

My father builds trails.

We live in a perpetual shadow, where trees blot out the sun and the moon, and the light that filters down is tinted brown and green. I love running to the top of the mountain, as fast as I can, because up there, the trees thin out and the sun splashes onto the ground triumphantly. I can open my arms and twirl and feel the yellow sun hit my skin.

I was my father's trailblazer—he loved to tell me about how I had a knack for following the curves of the mountain, picking my way up, up, up, among rocks and fallen trees until I reached the top. Then, after I twirled underneath the yellow sun, I would pick my way back down and show him how I got up. And he would come in afterwards, with machines and artificial rocks and wood, and build part of a trail that would edge its way up the mountain so that people who lived down below could come experience the molding of shadow and light that me and my father knew so well.

My father builds trails.

He is the best, out of all of the trail builders, because he is one of the only people left who really know the trail. He can feel the mountain, hear where it wants to be carved away at and where it wants to be left alone. My father always complains about how nowadays, people don't take the time to let the mountain talk to them. They just come in, with loud machines and piles of rock, and build a trail wherever they please, mountain be damned. But both my father and I know that this is not the right way to build a trail. If you cut out parts of the mountain that it needs, it will shrivel and die. But my father, he does it right. Him and I, we pick our way up the mountain, we reach the top, we take a moment to appreciate the sun, we pick our way back down, and then we begin to build a trail.

When walking on my father's trails, people never say what I expect them to. No one has ever said—wow. This trail is positioned just right. It cuts out the parts of the mountain that aren't needed, and it keeps all the parts of the mountain that keep it alive. No one ever says that. Instead, people remark on the view—they stop and take pictures of trees, and the sky, and the ground, and each other. When they reach the top, they don't drink up the sun, they just take a picture, look around, drink some water, and then come back down the way they came up.

It's a thankless line of work we're in, my father likes to say. And I laugh, even though we both know it's not a joke.

But ever since I can remember, my father has built trails. Everyday, we wake up, pick our way a little further up the mountain, build a small part, and then come back to our little cabin and wait for the day to start all over again. My father likes to point out plants and animals to me—which ones to eat, which ones are poisonous, which ones travel in groups, which ones are solitary. When the sun leaves, I point out constellations—the big and little dipper, Orion's belt. We learn from the mountain and from each other.

Me, my father, the mountain, and the sun. That is all I have ever needed.

And for as long as I could remember, I had all four. My father built trails, I picked my way up the mountain, twirled in the sun, laughed at the people who did not understand all the vast things that I understood; the people that didn't appreciate my father's trails. For as long as remember, I had all four, and that was more than enough.

But as I grew older, the machines that bulldozed through mountains seemed to grow younger, and faster, and better. People started calling on my father less and less to build their trails for them. We moved from mountain to mountain—sometimes, I wouldn't even have enough time to pick my way all up to the top before we moved to another one.

My father would build a trail, people would walk on it, and we would be shooed away. My father would arrive at a mountain, see that machines were already plowing through it, try to explain that, no, you had to pick your way up the mountain just so, see where the best place to build a trail is, and then build it slowly and softly.

The men who ran the machines always laughed him away.

Once, I asked one of the men in the machines: why don't you climb up the mountain yourself first? To see the best way?

He laughed. That's not how capitalism works, kid, he said.

Neither my father nor the mountain had taught me what capitalism was, so I did not know what he was talking about, but I did not like the sound of it. I stumbled away from him and his oily smelling machine and me and my father went to find another mountain that needed a trail.

But every time we left one mountain, it took longer and longer to find another one. I would watch my father stride up to oily machines, confer with men in yellow hats with snake eyes and then trudge back to me, smile, say, well—it's not this one, kiddo.

As we drove away, I would hear the echo of the man's voice in my ear—*that's not how capitalism works, kid.*

I wish I had told him: my father builds trails. He cannot build trails without a trail-less mountain. That's not how trail-builders work. Turn off your oily machine that will destroy this beautiful mountain. Let trail-builders work do what trail-builders do.

The smell of oil curdled the blood in my veins and made me sick to my stomach. I wanted to scream—that's not how trail-builders work.

But capitalism, whatever invisible evil it was, worked harder than trail builders. And one day, around the time the air had begun to smell like winter, my father came back smelling of oil and despair, and told me that he thought maybe it would be a good time to move back to the ground.

Away from mountains? I asked.

Yes.

Away from the sun? I asked.

Well. The sun will still be there.

But not as close, I said. It won't be as close.

There are no more mountains for us, kiddo, he said.

There has to be, I yelled. You are a trail builder! You build trails!

Kiddo—

You build trails! I screamed.

I refused to live on the ground. I did not help my father when he began packing all of our things into boxes, I squeezed my eyes shut when he showed me the house he had gotten us, I put my hands over my ears when he made plans for our departure.

My father builds trails. I pick my way up the mountain and twirl beneath the yellow sun. These were undeniable facts. I would not leave the mountain.

The day came for us to leave. My father called me, said, we have to go, a storm coming, stop stalling, lets go kiddo!

Kiddo?

Kiddo?

And then I could not hear him anymore, because I had climbed out my window and was running faster than I had ever run before, leaping over rocks and shoving aside tree branches, gritting my teeth against the cold. I did not know where exactly I was going, but I did know the direction I was headed—up.

My father builds trails. I pick my way up the mountain and twirl beneath the yellow sun.

But I was no longer picking my way up the mountain, I was leaping my way up it. Above me, the sky was almost purple, swirling with the storm my father had wanted to avoid. I paid it no heed—up, up, up, I went, among rocks and fallen trees. I was my father's trailblazer. I was showing him the path. Tomorrow, he would bring his small machines—nothing like the oily monsters I had grown to hate—and he would do what he did best. Build a trail.

Somewhere far away, I could hear my father's yell. But it was drowned out by the sound of my panting and the sound of roiling thunder. Right as I got halfway up the mountain, it started raining. It was the hard kind of rain, the kind with sharp tips that dug into your skin and deposited little bits of ice into your bloodstream. It had a shrieking sound to it too, almost like the whole world was crying with me.

I paid it no mind. I was a trailblazer, I was going to get to the top of the mountain, I was going to show my father the way.

My father builds trails.

And a trail, I began to think, would be quite helpful on a mountain like this, at a time like this—a dark stormy evening with rain that was beginning to feel more like hail and wind carried pine needles that cut your face and left little wounds on your cheeks. My run soon became a jog, my job a walk, my walk a slow shuffle up an almost vertical edge.

It was dark, and the rain was thick, and I had been careless. I hadn't stopped to listen to the mountain, and now I was not on the best part of it.

As I shuffled closer and closer to the top, I thought, over and over—*my father builds trails. My father is a trail-builder. I am his trailblazer.*

The wind got stronger and stronger. I could not hear my father's voice anymore, but I could feel his worry. It almost pulsed throughout the entire mountain. I could feel it telling me—turn back. Go home.

I said—*no. I am a trailblazer. See, my father builds trails.*

The wind got stronger. I went higher. And then—*crack.*

A branch whipped off a nearby tree and hit me square in the temple. I screamed and fell to the ground. In my mouth, I tasted rain, and mud, and blood. I held my hand up to my right temple, and I could feel a warm pulse—like a heartbeat outside of my body. I quivered. The mountain had turned on me.

But there was nowhere to go, nothing to do, except get to the top. I pressed my hand against my temple, used my other hand to hoist myself up. I kicked the mountain and said—*I am a trailblazer.*

*My father builds trails.*

*I will reach the top of this mountain and twirl in the sun, feel the yellow on my skin I will conquer this mountain and I will pick my way back down and my father will start to build a trail and we will not live on the ground and I will stay in the mountains forever, above everyone, above everything and I will never come down I am a trailblazer my father builds trails my father builds trails my father builds trails my father builds trails my father builds—*

I reached the top.

The rain subsided just the slightest bit, as if congratulating me for reaching the top. I held out both of my arms and did one tiny twirl. But the sky was grey, there was no sun to pour yellow on the ground or on my skin. There was only the grey sky, the brown mud, and the red all over my body.

The sun was gone, the mountain had betrayed me, and I was suddenly eternally tired. I laid down in the mud, my hand still covering my head, feeling the open heartbeat, and I closed my eyes, resigned.

And as I drifted off to sleep, somewhere, deep in the ground, I heard the man again: *that's how capitalism works, kid.*

My father builds trails. And on the same night I picked my way up my last mountain, he built his last trail, sloppily, digging through mud, as he led paramedics up a steep mountain to reach the top, where he would find a girl lying on the ground, soaked to the bone, covered in mud and blood. He wrapped that girl up in his jacket and he cried for her, and in those tears he was also crying for his last trail, and the whole mountain, and mountains everywhere.

My father built trails.

Now, we live on the ground and I only twirl and feel the yellow sun hit my skin in the depths of my dreams.