

The Brismond Trail

Ella stomped uphill, breathing hard. She hadn't felt this tired in a long time and she watched intently as her boots repeatedly landed and launched off of moss covered rocks, hard-packed earth, and loose gravel. Her pack felt excruciatingly heavy as it rubbed on bare, sweaty shoulders and her legs ached and begged for a break. Ella's brain was no match for the loud screaming of her hamstrings and calves; she was forced to rest. She unbuckled the chest strap of her pack, and lowered it onto a rock next to the trail. Perching next to the teal backpack and leaning her sore shoulders against a tree trunk, she unscrewed her water bottle and took a grateful drink. Ella was exhausted.

She remembered being better at this the last time she had hiked, when she used to go on long backpacking trips with her mom. Ella was never one to complain about her shoulders or blisters on her feet. Today though, she felt she could scream with pain and frustration. Looking up the trail at more boulders and loose rock she felt helpless and angry. Isn't that what she had wanted? To march herself into numbness? She guessed this was the first step. She tried to focus her mind on something other than the hundreds of vertical steps she would have to endure before sleeping tonight.

Ella leaned her head back and closed her eyes. She took long slow breaths as she listened to the chirping of the birds in the trees. The soft twitters of chickadees, the harsh squawk of distant crows, and the beautiful, sing-song tones of a wood thrush. She listened to the interwoven sounds of the forest and heard a different whistling. This one didn't quite fit with the others. It was so faint she wondered if she imagined it. Ella thought she would have to look it up when she was back in a place with Wi-Fi.

She pulled her iPhone out of her pocket. It was comforting to have it on airplane mode. No dings, no emails, no sympathetic texts. She scrolled to her offline maps and found her location. She estimated that she had about seven more miles before she reached her first preplanned camping spot. Stowing her phone and water bottle, she shouldered her pack, buckled, and started to trudge.

It felt like ages ago since her friend Sara dropped her off at the trailhead.

“You sure you’re going to be okay?” she had asked, as Ella had unloaded her pack from Sara’s Subaru. In response, Ella had handed her a print-out of a screenshot from Google maps.

“Just remember, the pick-up point is at this trail intersection, see, I’ve marked it here.” She had circled the spot on the map with red pen. “I will be there in two weeks. I’ll try and get service or Wi-Fi along the way; if I do, I’ll let you know my progress.”

“I know,” Sara said calmly, “we’ve already been through this Els, I know the plan; what I’m asking though, is if you are okay?” It hadn’t been a quiet car ride, but Ella had swiftly evaded all of Sara’s prodding. Like a deft sea captain, she had steered the conversation towards safe waters, smoothly avoiding the jagged-emotion-wrenching-ship-wrecking rocks. That had been their last few minutes together, and Ella knew her friend was just trying to make sure she was okay.

“I’m fine,” Ella had responded, forcing a smile for her concerned friend. They had hugged and said goodbye, and Ella had marched into the woods.

Ella was hiking the 161 miles to Mount Paradis alone. She had estimated that it would take her about two weeks. That being said, she had based this on the last long distance hike she had been on, three years ago. That trip was different, she was in hiking-shape back then, the journey had been fun. She had put every inch of herself into the planning and preparation and

had felt comforted by the meticulous packing. For the past nine days, she had created lists. Lists of gear, lists of food, lists of campsites; nothing would be forgotten. She had done this before, she knew how to travel in the mountains, but this time still, she covered her walls in sticky notes. She had felt some innate longing to do something, to be gone; gone from her home, gone from her town, gone from the people who loved her. She felt like she was drowning and she had grasped onto this solo journey like a lifeline thrown to her from someone who knew what she would need to heal.

Ella's pace slowed as the sun sank below the ridge of the mountains. Shadows stretched like capes from the backs of tall pines, and the trail leveled slightly. She glanced at the map on her phone, she had reached her mileage goal for the day. This was where she had decided to camp, back when the trail was just a wiggly line on a piece of paper at her sticky note covered desk. It was time to look for a spot for her tent. She scanned the area; her eyes gliding over moss-covered logs, dancing crowds of mushrooms, and dense ferns that unfurled towards the darkening tree canopy. A little further down the trail, she eyed a small clearing with a blanket of dry pine needles covering the hard ground. She deftly set up camp with practiced hands and started a fire for dinner.

Dinner was easy, she had packed mostly dry, 'Just add water' food, and soon, she was inhaling mac and cheese. With her last bite, she remembered her last trip in woods similar to this. Her mom had sat next to her watching a similar fire flicker and wave. "You know that's probably the most unhealthy of all the dry food," her mother had said, playfully. Her short curly hair was pushed back from her face; a red and teal buff acting as a headband. Ella had responded with a smile.

“Yeah, but it's the only dry food that we really eat in the real world. It just tastes normal, not like trail food.”

“I guess that’s true, you have a point.” Her mother had said, the corners of her lips turning up merrily.

Ella blinked hard and stood up. It was time to get to bed; she wanted to get an early start tomorrow. She quickly rinsed her small cooking pot with as little water as she could spare and set it to dry on a stone next to the fire. She packed away her other food and moved any dry material away from the fire. Feeling her legs aching, she popped two Advil pills, removed her hiking boots, and settled into the tent.

Laying back, cocooned in her sleeping bag, she could make out the first scatterings of stars peppering the dark sky behind the pine branches. Ella sighed; she felt truly alone. With the tasks of the day accomplished, the sticky notes all checked off, Ella was left with the nothingness of the night. The dark night and her own thoughts; these were the things that scared her the most. She was scared of thoughts that would bring her back to the hospital room, the hospital room with the hospital bed, with the woman in a hospital gown; the woman who was her mother, a mother now gone.

Nine days ago, Ella had watched as her mother was stolen by cancer. Fourteen days before that Ella had looked out to her mother’s pale face, in the crowd at her graduation. The hospital bed had concluded a yearlong battle that Ella thought she was prepared for. But how can you ever prepare for a parent’s death? Ella felt her eyes grow hot as a tear filled up the cavern between her nose and eyelid. She turned on her side, shutting out the dazzling night. *Tomorrow*, she thought as she steered her ship away from the rocks, back to something safe. *Tomorrow* she would hike another twelve miles. She would reach her first summit, and travel along the first

section of trail above tree line. *Tomorrow* she would stop to refill her water bladder at a spring marked on her map, and she would find her next campsite. *Tomorrow*, she had a plan. With the checklist floating in her head she drifted off to sleep.

She woke early and quickly broke camp, all the while picking at granola for breakfast. She had made good time and was able to hike about six miles before noon. Her legs were beginning to settle in. She was on Mount Wrentcord, a 5,000 footer, and she was right on schedule to make the summit by sunset. To her relief, the trail had been quiet the past two days, and she had seen no other hikers. She remembered what her mother had told her in the kitchen one morning over breakfast a few summers ago. Her petite and strong hands had laid the newspaper down on the table next to her steaming hot, black coffee.

“I just don't understand people,” her mother had said hopelessly. “There was an assault on the trail.”

“What?” Ella had asked, incredulously as she stuffed a piece of toast into her mouth preparing to leave for her summer job.

“Yeah, down by Lene Ridge. It says that a female hiker was found on the trail with a substantial head wound.” She peered down her nose pointing at the paper; beginning to read, “Last week a female hiker was found severely injured on the Brismond Trail, a trail that stretches the 2,135 miles from Mount Rosdeen to Mount Paradis...blah, blah, blah...The female was found alone and unconscious by fellow hikers who called 911.”

“Wait,” Ella had said interrupting her mom, “how did they call 911, there's not a lot of service on the trail?”

“Lene Ridge is a few hours south of here and I think it's really close to a town,” she said hurriedly. “The female has been brought to a local hospital where she is being treated for a head

contusion and wounds that appear to be related to sexual assault. Local authorities have been unable to identify a suspect and urge hikers and townsfolk residing near Lene Ridge to exercise caution. Anyone with information is encouraged to call,” she put the paper down again, “and they list a number.”

“Whoa,” Ella said as she glanced at the clock hanging above the kitchen sink.

“Ella, listen, we do a lot of hiking and I want you to remember what I’ve said about trail safety.”

“I know, I know, Ma. It's okay I remember.”

“What do you tell people if you're hiking alone?”

“I rarely hike alone, Mom, I’m usually with Charlie or you!”

“Ella, just answer me, what if you were hiking alone?”

Exasperated Ella answered, “I would tell anyone that I met that I was with a group and that they were a little ways behind me.”

“Yes, good, and what’s also important?”

“To bring a lot of mac and cheese?”

“Ella Outten!” Her Mom had yelled, “I’m serious! Check-ins! That’s what’s important!”

“Got it Ma,” Ella had said as she kissed her mother on the cheek and headed out the door.

Ella remembered this as she walked on. She bristled slightly as she thought of her mom. The tanned full face of this memory so different from the woman she had known nine days ago. She longed now for her mother’s company, for her chatty stories as she led the way up the trail. Ella had been so wrapped up in getting this hike started that she had not given much thought to others on the trail. She didn't feel at all scared, but she did prefer the trail to herself.

The sun was low and the wind whipped through the trees. She wondered if she was close to the summit. Pines creaked, moaned and waved and Ella marveled at how similar the sounds were to the ocean's crashing waves. The moss, ferns and pines around her turned to dry alpine vegetation, course and muted, like coral sponges dried in the sun. Bleached grasses swayed and stroked her shins as she climbed, following the perfectly stacked cairns. She saw the outline of the summit marker ahead and felt a newly found energy pushing her on. She reached the top after a few long minutes and stood breathless next to a wooden sign. It read: Mt. Wrentcord Summit, Elevation 5,198 ft.

Ella looked out onto the mountains in the distance. The sky was a dusty orange; the sun had not quite touched the rim of the mountains. The ridges rolled across the horizon, stretching to lighter and lighter shades of blue. All of a sudden she was overwhelmed with the beauty of the place, the sadness that she felt, and the torture that she was creating for herself. Her mother's face swam across her eyes, her hazel eyes smiling through the haze that was Ella's life. No more summits together, no more phone calls about her life plans, no more warm embraces just because. Her stomach dropped and she collapsed onto a nearby rock. Hollowness that she had been trudging away from the past eleven days came sweeping towards her. She felt like a child again, terrified, alone, exposed and ripped from a womb too early. The hollowness cut through her body like knives, soaring on the winds that battered the summit. She wanted to scream, she wanted to thrash at a world that cast her out without a mother. *WHY?* Bubbling anger receded, replaced by heartache a thousand times more painful than her sore legs. Her tears flowed hot down her face mixing with snot and sweat, but she didn't care. Her mother was gone.

Ella watched as the sun sank further towards the rim of blue. She remembered her first summit. She was six years old. She couldn't remember which mountain it had been, but she did

remember her mother hugging her close as they both gazed out on that misty, blue horizon. She could feel her mother's strong arms holding her thin shoulders. Ella could smell the coolness of her mother's curly hair sweep past her face, cascading down to match with her own sandy brown tresses. She could hear a faint heartbeat pressed against the small of her back. Her father had stood a few feet away, poised with an old camera aimed at them. Ella still had the photo, she always carried it when she was in the backcountry. It was tattered and old, but the smiles of mother and daughter blazed on through the fade.

Ella's memory was interrupted by a quiet whistling. She sat erect, her ears straining to hear more against the wind. It was the same strange bird call she had heard days earlier. This time she could hear it more clearly though, and it didn't sound like a bird. She looked back at the trail where she had come and didn't see anything. She wiped at her tear-stained face and stood up, her heavy pack making this a difficult task. Her heart began to pound. Was there someone else here? The memories of her mother had sedated her and now hearing the whistling again she felt adrenaline rush through limbs. She saw a man come over the last hill to the summit. He looked to be middle-aged, probably around fifty-five. Ella's mind raced back to the kitchen table, and her heart beat faster. She tried to take a deep breath. *Breath*, she told herself, *there's nothing to freak out about*.

The man was closer now and called out to her before she could turn to walk down the trail, away from the summit. "Hey," he said, "beautiful sunset." He was tall and fit looking and wore a faded, green trucker hat that covered his greying hair. He had a scraggly beard, less grey than his hair, and wrinkles stemming from the corners of his eyes. He was dressed in standard hiking clothing, a neutral colored, fast wicking, long sleeve shirt and navy blue pants. His boots

were laced tightly and were muted by a layer of caked-on mud. His sleeves were rolled to his elbows exposing sinewy, tanned forearms. His left wrist was adorned with a bulky, grey watch.

Ella watched, terrified as he approached. She just wanted to keep going, but he had seen her, and she had to acknowledge him. She observed his long strides and couldn't help but admire his fast pace; she could hike double her mileage with that pace. Ella tried to calm her mind, but something was strange about the man. She scanned him once more, and realized what she had detected as strange: he had no backpack. Her brain riled as she wrestled with this fact. *Why would he be up here with no pack?* No food, no water, no gear. Her mind sped towards horror films and muggings. She reached around for her water bottle and grasped it in her hands. It was metal; she could hit him in the head if she needed.

“Howdy,” he said, finally reaching her.

“Hi,” she responded coolly, trying to tame the waiver in her voice.

“Didn’t mean to startle ya, just wanted to make it up for the sunset. You enjoy it?”

“Yeah, it was nice.”

“You hiking up here alone?” There was the question. She knew it would come.

“Nope, I’m with a few others. They’re up ahead a ways.”

“Ahh, nice. You a thru-er then? Headed all the way to Mount Paradis?”

“No, just doing a section.”

Ella remembered her mom’s words: “Don’t tell anyone on the trail your route, always be as vague as possible. Be polite, but vague.”

“You?” she asked the man.

“Yeah, I’m a thru-er. Not my first time either, this is my third time doing the whole Brismond Trail. I make it a point to do it every few years.”

He was hiking the entire trail, all 2,135 miles of it. A “thru-hiker,” as hikers called themselves, are people who hike the whole trail in one go. Ella had aspirations of one day doing a thru-hike of one of the many famous trails she had grown up hearing about. *He was doing the whole trail, but where was his pack?* Ella still felt uneasy, and she itched to be gone from the summit.

“You want to share supper?” He asked, pointing back down the way he had come.

Ella’s arm hair stood up. *No, no, no*, she thought. *Get away.*

“I’m all set. Thanks though,” she said as she turned to continue on the trail.

“Suit yourself, my fire’s already all set up, ready to be lit. I like to set up camp in the daylight and watch the sunset from the summit. My stuff’s all back down there, plus, then I get to summit twice,” he chuckled as he turned toward the way he had come. “Good talking with ya!”

Ella didn’t answer as she walked downhill towards the dense tree line on the other side of the summit. She let out a long breath. She felt shaky and exhausted. Her emotions had run their own personal marathon in the last half hour, and she longed for her sleeping bag and tent. She walked quickly throwing in a few paces at a slow jog to put as much distance as she could between herself and the summit. It was getting dark. The sky had turned into cotton-candy dusk and as she entered the trees again, the world turned a dark navy. She was breathing determinedly, focusing on her steps. Luckily she had clipped her headlamp to the shoulder strap of her pack so she could easily reach it without stopping. She charged on. Was her fear rational? The guy seemed normal enough. It was funny how her biggest fear on the trail was other people. Not snakes, not bears, not hunger or thirst, but other human beings. She could trust a snake; she knew its intentions. Same went for a bear; but people, people were shifty.

Finally, when it was so dark that she couldn't see anything outside of her headlamp's narrow beam, she stopped. She had no energy to pitch her tent so instead, she laid her sleeping pad and bag on top of her rain tarp. She was not hungry, so she unlaced her shoes and tucked in. This comforted her, knowing that she would have a fast escape in the morning. There was a hiker behind her, and she wanted to keep up her pace. Conceding to the fact that she was at least safe in this moment, her eyes slowly began to droop. She had one last thought before drifting off: *Momma, I wish you were here.*

The next day came too soon, and Ella was up and walking before sunrise. She was determined to push her pace. The next summit was on Mount Ponnora, 15 miles away, she hoped she could get to the shelter on the southern face before nightfall. She also sensed there would be weather tonight. The sky was filled with fish-scale clouds, and Ella knew from her many days in the mountains that there would be rain this evening.

She had spent the day twitching at every sound; a snapped twig, or rustle of a chipmunk would set her chest thumping. Shaken by her hypersensitive emotions, and running from the pain she had felt on the summit, Ella welcomed the fear replacing the thoughts of her mother. She kept up a brisk pace most of the day, only stopping to get food from her pack, drink, and pee.

It was late afternoon when she heard the sound. The sharp whistling traveled up to her on the breeze. *Shit*, she thought. Her pace had not been fast enough. *Be cool*, she thought, *it's going to be okay*. The man was striding up the trail behind her. She found it unsettling that the forest muffled and absorbed sounds so much that you wouldn't hear someone coming until they were only yards from you.

"Hey kid!" the man called out, looking up from the trail and seeing her. "You're pretty quick ya know! Took me a while to catch up with ya." *So he'd been trying to?*

“Did you see a momma bear and cubs this morning? I passed your campsite and saw prints all over.” She hadn't even made a fire last night, and he was well versed in prints, there would be no escaping him on the trail.

“Uh, no I didn't see any bears. I got up early.” He was next to her now, the trail had widened, and they continued on through the trees. *Maybe if I walk slow enough he'll get bored and move on*, Ella thought as she placed one foot in front of the other.

“So kid, what's your story? Why are you out here hiking alone?” *Crap...* Ella felt all of the air rush out of her as she responded, seeing through her own words as they drifted from her mouth.

“I'm not alone,” she protested, “My group's a little further up the way.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever,” he said with a smirk. “It's impressive, I think it's great to see solo ladies on the trail.” Ella cringed, she thought it had to be noticeable because the man stopped for a second. “Oh, god!” he said, continuing his stride. “That sounded bad. Wow, I'm sorry kid. You're probably freaked. If you're any type of normal, you should be freaked right now, sorry. Let's start over. My name is Robert for starters.” He seemed to not know what to say next. Ella offered nothing, and seeming uncomfortable with the silence between them, he continued. “My trail name is Père. It was longer at one point, but through the years it's been shortened. Do you have a trail name?”

“No.”

“Do you have a real name?”

“Yes.”

“Kid, you're killin' me, I'm just trying to be nice. Is it always like pulling teeth trying to talk to you?” Ella felt a small nugget of guilt ripple in her stomach.

“How’d you get your trail name?”

“There we go,” he said, mollified slightly. “Some French kid gave it to me a few years back. It was longer I think at one point. Something like ‘father of the trail,’ or ‘forest father’ but that doesn't really roll off the tongue, so it just got shortened to Père. You see père means ‘father’ in French.” Ella nodded as they walked on.

“Who was the kid?” she asked.

“Ehh, just some kid with a bunch of his friends. They were thru-hiking this trail as well, the first time I did it. I came up on em’ and it must have been the beginning of their trek cause they wouldn't have survived much longer than a few nights. They were trying to make a fire, and doing a darn horrible job at it. Their water cans were empty, and there weren't any springs around, see this was all down south in the Dolsol Range before the trail enters the Brismond Mountains. Anyway, these kids didn't have any water, they barely even knew where they were, jabbering away in French and all. I decided to help ‘em out, would be an easy fix see. They just needed to boil water from the stream for drinking, they had that much figured out but they just couldn't get the fire hot enough. So I helped, and after that, we hiked most of the way together. I was glad of their company too, it felt nice not to be alone on the trail with my mind.” He paused as if remembering something from a distant life. “So yeah, they nick-named me trail father or Père.”

Ella felt herself relax a little. This had to be a nice person, he seemed so normal and kind. *But that's what he wants you to think...* Her fear receded slowly as her steps tapped out a rhythm with the man's. The pair chatted about aimless things and Ella noticed that Père slowed his pace almost by half to make sure he was hiking at her speed. She had never hiked a trail before where another hiker abandoned their mileage goal to have company. Her normal interactions with other

hikers were short “Hello’s” and brief conversations about the next water source. Ella felt lulled by his ability to talk about anything but she continued to warn herself silently.

They stopped at a spring around mid-evening. Ella bent down and lowered her water bottle under the surface. The bubbles escaped the brim in little spurts as the ice cold water burned her hand. Père was still chatting, but Ella had momentarily stopped listening to him.

“Yeah, and a few years ago there was this accident on the trail. Well, I’m not really sure you could call it an accident.”

Ella's ears pricked as she tuned back into what he was saying.

“There were a bunch of women that got attacked on the trail.” Ella stood up from the spring uncomfortably. She screwed on the top of her water bottle as she listened.

"It was the craziest thing; I was on the trail that summer, and it was the buzz of every conversation. A bunch of women were found on the trail that had suffered serious injuries. They got mugged basically and then raped. Super scary." Ella's face must have read as horrified curiosity because Père continued. “The sickest thing about the whole thing was that the women were all interviewed after, and none of them could identify the bastard, but they all said one thing that was similar.”

“What’s that?” Ella said as her heart thumped in her chest.

“Well, the guy apparently took stuff from each woman.”

“What do you mean?”

"Well... sort of like souvenirs, I guess. Each woman reported nothing stolen. He never took money or valuable things. They all said that they were missing small things after the attacks."

“Small things? Like what?”

"One woman had a bandana wrapped around her backpack strap, that was gone after the attack. Another said that she had a keychain, you know one of those troll dolls with the crazy colored hair," Ella nodded. "Those sorts of things." Père leaned over the small spring and filled his water bottle. "Anyway, ready to go kid?" He asked, turning towards the trail, not noticing the look of horror she must have had painted on her face. Ella followed a few steps behind. He had finished putting his bottle away and Père swung his pack behind him. She looked up at the faded grey bag and on a side strap, she saw a glimpse of pink. She peered around as she walked and her eyes fell on a faded pink, sparkly ribbon. It had been tied with care to the strap of the pack. The perfect bow stood out like a warning sign to Ella, and her stomach roiled.

This part of the trail was overgrown with a certain type of green ivy, that Père explained was very rare. His excitement over the plant allowed Ella to walk behind him, uninterruptedly terrified. The afternoon passed; the pair slowly making their way on the single track leading to Mount Paradis. Ella was tense as she walked, trying to decide if her companion was dangerous. Père chatted as she listened; Ella never offering more than a word here or there. His way of talking seemed normal enough, and he had a believable backstory. She learned he was a High School teacher. He had the summers off so he hiked around the country. He taught geology and loved working with students. He had a wife a long time ago, but they were divorced. He said that they still loved each other though, and would see each other at Christmas. He didn't mention any kids. He loved the mountains and skied and rock climbed when he wasn't hiking. He preferred freezer dried camp food to the cheaper dehydrated option, and he only hiked with a 40 Liter pack, never larger.

Ella had shared the bare minimum. He knew her basic story: graduated from college just recently, studied music. Grew up in a town near the trail and hiked sporadically her whole life.

Had divorced parents, didn't really know her dad. She left out the mom part, she didn't want sympathy from a stranger.

“So I still don't get it,” he said. The sky was fully grey now, no sun to tell the time. “Why are you out here by yourself? Life-long goal? Graduation Requirement? Delaying the nine to five?” *Escaping*, Ella thought, *trying to forget*.

“Can't a person just want to hike alone?” Ella said in response.

“Yeah sure, I just don't think that's your reason,” he said with a knowing look. “I've hiked a lot of trails, and I've met a lot of hikers, and everyone has a reason.”

They reached the shelter just before nightfall when it began to pour. Ella's prediction of weather had been correct. Père hurried into the wooden structure. It wasn't much, just a large square room with three walls and a roof. It was raised off the ground on short stilts to keep the water out and its walls and floor were covered in carvings from hikers who had sheltered under its roof. Displayed in rough letters: “I heart Paul,” “Happy Meal and Lady Bug were here,” “Take me to Mount Paradis.” Ella did not enter, she made to continue down the trail, already soaked from the cold rain.

“Aw come on kid,” Père retorted, “it's pouring! Look, I'll stay on my side,” gesturing to the right side of the shelter. Ella was cold, and not nearly as wary of her companion as she was before. She agreed and climbed under the dry roof. She huddled in her sleeping bag listening to the rain. She was exhausted and her eyelids drooped heavily in the cold air. *Stay awake! Stay awake!* Ella thought about her mother, briefly. *God, she'd be pissed at me, sleeping next to a stranger.* She fought her tiredness and with every few minutes, she felt more confident that Père would sleep first. She waited to hear natural heavy breathing and then when she felt sure, she drifted into the darkness of her dreams.

The days past, and before she knew it she had spent four days with Père. He had turned out to be very useful in picking camp spots, finding water, and he knew almost every type of plant native to the forests. Ella had a personal botany lesson almost daily. Ella could see his trail name clearer now. He naturally took people under his wing. He couldn't help but want to teach, protect, and comfort the people he met on the trail. Most importantly, he helped distract her. She only thought of her mother at night, when she would curl up in her sleeping bag. She knew, deep down, that this was a cop out, the easy way out; but she took it because the pain was less.

In the afternoon on the fourth day, Ella and Père were on Mount Eckbron, there were still days of hiking until Mount Paradis. They had planned to stop at a lake halfway up the mountains south ridge. Ella was excited for the prospect of swimming, the days were hotter now and they were going through their water supply more quickly. Their conversation was light as they headed uphill, until Père paused, thinking. Ella was struck with the strangeness of this; Père rarely seemed to choose his words. They came streaming out, and eventually by some roundabout way with a few tangents, he found what he wanted to say.

“Can I ask you a question kid?” He said calmly.

“Sure,” Ella responded.

“The first night on the summit, when we met the first time; you were crying. I could tell by your eyes. I’ve just been wondering, why?” His voice trailed off slightly at the end. Ella felt her chest tighten and her breathing grow shallow. She didn't want to have this conversation; she was done with her grief. The panic welled inside her and she feared she would have another breakdown. She didn't care if Père saw, it was more that she didn't want to have to go through it. She was content and had found a routine in ignoring.

“Kid, you can tell me.” Ella still did not respond, she didn't know what to say; *My mother is dead? She was the closest thing to me and now I have no one else? I don't know how I'm going to do the next part of my life, I wasn't ready, this was never the plan?*

“I don't want to talk about it,” she said instead. He didn't seem content with this answer but he let it go.

They walked on, Ella receding back into her quiet reserve. She thought about the last year of her life. She had broken it off with her long-term boyfriend. She had distanced herself from her friends. It had been her and her mother and her mother's cancer. Ella didn't know how to go back. She had nothing anchoring her, she felt dangerously fragile, like a leaf drifting in the wind. The afternoon sunlight streaked through the trees in bright rays. The leaves danced in the breeze; their light undersides flickering like sparkling jewels. There was a silence between the pair; one that was felt instead of heard. Père broke it.

“You know kid, the first time I hiked this trail, I was running away just like you.” Ella didn't answer but straightened her head and stared ahead to the rocky trail.

“I can tell, you see, that you're in pain. It was the same pain I felt years ago.” Ella's mind whirred with slight curiosity.

“My daughter died. Her name was Cassie, she was five. She was diagnosed with terminal cancer. She was undergoing treatments for a year, and Lena and I tried to prepare the best we could. Our only child, our only little girl. How do you prepare for something like that? When it happened I broke. I left and felt that I had to run, I needed to move, be away from everything so I came and hiked this trail.” He paused and twisted his pack to one shoulder. “See this bow? It was tied to one of Cassie's stuffed bears, her favorite bear. I dreamt of hiking this trail one day with a daughter...Anyways, Lena had different ways of coping, and eventually, we split up, we couldn't

stand to be together. At the same time couldn't stand to be apart. I went crazy the year Cassie passed.” He positioned his pack to both shoulders and took off his hat and ran a hand through his grey hair. “Then I met those kids, those silly French kids, and I grasped onto them like my life depended on it, and you see, it did. I didn't know it at the time, but those kids made me whole again. They made me address my grief to myself, and to them. Hell, I cried so often after I met them my trail name almost became ‘Waterworks.’ But you see, the point is I let myself be open to those boys. I allowed them to see me at my lowest, and that I think, helped me survive. I’ve heard a lot of folk talk about how the trail heals you, how nature helps you move on. I partly agree, but I really think it’s the people. It’s the *people* that make this trail. Wanderers searching for something, something to help us go on.”

The pair walked on, the rhythm of their boots filling Ella’s head. Her mouth was quiet but her mind was not. She felt relief in knowing she was not alone, and surprise in realizing her need for company. She thought about Père and his walking journey. She thought about Cassie, and how she would have loved her dad. She thought of herself, barely seeing the shining light, but knowing now, that it was there. And finally, she thought of her mother and how she would have liked this man.

The pair hiked on towards Mount Paradis.