

CONGLOMERATE

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They had been walking away the morning's hours through a stretch of jaded plains that barely bothered to lift up clumps of scrub; indifferent plains that let them wander where they wanted, plains that channelled the broken sky between long rows of heaving mountains. Rose had been striding out the front with her peeling blue jacket warding off the prospect of rain; consulting her old-fashioned map and compass every hundred metres, comforting the paper with magnetic assurances and resting her hands on her hips as she waited for the rest of the group to catch up, her hair damp and speckled with old drips. Behind her walked Aaron with his bright blond hair balding quickly and his new boots, smooth and polished and subject to much mockery by his companions and the landscape's grinding stones. Further back, Sonia, short and sturdy and able to lug boulders in her pack, and Bryony with her cantankerous enthusiasm for difficult weather and terrain, a rock-climber and former Overland Track guide who was delighted by anything out of the ordinary, no matter what obstacle it might thrust at her; both of them workers at the public hospital, nurses and obsessive photographers of beetles and peaks and vibrant shapes and colours wherever they were to be found, lingering figures at the rear of the group, finding space and time to slowly rip their stresses

and anxieties into shreds small enough to hide behind the silent droplets of water; lenses fixed against the fronds of ferns.

And then Marco, a little older; his wife with no apparent interest in getting outside and bashing her head against the fog. While he walked she would care for their two young children, both boys – pack them up in canvas bags and drive them to her sister’s house to play in her wilderness of rudimentary and largely percussive musical instruments, instruments you could shake and hit and blow without regard for melody or rhythm, instruments that sounded like a hailstorm heaving about a flock of failing birds.

And there, comparing lunches and swapping chocolates and nuts, joking about past walks and crucial tent pegs left behind in the garage with the shovels and old gloves, established territory well mapped by friendly mockery on many previous occasions; there, amid all that inconsequential and perfectly happy chatter, Rose tearing a muesli bar from its plastic sheath before moving on to sandwiches of ham and cheese and what seemed by the stains on her shirt to be a kind of tomato chutney; waiting for a lull in the showering fronts of conversation, swallowing the chunk of

wholemeal bread that had been pummeled by her jaws for an unusually long time – Rose kept her eyes averted from her companions when she finally spoke, addressing instead her fingers and her food.

Perhaps it was inspired by the mountain they were felling, a shard in the south-west with many cliffs that trembled at their exposure; the real risk of slipping off the rock. Strange and unfamiliar terrain. None of the safe, shattered steps and cracks of dolerite crystals or the sharp edges of quartzite; this was a rock built from fragments poorly mortared together. Unfocused and lacking clear identity. Handholds that broke apart and crumbled, surfaces that swept you off your feet. Rose had looked up at those cliffs and the blend of weather and “well,” she started uneasily, thoughtfully, “do you ever think about how walking would change for you if one of us died out here?”

There was a pause.

And then a laugh or two sat down beside her and slapped her on the shoulder, refusing to take her question seriously. First Bryony: “Would be a hell of a lot quieter at night.” And Aaron, grinning at Marco: “Guess I’d have to get a lift with some other hoon. Reckon I’d be safer, anyway.”

And while the conversation sped down a gully into the merits of various sleeping bags, and then hospital overspending, and then the particular shade of mud that was staining Marco's knees – was it crap mud or shit mud possibly even just mud – Sonia leaned forward a little, pushed her short, straggly hair out of her face, and “I dunno,” she said. “I really don't know how it would be.”

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Like any group of walkers who would follow their weekend whims to waterfalls and peaks and rock formations, walkers with the same brands of boots, the same jackets, the copycat packs and over-trousers, the same hopes and desires, reveling in the views and relaxation and simplicity of focus that stamped their pursuit; so many worries of burdensome jobs and mortgages and mothers with liver cancer and looming divorces, all of that left behind with the sunglasses and changes of clothes in the back of the four-wheel drive, its tires edged off the gravel by the side of the road with the sleepy headlights facing downhill. So many headaches and doubts abandoned and completely overwhelmed by a series of simple, square decisions: where to go, when to eat, where to go, what to eat, and where to go next.

But in the dregs of the previous year, when Aaron and Marco had spent a day chasing high places on the Central Plateau, they had wondered at those species that were losing their hold and slipping off the tips of peaks as the flushed air warmed, scraped off and dumped in the sky. The flowers that were blown away by dry mainland winds, trying to sprout vainly in the southern ice. If only the mountains were a few hundred metres higher, if only those threatened shrubs could be sown in

the air and the clouds, feeding off the cold veins of water and busy minerals that circled in the atmosphere's metropolis.

"Marco," said Aaron, shaking his head, "Can't see them hanging on."

But what was to be done about it? Could they build great cairns or poles on the highest peaks, where the thinning vegetation might sit safely in a carefully prepared garden of native dirt like a saint cut off from the concourse of extinctions?

Or perhaps a more down to earth solution.

Marco suggested to Aaron: "You know, I reckon we could at least raise some cash."

Welcome funds to extend the shivering rooms at the botanical gardens, a broad-shouldered donation that would enable the directors to care for an old and lumbering climate that was being lost like so much megafauna, a climate that could not adapt to what had been thrown at it. That was it, they thought, that was it.

And so Aaron and Marco put a proposition to their friends, to Rose and Sonia and Bryony, and they