

# SHORT STORY

## The Five Stages

AI SLING DOONAN

“Quick, grab her bag, I need the pen.”

Stella feels ice glide up her spine and bloom across her shoulders as the woman next to her, breath rasping, collapses into her companion’s frame as he eases her to the ground.

“Get her bag, it’s by the car, there,” he gestures clearly towards the vehicle parked on the grass, “hurry.” Stella observes remotely from a safe distance. In reality, she is standing two feet from the bag, watching with frozen eyes and a slack mouth. Unaware of the other walkers on the path who are pausing and muttering before moving on, all she can hear is the slow gasping noise that is filling the air. The way the woman’s face begins to distort and fill up strangely puzzles her.

“She’s allergic to wasps,” he says sharply, Stella finally swallows and nods. Her reaction is set to slug speed and she clumsily grabs the bag and hands it over. He unzips and retrieves the EpiPen in seconds and barely hesitates before flicking off the lid and pressing it firmly to the woman’s thigh. Stella registers the click and stands by awkwardly as people pass on the path but don’t stop. The man speaks lowly to the woman now, rubbing her back as she rests her head in her hands.

“Should I call an ambulance?” Stella hears her voice say. Her hand trembles as she tries to dial the number, when he nods at her. Her zombie fingers don’t connect with the touch screen numbers. Is it 999 or 112? She doesn’t know. She has never had to ring for the emergency services before, though they have had reason to contact her in the recent past.

“What’s her name?” she mouths at the man, pointing to her phone.

“It’s Liz, my daughter Liz.”

Thankful to know her exact location, she answers all their questions clearly and hangs up.

“They will be here as soon as they can,” she flounders, “will she be ok now?”

“Yes, sorry I shouted a bit. Getting the medicine is a bit time sensitive.” He strokes Liz’s hair and Stella can hear her breathing smooth out. “We’re good now, I’d hate to spoil your trek, sure you head on,” he smiles up at Stella, “thanks for your help.” She hesitates, torn between guilt and the knowledge that she is of no further use, then moves away with newborn limbs.

The path ahead is filled with people. Stella can see it worm through the pale grass and burnt heather for miles. It is a river, in the distance, falling from the top edge of the mountain like a snapshot waterfall. The sun warms the air and the aroma of sheep is both comforting and pleasant. Their intermittent bleating is punctuated with crumbling gravel as people take their varying paces in both directions. She thinks of Liz, her own slow reactions, should she have stayed? There is nothing more she can do, yet she stops and glances back to see if the distance she has put between them has brought the ambulance any closer. Sometimes the ambulance arrives too late.

“Are you ok love?” a mother and child stand, red faced in front of her. “You look a bit shook.” Stella nods, not trusting herself to relay the event in the carpark. The child whimpers “I can’t stand anymore mammy, are we nearly there yet?”

The mother laughs “we’ve only just started you scamp, you couldn’t be tired already!”

She looks at Stella “I feel bad now

for bringing him, we might turn back unless I tell him there’s a sweet shop at the top.” She rolls her eyes and grins, fanning herself with her hand she bargains with him “come on, we’ll do another little bit and then you can have a treat, deal?”

“Did you bring chocolate? I want it now mammy, I swear my legs are sad and they need something happy.” She rummages through her rucksack and Stella walks on.

For the most part, the path is level with short but sharp inclines. Stella tries not to stop too often; her purpose is her motivation. She remembers walking with her father to school, his long step leaving her scampering along beside him to keep up. He had always walked fast, a skill she never mastered, and sometimes she wonders if she had slowed down as an act of childish rebellion. Yet, here she was climbing up a mountain, something she hasn’t done since childhood. Something she had always done with him.

She stops at a rest area for a drink and regrets the warm tap water in her borrowed bottle. A couple has also stopped by the bench and are muttering sharply to each other whilst looking in opposite directions. Behind them, an older lady huffs and puffs up the hill as she tries to catch up.

“Why did you have to bring her, I thought it would be just the two of us,” says the woman her lips thin and jaw taut. Her make up is glistening and threatening to slide off her narrow face. Her partner shrugs and asks for some water.

“Get your own, or better still, ask your mother,” she snarls at him.

Turning 180 degrees the gravel skitters off the path as her hiking boots make heavy contact with the ground and she storms away. Stella wonders if the woman regrets her hasty departure as the hill is steep and she knows she is beginning to struggle. She can feel the sweat on her back where her rucksack sits, the dampness is uncomfortable and her breathing is sharp and wild.

People are beginning to thin out now, having reached the narrow wooden

boardwalk, everyone tends to walk in single file. Stella watches other walkers mill about before the wood slats, laughing loudly and readjusting rucksack harnesses on each other with a familiarity and intimacy that leaves a stone of pain in her chest.

“Here we go,” she murmurs to herself, “I can do this.”

The positivity mantra is supposed to encourage and revive her weary self-motivation, but the leaden weight of it compresses any flights of hope. She can see the steps ahead of her and knows this will be the toughest part. Taking a quick look behind her, the path snakes back for miles, numbly she realises there is no point in quitting now.

As she takes each flight of steps, Stella keeps her eyes locked firmly on her feet. Her calf muscles ache and burn from this brand-new exertion so she speaks to herself as a parent would to a young child, offering bribes and simple encouragement. “Only ten more steps, then I can stop and take a drink,” small achievements suit her just fine. People pass her, mumbling “sorry,” as they tackle each new set of stairs, but she turns her back to the ascent and looks back on her progress as she catches her breath.

The boardwalk meanders through the bogland and in the distance, as far out as she can see, is the glare of a windscreen bouncing sunlight as it moves around in the carpark. A couple in matching lycra power past her going up and she meets them on the way back down two flights later but she doesn't even wonder if they got enough time to enjoy the view at the top.

The sun and exertion show on her face as Stella reaches the viewing platform at the end of the trail. There is laughter, selfies and surprisingly few people sitting down. The outside rail is thick with tired walkers propping themselves up and congratulating themselves on their insta-worthy endeavours. Stella turns her back to them and looks towards the mountain itself.

The fence is just over waist high and a couple nimbly hop over it with youthful arrogance in front of her. She hopes her rag doll legs will obey as she stands on the wooden bar and hoists one over, wincing slightly at the tenderness in her calves. She hooks her knee against the guardrail to bring the other leg safely over. There is a looseness in her now that lets her shoulders drop and the squiggles in her brow melt away. She makes a leap forwards and surprises herself with a yelp as she lands feet together on the soft boggy ground. The parched heather crunches underfoot before being cushioned by the ancient peat. A graveyard of boulders and rocks litter the vast plateau, blistering starkly against the bronze earth. Her hand flies to cover her upturned mouth as she remembers the vague directions she has been given, “look for a rocky outcrop.” She takes in the kilometres of blanched and beaten rock, lying close to the ground in sullen submission and laughs. This could take a while. Her goal is within reach if she only knew which direction to look in.

The sweat begins to bubble through her pores again, as the sun bears down and the clouds remain staunchly tethered. Stella shades her eyes and scours the barren landscape for a clue, an abnormality, a sign. There are no lightning bolts or stairways to heaven to guide her, nothing only boulders gritty and pitted by the relentless sun, wind and rain and the scorched heather nibbled beyond recognition by nomad sheep. There are no obvious trails, no muddy paths or impressions of regular footfall, just a long-fingered ridge that stands proudly above the rolling drumlins below. The only higher point on the tabletop, is a white mound with an upright rock standing sentry to her right. As it is the only distinguishing feature of the landscape before her, she sets out towards it. Feet no longer trudging, she enjoys the marshmallow crisp ground and feels closer to the sky than the earth. The further she walks, the more featherlight her limbs become. A relief after months of tension and stress. She

stops, her gaze still searching, barely distracted by the view. She still needs some form of confirmation, she doesn't trust herself yet and finds doubt on every rockface she sees.

There are flat slabs of limestone, the earth struggling to reclaim them, all around. Smaller rocks and pebbles appear haphazardly and immediately a small oval one catches her eye. Picking it up she twirls it between her fingers, both roughened and warmed by the sun, it is the perfect size to leave at her destination in lieu of flowers. There are no flowers here bar the heather and no trees. Rolling the pebble gently against her skin she realises she is occupying a space of pure silence. No birds, no insects, no traffic, no people. Squeezing her talisman, she lets go of her breath and realises that she no longer feels alone.

The ancient cairn squats 15-foot-high along the end of the steep stone ridge she has just walked, beyond it several counties stretch lumpenly towards the sea from the sheer rock face. The lush greenness and cobalt sky meet in a hazy line, too pixelated to make out clearly and perfect fluffy clouds leave dark splotches on the earth, a frigid tattoo on life below. Stella carefully walks the edge of the precipice, unblinking, the ancient rock passing through her fingers like a rosary bead. An intense flare catches her eye in the flat distance below, higher than road level it must be a reflection from a metal roof. It beckons her forward, winking at her steadily. Walking towards it, flat rocks slide out from under the heather and grass, warmed and ready for her to rest on. A small pond with brackish water nestles stubbornly on a ledge, the water too dark to reflect the sky. Curiosity propels Stella forward. Her hand rests on a large boulder, fingers linger over the course stone, bleached lemon and lime lichen, and meets at long last the mirrored plaque that holds the sky, perfect white clouds against a clear blue. In memory of... “Daddy” she whispered.