

Alone

A stealthy breeze ran its cool fingers through her hair, tugged lazily at her shirt and was gone. She sat very still, exhausted, overwhelmed by her surroundings. It had been a hot day but now the temperature was creeping imperceptibly lower. Clouds began to soften the sharp edges of the peak, as, fascinated, but with thoughts still far away, she watched rivulets of mist slipping gently into surrounding gullies.

Here the sun warmed the slope and placid pools of water winked among the lichen covered rocks where pink-white scoparia grew, interspersed with the deeper green of Orites and the untidy mess of white starred Beackea, names she had learned only yesterday from Mona. Scrubtits and honeyeaters darted among the bushes. She sat on, unmoving, entranced by her surroundings, oblivious to her predicament. The sun was still high but now she began to notice the drop in temperature. Although unfamiliar with this country she had an instinctive feeling that the mountain peak was too close and hadn't the track been a steady uphill haul for quite some time. She really should have caught up to the others by now. She pushed back a moment of panic.

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For several days she had stayed close to the group fearing to be alone in this majestic, unforgiving land. But today was different. As she swung along the track laughing and chatting with Simon and Moaning Mona she had felt strong, confident again. How could such a common, non life threatening incident leave her feeling so worthless and incompetent. Perhaps she should work harder at putting it all behind her, regaining her independence.

The surroundings were so alluring that along the way she had become quite snap happy and on several occasions Mark, the guide, had had to remind her to keep up. And then, true to form, Mona had developed ankle problems. She and Simon had dropped back to walk with Mona. With just five kilometres to go the guide had assumed they would see to each other and smelling an imminent change in the weather had hurried the rest of the group along aiming to get them to shelter early and come back for the remaining walkers.

It had been the camera that had got her into trouble again. Mona was requiring all Simon's attention, probably on purpose she thought cynically. She had loitered again and before she realise it they were out of sight. The track seemed to be less well defined here but she was not really worried. She felt less nervous about her surroundings and was keen to regain her independence and inner strength. God knows she was going to need it when she went home. The track began to rise steeply but the next cairn was always in sight and she revelled in the fitness she had acquired after three days on the track.

All this talk of safety in the high country, unpredictable weather, getting lost, poor equipment, snakes! Being out here on your own was beautiful, empowering, spiritual beyond belief and how could you possibly get lost if you stuck to marked tracks. She walked on with a spring in her step.

Occasionally she wondered why she hadn't caught up with the others but, since she was still stopping often to take photographs, she assumed that Mona had finally decided to get on with it and that they were making good time. She rock-hopped between some exquisitely landscaped tarns and found the next cairn. It had been quite a slog up that last slope and she was beginning to tire. She found a convenient rock and was soon lost in reverie. How beautiful are these Tasmanian highlands, wild, empty and fearful.

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Simon glanced back for the hundredth time hoping to see her fair head bouncing along the track. He was getting very weary. For some time now he had been carrying Mona's pack as well as his own and although he hadn't disclosed it to the others he was not a well man. Why do women always think men are so fit and strong? He was quite sceptical as to whether Mona really needed someone to carry her gear. And that bloody guide. Couldn't he have helped a bit. Simon supposed he understood the guide's rationale but that didn't help him right now. He felt another wave of nausea as he pushed and cajoled Mona through a boggy patch of mud and up another rise. Should he stop and wait or do as the guide had done and get this dreadful woman to shelter. He sighed. He'd push on. The track was well marked and the guide would be coming back anyway.

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She pulled her thoughts back to the present and glanced again towards where the peak had been. She gasped. The peak was now entirely hidden and mist was beginning to swirl about her feet. Suddenly her error dawned on her. She had no map with her but last night at the hut she had poured over Simon's. She recalled the track winding its way along the cirque to the next hut and she remembered too the thin dotted line that veered off to the right, cutting into the contours with such determination as it headed for the highest point of the mountain. There could be only one reason why it so resemble the contour of the track she had been following for the past two hours.

At that moment drops of freezing rain touched her face. Was it possible that such a beautiful day could deteriorate so quickly? Panic filled her as she scabbled for anorak and gloves; gloves that she had scorned as she packed them several days ago.

She realised that her predicament was dire. The track was almost imperceptible here and at times she had doubted whether she had really been following a track at all. In several hours it would be dark. She breathed deeply and slowly, calming her racing heart so that she could analyse her situation. She didn't really know where she was. In fact, if she had missed the track, no one knew where she was. Going on was not an option. She would have to retrace her steps seeking a lower altitude and perhaps find the main overland track. But, she reasoned, in bad weather you could easily walk right across a track without realising it.

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With a sigh of relief Mark almost shoved the last of his guests through the door of the hut and looked around for Pete. He was nowhere to be seen but time was short and Mark had none to lose. He quickly briefed one of the more competent of his guests as to his intentions leaving a cryptic a message for Pete should he materialise. The weather was still holding up. He must make the most of it. 'Please give me time,' he muttered as he hefted his pack of essentials and headed off back up the

track. Guests could be so demanding and Mark always felt personally responsible for his charges, never quite passing that responsibility off to the company as did other guides. It was a huge responsibility that city folk were quite oblivious to. Half an hour later, just as he felt the first drops of rain, he came upon Simon staggering towards him with a very muddy, very cross Mona in tow. But where was the girl? His heart sank.

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Pete checked the waterline and saw the problem immediately. Some jerk had turned the stopcocks off, in spite of the clearly displayed notice. Oh well. He was relaxed after a pleasant afternoon wandering across the moors. A keen bushwalker of many years, he was in his element. What a job eh. He'd given up real work last Christmas and had wanted to volunteer for something useful so when he heard that Parks posted volunteers in various huts along the overland track to assist with – well – whatever needed to be assisted with, like turning on stopcocks he supposed, he jumped at the opportunity. He'd been here for three weeks and apart from meeting lots of enthusiastic walkers he really hadn't done much. He came to with a jolt at the unexpected sound of his mobile ringing.

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She was now quite nervous. Her palms were sweaty and she knew she was not conserving her energy. The solitude was getting to her again. As she stumbled along she tried to recapture the serene joy of being alone in this beautiful alpine environment, but with each scudding shower of icy sleet she found it harder to do so. At least her trusty cairns kept popping up with reassuring regularity. At that moment she tripped and tumbled onto a quite prickly scoparia bush. 'Be positive,' she thought. 'At least you didn't fall on your mobile and smash ---. Mobile! How stupid of me!' As she fumbled for her phone she realised how cold her fingers were. She switched it on. "Yes! Coverage – just!"

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Mark heard Pete's pounding feet some seconds before he came into view. He'd never been more relieved to see anyone in his life. Pete, with his strong, suntanned face and gently, reliable nature would fix everything. 'Pound to a penny I know where she's gone wrong. Let's hope she stays in one place when it gets dark,' he said They exchanged information and in seconds Pete's form was swallowed by the gathering gloom. Mark hesitated. Should he have gone with Pete? No. He'd be fine on his own. Like Mark he was good in the bush. Mark had started walking with Mick's mob in Year 12 and was well versed in bushcraft, map reading and looking out for the group, but guiding beginners was another thing. Other walkers know about looking after themselves but tourists can be like babies in the bush. He could feel Mick's reproving gaze, 'Cardinal rule Mark. Don't split the group unless you really have to.' He sighed and turned his attention to getting Simon and Mona to safety.

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Another squall of sleet scudded past. The ranger she had spoken to had calmed her considerably. He seemed to be quite unconcerned. Fine for him in his warm room she thought. He'd been adamant about keeping the cairns in sight and not trying to go on after dark. After dark. That was something else.

She was becoming very attached to the cairns. They had been her saviour but they were also her downfall. The overland track isn't marked by cairns but by snow poles. The track she had followed therefore was a side track and with more bushcraft she'd have known that. As the shards of sleet hit at her face she wondered whether she would ever venture into the wilderness again. She realised that if she kept moving she didn't really get cold and as gloomy darkness gathered around her she felt strangely comfortable, almost warm. Maybe she would have to spend the night out here. The ranger had suggested that she look for an overhang of rock and bushes. Bushes grow in less exposed places he'd explained. But it must be in sight of the track and above all conserve her torch battery. Did she have a whistle? Whistle? What on earth for.

The overhang was in a depression, damp, but protected from the full force of the wind. The ground was very rocky and she didn't think she'd be sleeping much. The wind had abated considerably and between gusts she could discern rustlings and thumpings as animals went about their business of the night. Gradually her nervousness subsided and she began to feel a part of this little community into which she had dropped as an uninvited guest.

In a strange way she was pleased this had happened. She hoped that she wasn't putting others in danger but for herself she knew now that she could shut the door on the past and get on with her life. In the dying light of the day she looked up to where a shadowy peak had reappeared momentarily from its misty veil and saluted its wild majesty.

She nestled further into the overhang, lulled by the silence. The scuffling of animals had stopped. The wind had dropped and she was aware of the deep silence that surrounded her. It had begun to snow. She was so very weary. As her body temperature dropped she drifted into a fitful sleep. Once she roused at what sounded like boots scraping on rock, perhaps a voice, but sleep captured her again. The snow drifted softly, filling indentations until the world was blanketed in a silent white shroud.

GRM's fair a-tale