

Foolscap

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Like a beacon, the summit catches the early sun.

B stares up at it, waiting in the dim light of the kitchen. Drowsy and nervous. Coffee scalds the hob with a hiss and he rouses himself. An excitement flushes through his body, like a soundwave.

He packs and unpacks a bag in anticipation. Leftover food from the leftover, uncounted days at the year's end. Gold-wrapped chocolates spill across the counter. Toffees that cloy on gums and pull fillings and are best avoided.

This house is council new. New-ish. New enough to feel displaced, temporary. A single cul-de-sac of interlocking brick driveways smother the earth below. Rainwater run-off rills from concrete edges in icy sheets. All on one level. Accessible. Grab-handly handles and wipeable surfaces and the smell of Dad's ashtrays and mince, which lingers, even after all these months.

A fitted kitchen, fitted bedrooms, fitted carpets and ill-fitted doors, which close with soft cushions of air. Frustrated doorslams dissipate in damp corridors. Weightless cardboard

interiors and hollow aluminium handles spring click. A plasterboard-thin unit of rooms clinging to an indifferent hill.

In the bath, he scrubs himself all over, again and again. Carbohc froth ebbs and ripples. A leg hangs to cool as he lifts his hips to wash below. Liquid rises in his ears as he sinks, his body a pink island in the milky, clouded water.

The coming expedition feels parallel, separate, unreal. It hangs just below the surface of his mind, a confusion of fear and shame and excitement. He's not quite sure what he's walking towards. A pulling and a pushing; his instinct to go, his anxiety to stay. Either choice feels wrong. He can't not act. He can't stop the buzz, the vibration. The hunger.

They had talked at the bar. The shopkeeper was buying a round for loyal customers. A large round. All smiles and Christmas. Hands and spills and drinks passed over shoulders in odd-shaped glasses, and tonic and snacks and nuts gripped in clenched jaws and have you got a straw? Four straws, ice and a slice, and two more pints and one for the barman and good cheer and broad laughter. Sorry. Are you waiting? Here, let me get yours. And he did.

With drinks delivered, the shopkeeper stood apart, unnoticed. Beer froth on a dark beard, a mid-distance stare. Then a shift, a slight difference in his posture. Or a change in his face. Maybe just a pause. He looked sad. No, not sad, just alone. B recognised something he couldn't name.

It doesn't make sense to him now, but just like that, he turned to the shopkeeper and cheers-ed him. He never does that.

FOOLSCAP

At the edge of different regulars' territory, staked in coats and handbags, they stood, together. He knew him before that meeting at the club. Good natured, M, the shopkeeper, the hardware shop in the village, handy, knows his stock, knows his decorating kit. He'd never looked at him properly before. Small talk. Christmas. Doing anything? Family? Quiet one. Same.

He bought him a drink back. Christmas after all.

Night's end, tinsel gaudy and rasping, a festive singalong, then one for the road. He was drunk. They were both drunk. M pulled a sheet of foolscap from a pad above the payphone. A time and date, about a week from then, written twice then torn; half each. An agreement. Every year, before the next, he heads to the stone at the highest point. It's the one time the shop shuts. There's a view.

The music ended, suddenly. Everyone cheered. Eyes flinched from an abrupt strip-light glare, shiny faces in an electric spark and flutter. Pints gulped. Coats, party-hats, bodies steamed in the cold air.

When he woke the next day, the yellow, lined paper was still in his pocket. He couldn't quite remember what it meant, fogged and dry-mouthed. Slurred handwriting, a torn edge: *31st noon, '87*. His half of their agreement. Gradually, B recalls the smiling face that fleetingly looked like his own.

He clears an arc in the mirror steam. He dislikes shaving, dabs some abandoned *Brut 33* over his stubbly chin. Too much, overpowering, he coughs. He scrubs it off, his cheeks pink and shining.

Held in the palm of the valley below, a freezing fog flows with the river. Winter pale, above, the slope is gridded with larch. At least the climb will be warm, he tells himself, pulls a red peaked cap low over his eyes and hunches against the cold.

He calls a goodbye to no-one but habit.

The lowland has been left to sour, compacted, newbuild clay. Water slicks its brownfield surface in frost above the river and road, the railway and town. The air is chill and he shudders. The valley is shrinking. Houses fall apart, worthless. A place of industry sagging, starved of purpose, underfed. Graffitied *Scab* in a made-clean scrubbed stone scar. Drainage ditches choke with briars that scratch into the pasture. Flag iris fan where reeds clump. Marginals thrive in the lost farm's soggy decline and grass cedes to scrub, white with hoar.

On the shallow incline, bog-soft and glazed with ice, the ground cracks, sucks and pulls. His legs swing an awkward pendulum, mud-heavy boots clod.

The hill rises above the town, tipped from mining spoil, load by load. An unnatural mound poured from above, like sand funnelled in a slow hourglass. It grew until it settled, leaning back on the hollow east mountain behind. Unstable, weighty twins. Land held with trees in fear of slip.

B peers into the forest. Resolve drops from his mind momentarily. Everything feels motionless, prop-like. Scenery thrown up in haste. The man-made plantation gridding a man-made mountain.

A Jay swoops low, bounces, and takes alarm up to the canopy. Lines of trees open and close with a pulse of shadow as he walks. Light filters onto deep soft-dropped layers of needles that make for a quieter tread. Roots bind tree to tree, holding the slope and rocking the dense floor as a breeze takes high branches in pulls and sways. He is aware of the bird's silent side-eye high above, the sweep of branches that whisper in scrapes and feathers of air.

He closes his eyes, lets other senses navigate.

This hill is a bright map of his childhood. A play track for stunt bikes, a den, a place to get lost in, to disappear in, alongside siblings. Or away from them. A place to loiter and mischief dull school days out until the bell. A place to be alone. Alone with this feeling that he's not the same as his brothers. Knowing instinctively that some part of himself is best off hidden.

How often he has stared into the mirror at this hidden him. An understudy, carefully learning lines, behaviours; in the wings waiting to take the stage. Trying to understand how it is to be in this small town, a boy in this world.

He sings quietly to this other self walking alongside him. Any song he knows. Lyrics escape his memory and whistling fills the gaps when words don't come. Unembarrassed, his choir-learned bassy-baritone sounds out, clear but sad, without a soprano lift. He tries falsetto until the sound makes him smile, then notes flatten into melancholy.

With eyes closed he isn't alone, his own footsteps come back to him. He pauses; the other him pauses. He moves through the

vertical planes of trees with himself in parallel, neither hunter or hunted. Obscured, hidden between columns of warm bark.

His pace is steady. Ahead, toward the clearing, he can see the tips of larch, amber and fiery. With the rise, the ray of sun that reaches further into the valley will meet him, or he will climb to meet it.

His song stops. Sounds that bowed soft vibrations in foliage play staccato and sharp. Abruptly the line of trees ends. He blinks a brighter light and stands on the edge of desolation. No longer the warm, acidic, compress of forest carpet. Cleared trunks and scrub and a dry smell. A diesel smell. The forest cull. Breakers stripped and replanted methodically.

The wreckage is silver, bony and torn. Ruts change the path to a difficult clamber. Branches and trees, clipped and stacked by machinery, are unkind. Here is the tipping point of the mine-spoil, the spout where the ground turns inside-out, the moving mountain, black and shimmering and unstable.

Stumbling, he is suddenly tired. He rests.

The days that led him here were eased by a hangover and nervy excitement. It felt far off, distant, possible. Now he is ambushed by hesitancy, a judder of confusion. He wonders if he's being a fool.

He sinks back into the grass. It's cold and damp and he lies low, out of sight. A buzzard circles overhead. He imagines it slowing mid-air, wings back, before plummeting toward him, snatching his pathetic body up from the grass.

What the hell is he thinking?

Suddenly he is nervous. He knows only too well what he's doing out here on this bare hill. He wants to pay attention to the bearded man, with curled hairs at his collar, who smiled. He wants to feel all those things he shouldn't feel, think or seek.

He gets up, his throat tenses in a grip that augers tears, or nausea, or grief. He understands the stir in his gut; why he washed so attentively; why he's wearing his good clothes, new clothes with labels that scratch. He'll go to hell for what he wants, but still he climbs.

And there he is. The shopkeeper, M, in the distance.

The ground is softer. The spring of grass and moss and rock is kinder, the air clear. Sheep tracks ring the slope like ribbons and wool tufts on gorse with pink and blue smit marks. Ferns curl bright fiddleheads through grey earth. The breeze is keen. He feels his shoulders ease, his lungs open. The day is short, just past the shortest, but the clear sky makes it feel endless.

M squints into the bright sun as they cross the plateau. Cold-bitten pink cheeks; he waves a gloved hand. They both pause. Nerves slow into stillness. They walk toward each other and to the platform of rock at the highest point.

Men with men, mates. B knows how to be with his brothers, with friends, how he used to be with his dad. Hesitant steps. How to behave, how far apart to sit, what to talk of.

Suddenly they are strangers together, as on a train, limbs and bodies settle, close but distinct.

The buzzard's silent circling soothes as their eyes follow the spiral and fall of its search. Glancing sideways, the shopkeeper's face is near. A drip shivers under his nose at the top of a dark beard. His green eyes shine with tears.

Two breaths meet in a single drifting vapour and they sit and look out over the hills.

They both remember they've brought food. A winter picnic of sorts. The crackle of foil, a sandwich teased in two. Squashed mince pies and a shared thermos of coffee, which splatters away from their lips in the breeze.

The conversation eases with the sharing. The land ahead maps out their stories of relatives and memories and school. More gestures than chat, they say little. The sway of the story and the rhythm of sounds settle between them. They talk in roundabout ways, circling a centre like the buzzard's spiral and fall.

They find common ground. Step forward and back in words and codes and invitations and pauses. They run out of the things they can say easily, but the silence is comfortable. Side by side, they face south and talk to the hills.

The sun is overhead. Ears blush cold, sparks light hazel eyes. A crumb of pastry is lost in his dark beard.
Their shadows get shorter,
two parallel lines.

Equal.

Mirrored.

A lone cloud idles.

They gaze straight ahead,
suspended from life, excused from time.

M takes a toffee, cold, hard and sweet. He ends each year on this hill, quiet. This year as he climbed, vaguely and without directing things, he felt he might understand more from up here. He hoped he'll be understood, that he'll be more than *the man from the shop*.

He rolls a yellow cellophane square. Unrolls it. Jaws a sweet-chewed figure of eight. Speech is stuck on the horizon. The sun drifts west and a breeze lifts.

M feels the weight of the two bottles of stout in his bag, a gift from a shop customer. He forgot an opener, sorry, but offers them; B deftly upturns one bottle over the other. A satisfying twist, *psh*. Caps lift.

They clink, a cold swig sinks warm, tart after sweet.

Chat, unstopped, pours in drink. They talk about building things, farms, pit closures and hasty, propped-up factories. Their ambitions. Blushing red as his cap, B confesses that he wants to be a painter, to properly learn. Muddy feet swing free. Proper like. Decorating's a step in the right direction, he reckons.

They lean, in gossip about the village, about the shop and work. Under the peak of his cap, his brow lowers, the strike. The anger, the divisions. His brothers picketing. They raise a solemn *cheers* in respect of the newly formed dead dad club.

B talks about wanting to leave, to see more. He feels trapped without a real job, without a trade. The river, the road and the railway go just one direction. It feels small. Everybody belongs to someone else. Nothing changes. A sigh in clouded breath.

Fingers shred the bottle label. He talks slowly. The cap hides his face. His throat is taut, his voice catches. He plucks blades of grass. A careful balance. He steps forward on each word.

He needs to change something. He doesn't feel like he belongs, he loves his brothers and sisters, but feels like he'll never fit. His jaw-tight clench pulses where his cap sits. Their arms brush. B turns. His moist breath warmer and closer than the cool air.

Beneath the words, trust is signalled. Shared and private. An agreement. A foolscap date. No lies.

M seeks words to offer in response, but the right ones don't come. He tries to nudge a sentence into life. Some meaningful sign of understanding. He wants, more than anything, to talk for longer but, as soon as the thought arrives, he's like an actor left without a script.

He looks inward to something he can't speak aloud. Something

he rolls toward in countless night grunts. An imagined climax, forbidden, hidden in shame behind locked toilet doors, under heavy blankets that pin down the sin, the wretched. The hunger for another body, for a person to know, to see what he knows. To share.

He feels caught out, seen doing something he ought not. Sadness sinks through him in an obscure confusion of fear and shame. The heavy impossibility of the shop, of the valley below.

He's filled with guilt. What is he doing up here?

He blurts out that he should get home to his daughter.

A mouth opens to reply. Then swallows the sentence.

Why did he say that? His daughter lives with her mother and her stepdad, real dad, a better dad than the grieving boy-dad he cut, trying to fix something in him. An alibi. He feels disgusted at his life. A shopkeeper, sad and alone. A cold claws through the stone in shivers.

I don't have a daughter; I mean I do have a daughter. She's great. But she's not at home. It's just me. Just me for years since Tigger died. The cat. Sorry. He falters.

Soon they both sit and stare at the ground as if some important memory is lost.

A long wait.

They peer down into the valley.

B lifts his red cap and nudges the shopkeeper.
Daughter – you dark horse, you!

Ease returns like a clear note in a song. A glance and, in their shared deep broad smile, shame lifts. A longer look, a stare, unashamed. Its end acknowledged in a nod. Settled.

A hand on his shoulder, their goodbye. Sincere. The new thread connecting them thrums as they start to move. Long-sat legs move slowly. M feels big and clumsy, shy. An animal learning to be wild again after long performing tricks.

They walk without turning away. B waves, his red cap raised, sunlight on an open face, a smile. He sinks below the east horizon. He shouts, hands cupped, mute, until the word glides into the listener's ear, *thanks*.

Happy new year the shopkeeper calls as he starts his own walk west.

M steadies himself for the first steps over the edge. This stretch is steep. Muddy footholds worn in sod, pockets in roots and rocks and wiry grass. On heels, leaning back, legs move ahead of his body, knees jar in a sharp descent.

With a gasp he grabs a tree and holds tight and hugs tight, an anchor. A beery belch through a smile, his tongue tastes sweet crumbs in his beard. He feels drunker than he should and giggles. He tips forward in baby steps. The slope rolls to a trot, a run, faster, skimming stones and air as feet land heavy. He is above the ground, wild and laughing.

He wants to leap high and yell out all the things he didn't say. How he hasn't felt like this before, that he doesn't know what it is, but it isn't wrong; then gravity tips and turns and the hill shrugs him, light as air, toward home.

A slide, his bum bounces until a pile of leaves slows him to a stop. M laughs in surprise and his head rests with beetles and worms. In his mind an image of B lingers, arriving with the sun behind him, hair caught like fire. A halo, a red glow of light through cold ears, a shy wave.

thanks, on a breeze.

The shopkeeper looks up at bare branches bathed in sun, breathes clouds of bright amber as his chest rises and falls. Lichen furs oak and birch. Evening light glows. The silent bed-warm rot of winter is soft. Roots fix deep in the soil, reaching through streams and fissures to hold on to the unmined rock below. Whatever happens next, it is a good thing.

A sphere uncurls. A woodlouse navigates this new obstacle to sink from his shoulder into leaves.

M sits up. He knows this place. They foraged here, before everything changed; it fed his dad's fondness for anything free, his mam's despair at the grocer's wilting offerings. He wonders at her, mushrooms in her skirt apron, slim dirty fingers in earth. As he walks he remembers; bolete, chantarelle, inkcaps. He tastes crab-apple bullets made sweet; the sherbet flowers, berries of the Elder, *the Judas tree*; papery hazelnuts in the paws of thieving squirrels, wimberries stuffed in pint bottles, stained mouths with sticky, smiling teeth.

His father held him close. The part of her he could keep safe, after she died. In her place he worked hard, laughed hard, learnt the trade. He was all the sons and daughters that never came. The shopkeeper & *Son* became self-sufficient, just the two of them. M filled the gaps and siphoned play into work. His options narrowed. His path was set. Then his dad slowly faded. Like a light going out.

And now it's just him. The shop fills his waking hours, his dreams. It is the soundtrack of every day. It is his familiar, M, the & *Son*.

The trail is hard to follow in the low sun that flashes on motes of dust and shines on every dropping leaf. Lekking gnats weave sparks. The glare floats on his retina, even if he shields his eyes. He strays. He reorients. His interrupted rhythm is wrong.

The afternoon shadow rises and as he sinks below the air clears, cold. A brittle crunch of frost in the leaves and glassy puddles' icy contours. Meltwater trickles a bubbling echo into the drainage pipe funnelling it beneath the village.

He acts his part in that small world. The village. A community, where the same money just gets passed around without ever seeming to multiply. The shop keeps it moving and he is the shopkeeper's boy-shopkeeper. His father's mantra: solve problems; answer questions; clean up messes; take pride; be useful; needed. Liked.

In the shop, he is their mirror; he's one of them. On the side of the useless never-get-round-to-it husband; in sympathy with

FOOLSCAP

practical wives; lazy sons should take it easier; enthusiastic brothers, go-for-it. He coos over babies with doting grandparents, and arms pragmatic daughters with the right tools. He offers credit to the disinherited, those who never clear a tab. He is diplomatically on all sides in feuds or squabbles. All their lives held in a matrix of problem gutters, stained carpets and woodworm.

It adds to all he carries. M holds it all, a complex ledger of lives written over half a century and more, a history of the village through a family shop. The keeper.

And what do they know of him? Who holds his story, his truth? If he dies tomorrow, they will all fade a little. All those reflections he offers back to them, day after day. He will fall, silent, confiding in nobody.

Sometimes he feels cheated. Taken for a fool. There are things he knows he will never have, things he won't let himself imagine, and the village is ignorant of them. An unwitting daily reminder delivered in tight, ungenerous faces. His disappointment surges into anger. He is not allowed to be truthful. He is a liar.

Every day, customers tell him that, of course, *men like that* are born liars, untrustworthy, effeminate, weak. Light in their loafers, shirtlifters, nancies, benders. *Men like that* are a menace. Buggers. Keep children safe, boys away. Abusers. Corruptors. Perverts.

Sooner shoot their sons than father *men like that*, meting out shame in everlasting fire. Sinners, sodomites, unnatural and

debased. Papers shout of abominations, a disease, a cancer, a terror, a time-bomb, a plague, of *men like that* swirling in the cesspit of their own making. *Men like that* are grossly indecent. *Men like that* should be locked up, hung, stuck, castrated. Every day the customers tell M, this *man like that*.

A piano doesn't pick its tune. So, he will be a liar.

The shop-door of home bells to the evening, he throws the bolt. He stands in the silence. *New Year Sale!* signs and stock and the pulse of coloured fairy lights in the window.

In this slow disco, M takes his boots off, pulls muddy jeans from damp legs, and drops them to the shop floor. He smells aftershave, not his, on his cord jacket. Keen, cheap and sweet. His stomach jumps with excitement.

He thinks of the plateau. He wonders how close they dare go toward an edge before it might crumble and they might fall.

Through flyscreen ribbons he trips up the narrow stairs, holding his half scrap of foolscap and a square of yellow cellophane.

He strips and washes, drops his head to the sink to get the dirt from his hair. Water clouds pink. A cold-weather nosebleed runs over his top lip into his mouth.

Plugs of toilet-roll stopper the iron tang of salty blood. His dad swore blind that stout causes nosebleeds. He feels a wave of love and smiles in contentment from a wonky jaw.

FOOLSCAP

From here, at the foot of the hill, the shadow climbs as the last rays of sun reach higher. A warmer glow. M opens the skylight and the early evening drops cold air past his body like fabric.

He watches until the peak gently lights like a candle.