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On Winter Hill

Burnt Edge, Noon Hill, Winter Hill: the names of the North of England's north-west Pennines. The hottest summer on record ripens to autumn. High ground edging the Peak District is parched yellow. I carry Dad's compass.

I take the lane next to the school. Hawthorn bushes burn red; the berries of the rowan are kindling. The sun warms the backs of my legs. A wood pigeon claps into flight. Broken acorns underfoot. The nettles in flower, explosive ranks of balsam going to seed. Blackberries ripen and rot. A comma butterfly, ragged as a dead leaf, settles on a mouldy berry and sips the juice, lifting and lowering its proboscis.

I've walked this landscape for eight years: the long, whaleback rise of Winter Hill, transmitter masts harpooning it. On the hill's western edge, the stone tower of Rivington Pike stands like a lighthouse. A landscape of soft rush and peat-bog, of broken-down walls and waist-deep grass. It's haunted by tales of plane crashes, spectral horsemen, a murdered Scotsman, and even a boggart. Most days, I look out over Winter Hill from the train window, shuttling from one city to another, tapping on my laptop keys until the Northern Rail WiFi cuts out.

I reach a gate by a burly sycamore, its bark creased with years, and enter a field where lambs pause to stare, then spring away. I'm following a fenceline now, along a path of grass and cobbly boulders. *Climb along the grassy track/ to the top of Winter Hill*, goes a song by the Manchester band Doves.

The *kraa-kraa* of a crow; a solitary magpie breaks into flight. *With the sky full of birds...* the lyrics sing in my mind's ear.

I take my father's compass from my pocket. Its dial and direction arrow are worn with years. He used to motor past Winter Hill from South East England, to reach the Highlands. Dad never paused here in the Pennines; he preferred the highest hills in Britain. They were hardly the Alps or the Himalaya – although he walked there too – but when my father arrived in the Cairngorms or the Nevis range, he'd jump out of the car, gaze at the mountains and spread his arms wide, inhaling a deep lungful of air – 'Ahh, *this* beats working for a living!' His guidebook records the dates of his various expeditions: *Ben Alligin: Hill of the Jewel. Cairn Gorm: the Blue-Green Hill. Ben Hope: Hill of the Bay. Buachaille Etive Mor: the Great Herdsman of Etive.*

The gradient steepens; I make my in-breaths deep and tidal. My memory flickers back to the last time my breath came in snatched gulps that I struggled to steady, a knot of fear clenching in my stomach. Earlier in the summer, I was crossing the glacier to the Alpine refuge under beating sun, rocks cracking and tumbling down the couloir ahead.

Rivington Pike looms into view; I spot the tallest transmitter mast ahead of me. No-one else is on the path. But for a second, I swear someone is walking stride for stride with me. The figure hovers near my left elbow. I turn, and glimpse him. Five foot eight, stocky, tanned. He wears his check hiking shirt rolled up to the elbows, black Craghopper trousers, mucky hiking boots. His hair is grey at the temples; the wind ruffles it. The jaw and cheekbones that led people to joke that he resembled the *Superman* actor Christopher Reeve, when he was young. But he is weathered now, contour lines furrowing his forehead, the skin around his eyes crinkled. His eyes, identical to mine: grey-green. He carries his battered blue Berghaus rucksack, which is the same age as I am. His hands are blunt – my sister calls his fingers 'sausage fingers' – the line of a white scar slicing across the back of the left hand, in

which he holds a compass to the map, the wedding ring bright on his finger. I can almost hear the conversation unfolding between us, the way it always used to.

‘We near the top yet, Dad?’

‘Come on! It’s only another hundred metres. Warm today, eh?’

‘Must be climate change!’

‘You’re always complaining about how cold the North is. Bit more sun would do you some good.’

The path disappears in a muddy rut. He stumbles and gets his boot stuck in a boggy puddle – ‘*Bastard!* Ooh, my ankle – ’

‘You all right?’ I grab his arm – he brushes me off.

‘I will be...’ He hauls, and his foot and boot plop out of the bog with a slurp. ‘Urgh, it’s leaked into my bloody socks!’ He wipes clods of sodden peat off the toe and sides of his boot.

‘Trying to strike oil there, Dad?’

‘Cheeky... Come on, you go in front for the rest of this squelchy patch. You can be the depth gauge!’

I take a few steps ahead of him, testing the damp ground with the toe of my boot. At a solid tussock, I glance over my shoulder to see if he’s still following me.

No-one else here but my shadow. *Wherever you walk/ you’ll be walking with me*, the song continues. It’s been eight years, one month, to the day since I last saw Dad.

I look south-west; a squall has begun to close in on Manchester, a wall of grey rain, rays lancing through the cloud. Woodlands, reservoirs, the coastline, the gas fields under Morecambe Bay. There’s the line of the road near the fracking site, where they injected ‘slick water’ into shale bedrock, cracking fissures, forcing out fuel. The earth trembled under nearby villages; there were pickets and barricades.

I’ll cross the burnt ground soon. The grass is coming back, but here and there, you can still see patches of bare peat torched to charcoal. Four years ago, wildfire scalped the hill’s north-east side. The smoke-plume drifted over the city; the air smelt of scorched heather and cremated nests. Fire skulked underground, eating through peat under the surface. It took weeks to put out. That was the first year that I realised that summer meant fire in so many places, from the Sierra Nevada to South Australia. And fire season had come to rainy Britain. I remember what my friend Lindsey said to me when Winter Hill burned: ‘It’s happening here – it’s arrived.’

I’m heading for the Pike Stones, the chambered burial cairn on Anglezarke Moor. I check the compass: north by north-west. This compass was around Dad’s neck when he left for the last mountain.