



## Mountaintop

I.B.

At the top of the world, the air is thin and it's hard to breathe. I'm panting. It doesn't help, but I can't stop. Each breath in is short on oxygen. My lungs feel empty; they stay empty. Hunched over, the only thing to see is gravel and rock; the only other things to see are hard-crusting snow and darkness.

"Hey," The porter, the only other person up here, gets my attention.

I lift my head.

"Do you have a cigarette?" He asks with a Swahili accent and toothless smile.

I'm stunned. It's been days since I could smoke -- not from lack of want, but from lack of air. Between the cold, insomnia, and pure exhaustion, I'm on the verge of collapse, but the porter, cool as a clam, reckons it's a good time for a cigarette.

"Sorry," I shake my head.

He shrugs. Leaning back on his heels, he stares out even though there's nothing to see.

On a clear day, you can see the curvature of the Earth from the top of Kilimanjaro -- supposedly. I'm at the top of the mountain, but I won't know until the sun rises. Right now, there's not a hint of light, no crack over the horizon. I don't know how long I can wait. Between the thin air and the cold, all I want to do is get away from this mountain, back to somewhere I can breathe and sleep and be warm again.

But the sun isn't the only thing I'm waiting for.

Coming from below, I can hear his shuffling ascent; it's not fast: a couple of steps. Stop. Pant. Pant some more. A couple of steps. Stop. Pant.

At this rate, I have no idea how long I'll be up here. I start to wonder if he'll make it to the top or turn back.

Half our party, my sister and her husband, had to turn back before the peak. After

another sleepless night, the cold and altitude got to them. With frozen toes, they went back down -- back to air and warmth.

If you had to place a bet who, out of the four of us, would make it to the top of Kilimanjaro and who wouldn't, my sister and brother-in-law were the safe bet. They run. They work out. They trained for this trip. The safe bet isn't me -- the longhaired, party-loving and cigarette smoking baby of the family -- and it certainly isn't my aging father.

But here we are: me waiting at the top while my dad shuffles to the finish -- Step. Stop. Pant.

Only, this is a memory. It should be past tense. But this is also a story, and in my memory, it's not past tense; memories of my father never are.

And I fall into another one.

It's summer -- one of my first summers in Calgary -- and I'm in the kitchen with Mom. It's almost dinner and she asks me to get my dad. I ask where he is.

"He's in his hole." She tells me in a loving way that implies there's nowhere else he could be -- not if he was home and the weather was nice.

Opening the patio door, I can hear him before I see him: a shovel scraping against the earth; a pause; the thud of falling dirt. It has a rhythm to it: Scrape. Pause. Thud.

"Dad!" I shout.

His head pops out of the ground, emerging from the trench he's been digging for weeks -- the foundation for a wall that only exists in his head. In the future, my parents will drink wine together in the shade of that beautiful stone wall under the watchful gaze of Dionysus.

"Supper!"

"Be there in a minute!"

Like a gopher, he pops back down.

That night, my family will tease him about the wall. I can't remember that specific night, and as the years move on, I can't even remember the specific jokes. But in the aggregate past of memory, I know we did because we teased him a lot that summer. Dad and his hole, digging away, hour after hour, for, seemingly no reason. He didn't need to. He could have hired someone or used a machine, but instead, he wanted to dig a hole because he imagined a wall. Scrape. Pause. Thud.

And one memory falls into another.

I'm back in the dark and cold of a mountain top. It's the furthest from home I've ever been. I look down. As the night starts to lift -- faint, early morning light, just a shade away from darkness creeping in -- I see him. I see his tired, exhausted rhythm: Step. Stop. Pant.

He's not far from the top now, maybe twenty feet, but he looks defeated: shoulders slouched, breathing frantic, feet heavy -- every step a labour.

I don't understand how he keeps going. He looks like he's going to keel over. I shout at him, telling him to go back.

He ignores me.

Step. Stop. Pant.

And then I fall into another memory: it's brief and indistinct, voices from faces I can't remember; blurry and surrounded by primary colours: kindergarten.

"What does your dad do?" A voice asks.

"He," The name of his job is clumsy in my mouth. I say what he does instead, best as I understand it: "He makes things."

Later on, when people ask, I'll say: *Engineer*.

I fall back to the top of the world, waiting for him on Kilimanjaro.

At this point in my life, it's hard to see myself in my father. For the last couple of years, I've grown my hair and dented a chip on my shoulder, chasing some outdated 1960s counterculture dream I don't understand. *I'm a writer*, I tell people while I cook for minimum wage after dropping out of university, *I don't need a*

*degree*. The irony. But my dad, he listens, he encourages university, but he listens even though I don't.

It takes me a while to hear him. He's an engineer, now a businessman, and I want to make art. It's hard to see myself in him, and I only want to listen to myself.

Step. Stop. Pant.

I tell him to go back down again. This time, between pants, he waves me off.

I fall into another memory, one, if it were printed, the ink would still be fresh: I'm sitting at home -- the mountaintop over a decade in the past -- writing a story and listening to a record. The vinyl spins a song from the start of the 70s -- *Helplessly Hoping*. My father gave me this record. He gave me this song.

And he built the wood-paneled speakers it's playing from while I'm writing about him.

I wonder, if like the wall he hung Dionysus from, if he ever imagined his son listening to songs from the 70s, playing from speakers he built as a teenager.

And then a realization fit for the top of Kilimanjaro strikes me, one I wish I saw earlier when I was actually on top of Kilimanjaro. But this is a story, and time doesn't matter.

Step. Stop. Pant. He's just feet away now and it's getting lighter. Each of his steps is shorter than the last, each break longer than before. But he's so close. The guide beside encourages him, helps with the final last steps to the top.

He shuffles over to me and we sit together on hard rocks, smiling in front of a small wood sign. The porter holds my father's camera, aiming it at us. My dad puts his arm around me. I hear the camera's shutter.

The realization I wished I had: I stop wondering why he's doing this. Why he would put himself in so much pain and discomfort: It doesn't bother him. It never did.. He could see the top so clearly in his mind, that the route to get there stopped being an obstacle and became an adventure. What was there to complain about? That's true of everything he does, seeing something in his head and

making it real: a patch of shade to drink wine with his wife under; sharing a view of a curved horizon with his son; a pair of speakers to listen to music from.

And I realize that's who I am too, imaging stories and futures and labouring to make them...something -- a novel, a picture, a performance. We're the same.

And as the memories collapse together, I'm sitting at the top of the world with my father, watching the sunrise over a curved horizon, forgetting about the cold and exhaustion because, from up here, the world is beautiful.