

## To the Mountains

Sarah Whiteside

**T**he older he gets, the closer he comes to being a landscape, the crags and lumps of him, his folds and foliage. He is marked by everything that's happened. In the bathroom lit by early morning light through one small window, a fern stands between him and the old mirror, half covering him from himself. He can see the reflected clutter behind and his own body as he moves, more bone and sinew now than muscle or even flesh. What gets him is the way the skin hangs loose. It collects at his knee and elbow joints on its way south, the way a river's flow is held back temporarily by rocks beneath the surface.

He dunks his flannel in the sink and squeezes it out then brings it to his face to feel the opening heat on his skin, primping his beard into shape at the end. He breathes deep, dunks the flannel again and sluices the water over his shoulders. As it drips down his back he shivers with pleasure.

The girls might be up and about by now. He doesn't know their habits and he wants to be sure to catch them before they leave. Wanting this, he did not sleep so well, kept waking to check on the time and finally gave up, went and made himself a strong coffee and drank it standing at the kitchen door. Mist still hung about the hills but the sheep were already awake, racketing as usual. He found a bow saw and went out to the woodpile, cut two four foot poles from good, straight branches, then examined them at arm's length. He decided they would do.

He likes it when he gets women out here. Often, too often, it's groups of men with their nifty packs and all the gear, their waterproofs on, all emblazoned and too new. They always insist on firing up their camping stoves on the bunkhouse table even though there's a perfectly good microwave. They talk too loudly and pat each other on the shoulders – him too if he gets too close. You can tell the people who don't belong here. Men like that attack a walk as if their life depended on it. They go too fast and too straight. The land round here is like a woman. It unfolds slowly, gives up its secrets slowly. You have to treat it that way. You have to meander. You have to bring your attention and your delight to what you find.

These two didn't have the gear; in fact they were on the scruffy side. He watched them walk down the hillside to the old church. They were laughing together about something and their hair shone in the late afternoon sun. He waited a few minutes inside the cottage not doing anything in particular. When he went out they were by the locked door to the bunkhouse, two blondies, their cheeks pink with walking and weather. He took them into the room adjoining the old church and sat them down, the one with her wild laugh, the other quieter, earnest – both of them taking a good swig of the whisky he offered round.

The quiet one, he could see she was scared. Maybe it was the day they'd had. Maybe it was the thought of the walk ahead. Some idiot in the tourist office had tried to warn them off. He had told them that the streams are wide and deep with run-off from the hills this time of year, the flow fast. One of the streams can be impassable in some weathers if you aren't experienced, he said. Wild-laugh girl saying, each one we wade through we're wondering, was that the one he meant?

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