

Mountain writing competition 2020

Prose 2nd prize

Onwards and Upwards

By Saudamini Sigdel

Saudamini is a final year BA student based in London; when not studying, she loves to bake, work out, watch comedy gameshows, or read a novel or two.

The attic had never looked better, in Maya's opinion. The slanted wooden rafters, the plywood floors, the tiny four-panelled glass windows— they looked like they could breathe again, finally free of the layer of grime that had collected over months. She looked around the room with pride, ignoring the dull throb in her knees. It had been an arduous task, scrubbing and wiping all the surfaces: who knew such a cramped up little space could hold so much filth? But she had done it, all by herself. She had gone over every corner of the room with her rag not once, not twice, but three times until the wooden strips of the floor gave off a dull shine and the room smelled faintly of limonene.

She analysed the layout of the room, trying to imagine where Felix's old bed and gaming chairs could be placed. It had been six years since he first left home for university, and she felt he wouldn't mind now if she used his old bedroom to practice her painting during the weekends. Her scanning eyes fell upon the neat hodgepodge of items stowed away in the far corner, artefacts from years bygone that had long been relegated to this hidden chamber. She picked up what was on top, a box of memorabilia and made her way downstairs.

Box tucked under one arm, she slowly eased her way down, wincing at the sharpness in her joints felt with each step down the retractable attic stairs. The stairs were crying out for some oiling, bemoaning their neglect with a noisy squeak under the weight of her careful steps.

Creaky old stairs, creaky old bones.

Am I turning old and creaky?

She pushed away the invading thought, making her way to the kitchen. Some nice nettle tea was what she needed, a well-deserved reward after over two hours bending and sitting on her haunches in the attic. And it helped with the inflammation.

We can teach ourselves to practice optimism, cultivate it for better quality of life. Or so she keeps hearing from Felicity, her youngest who is currently on the Positive Psychology chapter in her A-Levels classes. Well, it was easy to be positive when you were 17 and full of energy and your hormones weren't waging a war against you.

Not so much when—slowly but surely—you could feel your bones eroding, your muscles withering, your vitality wearing out. When your grey roots had to be touched up every two weeks. When you hadn't made love to your husband in four months—and somehow, you didn't really want to. When you opened the windows in the living room to get some air, "but gosh, how are you not *freezing*, mum?"

You're doing it again, Maya berated herself as she set down her cup on the counter and took a seat. She pulled the old keepsake box from the attic towards her, brightening at the assortment of items within from back in the day.

Oh, what a box of treasures this was! The bride and groom figurine from her wedding day cake. A couple pairs of Felix and Felicity's infant clothes. A tattered scrapbook-cum-diary circa fourth form. The little peg dolls that Papa would bring back from his business travels when she was a child. She ran her delicate fingers gently through them all, soaking in a deluge of nostalgia.

At the bottom was her old Polaroid and a collection of photographs. How she had adored this little device, taking it with her almost anywhere she went. And what snapshots she'd taken! There she was, grinning from ear to ear on her 18th birthday party in her parent's background, decked down to the toes in dowdy pink taffeta—what had she been thinking? And there, her and Henry posing together by Loch Lomond, their very first trip together. Then there was that rust-coloured convertible they had taken on that road trip down the Eastern Cape of South Africa; the Wild Coast, they used to call it. Oh, it had been a wild time indeed.

The next picture made her stop short. How long ago was this, some thirty-odd years? She was in a fleece trapper hat and hooded parka, seated on a low bench with a table in front of her. On the table was a big black flask and a steaming mug. Next to her was a rosy-cheeked middle-aged woman in a red jacket and lopsided hat.

Maya remembered now, how fretful she had been that day because of the altitude sickness at 3500 metres. She was from London, which was 11 metres above sea level and the streets were flat. In London, you could see what was before you for as far as your eyes would allow. But there, in the cradle of the Himalayas were the meandering highlands, those weaving hills and mountain paths that took you up and down, up and down, up and up and up...

The woman in the picture was the lovely Sherpa owner of a lunch and teahouse in the Nepalese village of Manang. Tshering—that was her name!

Tshering had introduced Maya to *po cha*, a rich and creamy tea made with yak butter and salt. Nothing like the English breakfast of home, but surprisingly delicious. She had even tried making it at home once after returning from her trip, but alas, it was just not the same. Tshering had reassured her, told her that her body would acclimatise to this new place in no time. She had filled her flask up with *po cha* for the rest of the trip. And she had been right—the next picture was Maya with majestic white peaks in the backdrop and strings of colourful Buddhist prayer flags hung across a sign that said 'Thorang-La Pass, 5416 metres.'

How beautiful it had been... Those two weeks spent traversing the mountains of the Annapurna Circuit, trekking for nine hours a day sometimes, wearied but happy. Looking back, every little moment seemed so special now. The strangers that had started feeling like family, the jokes and stories they exchanged. The rice and curried lentils she had grown to love during pitstops. The card games they played each night before sleep. The stray black mongrel that had walked alongside their group for three straight days. The breath-taking monastery built upon rocky steep-edged mesas, and inside it the low trance-inducing hum of the monks in prayer.

And once she got used to the altitude, Maya had discovered there was something enthralling about the mountains themselves. Something about those great white giants that were at once tranquil and formidable. They seemed to possess some mystical qualities, instilling a swell of peaceful bliss into her very core. She could have stared at them for hours.

Maya wondered now why she had never gone back. She had vowed to herself that she would return before long, if not to these faraway Himalayas then perhaps to the Alps or the Dolomites. But life, as it so often does, had come in between. She had been swept up in a whirlwind of decisions and responsibility, starting with marriage then the children then climbing up the professional rungs. And now she had it all, the perfect husband and perfect children in her perfect little house. Yet she couldn't remember the last time she had felt as free and fulfilled as in that picture on the Thorang-La summit. Now, that had been a truly perfect moment.

Staring wistfully at the pictures in her fingers, Maya relived the yesteryears of carefree youth. When she could trek for hours on end with an endless smile on her face. Now, she might not even be able to squat without a grimace on those rural public toilets if she went.

The pensive minutes passed by as the tea went cold, yet Maya couldn't bring herself to move. The kitchen sounded with the scuttle of soft footsteps, but all she could hear around her was the soft rush of the Himalayan wind circulating its distinct conifer scent. It wasn't until she saw him pull a chair and sit opposite her that she woke up out of her trance-like reminiscence.

"You alright there, darling? What were you looking at so intensely?" Henry chuckled.

Maya laughed, bristling up with renewed spirit. "Memories from a long time ago, I'll tell you all about it."

She threw her untouched nettle tea into the sink and grabbed a second mug from the shelves. Refilling and turning on the kettle, she looked around: what else did she need? Teabags, milk, sugar... salt and butter.

"Oh, and darling? Isn't Dara's son a physiotherapist? Could you look for his number please?"