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# Who the Mountain Made Me

Katie Cisar

**I was ten years old** when I met the mountain.

For years, I waited impatiently for the day that my father would allow me to join him on his weekend runs up Maryland Heights, a mountain that towered over my hometown. He'd insisted that he would let me join him when I was old enough to handle such a run, and he kept his word.

I could not afford to let him down.

I spent my childhood looking up at the mountain in reverent wonder, dreaming of the day that I would be strong enough to run to the summit. My father believed that I could, and I swore to exceed his expectations.

"Run the mountain," he'd instructed. "Don't let it run you."

I had never felt so small, standing at the base of the foothill. The path ahead urged me to go forward, to let the forest swallow me. I convinced myself that I was unafraid, that I was capable of conquering a mountain with all the strength that a kid could muster. Maybe then, I could be enough.

I remember the takeoff, my father taking the lead. I immediately felt the physical strain, as if weights had been attached to my feet to bind me to the earth. The hot summer air flooded my lungs, making my eyes lose focus.

I let the heat smother every vexation. I had to keep running.

I imagined that the world around me was beautiful, but I could barely make sense of it. With blurred vision, everything looked like a sea of green. The forest canopy rippled like waves as a light breeze brushed against me, providing temporary relief from the heat.

I remember that we ran for hours, but hardly a sound passed between us. In the silence, I pretended that we talked. I pretended that he asked me about how practice for the fifth grade musical was going. I pretended that we laughed at how obnoxious our feet sounded, pounding against the dirt trail as hikers looked at us in disapproval.

I pretended he told me that he loved me as I was.

I remember holding the hem of his shirt as we continued uphill, afraid that he would run somewhere I couldn't reach.

**I was twelve** when I returned to the mountain with my father, but I felt that I'd grown much older.

The month was January. The temperature was cold enough that my breath fogged in the air and snowflakes fell from a sunless sky.

I wore a tank top and shorts, eager to challenge the mountain again.

As we arrived at the familiar foothill, I was hit with both dread and excitement. Dread, because I had something to prove. Excitement, because I had been training for this moment. Without the heat to hold me back, I would be a force that not even a mountain could dare to reckon with.

I would be strong enough this time.

I'd hardly noticed when we started running, my feet moving forward before my mind could catch up. The cold was sharp against my skin, pricking into my fingers and the tips of

my ears like hundreds of tiny needles. My own breath seemed to freeze in the air. Still, I would not be held back.

The forest, once a painted world of green, had faded into barren branches and perpetual overcast. The fine details were still lost to me. My watering eyes made everything blend together like a smeared oil painting of browns and grays.

My father spoke to me as we ran. It was intermittent and short, but that was more than enough for me.

He told me that strength would make me better, that it would make me superior to everyone else. He told me that I was special, that I had the power to harness that strength. He told me that he loved me more than anything.

The trail was empty that day.

**I was fourteen** when I heard the mountain's voice.

The harmonies of songbirds, the awestruck shouts of tourists and the mindless chatter of locals. My mother's shoes drumming the ground beside me, the wind rustling young leaves that budded for spring.

That was how the mountain spoke to me.

This was the first time that I had run the mountain with my mother. I was more insecure than I'd anticipated. Doubt stumbled its way into my every step. The forest symphony came to an abrupt rest as my labored breathing drowned out the melody.

"I'm sorry," I told her. "I'm so slow. Go on without me, and I'll catch up." My mother shook her head, beaming down at me with her usual fondness.

“Absolutely not,” she said. “You’re faster than you know. I’m working hard to keep up with you.”

I knew that she only said that to ease my worries. My mother was the most talented runner I’d ever met. She ran every evening like clockwork, and she could keep running for hours at a time. She was fast and powerful, but she remained so humble that I wondered if she knew just how incredible she was.

And yet her words comforted me all the same.

I was enough for her, and I would always be enough.

If I could be loved by her forever, I could withstand any storm.

The mountain sang again, even louder this time. It sang for the young and old, of nights long ago and of days to come.

It sang of immortality.

**Once I was old enough** to drive, I began to visit the mountain on my own. I knew it well, but it felt as if I was meeting it for the first time.

The colors were more vibrant. The sun seemed to reach deeper through the treetops, warming pebbles and branches along the path.

I saw details that I should have noticed long ago, like the gentle stream that ran down the mountainside, or the peregrine falcons that dove like winged acrobats through the air. As I ran downhill, I imagined I was flying right beside them.

I returned to the mountain every weekend. Under my breath, I whispered the stories from my school week. I hummed with the rock songs that played on my headphones,

accompanied by a chorus of birds. The mountain knew everything that I was, and of everything I wanted to become.

Through the rubber of my shoes, I felt the mountain touch my soul. I could feel its heartbeat when my feet connected to the earth.

We were alive together.

I was weightless as I flew down the mountain. A soft wind brushed against my back. I wondered if it was the mountain's hand that pushed me forward.

**I was eighteen** when the mountain taught me a lesson.

I had just come home from college for Thanksgiving break, and all I could think of was how ready I was to be reunited with the mountain again.

I'd been struggling with my mental health for a long time, but my first semester of freshman year had been particularly difficult. On the hardest nights, my mind often wandered to the mountain. As I laid in the quiet dark of my dorm room, I would close my eyes and dream of bounding through the forest on hot summer days. I would imagine the wind's embrace as it pulled me upwards, propelling me to the summit. Higher and higher until I was wrapped in my blanket of clouds.

Now that I had returned, I felt whole again. The mountain welcomed me home as the sunset cast an orange haze over the forest. I was completely at peace.

My younger sister ran beside me, the two of us bickering back and forth as we ran downhill. She was surely fed up with me telling her to watch her step for the millionth time. The consequences of my carelessness had already taken root in my joints, and I wanted to prevent my sister from enduring the same aches and pains.

In hindsight, I was a bit overbearing.

I was so focused on the rocks beneath my sister's feet that I'd failed to notice that I ran on the same uneven ground. Loose rocks of all sizes were scattered across the path, creating obstacles to weave around.

As we reached the midway point of our descent, the trail took a sharp turn. It was a turn that I'd run many times before. Watching where my own feet landed was an afterthought. A loud popping noise and a cry of pain. *I was on the ground.*

The setting sun, the cold air. *We had two miles left to go.*

Alone. *I hadn't seen another soul since we'd started our run.*

My sister looked down at me, eyes widened and terrified. She was counting on me to get us home.

She wore a tank top and shorts, and the temperature was going to drop below freezing. "I'm fine," I said. Whether that was directed to myself or my sister, I was unsure. I could feel my voice breaking, tears threatening to fall. I didn't want her to be afraid, so I swallowed my own fears to be the responsible adult.

*"I'm fine. I'm fine. I'm fine."*

With all of my strength, I pushed myself off the ground. A sharp pain shot through my ankle, threatening to knock me down again.

"We have to keep running," I said, keeping my tone as even as possible. "The sun is going down."

I remember my sister looking at me in disbelief, and I couldn't blame her. As we started to run again, I realized that I could barely stay upright. Each step forward was more

painful than the last. The world became darker as night drew closer. It was nature's reminder that time was running out.

I ran, and when I couldn't take it anymore, I limped as fast as I could.

*I'm fine. I'm fine. I'm fine.*

"Do you want me to carry you?"

At first, I thought I'd misheard my sister. Even if she could carry me, wasn't she scared? I was supposed to take care of us. I was supposed to be strong.

"I can do it," she said.

I was hesitant, but with my ankle only growing worse, I agreed. She wrapped her arms around me, allowing me to lean my weight on her.

Together, the two of us made our way down the mountain. She supported me the whole way, never once complaining. Our bickering had shifted into comforting, passing words of encouragement.

In the past, I'd come to the mountain in search of permanence, a peaceful love that I believed could only exist in nature. The pressure of my sister's shoulder told me that maybe I'd been wrong.

She was so strong, and she didn't even know it.

I was so loved, and I would carry it with me forever.