

1st prize, prose

Moraines

By Eric Hildrew

Eric is an Edinburgh-based climber and mountaineer, and began writing short stories to while away the long evenings in his camper van.



Maria has the original slide. Once a year she takes her Kodak projector from the cupboard, selects the same box from the neatly-labelled selection, and flicks through the images from that long summer.

Her two children are less interested now than they once were, less impressed by the miraculous appearance of the dust particles illuminated by the yellow shaft of projected light, the satisfying thunk as the slide carousel rotates, or by the dawning realisation that their mother was once young too. Maria finds that this process of looking and remembering has become a ritual - a way of grounding and making sense of her contemporary life, which seems hallmarked by complexity and obligation. If there is a flicker of sadness at seeing his face again, so very alive and sure of his future, it has always faded by the time the projector has been neatly packed into its foam surround and placed back on the shelf.

The beaming faces projected on to Maria's living room wall look younger each year and are tanned by weeks of exposure to the sun. If you looked closer you would see traces of the wind and frost which had nipped and fretted at the flesh. Chapped lips. Crow's feet a little too deep for the brightness of the eyes. A blood-red hue to cheeks pummelled by mountain jet stream, now thawing in the temperate paradise of the valley. In the meadow grass around the six climbers is strewn the detritus of outdoor life; grubby foam sleeping mats, half-eaten baguettes, empty beer bottles, uncoiled ropes drying in the warm air. A battered stereo and a shoe box of loose cassette tapes, their cases long lost. Joy Division, ELO, The Smiths.

There is a block of luxury chalets on the site of that ramshackle campsite now, providing a good investment yield for an old Chamonix family, long since moved to Geneva.

Sean has a copy of the picture, printed out on glossy photographic paper, buried deep in a cardboard box chaos of paper photo wallets and royal blue, faux-leather albums with transparent plastic sleeves. He doesn't like looking at old photographs of himself any more. This is not a consequence of vanity, despite the inexorable retreat of his once-wild shock of ginger curls. He couldn't avoid the conclusion that the face smiling back at him from the past was not simply less experienced and more optimistic than he now felt, but a naive and deluded stranger, hopelessly oblivious to the crushing impact of all that was to come. He found this disconnection between his former and present selves impossible to reconcile.

Of the six, only Paul still climbs. Gerard and Cathy go skiing once a year, ride mountain bikes and, though their family would rather go to France or Italy for their holidays, occasionally insist on a wet week in Snowdonia, where they always stay at the same campsite. Though they didn't know it at the time, their climbing zenith had largely been reached in their second year at University. There had never been a conscious choice to give up climbing - on one level they still took a pride in having belonged to what felt like a counter-culture - but the realities of career paths, mortgages, partners, and children left little room for the fickle and unforgiving call of the mountains. At least, these factors all combined to create a credible narrative of duty, disguising the blunter conclusion that with the passing years the siren-call of risk had grown fainter. Climbing had once been an

obsession worthy of single-minded devotion, but it had turned out to be a means to an end; an expression of freedom which other pursuits could satisfy at a lower price for all involved. For Paul, climbing on summer rock and winter ice remained not so much an undimmed passion as an old habit he felt no compelling need to shake off. He had climbed before he married, a little less for the four years it took to realise he and his wife were fundamentally incompatible, and then more frequently again when he found himself single and a part-time parent. Relationships aside, he was aware he had been lucky. Having suffered no major impacts, his body didn't nag him the way many of his friends' battle-scarred bones and joints did. He harboured no major climbing ambitions, had never performed at a level any higher than competent cragsman, but if success was measured in satisfaction, he had achieved a great deal. In early autumn, as the days began to cool and his calloused hands felt the familiar bite of gritstone beneath them he felt a kind of simple contentment, the like of which many people searched for and few found.

At first sight the frozen mass of a glacier looks stationary but at its own catatonic pace it is a river, alive and flowing. Up close, amongst the dripping blue crevasse walls and stone-encrusted pools of meltwater, the daily cycle of freezing, thawing and moving becomes perceptible on a human scale. They are places to pass through and over quickly, not to dwell on. In time, a glacier will regurgitate the half-chewed contents of its cold belly, spewing them out indifferently further downstream. In that formative summer, it was Richard, not Paul, who would have been tipped as the climbing lifer. If others in the group were merely playing at being climbers, intoxicated by the newfound feeling of belonging to a tribe but hesitant and awkward in the activity itself, Richard had a natural ability which marked him out. Tall and broad-shouldered, with large hands made for jamming into cracks, it was as if the urbane constraints of ordinary life couldn't contain his restless physicality. Limbs which, in a library or laboratory were hemmed in and clumsy, became proportionate and useful in the hills and mountains. If he lacked technical precision, he made up for it with a confident determination that led him easily into and out of trouble.

Richard's love of moving over rock made University club trips to shambling outcrops of damp English rock a joyful experience which proved infectious to those around him, but it was on the bigger stage of the Alps where he began to shine. Having climbed a few warm-up routes with friends in his first season, his ambition quickly outgrew theirs and he teamed up with a group of older Polish climbers camping illegally in the woods near Chamonix. With their home-made equipment and habit of drinking heavily before and after their climbs, these hardy men and women had a capacity for soaking up physical suffering which spoke of a life without domestic luxuries. Hard, long, and committing routes sealed friendships despite the language barrier and loose arrangements were made to meet again the following summer.

In the photograph, the last taken of Richard, he sits cross-legged and centrifugal in the middle of the group, as if the others have arranged themselves around him. He is wearing cut-off denim shorts and his unkempt hair is held in check by a tie-dyed bandanna. You might mistake his lean, topless body for a local but the stark tan line at his elbows and neckline gives him away. Maria and Paul seem very aware of his proximity, their smiles widened by his presence. When she looks at the picture now, Maria sees a much younger Richard than she remembers from that time, his smile less certain than it had once appeared in the bright white mountain light.

Two days later Richard left with one of the Poles to climb a route on the far side of Mt Blanc. The group waited for days in the campsite, willing him and Wojciech to turn up, hairy and unwashed, to throw their rucksacks on the ground, reach for a beer and recount some epic near miss. Just sitting around became unbearable so after alerting the Gendarmerie on the third day without news they went climbing on the bolted limestone crags nestled in the valley woods. It was only when Richard's mother and father arrived from England a week later that the sickening gravity of the situation began to sink in, their fraught features a withering rebuke to the carefree ethos of the preceding weeks.

A few years afterwards Richard's younger sister had arrived at Maria's flat unannounced one Monday evening. Over tea she had asked questions about the brother she had barely known but Maria had found herself struggling to give meaningful answers. She had considered Richard a friend but now realised this amounted to some half-drunk conversations in pubs, a handful of shared rock climbs and a couple of nights spent dancing in the Union bar. When they said goodbye and agreed unconvincingly to keep in touch, Maria could sense his sister's disappointment. She had come in search of a portrait and left with no more than a sketch.

Paul still meets up with Sean, sometimes only once a year or less but that doesn't bother either of them as a deep bond underpins their sparse conversation. Paul has stopped asking if Sean would like to go climbing. Instead, they go on long walks across the moors, or ride their bikes mile after mile until they can barely turn the pedals. They don't talk about Richard, or about how Sean has always struggled since leaving University to find his place in the world. Paul does know that when they return from their walks or rides Sean seems more settled and begins to share plans for the places he wants to visit when the good weather arrives. Maybe Skye and the Western Isles will happen this year. Paul's daughter is getting older and he plans to take her with him the next time he visits.

High on the Brenva glacier the rising summer sun wakes the ice after a night of frigid sleep. Ice cream cornices adorn the lips of crevasses and curl in on themselves as the sugary snow contracts, revealing their cavernous interiors. A mushroom stem of ice, protected from the sun's glare by the car-sized rock left stranded on top of it, finally loses its slow war of attrition and collapses, sending the huge boulder crashing a few metres further downstream.

Today there is no-one around to witness this inexorable geology, just a few ravens circling high on the thermals. Further down the glacier, still partially encased in the retreating ice, a faded tie-dye bandanna is beginning to emerge on to the surface.