

Castle Peak

a short story

by

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Liv had just reached the summit of Castle Peak when she heard the crunch, almost as if the sound was coming from somewhere far away, and not from the tendons and muscles pulling and distorting in her ankle, as it rolled sideways, her foot slipping off the side of a rock on the trail; Liv losing her balance. Her hands scraped across a round boulder as she broke her fall. A small rock embedded in her knee and she brushed the rock away and with it the bloody skin attached. She rolled onto her back and lay near the edge of the peak, where a cliff fell away to a broad valley below. Then she felt the hot flood of pain in her twisted ankle, the nausea-inducing warmth akin to peeing herself. Sweat steamed from her pores, like an underground spring. A wild herd of fear stampeded through her veins and then was gone, leaving the dust clouds of anxiety to settle slowly onto her skin.

The moon hung in the blue morning sky and Liv felt herself shrinking to the tiniest speck on the face of the earth. Her consciousness floated somewhere above her, outside her body, tut-tutting. Not even 8 a.m. Alone at 9,000 feet on Castle Peak in early November, where no one was likely to come by for a long time, possibly not until the weekend hikers came back in three days. And she never carried first aid

whatnot on her runs. What would she have done for a sprain anyway? Her ankle hurt, but the pain would pass, wouldn't it? That was what pain did, after all.

Liv had imagined this kind of moment and worse; eyeing the sharp corner of a rock, she'd see herself falling, see broken bones, see the gash in her head. But cars crashed more often, and she still drove a car. The Peak was her favourite Wednesday run. One hour of grueling uphill climbing on the most technical mountain trails, followed by forty-five minutes of exhilarating descent, her feet sliding in the loose rocks and pebbles of scree, dancing down the slope at the edge of control. But she had always imagined the fall on the way down, never on the way up.

She closed her eyes and felt the pulsing drum rhythm of pain in her ankle, as if her heart had changed location. She lifted her leg in the air, with some idea of draining the blood away from the pain. The wingtip of her shoulder dug into a rock beneath her. She looked at her watch, 7:58 a.m.

What had happened? One minute she was stepping up between two rocks, heart bursting with exertion, just moments from the top, her turnaround. She'd looked right at the spot where she usually paused for thirty seconds or so, gasping in the view, 360 degrees of mountain spilling away on every side, spreading like green ink into a broad valley, only to run up against other slopes. In the distance of the valley floor there was a lake.

Liv had never learned the name of the lake, forgetting to look it up every week when she got home. She didn't even know what direction the lake was in. Liv had never been a Girl Scout. She knew the sun rose in the east and then passed

through south in some curved fashion, but the translation of sun position to geographical direction somehow got lost, as in a game of broken telephone.

She rolled onto her side and looked over the edge, down on Nameless Lake, resting her cheek against a boulder smoothed by time. The lake couldn't help her. She didn't know how to get there, or where she'd be, if she did. Enough people had told her she ought to familiarize herself with the terrain where she ran, spend some time studying a map of California's Sierras. She hadn't. The week before, at a dinner party, she'd told some guy who was fruitlessly trying to chat her up (why did her friends persist in thinking she wanted some "one" in her life, when she'd made it so clear she didn't) that she thought too much map might ruin the magic of her experience in the mountains.

They said that Castle Peak had spiritual properties, that the wandering spirits of King Arthur's court inhabited its spire rocks, walked its ramparts. Why not some Native American legend, Liv had once asked a friend who was into trivia. Just look at the landscape, her friend answered. And it was true that the three rocky turrets could have been bits of an abandoned castle. Sometimes she'd feel them, the knights, their fierce and courtly presence, the purity of their mission, a purity she felt, too, in her running. Inhale. Exhale. Thrive. Be alive, breathing in nature, the energy of the mountain igniting her. She had run with other people, but never here, never up the Peak. Other people with their talk, their heavy breathing, and the swish of their advanced-technology-moisture-wicking fabric interfered with her experience. Not that she was against technical running gear, just company. It was a rare week that she saw a single other person. This was her run alone, the knights,

the cliffs; no one had looked out at Nameless Lake with her, so that she could imagine that no one else had ever seen its waters but her.

She had to pee. She wasn't ready to test her ankle, knew that if she gave it a couple of minutes the worst might pass, and in any event walking, when the time came, would be easier than trying to squat now, a static position in which the weight on her ankle would be inescapable. She had to angle herself downhill. From where she lay on the ground, she rolled away from Nameless Lake and dragged her legs across the ground until they were angled down the slope. The pain pulsed as gravity pumped blood into her ankle. Half sitting up, propped on one elbow, she pulled aside her shorts, spread her legs a little wider, and hoped she could pee strongly enough not to dribble on her legs. Jesus. Upwind. Her legs now damp with a sea spray of her own pee. She wiped the droplets with the sleeve of her shirt. Maybe it was good for the scrape on her knee. Didn't they put urine on wounds in Africa? In their eyes even? She thought of the children she'd seen on a trip to Africa, flies settling on the discharge crusted corners of their eyes.

She maneuvered her legs back up the hill, avoiding the stream of pee running down, and shrugged off her backpack with its integrated water bladder and drinking tube. From the top zip pocket she unstuffed her jacket, noticing, as she did so, the thin hat and liner gloves she always carried. Should she put them on now, or wait until she got a little colder? She wasn't thinking clearly; couldn't remember which was better. She should have worn long running pants. It was late November and the mild weather and lack of snow could hardly continue. She could feel the weather was turning, even as she lay there, her ankle feeling shot to hell. She

pushed away the tiny prickle of fear that touched the back of her neck. She put on her jacket, felt a light surge of warmth and decided to wait on the hat and gloves until she really needed them, postponing the pleasure of the warmth. Checked her watch, 8:05. Maybe she'd put the hat and gloves on in 10 minutes, if she still needed them.

Her Blackberry burbled. Ninja rain ring tone. The sound of a text coming in. A sound like rain beating on the roofs of the tin shacks she'd seen in India. So crowded, India had been. Was anyone ever alone in that country?

People often asked her why she liked to travel. To know the world, she'd said. Because I can, she'd said. She thought of it as reaping the benefit of no attachments and a career as an event planner, which came with at least six weeks a year that were all her own. To escape myself, she might have said, too, but didn't.

She pushed herself up to a sitting position. Pain shot through her like lust. A hot radiance that momentarily dispelled the chill that burrowed beneath her skin, searching for bone, curling her fingers like claws. 8:06. Only one minute, but she couldn't wait ten. She put on her hat and gloves and pulled out her Blackberry. She had forgotten to silence it in her sleep-deprived rush to get out that morning. Still, she didn't have to answer, especially now, when she needed all her focus for getting down the mountain. She only brought the device for absolute emergencies, not like this twisted ankle. She could manage this situation. Asking for help was the last resort.

The text would be Peter, her work husband. Though he was, as all good work husbands are, happily married with a couple of children Liv saw once a year at the

summer staff gathering. Liv had no one waiting at home. No one poised to notice her lengthening absence, her failure to return from her run, a state she had always valued; as she watched friends bend their schedules and lives around another's.

Thirty-eight wasn't too late to change all that, but why? The demands of work were different. Work created a welcome, non-threatening urgency, a sense of being needed, without the vulnerability of mutual need. Work did not intrude on her heart. Instinctively, she touched her cold cramping hand to the polished red stone she wore as a reminder, a flat disc that hung from a black leather cord around her neck, just below the hollow where throat met collarbone; a reminder not to open the gate to her heart again. She'd thought he was "the one" when he'd given her the disc, and when he so spectacularly proved not to be, she'd kept it, a grain of salt that would never allow the wound to heal completely and risk being forgotten.

The rain beat on the tin shanty roof.

Now the pain had leaked into the rest of her body. She could feel a throb in her teeth and in the spot behind her ears, where it hurt when she wore sunglasses all day. When she swallowed, she could feel new pain sliding down her throat. Jesus. It was just her ankle, wasn't it? Not anything serious. She'd have it looked at as soon as she got down.

She pushed herself up to a standing position, putting all her weight on her good leg. The pain in her head and throat drained through her, until every sensation she felt had pooled together in her ankle. She put her second foot down and shifted infinitesimal increments of weight into the leg. Pain flared like an oil well fire.

More Ninja rain, as if the wet season had begun. Peter always sent her cascades of texts, never waiting for his first thought to be finished and typed before pressing send, then send again as he finished the thought. And send again, as a second refinement of whatever request or idea he had just sent. Peter had come from the investment-banking world their events catered to and he had absorbed their urgent-everything style. Liv wondered if Peter's rapid-fire manner carried over to home, or if he was a different man at home. Were people different at home? Was she? The mirror couldn't tell her.

More virtual rain.

Then wind, real wind now, stirring up the fine dust of the rock ground down over decades under the heels of hikers' boots; sharp wind carrying fine needles of cold with it, which soon enough turned into an icy mist that pricked her eyes.

Marimba. Her Blackberry phone ringtone. Peter expected, based on years of working together, that Liv's responses would match his cascade cadence. He was no doubt calling to find out why she wasn't responding to his latest torrent of communication. She'd left late for her run, waking up an hour later than usual after an unaccountably restless night. Peter knew about her weekly run up the Peak, but by now she ought to be down and responding to his texts in between making her oatmeal and showering. So it wasn't true that no one would notice her absence. Work would. A scintilla of relief mixed with a tiny shot of discomfort. She had worked so hard to avoid the ties that bind, and then betray. Still, this was only work, if she answered she could just let Peter know she needed some time to deal with this situation. The thought of speaking to someone buoyed her spirits for a moment.

Then Liv realized she was gripping her phone, but that her fingers were too cold to press the tiny buttons to answer. Reynaud's. Sometimes long after she'd come in from the cold her fingers would turn a ghastly white of their own accord, tingle briefly and then go numb. She'd been glad when the somewhat disconcerting occurrence was explained to her—a circulatory problem common in women called Reynaud's Syndrome. She shook out her arms, but the cold had penetrated too deeply. She made big circles with her arms, back, up and around in a giant straight-armed swim stroke calculated to whirl the blood into her numbing fingers, making of herself a human centrifuge. Her cramped hand relaxed as warmth trickled down her spinning arms, her fingers loosened; and then she found she couldn't re-tighten her grip on the phone. Released from her hand, the Blackberry flew from her still spinning arm over the sharp edge of the Peak and into the air on a trajectory toward Nameless Lake, as the Marimba started up again and the Ninja rains redoubled.

She moved toward the airborne device, losing her balance, then righting herself, sending a jagged sunbeam spray of pain through her ankle, leg, up into her groin, so that she felt as if she'd fallen on the crossbar of her first bike, a boy's bike, hand-me-down from the neighbour's boy; his the first penis she'd ever touched, amazed by its intrinsic ugliness and strange transformational abilities.

Then the Blackberry was gone. And winter announced itself. 8:12 a.m. Mist droplets clung to one another until they formed snowflakes, which gathered together as they fell, settling in clusters on the ground, only to disappear a moment later, leaving a whispered trace of darkened stain. On her bare legs the snowflakes

transformed on contact into cold bubbles of water that slid sideways off her skin, which mottled purple.

There's no bad weather, only bad clothing. Or that at least was how the saying went in the outdoor community, around whose edges Liv skated, without fully joining. Today she was wearing bad clothing. Very bad clothing.

Pain isn't real, her friend Martin once told her. Purporting to prove the statement by making her laugh and forget for a moment whatever the minor ache was that was plaguing her, something running related, no doubt. He was a runner, too, so he understood the constant companions of aches they both abided with. He tried kissing her once, outside in the yard, at a summer party, missed her lips and clipped her nose with his. She had moved her face out of reach, pretended not to have understood why they'd clinked noses. Cheers, she'd said, raising her glass of sangria.

Liv swayed in the thickening snow, falling denser and faster; now sideways, now straight down, now seeming to fall upward. Winter had come in the mountain way, sudden, hard and fast. The pain felt real, choking her each time she swayed to the bad leg. She swayed harder into the sensual waves of discomfort coming and going, like wiggling a loose tooth, waiting for that delicious moment when you can twist the final strand of bleeding gum to its breaking point. She told herself she was making friends with the pain. Maybe pain could be the imaginary friend Liv had never had, and she could summon her phantom companion and send her away at will.

Liv would have to walk down the mountain. She could do that, even on a twisted ankle. People had done worse. Who was that guy they'd made the movie about? The one who had cut off his own arm and walked out of the wilderness? She herself had run twenty-one miles of a marathon once on a sprain at least as severe as this one. Simply living was pain, the alone-ness, and she kept on, kept on, always keeping on.

But it wasn't as simple as down, not all down led to roads, to civilization, she needed to take the right down, and now the snow had obscured the path. Never trust the mountains, people had told her when she'd started long distance running. The weather can turn on a dime. She'd thought her hat and gloves would be enough. That keeping moving would be enough. But the cold moved in on her and spread like a virus; the damp sweaty warmth she'd generated on the climb made her that much more susceptible to the cold, as the damp began to freeze.

She'd never been on the Peak in snow. Still, she didn't panic. She knew the mountain. She could narrate the ascent and descent, the last trees at the bottom of the final ascent; the sentries, Arthur's knights, who guarded the bottom of the next pitch below, four spire-shaped rocks as tall as two men and thick as a sequoia trunk; the boulder she skirted before the flat connector to the fork in the trail, where she plunged into the woods.

8:15 a.m. Liv looked around to get her bearings, but there was nothing but snow, and between the flakes the sky, the horizon, the whole world was a pale grey scrim. Where was Nameless Lake? She could feel by the tilt of the slope which way was down, but the pull of gravity was her only navigational tool.

Better to wait the storm out, or better to keep moving downhill, even if it was the wrong direction?—Liv didn't know. Throw out what you think you know.

Hadn't she once read that scrap of advice in some piece of survival literature? Jon Krakauer? No. Somewhere else. How could she throw out what she didn't know?

She tried to walk, but realized her feet had frozen, so that it felt as if she was walking on leg stumps inserted into concrete blocks. And the pain in her ankle was gone, which she knew could not actually be, no matter if the sensation was fake or real.

She jerked her legs forward, down, down, down the slope. Moving slowly, so as not to plunge off an unseen edge.

The sensation in her hands fell away, and the cold moved up her arms, first sharp, then softening, until she felt armless and legless. Her torso floated through space, a sheath of icy cold drawing tighter around her with every passing minute. Her teeth stopped chattering.

And down, down, down she walked.

The cold loosened, as if her body was expanding, pushing all sensation away, opening, dissolving, and she felt a great emptiness come over her, a rapture. The Peak, her Peak, Arthur's Peak, whispered in her ear in a new language she began to understand. Love. So long she'd resisted, but it had found her. The snow brushed against her like the velvet of a king's robes.

Still, she walked. She couldn't be sure of the sensation of down-ness anymore.

Perhaps now, she thought, I will come to the shore of Nameless Lake, at long last. And the waters will have a name. And I will know it.