



*From the East of Derwentwater* by Lillian Long

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I have gotten to an age now where people aren't afraid to tell me truthfully what they think I can and can't do. You would think the phrase "respect your elders" would jump into one's mind while they're telling their mother or grandmother or, in my case, their patient that it would be impossible to climb a Cumbrian mountain at the age of seventy seven. Which makes me wonder, why in the world was I ever moved to a nursing home in the Lakes if I can't actually go out and fill my lungs with the fresh embers of birch, pine and oak?

Until recently, I lived in a market town in North Yorkshire for most of my life. It was a quiet place where the scarlet sunset bled into the land over the farmer's fields and the faint jingle of the Doubtfire's ice cream truck always drifted in the air by the Abbey. A perfect place for me to write my nature columns. And then, of course, I grew up too fast and was taken away in an ambulance one night. It happens, just as quickly as that. Had I not thoroughly checked my horoscope that morning, I might've been able to avoid the predicament of me losing my balance in an annoyingly vulnerable place—the top of the stairs—but this just proves that ignorance is my fatal flaw. I'd wished I'd made this discovery a bit earlier, though.

When my daughter relocated me to a nursing home in Keswick, I wasn't exactly thrilled. If there's anywhere I don't want to be, it's living in a place full of people my own age. I've felt this way my whole life, a sort of embarrassment which comes with the feeling of not being able to fully fit in, probably introduced to me by the dreaded institutions that are secondary schools. Not that I care really. It's just something I often think about.

Anyway, ever since I was allocated to this beautiful entrapment, I've had my sights set on a goal: Walla Crag. I have been reading up on mountains for the long slog of time since I've been here. In the common room, there's a stand made entirely up of leaflets upon leaflets about walks, mountains, and tourist attractions. Why it is here of all places, in a house of people who have long surpassed their travelling days, I do not know.

June, the one woman here who I have actually managed to befriend, thinks it's some form of modern torture. A way to remind us of something we can't have. June is a smart woman but I thought this was a relatively stupid way to look at it. I went through just about all of the leaflets in one day and, apart from the ad-riddled amusement park promotions, there were some really amazing ones. Namely, the mountain walks right here in and around Keswick. The one that caught my eye in particular was Walla Crag. Firstly because of the name; how

could you name a fell something like that and expect it not to catch my interest? Mainly, though, it was the sprawling picture of the view from the summit, plastered effectively over the top of the leaflet. Maybe the vibrancy was slightly photoshopped but I know a good sight when I see one.

That night, I talked to one of the nurses and expressed to her my keen aspirations concerning my ascent.

She looked at me and began to laugh. 'I don't think so, dear.'

I have no idea what the "I don't think so" was in regards to, as I had only simply told her that I aspired to take on a mountainous walk at some point over the next few weeks. So, leaving me without any instruction or dignity, I thought to myself: Well, what am I waiting for? A week later, I'm here at the foot of the Walla Crag, staring up at the condensation swirling about the summit. June found some way of getting me a taxi, or an Uber as they call them nowadays, and I was dropped off a few minutes away from the trail.

Map in hand, I look out from the east of Derwentwater. The sight towers over me as if it is riling to crush me and, as hard as it is now to admit, I can't ignore the possibility. My brittle bones could fissure on the trek up to the summit, or my lungs could collapse in my chest and I could fall to the ground, unable to get back up. I'd lie there, in the midst of the lonely Cumbrian mountains, with help residing below the line of forest smoke, a gradual plummet away.

I begin my ascent anyway, along the first path from the car park, avoiding the lowland bog and therefore the potential of falling before I even start. Soon, I'm thundering past the emerald hues of the forest with only one goal in my mind, the symphony of running water floating through my eardrums as I approach Cat Gill. Being careful not to damage the walking shoes lent to me by June, I stick to a steady scramble, locking my eyes on the jagged rocks below my feet and trying not to stop too long to sink into the desperate mud.

Here, the world is only natural. A flurry of greens, browns and the occasional grey, stretching out for miles upon miles in the comforting silence. When civilisation does appear, usually in the form of someone in bright orange or blue waterproofs, you're granted with firm, undeniable respect in the form of a short nod of the head as you cross paths. People don't look at you and immediately see your age or the greying of your hair or the wrinkles mapped out on your face. They simply see another person, another walker. And it makes me feel right at home.

As I go on, my confidence skyrockets and, soon, the trees fade out from around me and the Cat Gill zigzags break away to the open fellsides. The summit is in my grasp now and, so far, I don't believe anybody down there has figured out that I'm not really supposed to be here.

The path turns boggy, soon fading away to the rough route to the summit. I remove my light backpack for a second, taking out some water and pouring it greedily down my throat to quench the sandy texture. I'm almost here now and I pray that my body doesn't give out on me like it did that time on the stairs, altering my life, either for the better or for the worse.

I tuck away my water and, with it, the leaflet, trading the artificial view on there for the real thing that I am about to witness. I surge up the rocky hellscape, knowing the promise of the view at the end will make it all worth it.

And then it happens. The slow ache turning to a deafening pounding, running throughout my bones and taking away any possibility of me reaching that beauty I realise I have longed for my entire life. It's right here, it always has been, and yet I don't believe that I will be able to reach it.

My body falters like some broken robot and I accept whatever fate lies in my body spending an extended amount of time on these knife-like rocks beneath me. Which is when a hand, steady yet as frail as mine, latches onto my shoulder and pulls me up.

It's June, of course, smiling as if she isn't a huffing mess.

'Did you really think I was going to let you go without me?' she asks and I have nothing left to say but give her a wan smile of gratitude.

She half-walks, half-drags me up the rest of the way and, as soon as the lake hits my gaze, we fall together on the grass, panting and sweating much more than our ageing bodies should permit us to. It's worth it for that sight. The sweeping blue of the lake, the sun rebounding off it and lighting up the scene all over again, the swaying of the greenery around us singing the sweet song of the breeze, like a tiny choir.

This is the place I have been searching for all my life. Just this little pocket of time spent with the scenery around me. My heart soars as the swallows do in the trees. No longer thinking of my age, of fitting in, of anything, I can appreciate this sight in all of its natural silence. I've only been in the Lakes a short while, but it's beginning to feel like a home built for me.