

A June Defection

by Berit Ellingsen

The city was squeezed in between the black fjord and seven tall mountains, with so little room that one mountain had its foot in the city center. The streets and buildings filled the space between the surrounding giants like water in a bowl, grasped with teetering villas and terraced roads as far up the lush mountainsides as they could. Sunlight only graced the asphalt at the bottom of the bowl between ten a.m. and five p.m. in the summer, scant light in a season where it doesn't really get dark.

In winter, it was as if the pale sun disc never managed to climb over the massive white backs, before it was pushed down into the long, cold night. Low air circulation and high traffic made the city one of the most polluted in the country. Combined with frequent samurai-movie rain, which could last for more than sixty days, living in that city felt like staying at the bottom of a deep, dark crater.

I came from the only flat region in the kingdom of mountains and fjords, and called the city "Down in the Dumps". The beleaguering mountains smelled a flatlander when they saw one, and hated me right back.

Every Sunday I ran for one hour up a winding path in the mountainside, then one hour more through dark pine forest, until I reached the treeless plateau at the top of the mountains; the edge of the enormous mass of rock that makes up the interior of the country. I ran in rain, fog, sleet, ice, snow; every week, summer to winter and back again, accompanied by loud trance-music from neon-yellow earphones. I ran in the mountains so that I could bear down on the stone, instead of it crushing me.

However, the humans born in the shadow of those mountains had a simple love for the giants and were treated well by them. My boyfriend was one of those people. He adored the mountains.

He was also the most talkative man I had ever met. If he had known everything under the sun, he would have talked about it; the range in usability of computer operating systems, the exhumation of viral dead in the Arctic, the dangers of scuba diving while hung over, the right way to photograph sand dunes in the desert, on and on and on. Filling our silences was never any problem.

“Stop moping and come with me to the mountains,” he said. “Just for a daytrip. What do you say? Come on! There's no bad weather, only bad clothing!”

“I can't,” I said. “I'm losing my job. The professor refused to renew my grant. And I hate the mountains.”

“Let's go for a walk, get some fresh air, it'll do you a world of good,” he said. “You'll come back renewed, trust me, I know what I'm talking about.” In the kingdom of mountains and fjords, fresh air and walks cure everything.

Surprisingly, the day of the trip turned out to be dry and bright; early June. The sky was tall and soft, and the temperature comforting, rare in this cold country. We walked into the mountains, past the grey crescent of the old dam that holds back the city's drinking water, and started on the long path that leads down from the concrete structure. We stopped at a cliff overlooking the valley. Below us, a small lake blinked in the sunlight. White flock from the flowering chestnut trees that lined the mountains filled the air, like June snow. These are my memories of that day; his constant stream of words and the gentle harvest of the chestnut blossoms that touched our hands and faces in the sun.

He talked about a woman who had been found face down in a campfire at the edge of the little lake, some time in nineteen seventy. The woman's features and fingerprints had been burned away, her belongings stripped of all identification marks, including the brand tags on her clothes. The remnants of several passports lay nearby. The newspapers thought the mysterious woman had been an

agent from some Eastern Bloc country who had tried to defect and been killed by her own. The woman's true identity was never revealed by the media. I listened with mild interest and gazed down at the lake where the woman had been found.

I suggested that the defector hadn't been killed, that she had come to the city between the mountains, as good a jumping-off point to the West as any. In the row of pubs and bars at the grotty, historical wharf in the city center, she spotted someone of her own height and build. The other woman was alone, another traveler, the city has many visitors in the summer. The defector offered her the safe and smiling company of another female tourist, a light-hearted exchange of travel stories, a drink, maybe something more potent.

Then the defector brought the tourist to the dark valley right outside the city, killed her, stole her passport and money, and left her face down in the fire. The defector escaped a life of secrecy and betrayal somewhere in the Eastern Bloc, an existence we could only guess the contents of.

He said the story was preposterous, fit only for cats and children, and laughed into the gentle wind. In the falling chestnut blossoms I turned slowly away from him.

Far down there, on the stony shore, I could see the defector get up and collect her new clothes and passport, having finally gained her freedom.

Two weeks later I had had enough of mountains and talk, packed my belongings and fled to another country, a flat place with a lot of sun, forwarding address unknown.

