

Stairs

Vanessa loved the sound of the gravel beneath her shoes. The sun was peeking in and out from behind the grey, chubby clouds. They threatened rain all morning, but it so far hadn't been more than a few thick drops on her skin. She wiped them from her bare shoulder. Today is the day she would let him go.

She climbed over the rail that led to the beginning of the trail. Bags of stones lined the entrance to the walkway. She had seen people carry these up from time to time, refilling the paths as they went. Along the stony pathway she watched the low-lying green leaves dance with the wind created by the stream below. The air was rising from the fresh water and felt cool. For a moment she thought she felt the appearance of goosebumps on her arms.

She had climbed these stairs with him once, all fifteen hundred or so of them. She recalled how he appeared to dance as he effortlessly glided up each step, one foot before the other. This was how he moved through most things – with an elegance she had never seen in any other man. No matter how many times she did this climb alone since, she still felt his energy next to her. Even among this stillness of nature he was there. The birdsong in the distance could not drown his voice in her head. Even the company of the playful fantails that teased her as she climbed each step was not enough to keep him away from her thoughts. She only remembered the best times with him. Her mind was quick to forget the many times he insulted her in some of the smallest ways. It was anything from criticism of how she folded the towels, to serving her less dinner in a not-so-discreet attempt to remind her she was gaining weight. He touched her with aggression more often than he did affection.

In the months after Grant left her – yes, to add insult to injury (rather literally) he was the one who left – she found therapy in physical exertion. Despite the hours of counselling she paid for only to learn about narcissistic personality traits, she found more forgiveness in solitude.

But today was the day. She would climb to the top of these stairs, and on the way down she would leave him there on the steps.

It was always more difficult than she remembered. Each step felt like a small mountain of its own. The muscles in her groin and legs began to feel heavy as she moved upwards. Every now and then she would look up ahead to see the maze of steps. It always reminded her of that painting of all the staircases that went in all directions. Some appeared upside-down or sideways, and some looked as though they led to nowhere. There is a feeling of disorientation as you climb; you cannot tell if you are facing north, south, or east or west. You are just moving upward. The strength of her mind always conquered the strength of her legs. Each time she was convinced that she could not make it to the top, but she always did.

Just before the halfway point, she began to hear her own heartbeat in her ears. Sweat was beginning to tickle her face as it ran down her forehead. She took a seat while her breath caught up with her.

Without all the noise she could listen to her thoughts clearly. A part of her still felt as though if things were different, it could have worked. She still blamed herself for everything that happened. She could not understand how she could still love a man that hurt her so much. After all, there were times when he was so loving toward her. After purchasing a new phone some weeks back she had trawled through her old photos to see one he had sent her. It was a photo of her pillow, with three notes on torn refill paper on three different spots. They read “Smell here”, “and here”, “and here”. She loved his cologne so much that one morning as he left for one of his overnight trips he had sprayed her pillow so that evening she wouldn't have to sleep alone.

As time went on the gestures came less and less. There was no rose on Valentine's Day; no sweet notes left on the pillows. He could find a fault in everything she did.

She took a sip from her water bottle. The chilled water on the inside had created dew on the outside of the bottle that she used to wipe across her forehead. Her fringe was matted against her skin. She listened to the birds in the trees high above, they sounded as though they were beckoning her to move onward. A short reprieve from the staircases led her across a gravel path. She dodged exposed Kauri roots and took a deep breath as she stood at the foot of the next set of steps.

She placed her hand on the wooden railing as she moved upward. The wood felt as though it was burning her palms as her skin glided upon it. The sun was now permanently out from dodging the clouds and the lights were iridescent, like spotlights upon the tree trunks. Immediately she was back in her childhood and recalled how at Christmas time they would hang a mirror ball high above the lawn at the park. The children would spend forever chasing each spot, jumping from one to another. The world was full of magic and impossibility through a child's eyes. She felt like a princess dancing upon that lawn. She wished she could for a moment go back to being that child. It was funny, she thought, the memories that would appear at some of the most random times. The wonder and the excitement a child feels when everything is new.

He made her feel like a princess once or twice. He really had her hook, line and sinker. It was those small fleeting moments and gestures that got her. One minute she was his soulmate, the next she was his nemesis. “I don't have to compare any more,” she told herself, “The next love I will find will be through brand-new eyes.”

There were other people who passed her on the track. She would always stop and wait for them to either come down or pass her on the way up. She hated to feel hurried, and had never timed herself like others do. There were men, women, children, people alone, people in groups. The track was so popular there was rarely a time when you did not pass someone. Every third or fourth person on their way down would say things like “Almost there!”, “Not far now!” Sometimes she would say thanks, and other times – depending on how out of breath she was – she would attempt a half-smile in response. Thankfully, there were no mirrors on the stairs as she knew she would look a fright. Her hairline was damp with sweat and her bare face was flushed with pink. Then she giggled, wondering why it even mattered.

She finally made it to the last flight of stairs. The lookout was only a half-minute walk through more kauri trees. She walked toward the clearing and could hear the voices of those who had reached the top before her. There was a secret kinship that these people all shared. They all have their own reasons for why they put themselves through it. Whether it just is about keeping fit, or overcoming emotional trauma, or just doing it because they could – every person had a reason.

She always felt the view at the top was underwhelming. As she stood on the lookout she could see across to both ends of the horizon but it always left her a little less inspired than she would have liked. She thought about the many walks and trails she had done, and often sought an epiphany along the way that never seemed to happen. You read books and hear songs about these things happening to other people, but it was yet to happen to her. She took a moment as she looked toward the coast to think of him and where he might be.


Her heartbeat eventually settled and the adrenalin began to kick in as she headed back to the stairs to begin the descent. She felt lighter already, knowing that this was it. She jogged down a few flights of stairs

and, further down, a step stood out to her. There it was, the outline of his spirit standing right there before her. It was transparent and featureless, but she knew it was there. Her heart was beating faster and faster as she approached him. She felt smaller the closer she got to him. She swore she could smell that Burberry cologne as she inched forward. She stopped on the step and stood there. For a brief moment, she felt a sense of sadness. She had carried this around, these memories for so long. But after all, it was only her that was suffering. He had long since moved on and yet here she was with his energy and his spirit still towering over her. She refused to be angry any more, she refused to be sad. She refused to be fuelled by this loneliness and embarrassment of what had happened between them. It was over, right then and there. She pushed past his spirit and she thought for a brief moment she felt

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him whisper in her ear not to go. But it wasn't him; it was all in her head. She needed to leave him behind. The breeze felt as though it came charging up the staircase as she stepped away. She looked back briefly and could see the spirit had turned to watch her walk away. "I'm leaving you here now," she said out loud. With that, it disintegrated. As she jogged further down she could barely distinguish the stair from any other. She jogged all the way to the bottom.

The trees appeared to clap and cheer as she jogged along the gravel path, each footstep like a drumbeat in her ears. The leaves quivered on the branches and looked more alive than ever. She had made it through, she had done what she wanted to do and she knew the mountain was happy for her.

When she got back to the car, she put the keys into the ignition and drove away with the windows down. The rush of the turbulent air began to dry the sweat on the back of her neck. For so long this distorted image of a person who was once in her life had haunted her. As much as she tried to leave it behind, it was always there. Because the reality was, this person was long gone and it was only poor memory and emotion that was remaining. It wasn't him at all that was following her, just her broken ego. He was just a manifestation of all the awful things she still felt about herself. This time she knew that it was different and she was ready to leave that part of herself and her life behind. She found her epiphany. It was finally over, and she had never felt more alive. 

**AUTHOR
REBECCA HILL**

This story was inspired by the many times Hill has completed the Hakarimata summit in the Waikato. She says she has been fascinated by words for all of her life and tries to write as often as she can. She inherited her interest in writing from her mother, who is also a keen writer. A single parent, Hill lives in Hamilton with her nine-year-old son. She has a passion for health and fitness and in the spare time she gets, the 31-year-old enjoys hiking, yoga and spending time with friends and family.



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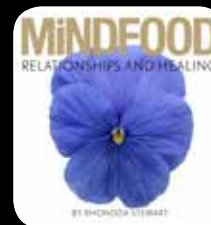
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