

Resignation

“Giving up or quietly accepting an unpleasant situation you cannot change”

The first decision of the morning is who I intend to be.

I rummage through the bag in front of me under the light of my headlamp for the jacket I picked out yesterday, a muted green with grey side panels, to layer over my merino thermal base. A pair of black gloves lined with fleece. A charcoal scarf and comfortable leather boots that will never give me the hassle of blisters. I slip them all on methodically, adjusting them until I am happy I resemble something similar to every photograph I have ever admired of a cragsman standing triumphantly on a mountain ridge.

“Do I look the part?” I ask.

“Yes, perfect choices,” Jess replies kindly.

At six forty-seven a.m the tent is still dark, and the world beyond the canvas feels impossibly still. There is no traffic. No distant aircraft. No dull mechanical hum that so often sits unnoticed beneath the clamour of ordinary life. Only the occasional whimper of the wind moving through the alpine grasses and the faint whirring of insects' wings drawn towards the weak beam of my headlamp. When I unzip the entrance, cold air spills inside with determination. I crawl out onto the frost-hardened ground and pause, allowing my eyes to adjust to the darkness that stretches across the valley.

Jess follows behind me, kneeling next to her pack. She folds the tent with an efficiency I cannot hope to imitate, each movement measured, perfected by repetition. I fumble with the pegs, shaking damp earth from their metal shafts before fastening them to the side of my backpack. We begin walking with the intention of greeting the sun at the summit.

The track disappears almost immediately into bush dense enough to swallow the beam of my headlamp. Damp leaves catch the light before surrendering it again. Tree roots rise unexpectedly from the soil, polished smooth by years of passing boots. Every now and then the forest opens just enough for conversation to replace my billowing breath.

“You've done this route before?” I ask.

“Several times.”

“It must get easier?”

“It becomes more familiar.”

Yesterday had demanded more from my body than I anticipated.

The ascent through the base slopes had been relentless, climbing steeply through tangled beech forest before giving way to loose rock and exposed ridges, where every gust of wind seemed intent on reminding me how small I was. By the time we reached the campsite, darkness had already settled over the mountain. My shoulders ached beneath the weight of my pack. My calves tightened every time I bent to secure another peg into the frozen ground.

Jess, meanwhile, had remained unchanged. She had climbed with the same steady rhythm from morning until evening, pausing only occasionally to drink from the narrow reservoir built discreetly into her pack. We had met only a fortnight earlier through a hiking forum. I had mentioned, almost absent-mindedly, that seeing the sunrise over Lake Wānaka had occupied a corner of my imagination for years. She had responded within minutes, offering to guide me. She knew the route well, she explained. She preferred early starts. She enjoyed introducing people to places they had never seen before.

The mountain has given us long hours together, and long hours have a way of dissolving the formalities people usually hide behind. We spoke about ordinary things first. Favourite books. Cities we hoped to visit. Food neither of us could cook particularly well. Later, without noticing the transition, the conversations deepened. She knew how to ask questions that encouraged discussion.

"What did you imagine your life would look like when you were ten?"

"Do you still speak to your brother often?"

"What made you decide against architecture?"

The questions seemed disconnected at first, as though she simply possessed an endless curiosity about the lives of strangers. Yet each answer led effortlessly into another. By mid-afternoon she knew where I had grown up, which teacher had convinced me to study law, why I refused to take the bus, which songs reminded me of my grandmother and what I imagined happiness might resemble if I ever managed to find it. Whenever I asked about her own family, she redirected the conversation.

"I imagine growing up near the coast would have been lovely," she had replied after I asked where she was from.

Then she asked whether I preferred the sea or the mountains. Only later did I recognise that she had never answered the question at all.

Thoughts of yesterday fall away as the track steepens; we climb in comfortable silence. There is something deeply reassuring about walking beside another person without feeling obligated to fill the space between you. The forest begins to thin. The only sounds are boots pressing into damp earth, the occasional call of a morepork somewhere within the trees, and the measured rhythm of our breathing.

Gradually, almost imperceptibly, darkness begins to surrender. The sky changes first. Black becomes navy. Navy softens into blue-grey. We pause briefly where the track widens beside an outcrop of weathered schist. I remove my gloves and flex my fingers, watching sensation return in slow waves. Jess remains standing, looking east towards the horizon where silhouettes of mountains emerge like islands rising through sea mist. Their outlines sharpen with each passing minute until I begin to distinguish ridges from valleys, cliff faces from slopes. Snow catches the faintest traces of dawn high above us, while the valleys remain hidden beneath layers of blue shadow.

"We're making good time," Jess says.

"How much further?"

"Seventeen minutes."

The final stretch of the climb is arduous. The incline increases, and the track narrows into a path carved between stone and stubborn alpine vegetation. The trees have disappeared entirely now, replaced by low shrubs and grasses that bend beneath the weight of the morning frost. There is nowhere left for the landscape to hide. Every step exposes more of the mountain, more of the valley below, more of the immense distance between where I stand and where I began.

"Your pace has decreased by twelve per cent," Jess says.

I glance sideways at her.

"Is that your way of telling me I'm slowing down?"

"It is my way of observing that you are slowing down."

There is no humour in her response, yet somehow I know she is attempting to be funny. I laugh despite myself. Jess suggests we take a break. I pause on a flat section of stone and look back over the path we have travelled.

From this height the route seems impossibly small, a thin line winding through a landscape that had felt endless only hours before. I roll my shoulders and stretch my neck slightly before deciding to continue.

Childlike excitement fizzles through my capillaries in anticipation. For years, I have watched other people stand where I soon would. Their faces illuminated in wonder. Voices hushed as though speaking too loudly might disturb the landscape around them. They described moments like these as transformative, as if a mountain could divide a person's life into a before and after.

The summit arrives without ceremony. There is no dramatic final step. No sign announcing that I have reached my destination. One moment I am climbing, focused only on the next placement of my feet. The next, the ground beneath me levels and the entire world unfolds.

I stop.

Below me, Lake Wānaka stretches across the valley, its surface reflecting the early morning sky. From this height it appears almost unreal, a sheet of glass placed carefully between mountains. The shoreline curves gently around the land, disappearing behind ridges before returning, as though the earth itself is breathing. Beyond it, the Southern Alps rise in layers. Older than any creature who dares stand atop them.

The sun continues to emerge. Thin lines of gold trace the highest peaks and their edges before spilling slowly down their slopes. The colours deepen with every passing moment, spreading their message for all to admire. I understand now why people had come here. Why they travelled across oceans, spending money they do not have, and time they could not spare. Because for a moment, standing above Wānaka, it feels impossible that anything this beautiful could ever be lost.

A bird calls somewhere below us. Then another responds. The sound carries upwards through the valley. I turn towards Jess. I want to say something. Anything. Some sentences that might capture this moment. Something worthy of it. But she is not there.

"Jess?"

Only the wind answers. I follow the track a little farther, scanning the bends ahead. Empty. The silence presses closer, unsettling my tired bones. I search the lookout again, expecting her to emerge with an easy explanation. Maybe she has wandered off to capture another photograph. Maybe the signal has failed. Maybe there was a technical glitch I wouldn't understand.

I stand alone. Something inside me loosens. Jess had been kind, patient, quietly reassuring, but without her the landscape no longer felt interpreted. There are no directions to follow, no voice shaping the experience before I can. I edged towards the cliff, placing each foot with care. Teetering on the brink, I imagine I belong. A tree

anchored to the mountainside through centuries of wind. A river surrendering effortlessly to the sea. A hawk suspended on rising currents above the lakes. Stopping only when I felt complete.

By the time I reached the car park, the stillness and sense of solitude had dissolved.

People drifted between vehicles, tightening backpack straps and checking camera settings. Families gathered children. Small groups spoke with animated excitement in languages I recognised only in passing—French, German, Japanese. Then I saw Jess. She stood with another family, a couple and their teenage son, adjusting their packs as she explained the trail ahead. The same measured movements. The same patient smile. Her gaze passed straight through me. As if I had never been there. A quiet ache settles in my chest.

The world comes out of focus as the message appears:

SESSION COMPLETE

Thank you for experiencing Explore New Zealand: Alpine Collection.

Your experience has been recorded.

OPTIONS:

REPLAY EXPERIENCE

SELECT NEW LOCATION

CHOOSE DIFFERENT COMPANION

UPGRADE REALISM SETTINGS

I remove the headset.

Reality snaps back all at once.

The harness cinched across my shoulders and chest tightens as I move. I unclip the buckles one by one, the catches clicking loudly in the silence, then peel the straps away from my body. My shirt clings damply to my back. I drape the harness over the arm of the sofa and sit beside the headset, its small green indicator still blinking patiently, ready for the next session.

The apartment is exactly as I left it. The air is cool without being cold, held at a constant twenty-three degrees. The lights adjust automatically as needed. Nothing has shifted. Nothing ever does. Every surface is clean. Every object sits precisely where it belongs. The room feels less like somewhere to live and more like somewhere waiting to be lived in.

Neon notifications apparate to the television.

YOUR AI COMPANION REMEMBERS EVERYTHING SO YOU DON'T HAVE TO. CLICK HERE TO GET 40% OFF. LIMITED TIME OFFER.

I dismiss it. Another advertisement appears instantly.

EXPLORE THE WORLD WITHOUT LEAVING HOME. UNLOCK YOUR NEXT ADVENTURE WITH VIRTUAL REALITY. *THE WORLD CAN BE YOUR OYSTER.*

Dismiss.

I turn the television off. The room is quiet and dull. My body slumps, my eyes wander, searching for entertainment. A green flyer rests on top of the pile of notes I have been meaning to organise for weeks. I don't remember putting it there. I pick it up.

“HELP PROTECT WHAT REMAINS OF NEW ZEALAND'S FORESTS AND WATERWAYS.”

“The decisions made today will shape the future of New Zealand's forests and waterways. Help protect what remains by making your voice heard...”

Three suggestions follow:

1. Sign the petition.
2. Write a submission.
3. Contact your representative.

A laugh escapes me; the sound receding into the walls. Signatures cannot compete with corporate lobbying. Democracy is noninclusive of those not set on destruction and profit. I fold the paper. I walk to the recycling bin. I drop it inside. The lid closes.

The rest of the day continues as expected. Emails. Reading. Notifications. Tasks completed without thought. I prepare food. I clean the spotless kitchen. I answer messages I don't want to answer. Everything happens exactly as it should. One task folds neatly into the next until time feels less like something passing and more like something being processed.

I'm checking the fridge again; the change of temperature offers some novelty. The recycling bin shimmers with pride in the wake of the refrigerator's light. Shiny and solitary, like a soldier. I stop. I don't know why. For a moment, I simply stand there. My hand rests on the edge of the counter. Slight panic rises to my chest, responsibility claiming its next victim.

I tell myself it does not matter. I tell myself someone else will do it. Someone with more knowledge. More influence. More time. Someone who can make change. But the thoughts register for what they are. Excuses. Resignation. I open the bin. I take the flyer out.

It leads me to a website that loads immediately. A simple form. A few boxes. A place to write. I almost close it. Instead, I begin. At first, the words feel unnatural. Like using a muscle that has been atrophying for years. I write something small. Something obvious. Then I delete it. I write again. This time, I do not copy the suggested wording. I write what I think, because I have thoughts. I write about places I have never visited. Places I have only seen through photographs and simulations.

I write about Wānaka.

The submission is not perfect. It is not groundbreaking. It will not change the world. I know this. But perhaps that was never the requirement. Perhaps the point was never that one person could solve everything. Perhaps the point was simply refusing to become another person who did nothing. My finger hovers above the button.

I press the button.

SUBMIT.

Word Count: 2333 words.