

## **BIRDS OF THE MOUNTAIN**

It was one small moment, but that's how everything like that always is. There was no reason for it to happen, the rock was dry and the wind was light, and they were almost off the ridge. The path dwindled into nothing, and there was no choice other than to climb up to where it restarted. The father knew that this was the hardest part, so as he watched his son go up he stood below with his arms out ready. The boy scrambled onto the top of the rock, grinned, and watched his father labour up until they both stood on the narrow, sloping platform, the world dropping away into dizzying air on either side. A bird rode the air above their heads, and the father wished he could identify it, the names of the birds of the mountain the kind of thing that every father should know. Like the names of flowers and trees, he'd never quite got round to it.

"Worst bit over," the boy said. "And you managed it. Not bad for an old man."

The father rolled his eyes but felt a stab of love that almost bent him in two. After all the years of a life twisted into the wrong shapes, it was hard to believe that this rangy boy-man with a wide grin and a shock of straw-coloured hair was his. He remembered the moment the boy was born, blue and quiet and whipped away by midwives and nurses in calm panic. The father stood like the subject of a time-lapse photo, everything a blur of motion around him while he was still and helpless. His wife said, "Where is he?" in a plaintive voice. He wondered sometimes if she

remembered him standing there, doing nothing, and that had been the start of all the things that came later.

“Come on then, Dad, let’s do this thing. I’m starving.”

“Is there ever a time you don’t think about food?” We’ll stop when we get off the ridge, the father thought. Mini pork pies and individual cheeses, and tea that tastes of the flask it comes from. Perfect.

His son shrugged. “When I’m asleep. Though maybe not even then.” He took a step on from the flat rock, and the father didn’t even see what went wrong but all of a sudden the boy had fallen and was sliding off the edge to the left. The father dived, making a wild grab at empty air until fleece slid through his hand. He tightened his fingers just in time to grip his son’s hand, but the momentum carried the father on, and he started to slide towards the drop himself. He flung his right hand out to the other side, scraping it against raw rock as he slid, slid, and then his fingers hit a jagged projection, an ancient horn reaching up to the clouds that weathered it. He grabbed it and held it tight and the two of them came to a stop, hung halfway between earth and sky.

“I’ve got you, son, I’ve got you.”

Everything was still, and quiet. The father’s chest hurt, and he had a tearing pain in his shoulder as gravity pulled at his son like it wanted him for its own. He tried to pull himself back up, to haul his son up the face and back on to the ridge. “Try and get

your feet on something. Anything. Even a crack. I'll pull and you'll push and we'll be OK." The son tried to push and the father tried to pull and the rock just sat under them old and unmoving and uncaring and nothing changed.

The father looked down into the valley below. Impossibly green grass was seeded with tiny white clouds grazing, and there were distant dots of scarlet or royal blue, walkers on the approach. None of them near enough to do anything. Perhaps there's someone coming up behind, he thought. Perhaps.

"Help," he shouted as loud as he could. "We need help, quick." His words echoed away and there was only the ridge, the sky, the bird still gliding effortless, lazy loops over the world.

No one shouted "I'm coming", or "where are you", or "don't worry". No one said anything at all.

"Dad," his son said, in a voice his father hadn't heard in a decade. "I'm really frightened. I don't think I can hold on."

"It'll be fine," the father said, although this time he knew it would not. But that's what you said when you were a parent, and they were colicky and too young to understand, but you said it and rocked them anyway. It's what you said when they fell over and scraped a knee red raw, or lay fragile and pale as a marble knight in a green gown waiting to go into surgery, when bullies turned school into constant fight or flight, that first time when a girl decided that sorry, it wasn't working, it's not you

it's me. An endless, relentless parental optimism.

His own mother and father died within a year of each other, which left no one to say it's fine to him except his wife, and he thought that she already knew that it wasn't going to be fine at all. So, he said it to himself, through the suspicion and the anger and the lawyers and the rented flat where the mould and damp crept out from behind the wallpaper like an assassin. On his weekends out with his son though, he could pretend to forget for two days that life wasn't like it was. He'd watch the boy move with grace through the landscape as if born to it, and he would say to himself: see. This is fine.

His left arm felt as if it was about to tear from the socket, and his hand hurt where it wrapped tight around his son's. You'll deal with this, he thought. You're his father, life has shown you that this is the only important thing that you're on earth to do. Now, think.

But he thought and he thought and nothing came to him. All there was to do was the hanging on and the pain, and the sound of his son breathing hard, and the scuff, scuff, scuff of his boots scabbling against the rock, trying to get a hold.

"I can't do it, Dad," the boy said. "I'm going to drag you off too. Don't. Don't." Then, in a small, terrible voice: "I love you."

The father opened his mouth to say something, but the air below them stole all the words. The arm that kept him hooked on to the ridge spasmed into cramp, he slipped

a little further towards the edge, and both father and son made a noise like an animal in pain. Then they were quiet for a moment, the father stretched out over the edge of the ridge as if he'd been crucified, the son hanging down below.

"You've been the only good thing, ever, son."

"Dad, let go. I love you, but you have to let go."

The father felt the sun on his cheek, a breeze which ruffled his hair like an affectionate lover, felt how the fingers of his left hand wrapped around the uncalloused skin of his beautiful, clever son's hand. He thought of how the boy had felt in his arms when he rocked him to sleep with a nonsense song, how he bit his bottom lip when he concentrated on learning to shape his letters, of his artless thrashing away on a battered acoustic guitar when he wanted to be so much better than he was. He thought about how they'd sit on a couch together, watching 70s sitcoms and eating pizza, not thinking about how soon the weekend ended. Most of all he thought of his son's wild, abandoned laugh that was the truest joy in life that the father had ever known.

"You have to let go, Dad."

"Yes," the father said, and he opened the fingers of his right hand wide and let go of the rock, and the walkers labouring up the approach saw the two of them as one dark bird that swooped silent and beautiful down from the mountain.