

Mist

'And for homework...' - a collective groan filled the classroom – 'for homework, boys, you are to copy out page 13. And make sure you learn what it says!'

'Yes, sir.' The response was barely audible.

I crammed the book into the bottom of my bag and elbowed my way out of the room and into the corridor. It was Friday, four o'clock, and time for the weekend...

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That lesson, that moment, seemed like a long, long time ago. It had receded into the mists of time, which, as I looked into the clouds descending around us seemed a darkly appropriate phrase.

'Which way, sir?'

The voice, which I recognised as belonging to Alfie, the youngest of the boys I was leading, was small and strained. Was he crying?

'Yeah, which way Mr Griffiths? Do you know where we are?'

I turned to the group, all toggled up, six pairs of eyes looking expectantly at me, their lives apparently in my inexperienced hands.

'No need to worry lads,' I said, and shrugged my rucksack into position. 'All we need to do is drop down a couple of hundred feet and we'll be out of the mist. This is your first time up here, but I know these mountains like the back of my hand.'

'I can't see the back of my hand,' said Alfie. A gloved fist punched him gently in the shoulder, and a couple of boys sniggered then went quickly quiet again.

'Right, let's have another look at the map. Get it out of the pocket, will you Marcus?'

Marcus reached into my bag.

'It's getting soggy, sir.'

And so it was. The plastic wallet hadn't been the best choice, and the section of the OS map I had photocopied at work was already the worse for wear.

'Not a problem. As long as we can orientate it correctly, we'll be fine.'

He looked at me, unconvinced, then stared intently as I laid the sheet on a flat rock and lined up the northings with the needle of the compass.

'There you are, Marcus.' I pointed the way we needed to be heading. 'That will take us towards the track we need. Boys, come and see what we're doing. Learn a bit from this experience!'

A crescent of boys peered at the crumpled map, the layer of droplets making the faint photocopy even less distinct than it already was.

'So, who's going to lead?' I said chirpily.

'You are,' came the groaned reply.

We strode off in the direction of the path I was convinced lay a few hundred yards to the north. Alfie was holding my hand. The mist was still falling. Swirling around our feet. Getting thicker.

We stopped suddenly at the cliff-edge, and I took out the map once more.

'What does that squiggly black symbol mean, sir?'

'That Marcus? I'm afraid I really can't remember...'

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'So, you didn't do your map-key homework then, Griffiths?'

'No, sir.'

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If only. If only. If only.

500 words