

Knowing the Mountain

Following Nan Shepherd's footsteps into the tumultuous Cairngorms

On the tail-end of a storm, nine women set off on a journey into the Cairngorms inspired by pioneering 20th century mountaineer Nan Shepherd in an endeavour to go against the grain and develop a deeper relationship with the mountains: connecting, not conquering; slowing down, not racing; and exploring the micro, not just the macro.

The last time you were with me, what do you remember? Do you remember the shape of me? The tiny yet endless intricacies which make up my skin, my bones. What about the marks left behind by those who were here before you? Some temporary, some permanent. You're frustrated that I rarely let you see my glory and beauty all at once, and sometimes not at all. Some days you talk about how inspiring I am. Other days, I frighten you.

You leave your impressions along my many spines and ridges. You swim in my lochs, you sleep in my corries and forests. You gasp and wonder at the rest of the world from my summits. But you miss the shades of the sky above you, the shape of the trees, the rocks. You don't notice the smell of the soil, the feel of the rain as it drips down your face, how the fog caresses your skin. The sound of the wind calling you. The birds trilling and shrieking. Your feet pass by fungi peppering rotting wood, the mosses, and the lichens. You don't see me as I see myself.

The last time you were with me, the mountain, do you feel like you were really here?

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'Summer on the high plateau can be delectable as honey; it can also be a roaring scourge. To those who love the place, both are good, since both are part of its essential nature. And it is to know its essential nature that I am seeking here.'

—Nan Shepherd, *The Living Mountain*

There's a buzz of nervous excitement running through our group. It's raining, but we don't notice. We're three team leaders: Hannah, Ruth, and Jen. Two filmmakers, Emily and Michelle, are working on a documentary about the micro-expedition. There's Alice, a musician who will be making an album inspired by this place, featuring sounds from our environment. Then there's Nicola, an avid hill-walker from Wales, Aisha, a coastal

path lover from Pembrokeshire, and myself, a south Londoner acting as expedition photographer.

It's day one and we're walking through Rothiemurchus on the northwestern side of the Cairngorms National Park. We've met up with two Cairngorms rangers, Polly and Toni, who are with us as we head towards Braeriach, one of the Cairngorm mountains. Hannah, expedition leader and main navigator, recounts our plan to sleep at the foot of this mountain tonight, next to Loch Einich ('Loch of the Boggy Area'). Tomorrow we'll start our journey upwards to the plateau and the Wells of Dee, the source of the River Dee, treading the very same paths that Nan herself walked.

On the way, the rangers educate us about the makeup of the Cairngorms, the many environmental issues it faces, and how different or similar it may have looked compared to when Nan walked the paths. We learn new names. Ling heather. Sphagnum moss. Ptarmigan. We stop for lunch in a small clearing by a large, flowing burn as the sun begins to come out and they leave us to it. Here, we try to engage with our environment in a way that Nan would have. Eyes closed, we let ourselves settle into the ground and Hannah leads us with some prompts. For a few minutes, we breathe with the mountain and listen. I hear rushing water, birds calling to each other, branches rustling in the wind. I'm lying in a patch of heather, cocooned on all sides.

The rest of the day is full of laughter and the light banter of new bonds forming – most of us only met each other for the first time last night. We walk a flat trail through boggy marshes surrounded by increasingly larger hills and a threatening grey sky. We ford tiny puddles and wide expanses of knee-deep water. Everyone deals with the crossings differently, some nervous and needing a hand, some light on the feet and hopping across deftly, and some deciding to remove their shoes and walk through the ice-cold depths.

A few hours later, we arrive at Loch Einich and the dark afternoon gives way to an evening that's the same velvety blue-black as the deepest parts of the ocean. We have a quick dinner together followed by a chat with biscuits, talking about our experience in the mountains and what led us here. "Sometimes I go up and when I come down, I feel like I was never really there at all," says Jen. "I wanted to be out here but struggled because I didn't think I had a place here... but it's in the mountains I feel most alive," Nicola shares. All of our heads are nodding. We've all come to find something new, something better for us.

Before I turn in, I stand and look around for several minutes, warm in my thick layers. The wind is picking up. There's a feeling in my chest, an opening-up; there are a multitude of emotions building up in me from being in this landscape, surrounded by

dark giants outlined against the twilight sky. Wonder, fear, worry, and an electric thrill of excitement.

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I came across the call out five months ago. Three women were recruiting for a journey into the Cairngorms inspired by 20th century writer and mountaineer Nan Shepherd. I was intrigued. It felt a bit like fate because I'd read Nan's book, *The Living Mountain*, a couple of years ago and couldn't stop thinking about it.

I loved to hike, I loved mountains, but I felt like I didn't belong. "You haven't done it properly if you don't make it to the summit," a stranger had told me on a multi-day hike. I'm not interested in personal bests, in getting from A to B in the least time possible, and for a long time I simply thought I wasn't cut out for adventuring.

Nan, on the other hand, had no interest in getting to the top of anything. In fact, she sincerely loathed any kind of attempt to conquer nature. Everything she had to say resonated with me deeply. There's no denying how special it is when you make it to a summit or when you do achieve something amazing, but Nan believed we can find something deeper by opening ourselves up to the *whole* mountain. Not only that, she was doing all this in the mid-1900s when it was almost blasphemous for women to be out alone in general, let alone traversing a mountain.

Today, we'd perhaps call her approach "slow mountaineering". She used her whole body when she was adventuring through the Cairngorms, indulging herself fully by using all of the senses she had available to her to know the mountain as intimately as we might a lover, and through her words we gain a sense of the flavour of the mountain – the sounds, smells, feel, taste, and movement.

This was something I wanted for myself. It felt right. It felt more me. So I sent an email and, five months later, I was on the train to Scotland.

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Day two begins dark, grey, and vibrates with anticipation.

By mid-afternoon, the anticipation is gone. The elements have been at war with us almost the entire way up and we're already battered. The weather has been unexpectedly bad – we're caught in the tail-end of a storm. *What's that saying? We make plans, and the mountain laughs.* I'm not doing so well. A combination of a dodgy stomach and lack

of energy has caused me to struggle since we stopped for lunch. I'm so lost in my own discomfort that I have no mental space to really engage with anything, notice anything.

Hours after we started, we reach the plateau after a slog through torrential rain and high winds and there's only one way I can describe what I see: *nothingness*.

A thick fog sits heavily around us, restricting to a handful of meters of visibility if even that. All I see is brown and red and grey. I imagine this is what Mars must be like. We continue to the Wells of Dee on the exposed plateau, fighting against a biting wind that chills us to our bones and stabbing rain that soaks us through our waterproofs. It must be minus degrees up here.

Despite all this, or perhaps because of it, I no longer have a sense of place or time, and it is freeing. I usually feel the anxious hum of screen addiction lying low, never not there. Here, with my mind full of fog, rain, corrie, loch, ache, pain, breathe in, breathe out, left foot, right foot, moving, moving... I forget life outside of us even exists.

We don't stay on the plateau as long as we had originally planned. We are too cold, too wet, and we must now navigate to an alternative place to set up camp. The terrain on the way down is as tough as the way up, but we begin to regain some life as we leave the freezing exposed flatland behind. And then – 'Look!' Hannah whisper-shouts to us, pointing ahead as we all come to an abrupt stop. There's a small white shape moving fast along the ground some distance ahead of us. We think it's a ptarmigan, a bird which calls the arctic-like Cairngorms home. We're as still as the mountain for a moment, and all I can hear is the deep howl of the wind.

"Walk down like a cowboy," Hannah guides the group as we trudge downhill. *What?!* "Turn your feet outwards and lean back slightly as you go downhill so you're leading with your hips," she explains, "you'll be more stable that way." I'm in awe of her. She seems to embody Nan's ways so naturally. She's as steady and strong as the mountain, confidently navigating us through this harsh landscape and unforgiving day.

Some hours later – which include a hail storm and the downpour to end all downpours – we have set up camp by Coire an Lochain, a small freshwater loch.

"I think my character is fully built now," Aisha quips as we bed down in the worsening storm. This night is as unforgiving as the day and for the second night in a row, our tent thrusts side-to-side crazily with the gales and torrent of rain outside. Despite being tired to the bones and then some, I'm too cold to find rest. I spend the night in a weird insomnia, unable to stop hearing the thunderous sounds outside.

‘And the sky did quiver
And the wind did moan,’
—Little River, Alice Boyd

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Day three is pure molten gold.

“Oh!” I exclaim in complete wonder and surprise. I’m standing at the edge of the corrie where seconds ago I’d blearily been searching for a spot to wee. “You guys! You have to see this,” I call to everyone behind me.

Booted feet run towards me.

“Oh my gosh!”

“This is incredible.”

There is ecstatic laughter, the sort that just comes out of you when you feel emotions too big to stay inside. Eyes well up with tears.

“Amazing.”

Today, the mountain lets us see her whole. In the nourishing sunshine, yellow and delicious like butter, we’re blessed with every little detail of the western Cairngorms which stretch out before us while above us the sky shines the bright blue of sapphires. Looking out to these unmeasurable elements, I feel a pull from inside me, my bones, my blood – from the very atoms that make up *me*.

This morning was a rough start. I was in a black mood, not having really woken up since I never really managed to sleep. It was a humbling comedown from my expectation of how the expedition would go. When I finally left the tent, scowling at my wet clothes, it started to snow. A flake lands on my cheek; an ice cold pinprick, but so soft at the same time. A gentle, calming touch compared to the harsh, crashing elements of the past day and night. It disappeared as fast as it had arrived, along with the claustrophobic fog that has closed us in for the past 18 hours, swirling upwards over the water as if scooped by a giant hand. Nan’s words are in my head, ‘I am an image in a ball of glass. The world is suspended there, and I in it’. It’s a line I’ve found myself echoing during the expedition.

We begin to make our way down. My clothes dry as I walk and my body warms. I feel alive again. We talk, and talk, and talk. Most of us have only known each other for four

days, but it feels as if we've experienced a lifetime in these few days. We talk without shame or embarrassment, intimately, collecting inside jokes, navigating our new mountain-forged bonds. We share our vulnerable moments of struggle from the day before, and we collectively wonder about Nan and how hardy she must have been. She experienced this tumultuous place in so much depth – sleeping out here alone in all kinds of weather, and doing it all without any of the technical equipment we have.

On the way, we stop often when one of us has seen something interesting. Hannah, a fountain of knowledge, teaches us about everything we see. We learn more new names: Stonecrop. Pixie cups. Reindeer lichen. “There’s still an abundance of plants down here despite snow just up there. You have to be quite hardy to live here... as we found out last night!”.

Nan’s words are in my head again. ‘...Face away from what you look at, and bend with straddled legs till you see your world upside down. How new it has become!’. It’s something I’ve been wanting to try this whole time, so during one break I speak Nan’s words and as one, we bend at the waist and look out at the earth through the window formed by our legs.

Today, we’re gifted space and time to notice. The mountain invites us to really see her. Dew-dropped cobwebs glowing in the sunlight. The golden curve of the rolling mountain in front of us. We see a herd of deer running in a neat line; we’ve hardly seen any wildlife so far so it feels like seeing the end of a rainbow. We forage and snack on cowberries and bilberries as we head towards Rothiemurchus Forest where we’ll spend our last night.

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The wind howls louder-than-ever tonight within the circle of pines we’ve camped in, each long limb groaning and creaking. But I’m finally able to relax in full-body warmth and I’m enjoying the sounds of the evening. If I had been alone, I would have been quite frightened (though not for any real, rational reason). Among the circle of my mountain-bonded sisters, I am safe and content. *I don’t want this to end.*

‘By a mountain river
There I lay my head
Slept below the tree line
Heather for a bed,’
—Little River, Alice Boyd

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Our last morning begins fiery red. Sleepy eyes and snuffly noses take in the quiet dawn together, soaking in the red-orange-pink sky before us. The silhouettes of the pine trees sit still now. We take a quick, brisk wild dip in the loch we slept beside. A few hours later, we pack into cars and head back to the youth hostel where we left our things. It's here we say goodbye and go our separate ways.

In *The Living Mountain*, Nan talks about visiting the mountain “as one visits a friend”. After my time on the mountain, I'm not sure this is right. For me, the mountain is the teacher – maybe even a parent.

The mountain bestows the most affirming and nourishing experiences on us, and equally we endure the most punishing experiences which stay with us forever. Sometimes the mountain embraces you. Sometimes she eats you alive.

I feel the same rawness I experienced as a child disciplined by a teacher. I am also encouraged and inspired. I am nurtured by the embrace of my mountain-sisters. I'm stronger – mentally, spiritually, and physically – for the experience, more confident, more knowledgeable about the land around me. I am more connected to my own body as well as the body of the mountain.

And just for a moment, I saw the mountain the way she sees herself.

‘So there I lie on the plateau, under me the central core of fire from which was thrust this grumbling grinding mass of plutonic rock, over me blue air, and between the fire of the rock and the fire of the sun, scree, soil and water, moss, grass, flower and tree, insect, bird and beast, wind, rain, and snow – the total mountain. Slowly I have found my way in.’

—Nan Shepherd, *The Living Mountain*