glacier, that the lip of a crevasse can collapse with no more warning than the muffled sigh of falling snow. He had said to be careful but she was headstrong, confident that she was as sure-footed as the chamois which bound effortlessly across the rugged terrain. She

laughed and went forwards, entrusting her life to a rope which should have been taut but was as slack as the man it was tied to.

Not a cry. Not a sound.

The man could neither venture close nor leave her: he stayed next to the crevasse for five nights, until his skin became waxy and yellow and the blisters on his toes filled with blood. Each morning he pulled on the rope until his palms were raw and he thought his arms would leave their sockets. As the rope frayed against the ice and the rock he bellowed her name until he was hoarse. When he could no longer fight the roar of the wind, he ate snow to soothe his throat and quench his thirst. On the fifth morning he fell backwards; a length of severed rope lay flaccid on the snow and he howled.

On the sixth day, when the cloud lifted, the man blinked in the harsh light of a cerulean sky and there was resolution. As he stood on the edge of the crevasse and stared into the abyss, which was both heaven and hell, he heard a voice and started: two climbers approached him.

So there she lies in a cold chamber, crushed beneath tons of compressed ice. Still wheezing, the man struggles to his feet and walks on.

He had hoped to make the summit that evening but the ascent is steep and there is no strength in his limbs. He covers his mouth and coughs blood into his hand. He camps overnight - shivering in a sleeping bag, barely sleeping - and sets off at dawn.

He climbs slowly, grimacing when he stumbles, frightened that a fall may be his last. With a final endeavour he reaches the top and hauls himself onto the plateau, fingers swollen, his gold band ingrained in purple flesh.

The man walks to the cairn that marks the pinnacle, takes the sheep's skull from his rucksack and places it on top of the pyramid of stones. He looks across the jagged barren landscape with its snow-filled craters and thinks that this is what it must be like to land on the moon. Exhausted, he lies on the ground, oblivious to the sharp rocks beneath him.

He feels the weight of a head on his chest. He feels warm breath on his cheek. He feels a cold hand slip into his own.

Silhouetted against the blue sky, the tips of the vultures' wings are splayed like fingers. The birds float effortlessly on the currents until one swoops, tucks in its feathers and lands on the scar. It is followed closely by another and another until a hundred griffons form a circle around a man who has no fear.

The glacier creaks and groans as the sun rises over the red mountain.

Sophie Hampton is a student on the MA Writing course at Sheffield Hallam University. She has had stories published in the Eastern Daily Press, Scribble Magazine and digitally by Ether Books. Recent competition successes include second prize at the Wells Festival of Literature 2011, shortlisted for the Hayward Gallery George Condo competition 2011 and finalist at the Brit Writers' Awards 2010. Sophie is working on a collection of short stories and has just finished the final revision of a young adult novel. The Cairn was inspired by walks in the French Pyrenees.