

The Way Forward by Brian Thomson

Neither had spoken for some time. As their path had become more uneven, the incline steeper, they had reserved all their energy and concentration for the climb.

Pam looked up briefly from her careful placement of each step to see her husband striding ten yards ahead. It was a view of him she was unaccustomed to seeing and he appeared almost a stranger. A fellow traveller – but on his own journey.

Will's determined tread however - the angry brushing aside of the undergrowth with his stick - the refusal to let the rough terrain best him - these traits she recognised only too well.

Eventually the canopy of branches gave way to an dazzling blue sky and Will stopped at the edge of a broad wheatfield that stretched up towards a cloudless horizon. He looked back into the shadowy wood and was surprised to see the gap that had opened between them.

'Do you want to take a break?' he asked when she had caught up with him.

Pam shook her head.

He seemed about to say something else but instead turned and headed out through the field, crushing the waist high stalks.

'Not that way!' cried Pam. 'We have to keep to the path.'

Will scanned the perimeter of the field. 'It'll take all day. We don't want to be coming back in the dark.' Seeing his wife's reluctance he added. 'There's no-one to see us.'

Pam shrugged and followed the path of flattened wheat he had carved through the field.

Purposely making no effort to keep up, she lagged further and further behind until all she could see of her husband was the red of his rucksack bobbing above a sea of yellow ochre.

At a point she judged to be the centre of the field, she stopped.

In a slow pirouette she took in the panorama. Each direction showed her a waving carpet of yellow fringed with green hedgerows and topped with vivid blue. The scent of the wheat stuffed her nostrils and, high above, an unseen skylark trilled.

She felt unconnected, untethered. No strings of guilt, responsibility, expectation or loyalty pulled at her.

‘We’d never have got a pushchair up here anyway,’ she murmured to herself, dismissing finally from her mind a long cherished dream.

Her reverie was broken by Will’s voice. He had reached the top of the rise and was waving.

‘It’s over there,’ he yelled, pointing.

Pam struggled through the crop towards the figure of her husband silhouetted against the curtain of endless sky. The wind tugged at his rucksack and streamed out his long, dark hair like a flag.

She saw the man she had married.

Shielding his eyes from the dipping sun Will watched as his wife groped her way to where he stood. She stumbled heavily over a root. His instinct was to rush to her aid but he knew she would resent his assistance. He waited for her to recover her poise and join him.

They stood face to face.

Alone on the empty hillside

‘Okay?’ he asked.

She nodded.

‘Nothing broken,’ she replied.

Together they turned to look back down the path they had taken. Beyond the darkening wood to the village in the valley where it had happened.

‘That was tough going,’ said Pam.

Will put his hand on Pam’s shoulder.

‘We’re over the worst now. Look.’

She followed his gaze. Before them the ground declined acutely into a narrow gully through which a shallow stream meandered. On its far bank a rocky outcrop rose dramatically – higher even than the point on which they stood. At its summit they could see a pyramid of stones brightly lit by the last of the sun’s rays.

‘We don’t have to go,’ he said.

‘Yes, we do. You were right. Anyway, we’ve come this far.’

He forced a smile and Pam saw in his eyes her own pain.

Hand in hand they half slid, half fell down the escarpment. They splashed merrily through the stream.

With teeth gritted they scaled the rocks. Will pulling Pam through the crevices.

Reaching the lofty plateau they paused to regain their breath, their shadows stretching out behind them. They began to slowly circle the cairn. Suddenly Will stopped and bent down.

‘It’s here!’ he exclaimed.

Pam leant over his shoulder as he scraped the dirt away from a stone at the base.

They read the rough inscription.

PAM + WILL 2012

The couple stood and took a pace backwards. It was as if they were at their own graveside.

Will unslung his rucksack and bent to unzip it. Pam helped him take the boulder, the size of a pomegranate, from the bag.

‘Do you want to do it?’ asked Pam.

‘No, you,’ he replied.

She cupped the stone in both hands and stretched up to place it on the top of the pyramid so that the inscription could be clearly read.

Laura 2014 – 2018

Pam smiled at Will.

‘It was quite a weight.’

Will nodded.

‘It’ll be a lot less to carry going down.’

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