

Halfway

By Robin Bhullar, First Place Recipient – Years 9-10 Short Story

Every evening, Aleš walked up the hill to meet his wife.

It was not a grand hill. The path began at the leaning gate behind the house and climbed through long grass to the overlook, where the valley folded open and the river caught the last of the sun like a vein of copper. Mira was buried in the churchyard, two miles the other way. But that was only where her body was. The summit was where *she* was. It was the last place she had stood on her own feet, her hand in his, laughing at something he ached to remember, the light pouring over her face as if saved up all day just for her. A man does not say “I love you” to a stone. He says it to the light.

Every evening, rain or shine, for eleven years, he climbed.

Vera went with him. Vera always went with him.

The dog had arrived three weeks after the funeral. Mira had arranged it all in her last month — chosen the litter, paid the deposit, written the instructions in her careful hand. *For Aleš. So the house isn't quiet.* He had resented the puppy at first, this small warm obligation squirming in a basket, demanding to be fed while his grief demanded to be left alone. He fed her anyway. You did not refuse Mira. With or without her.

Eleven years now. Vera was grey at the muzzle, and he was grey everywhere, and the two of them climbed the hill each evening a little slower than the last — two old clocks winding down in the same room, too gently to mention.

Tonight, the hill was longer than it had ever been.

He felt it at the gate: a tightness behind his ribs, like a hand closing without hurry. He had told no one. A doctor would only put a name on it, and naming a wave does not stop it reaching the shore. His body had been a faithful animal all his life; now it was old, and tired, and said so in the only language it had.

He climbed anyway.

Vera stopped ahead, where the grass bowed over the track, and looked back. She did this now on the steep parts — a few steps, then waiting, herding him gently upward as she

had once herded him out of the loveless kitchen, the silent winters, the years he did not like to describe.

“You’re as stubborn as ever, Vera,” he said, his voice thinner than he intended. “Go on. I’m coming.”

She did not go on. She waited, then fell in beside him, her shoulder brushing his knee like a tide returning to the same shore.

The hand behind his ribs closed a little more.

The summit was in sight now. The bare crown of the hill; the bench he had built the spring after she died, silvered by eleven winters of waiting; the sky behind it ripening to the colour of apricots. Mira was up there. He could feel her waiting, the way a set table waits for a guest who is already late. He counted his steps. Ten and rest, ten and rest — the grass hissing against his trousers in curious anticipation.

His legs went out from under him at the halfway stone — the lichen-spotted boulder where Mira used to stop and complain, happily, about the fireflies crowding the path.

It was not a fall but a kneeling — slow, almost courteous, the earth rising to take him the way water takes a leaf it has been promised. The valley tilted, righted itself. The hand behind his ribs was no longer closing without hurry. It was simply closing.

“No,” he said. “Not here.”

Vera was against him at once, pressing her grey weight into his side, whining low in her chest — the same sound she had made eleven years ago — a puppy at a closed bedroom door, mourning a woman she had never met by the shape of her absence.

“Up,” Aleš cried. He worked a hand into the fur of her neck. “Help me up. Come on, girl. Pull.” His voice broke on it. “It’s just there. She’s just there. I have to say goodbye to her, Vera. She’s waiting for us on the summit. That’s where she is. That’s where she must be—”

The dog did not pull.

The dog lay down.

She folded herself against his failing chest, deliberate as a door closing, and turned her grey muzzle toward the west, where the sun was lowering itself into the hills like an old man into a chair. And she watched it. That was all. She watched the light the way she

had watched it every evening of her life, from wherever the evening happened to find her, as though the gazing itself were the destination, and always had been.

“Please,” Aleš whispered.

Vera leaned harder into him. Her heart beat against his ribs — steady, unhurried — on the other side of the closing hand, like a gentle knock at a door almost shut: *I’m here. I’m here. I’m here.* And he understood, the way you understand the last line of a letter you have been reading your whole life, that she was not refusing him.

She was answering him.

Eleven years he had climbed past her to reach his wife. Eleven years he had walked beside the last thing Mira’s hands had arranged in this world, looking *up* — at a bare hilltop, an empty bench, the place where Mira used to be. He had kept an appointment with her absence, while her love padded at his knee, grey-muzzled, his name in its heartbeat.

The summit had the view. But the grass had her.

The struggle left him all at once, the way wind leaves a field — and what remained was so quiet he almost laughed. Halfway. He had made it halfway, and halfway held the same sun, the same gold spilling down the valley like a cup overturned in heaven, the same river burning its copper thread through the dusk. From the top you could see one more bend of the river. That was all the summit had ever offered. One more bend. And it did not have this: the warmth against his chest, the heartbeat answering his own, the *being here* of her.

A life was a walk. He saw it now, plainly, the way the dying are said to see. You set out from a gate you don’t remember, and you climb toward a summit you imagine, aching the whole way for the top — a top everyone has seen. The top was never the point. The path was. The one who walked beside you, matching your pace, waiting on the steep parts — that was the whole of it, and the dog had known it from her first evening on this hill. She had never once climbed *toward* anything. She had only ever climbed *with*.

He gathered her in. Both arms, the whole of her, her fur against his face, and she stopped whining and grew still, as if this were what she had been asking for all along. The sun kissed the hills. The valley filled with gold to its brim. Below, the house sat lifeless; above, the bench sat empty; and neither mattered, because everything that mattered was here, halfway, held.

“I see her,” he murmured into the grey fur. “You kept her all this time. You stubborn, beautiful girl.”

Vera sighed. A long, contented, aged sigh — and settled deeper into his arms.

The light lay down across them both. He felt no fear. He felt as he had on the best evenings of his life: that he had arrived somewhere, and was expected, and could rest. His wife had never been on the summit. She was here. Warm under his hands, faithful past death, too wise to let him spend his last evening chasing a hilltop while the sun was setting *now, here, for them*.

“You’re as stubborn as ever, Mira,” he whispered.

And he smiled, and held her, and watched the gold go down.

Eventually, his embrace lost its strength.

The sun set anyway, as it had before him, as it would after him — pouring its last light over the summit and the stone and the long grass equally, asking nothing, keeping nothing, beautiful for whoever happened to be present, exactly where they were.

In the morning they would find them there, halfway up the path, the old man and the old dog, his arms around her, her head upon his chest. The ones who found them would not understand, and would not need to. Some walks are finished. Others are completed.

Every evening, Aleš walked up the hill to meet his wife.

That evening, he did.

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