**North ridge**

Gone four o’clock. So, it’s true then. Or is it?

From the car you can see the path I took this morning.

That’s where I’ll come from. When I come.

The path is slick with milky ice. The overhanging pine branches sparkle with snow. Maybe not a great day for the hills. Not a brilliant time to tackle the north ridge. But I’m an experienced winter walker. I have crampons, an ice axe, all the gear. And it was beautiful earlier, pale winter sunlight glinting on snow. Sometimes, those are the best days. If you’re happed up. And you’ve got the gear.

The sun is slipping beneath the horizon now, tinging the clouds tangerine and rose – daubs of colour in a monochrome winter’s night. It’s going to snow again. You can tell.

Where am I?

‘Mummy,’ says Euan, ‘will Daddy be back soon?’

‘How should I know?’ you snap. Then you twist round in the driver’s seat and smile at him in the backseat, regretting your sharp tone. You thought he was asleep. If only he would sleep. He looks very separate, sitting there in the back of the car, snug in his green down jacket and purple woolly hat, clutching Hamish, his worn old teddy bear that used to belong to me. ‘I don’t know exactly when he’ll be back, sweetheart. Soon, I hope.’

Scream. You could scream. Or cry. That would be normal in this situation. But you don’t. As you knew you wouldn’t. As I knew you wouldn’t. My wife, the stoic.

Or do I even think like that? Who knows? I’ve become a stranger.

To you.

To Euan.

To myself.

That’s what happens.

If you did scream, no one would hear you. The camp site is deserted. It’s November, for Christ’s sake. The camp site owner laughed when you phoned to book. You can camp there if you like, but I’ll not be there.

The shower block is locked, one toilet left open for the likes of you.

And me.

The likes of us.

You washed there this morning, standing on a towel and balancing on one leg as you struggled to get first one foot then the other into the tiny metal wash hand basin, flinching as freezing water coursed over your already mottled skin. You didn’t even bother to make Euan have a proper wash. Just wiped his face with a flannel.

As the colours fade from the clouds, it starts to sleet. Dollops of water slap against the windscreen. Each one holds its shape for a second then dribbles down the glass.

You pick up your phone and check the screen. Two bars of signal. That’s enough. But there have been no messages. No calls. Well, maybe I don’t have a signal up there on the north ridge. But I should be down by now. That’s the thing. I should have been down long ago, skidding along the icy path towards you.

And our son.

Your son.

In some languages, the pronoun ‘you’ is different in the singular and plural. French, for example. *Vous* is plural; *tu* is singular. Your son can be translated as *votre fils* or *ton fils*. In English, the pronoun stays the same. That’s something to be grateful for, isn’t it?

‘Mummy, can I sit in the front?’ Euan asks.

‘In a minute, sweetheart. When this goes off.’

Euan sighs. ‘I’m fed up,’ he says, more to Hamish the bear than to you.

You lean over the driver’s seat and rearrange one of his soft brown curls. He’s such a good boy. So patient. Everyone says so. You’re so lucky.

We’re so lucky.

‘Do you want a drink?’ you ask.

He shakes his head.

‘Why don’t you draw a picture? You’re such a good wee drawer.’

‘All right.’ He sounds like he’s only doing it to please you.

You rummage in the glove compartment for his paper and crayons. You should have had another child while you still could. Why didn’t you? All the alleged obstacles – work, space, money – seem meaningless now.

But it’s okay. It’s fine. You have Euan.

And Euan has you. A pronoun that need not change.

The sleet is turning to rain and getting heavier. The remaining light is a chilly grey. You stare at the blur of hills through the misting windscreen, starting to hate them.

It’s amazing how quickly rain melts snow. Water is now dripping from the pine branches, creating pools on the icy path I took this morning. The path will be treacherous if it freezes over.

And that’s the way I’ll come.

When I come.

The light is fading fast now. Only the melting snow staves off total darkness. Should you phone or leave it? The number is written on a piece of paper stored in the glove compartment. I gave it to you before I set off this morning.

‘In case of emergencies,’ I said, gazing into your sea blue eyes.

I’ve never done that before. Given you a number to phone. I didn’t say why this time was different. And you didn’t ask.

Why didn’t you ask? Because you knew.

Slabs of silence. Grimaces of pain. Tell-tale.

‘Don’t ring too soon,’ I said. ‘If I’m not back.’

Now is too soon. You know that.

You turn the key in the ignition, put on the windscreen wipers and turn on the headlights. In the beam of the headlights, you see our lone tent bending and flapping in the gathering wind. Perhaps you should take it down. All our things are inside. Our Thermarests and sleeping bags. Our food and spare clothes. Our books and reading glasses. Our camping stove and plastic mugs are tucked inside the vestibule door, waiting for someone to unzip the tent, crawl inside and brew a panful of tea.

It was cosy in there last night. We held hands across our sleeping bags. I asked if you were warm enough. You said you were toasty warm, and I said: ‘These goose-down sleeping bags don’t owe us anything, do they?’

‘Mm,’ you said, and we fell asleep listening to the wind buffeting the nylon flysheet with Euan curled up between us on his own small sleeping mat.

It would be good to take the tent down before the snow melts, and it gets even darker. But you can’t take it down now. Not in this weather. You’d get soaked bringing the things back to the car. And what about Euan? He’d have to wait in the car on his own. Better do it later. When I’m back.

You turn off the windscreen wipers and the headlights. God, it’s dark without those twin beams of light.

Where am I?

‘Mummy,’ says Euan, shifting in the back seat, his drawing abandoned on the seat beside him, ‘I wish Daddy would hurry up.’

You turn and tell him what you must tell him. ‘He’ll be here soon.’

Then you say, ‘Give me those crayons if you’re not using them. They’ll make a mess of the upholstery.’

‘I’m fed up,’ he says, but to you this time, not Hamish.

‘Why don’t you lie down then? Have a wee snooze. You must be tired. That was a very long walk we did.’

‘Not as long as the one Daddy’s been doing.’

‘No, not as long as that.’

‘Daddy’s been doing a proper hill,’ Euan disclaims proudly.

‘So he has.’

‘The north ridge.’

You grin at him. ‘That’s right.’

Perhaps you’re remembering how happy I looked this morning as I shouldered my rucksack, adjusted my walking poles and folded my map into my waterproof map case. A man on a mission. A man setting out to do the north ridge. It must be written somewhere in the Book of Time that fathers of small children shall one day do a proper hill again while the children’s mothers take them on easier walks, for you know of no example of it working the other way round. Not that you minded. Not this time. Not today. The walk up to the lochan with Euan was beautiful. You saw red deer loping through glittering snow, a stag and five hinds, a harem in the making.

At least that’s what I hope.

Afterwards, you walked along the pebble beach in front of the fishing village and skliffed stones in the sea.

You did do that, didn’t you?

And over fish and chips in the village hotel, you told Euan about the white-harled fishermen’s cottages behind the beach.

‘They’re called the twelve apostles, and each one has a different shaped window upstairs. Do you know why? So that the fishermen could tell if there was a light on in their house when they were sailing home after a hard day’s fishing.’

Perhaps Euan asked what the fishermen did if there wasn’t a light on.

Perhaps you said, ‘There was always a light on. The fishermen’s wives put a candle in the window to welcome them home. They were looking forward to seeing them.’

And Euan said, ‘I’m looking forward to seeing Daddy.’

And you ruffled his chestnut curls and said, ‘So am I.’

The rain has stopped now, and the moon has appeared. But it’s just a sliver. It hardly gives any light. You can barely distinguish the black hills from the indigo sky.

‘Mummy,’ say Euan, ‘Daddy said he’d be back at three and it’s nearly five.’

‘How do you know it’s nearly five?’

‘It says so on the clock.’

And so it does. The luminous green digits on the car clock, which I changed to the twelve-hour clock so Euan could read it, say five to five.

You must have left the ignition on when you turned off the windscreen wipers and headlights. What if the battery’s flat? You depress the clutch and start the engine. It turns hoarsely a couple of times then sputters to life. You touch your head to the steering wheel in relief.

‘Can I sit in the front?’ Euan asks. ‘You said I could sit in the front when the rain went off, and it’s gone off now.’

You smile at him in the rear-view mirror. Such a good wee boy. It’s his teatime now. He must be hungry. And tired. But he hasn’t complained once.

Our son.

Your son.

Ton fils.

‘In a minute,’ you say. ‘Why don’t you lie down for a bit?’

‘I’m not sleepy,’ he says, stifling a yawn.

Of course, I might be lost. I might be in trouble. I might have fallen. The north ridge is tricky, especially in this weather.

What then? What if there has in fact been an accident?

Perhaps you remember the look in my eyes when I set off this morning. The way I said goodbye. The way I embraced you and stroked the back of your head. The long moment when I picked up Euan and held him close. The way I closed my eyes and buried my face in his curls, inhaling his scent.

There have been spaces. Private spaces. Things not discussed.

But you know me. You know my limits. You know what I can and cannot take.

I cannot take the rot inside me. I cannot take pity.

I cannot let my son watch me waste away.

You glance behind you. Euan has fallen asleep, stretched out on his back, one arm flung back above his head, the other wrapped round Hamish. You lean your arm round the seat and touch one of his soft brown curls. Then you put on your woolly hat, pull on your gloves and take the number I gave you from the glove compartment. Softly, you open the car door and get out, clicking the door shut behind you.

Outside, the air smells of wet earth and encroaching night. You zip up your down jacket against the wind and pull your hat down over your ears. You take your phone from your jacket pocket and check the screen. Still no missed calls. No messages. You slip the phone into your pocket and gaze at the darkness where the path is that I took this morning.

That’s where I’ll come from.

When I come.

If I come.

You walk away from the car. The dark is suffocating now.

Night has fallen; you are falling too.

It’s time to phone. You must phone.

The nearest town is only a couple of miles away, but you feel entirely alone. Wildlife rustle and squawk in the undergrowth. You can no longer make out our tent. Only the thrum of the car engine charging the battery provides a measure of solace.

Inside the car is our son.

And he is clutching a worn old teddy bear called Hamish that used to belong to me.

Once you phone it will be over. That’s the thing. You will become you singular. Euan will become your son. Ton fils.

But it’s dark now. It’s time to phone. You must phone.

You take your phone from your pocket. By the light of its torch, you read the number I gave you. You pull off your right glove and punch in the number.