

Kensey Kirby

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The Peak

I sit on the edge of my bed in Wadham College in Oxford, England and wonder if coming here had been a mistake. My mom was lonely, and she had wanted me home for the summer. But, when I enrolled in this study abroad program, I was too stubborn to sympathize. “I’m going, Mom,” I told her. “I have to go.” In England, I wandered the streets of London alone at night, befriended an eighty-year-old man named Dick while in an English pub, and avoided calling anyone from home for weeks at a time. While in class earlier that day, I had overheard a girl in my program, Caroline, say she planned to leave for a weekend trip to Norway the next day. I immediately decided that this could be my next adventure. “Excuse me,” I said. I’m Kensey. Feel free to say no, but can I invite myself on your Norwegian vacation?” Forty-five minutes later, I had booked a flight to Norway, and Caroline said she booked a hike for us. When she asked if I had any hiking experience, I replied “No, but everyone has to start somewhere.”

The next morning, Caroline and I, pressed shoulder-to-shoulder, sit on a plane to Stavanger, Norway. We appear to be the only people shorter than six-feet-tall on board, and I am the only brunette on the flight. A gorgeous woman in a flight attendant uniform says something to us in Norwegian. When Caroline and I blankly stare, she shrugs and pushes her cart of juices up the aisle. “Okay,” Caroline says, “If everyone in this country looks like her, I’m going to be a stump in a forest of sycamores.” I giggle and respond, “For the next three days, I’ll call you Stump, and you call me Shrub.” We joke about our rotten bark and withered leaves

until a deep voice says something that I don't understand over the plane's intercom. "He either said we're crashing or we're landing. I'll choose to believe the latter." I smile and decide that I want to be Caroline's friend.

We arrive at Hotel Myhrehaarden in Stavanger at 11:00 PM; there is complete daylight outside. We haul our luggage up a narrow, winding staircase, exhausted from jetlag and giddy from the idea of adventure. Although I had met Caroline only a day ago, in this moment, I feel as though we are on a different planet, and she is the only connection I have to the real world. We are scheduled to meet our hiking group at 7:00 AM sharp the next morning, so we arrange for a car to pick us up at 6:30 AM, and we set our alarms for 6:00 AM. "What exactly are we climbing?" I ask my new friend while we lie in the hotel's twin-sized bed. "It's called Pulpit Rock," she says. "It's a 2,000-foot cliff that overlooks Norwegian Fjords. I've heard it's one of the most beautiful sights in the world." I think about how I became winded after walking three flights of stairs to our hotel room and shut my eyes for the next six hours.

The early morning comes, and our car arrives on-time. Caroline and I forget to eat breakfast, and our growling stomachs remind us of our stupidity as we arrive at the meeting sight. A tall, chiseled man, who could have been on a Calvin Klein magazine cover, says, in broken English, that he is our tour guide. I ask his name, and he makes a throaty noise that sounds like "Stachanvag." I ask if I can call him "S," and he says, "Fine," without smiling. Next to S stands a couple that belongs in a GAP catalogue. They are both tall, muscular, with piercing blue eyes and matching electric-blue jumpsuits. They say they live in Amsterdam, where, according to the woman, "Everything and everyone is happy, and life is good." A quiet, thin woman also stands in the crowd. She says she is from Chicago, and I realize she is the first

American that Caroline and I have met since we arrived. A couple from China and a single man from Nigeria complete the group. S explains, "You have signed up for advanced hiking tour." "Five hours up, five hours down. We go off the trails. Trails are for beginners. Let's go." I stare at Caroline. "I guess I should have read the excursion's details more thoroughly," she says. I say nothing, but I think, "At least you read something. That's more than I did."

After an hour-long ferry ride and forty-five minutes in canoes, our group begins our journey to the top of Pulpit Rock. Twenty minutes into the hike, my rented hiking shoes fill with water and squish as I trek through mud. As I attempt to step over a small waterfall, I feel my foot sink into a hole in the ground, and I fall forward. Hands and knees caked in mud, I lie still on the ground and feel crushed under the weight of my situation. Earlier that week, my History of Oxford class had discussed Tolkien's statement, "Not all who wander are lost." The professor asked our class our reasons for studying abroad. "Are you running towards something or away from it?" he inquired. Now, lying on cold earth in foreign, wet shoes, with the promise of an intense ten-hour hike with total strangers ahead of me, I evaluate my reasons for being here. "Maybe I am lost," I think. Deep down, I know that I am studying abroad because the thought of spending the summer in the house that my father had died in a year earlier was unbearable. While running from grief, I ended up on this stupid hike. And in that moment, I hate everything. I hate the beautiful Dutch couple for the love-struck smiles; I hate S for his fitness, and I hate myself for getting into dangerous situations in an attempt to feel something other than sadness. As if the gods want to play into my pity-party, the skies open, and it begins to pour. I stand up. For hours, our group stumbles over slippery, jagged rocks and trips over tree roots as a thick fog forms. I stick my hand in front of my face to test how far forward I can see, but the

downpour of rain, and the cloud surrounding us completely obstructs the view of my fingers. Staring only at the ground below me, I blindly follow the voice of a stranger. "Watch out! Big rock there! Branch there! Put your hand here! Step there!" My body aches, and the Chinese woman begins to cry; S decides it is time for a break. Caroline and I huddle under a boulder in a fruitless attempt to shelter ourselves from the rain. S offers us a thermos of "Warm berry juice." As we sip on what tastes like hot Kool-Aid, S remarks, "You know, hypothermia is actually a quite comfortable way to go. I hear you your body becomes numb before you die, so it's not that bad." Caroline and I meet eyes and erupt into uncontrollable laughter. We stand up and press forward.

As the hours pass, the hike's difficulty increases. Every muscle in my body is tested as I lift myself onto elevated rocks and weave through rugged terrain. Finally, S announces that we are almost to the top. The rain does not let up, and the fog thickens. Heads down, we move on. "The top is what we all came here for," I think. At last, we come to a stop. "Is this it? Did we reach the top?" the Nigerian man asks. "Well," says S, you can't really see it, but yes, this is it." As I think of Pulpit Rock's google images of endless, blue water surrounded by a breathtaking, mountainous terrain, I look around and see only white fog. We could've been in Heaven; we could've been in Hell. I wouldn't have known the difference.

"Take your pictures!" S says. No one says anything, but I know we're all thinking the same thing. "Take pictures *of what?*" At the peak of feeling sorry for myself, I feel a tap on my shoulder. The striking Dutch man says, "Excuse me, miss. Would you mind photographing a very special moment for me?" I take his iPhone and bitterly wonder what could be so special about this disappointing moment. The man grabs his girlfriend's hands and says something in Dutch. I

don't know what he is saying, but, by her facial expression, I am certain that it is loving. I quickly turn the phone to video. The man drops to one knee. The woman puts her hand over her mouth. While crying, she frantically nods her head. They embrace. In their moment of ecstasy, I realize that I am crying too. The tears are swept away with the rain. The couple remains locked in each other's arms, and I turn the video camera off. I continue to cry because I am hungry; I cry because I am cold and sore and because we are only half way done with this journey. I cry because witnessing this couple's moment of love and pure joy was one of the most beautiful things I had ever seen. I think about the couple's future GAP model baby, and I think about how he or she may someday watch the video of his mom and dad, wet and surrounded by utter whiteness, declaring their love for one another. I cry because the day had been hard, and the last year had been harder. And I cry because the Dutch couple didn't care that their engagement didn't have a picture-perfect background as they had thought it would, and they were able to find happiness in what seemed like a grim situation. I continue to cry because I know that I will soon climb down the mountain. I cry because I know I will be okay.