

Mountain Lights

Isaiah 2:2-3, 5

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² *In days to come the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. ³ Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. ⁵ O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD!*

- Isaiah 2:2-3, 5

Being close to the shortest day of the year, by the time the foursome had finished dinner it was already dark even though it was early. Nathan paid the check, his turn after Lydia and Matt had covered the previous two years.

"Thanks for dinner," said Eleanor. "I guess next year is my year."

"Glad to. But this year is mine, right?" said Nathan. "Did you all clear the whole night?"

The other three nodded, curious about what their friend had planned. The students had made the Mexican place a tradition on the night of their last exam before Christmas. It started when they were freshmen, relatively new to campus and new to each other and completely unaware that they might be starting something that would continue into future years. Lydia, as usual, had initiated things when she bumped into Eleanor and Matt coming out of their last final; no one could remember how Nathan ended up in the car. When exams started last year, the sophomores had made sure to connect and to plan a return to El Faro. This year, the date had been circled on calendars since Halloween.

"Okay, then," said Nathan, as they climbed into his beat-up Nissan Sentra. "Let's go."

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Lydia, riding shotgun, pressed her face up against the window and tried to look upward at the stars. She liked to be surprised and liked traditions, so the annual gathering at the Mexican place suited her perfectly. The first year, the dinner itself had been a surprise; last year, Matt had found a theater showing *It's A Wonderful Life* on the big screen and taken them there after dinner. Nathan had called dibs on this year's activity but had refused to share any details about his plan other than to bring a jacket. Lydia felt her heart beat with adrenaline as they pulled onto the highway.

"So where are we going?" she asked.

"You know this is a surprise," Nathan responded.

"Can you at least tell me how long we'll be in the car?"

"Nope."

It was tough to balance wanting to be in charge and wanting to be surprised. Lydia had struggled with that a lot in college. She liked directing things, and she allowed herself to think

that stuff often went well when she was in charge, but she also wanted others to do their part and to take the reins on occasion. Still, nothing beat a good surprise, and she knew that even when she tried to take control.

“Come on, give me a little hint!” she pleaded. Nathan didn’t even bother answering her with words this time but just shook his head slowly from side to side.

Lydia turned back to the window, looked out, and smiled at the night sky. Cruising in the dark. Just the way she wanted it.

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Nathan had been looking forward to this night for a full year, since he’d gotten the idea halfway through the movie last Christmas. His father had brought him to the mountain when he was fourteen, the two of them hiking it alone in the dark with flashlights. He had always enjoyed time with just his dad, but the nighttime hike had felt sacred. Just the two of them in the dark, talking about school and friends and girls. His dad had shared stories from his own teen years, stories that Nathan had never heard, stories that made his dad seem real and that drew them close not only as father and son but also as friends, confidants, co-travelers.

Then they had reached the vista, and the conversation had stopped. Nathan had looked out from the peak, and he’d been not only speechless but also breathless. It was as if he feared breathing would disturb the perfect quality of the view.

He had come back to the mountain with his dad every December since then, would return here in ten days or so with him, and it never disappointed. Once or twice in high school, his dad had encouraged him to invite a friend or a date, but he’d always been hesitant. But the idea of sharing this view with someone else lingered, and this year he was making it happen. He had others at college he was closer to—many others, actually—but the foursome that met for Mexican seemed the most likely to appreciate where they were going, even if Nathan wasn’t sure why.

He gazed out the window as the highway stretched out in front of him. He knew it went on for miles, but they’d be exiting soon. He smiled with anticipation of the view that awaited.

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Riding behind Lydia, Matt could hear the conversation up front but was having a hard time paying attention or caring much about it. He enjoyed the foursome’s gathering, but these weren’t his best friends, and his mind was racing toward other places this evening. He’d had a hard semester, with grades that were below his expectations and a relationship that had grown toxic before deteriorating completely. He was anxious to get home a couple states away and to start the winter break, but he knew that this night meant a lot to the others, and he didn’t want to disappoint.

He drummed his fingers on the window along with the Drifters singing “White Christmas” on the radio. December was the one time of year you could count on the radio not to change. He couldn’t decide if that was comforting or depressing.

Matt turned to his left and noticed Eleanor drumming along too, and he wondered who had started first, if she’d mimicked him or if he’d subconsciously copied her. She was looking out the window, seemingly not paying attention to him at all. He sighed and turned to his own window, looked at the stars, and felt very, very small.

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Nathan guided the car into the empty parking lot at the base of the mountain. “Here we are,” he told the others. They looked at each other expectantly.

“Where exactly,” asked Lydia, “is here?”

“This is what we’re doing tonight. Just a little walk in the woods—it’s totally worth it.”

“Worth it, huh?”

“Worth it.”

“Okay,” said Matt. “Let’s go.”

The students began to make their way up the mountain trail and disappeared into the forest.

* * *

After a while—more than a while—it became apparent that they were lost. Nathan wasn’t sure how long they had been walking, but he knew they should have reached the overlook by now. The trail he’d climbed so often was harder to make out without his father leading the way. Beyond the city, the mountain’s darkness was heavier and more imposing. He wished he’d brought a real flashlight instead of relying on the app on his phone.

“Getting close?” asked Lydia.

“Uh-huh,” Nathan mumbled, more an acknowledgement of her question than an answer in the affirmative.

He wondered how this had happened. He knew the mountain well, came to it more than once a year, and there were only four of them walking up it, not a huge group that had gotten strung out. His father had never seemed even the slightest bit focused on where they were going, just letting his legs direct them up the mountain while they chatted. Was getting to the top harder than he’d realized? Did his dad have a secret route that Nathan didn’t know about?

He noticed the path thinning, more and more overgrown by the rhododendron and briars that survived at this height on the mountain. And then, without warning or fanfare, the trail disappeared altogether. Nathan stopped; the others bunched up in a sudden halt behind him. He slowly aimed his phone from left to right, looking for anything that could reasonably be considered a trail in the middle of the woods. He reached the end of his field of vision and

continued turning to the right, slowly spinning until his eyes reached his three friends. Nathan said nothing, but the others knew exactly what he was thinking and what that meant.

“Now what?” asked Matt.

No one answered.

Each of the four students peered hesitantly over their shoulders, as if they were looking for a big sign or a neon arrow. Finding nothing, they returned to center and locked eyes, still not speaking. In the uncomfortableness of it all, Eleanor lifted her chin and looked to the sky. The corners of her lips curved upward slightly. The others followed her gaze.

“The stars,” she said, “are wondrous out here.”

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They started to retrace their steps, grumbly despite Eleanor’s astral appreciation. All of the students had their phone lights on now, but the four lights didn’t combine to show the way much better than one had. They kept turning the beams to the side, searching along the trail for a clue, except for Nathan, who had opened the map on his phone and was hoping to figure out where exactly on the mountain they were from its GPS.

“Clearly we made a wrong turn,” said Matt, as if figuring this out was the key to getting them back on track.

“Or we missed a turn,” added Lydia.

“Kinda the same thing,” muttered Matt.

“I’m just saying I don’t think we’re looking for a big fork in the trail. It won’t be that obvious.”

“Well, of course not! Nothing is obvious out here in the dark. I’m not an idiot.”

“I didn’t say you were an idiot, I just—”

“You just wanted to correct me for no reason, right?” Matt and Lydia glared at each other, neither one wanting to back down even though neither wanted to fight.

“This GPS isn’t working at all,” added Nathan, mostly to himself.

Lydia turned from Matt to Nathan. “We’re not on any roads. There’s not exactly a cell tower on top of this mountain.”

“I can’t believe we’re out here in the cold,” Matt vented at Nathan. “And after eating at El Faro! You could have at least warned me not to order the *burrito grande*. That’s not hiking food!”

Nathan, oblivious to Matt, sat down on a tree stump and stared at his phone, silently willing it to locate him more precisely or to show the trail they were supposed to be on. Matt, still complaining to no one in particular, eventually quit saying actual words and just murmured instead. He snapped a branch off a dead maple and began breaking it into smaller pieces, throwing the bits into the woods and listening as they clunked against trees and rocks. Lydia aimed her light along the path they’d been walking, the path that would take them back to the beginning.

“Look,” she said, “the trail we came in on is here. We know it goes back to the car. Let’s just take it back and go get some hot chocolate or something.” She started back that way, pointing her phone down the path. Matt followed, continuing to snap sticks and throw the pieces into the forest. Nathan remained seated on the stump, glued to his phone. Eleanor glanced at the other two, then turned back to Nathan.

“What were we going to see?” asked Eleanor.

Nathan looked up from his phone. “Huh?”

“When we got to the end of the trail, what were we going to see?”

“Oh. It’s...I can’t even quite describe it. It’s a view of the city, but it’s more than that. It’s just...it’s just really beautiful,” he said feebly.

Eleanor dragged her foot through the dirt of the trail, drawing in the dust with her toes. “I’d like to see that,” she said.

Nathan sighed. He saw Lydia and Matt and their lights a few yards down the trail, Eleanor standing in front of him lit up by her phone, and the glow coming from his own hands. It looked so pitiful next to the cityscape he’d hoped to show them tonight.

A slow half-smile of comprehension crept over his face. “We’ve been doing this wrong,” he called out to the others. “Turn off your phones.”

“What?”

“Turn them off—all the way off.” Nathan powered his down. Eleanor quickly followed. Then Lydia, unsure but acquiescent. Finally Matt, disgusted and frustrated.

“Now, look,” said Nathan. “Where is the light?”

The foursome turned in slow circles. They eventually all stopped, facing the west. A glow came up over the horizon, slightly, almost as if the sun hadn’t quite dropped yet even though they knew it had set hours ago. “There. That way,” said Lydia, pointing.

“Then that’s the way we go.”

Lydia pulled her phone out to turn it back on, but Nathan stopped her. “No phones. Just us,” he said.

He began making his way through the forest, grateful it was thin at this altitude. The other four followed him through the brush. At times, they’d end up on a deer trail, or maybe on a path cleared by humans, but they didn’t seem to care when that happened. They’d still leave the trail and wander back into deep piles of leaves if that’s where Nathan took them. Nathan kept his eyes on the soft glow in the distance, leading the group through the trees. They walked silently.

Nathan felt a surge of confidence. He knew he was moving in the right direction, felt energized by the realization that the night might not be lost after all. The others picked up on his excitement as well. The frustration melted—slightly—into a sense of purpose and anticipation, even though the group was still on edge. After about twenty minutes, Nathan came to a stop and looked up.

“Up there,” said Nathan, pointing. His friends’ eyes followed his arm up the side of the mountain about twenty feet. “That’s where we’re supposed to be.”

“Where the rock juts out a little?” asked Eleanor.

“Yes. That’s where the trail is supposed to go.”

“Can we get there from here?”

Matt wasn’t waiting for an answer. He’d already started clawing through the brush, branches snapping as he trampled the bushes and grappled for handholds. The others followed him quickly, relying on their ears to know where he was blazing a trail and shielding their eyes from the leaves and limbs that flew up in their faces. The bark and the rocks scraped their skin, all four earning their share of cuts and scrapes.

Soon, the foursome found itself just under the overlook, surrounded by trees and shrubs on three sides and a rock wall on the fourth. The moon shone down on the cliff above them, spotlighting their destination as if it were in a play.

“I’m getting up there,” Matt snorted determinedly. He took three steps back, then two leaps forward and planted his feet with a mighty grunt. He vaulted as high as he could in the winter night, his lanky frame stretched out and his fingers scratching the dark sky in search of something solid. They found rock, just barely, and he clung to it with all that he had. Unfortunately, the hold was so slight that he couldn’t get enough strength on it to pull himself up, and he dangled off the mountainside in the night.

“Help him!” shouted Nathan, and the three on the ground jumped forward and grabbed hold of Matt’s legs and torso, trying to lift him higher. The lack of coordination, however, doomed the effort. Eleanor pushed as Nathan pulled, and Lydia discovered her hands were full of Matt’s shirttail but not much else. Matt’s eyes grew wider as he felt his grip slipping, the sound of ripping fabric punctuated the night, and soon all four of the students were in a dirty, sweaty pile among the mountain laurel.

Nobody moved. Nobody spoke.

Then Matt started laughing, and the others followed suit, and they all picked themselves up. Lydia felt her hand clutched tight around a scrap of cotton and was especially grateful for the laughter.

“Try that again?” asked Matt.

This time, Nathan leaned up against the rock and offered a more traditional boost. Matt used the girls for balance and climbed up on Nathan’s bent leg. He found a hold on the rock above and used it to pull up, still climbing Nathan as he went. When Matt got his feet set on Nathan’s shoulders, Nathan stood up straight, boosting Matt another foot or so closer to the target.

“Oof,” said Nathan. “Hey, Buddy?”

“Yeah?” called down Matt.

“I’m sorry I didn’t warn you off the *burrito grande* too.”

“Payback,” concluded Lydia, grinning.

Matt pulled his body up the rocks, stretching his arms out far. He found a tree root and grabbed onto it tightly, then moved his foot around to a crack in the rocks. He felt his waist come over the edge of the overlook, and he knew at that point he wouldn’t be going back down

among the brush. Matt pulled his body up and over. He rose in the moonlight and brushed himself off.

“Oh, wow,” he whispered.

The trio below heard his words drift off over the treetops above them. Nathan smiled knowingly. He motioned to Lydia, who took his hand and climbed up his body similarly to how Matt had.

“Little help here?” she called upward. Matt reached his hand down and locked arms with her. Nathan pushed, Matt pulled, and Lydia scrambled up the cliff.

“Your turn,” Nathan said to Eleanor, and she followed the same route.

When Eleanor disappeared from his shoulders, he suddenly felt very alone. He could hear his friends above him, but they sounded like they were much further away than they actually were. With his friends gone, the mountain’s darkness was upon him again, to the point that he wasn’t even quite sure what was mountain and what was sky. He blinked rapidly three times to make sure his eyes were open.

In the darkness, he became more aware of himself, of his own body and spirit. He breathed in deeply, held the breath in his lungs for a moment, and then let the air out slowly. Visions of his father, the rest of his family, his friends from high school, and his other friends from college glided across his mind, or across the darkness—again, the line between what was before him and what was only before his mind blurred. He saw the ghosts of people from his life who had never met interacting—telling jokes and laughing, sharing meals together, dancing. It felt like a dream, the kind of dream that is unreal but undeniably powerful in its perfection.

Suddenly it all vanished as Matt’s face, glowing with moonlight, jutted out from the side of the overhang. “Ready to try this?” he asked.

Nathan nodded. He watched as Matt lowered the top half of his body back over the cliff, face first, arms pointed downward as if he were frozen in mid-dive. Above, the girls each clamped down on one of Matt’s legs, anchoring him to the side of the mountain. Just as Matt had earlier, Nathan took three steps back, then bounded forward and leapt with all that he had. He was shorter and less athletic than Matt...but he wanted it badly.

The boys’ right arms locked tight, each one’s hand clutching the other’s forearm. As soon as they caught, Nathan reached his left arm up and across; Matt searched for Nathan’s hand with his own. They found each other. With the grip doubled, Matt told the girls to pull, and they used him as a human towrope, dragging him across the mountain, rocks and dirt smearing his face and hair. Soon Nathan reached his own handhold and foothold and hoisted himself the rest of the way.

The foursome scrambled up and looked at each other in the moonlight. They were covered in twigs and leaves, dirt and scrapes, Matt double or triple everyone else. They collapsed onto each other in a hug, clinging tighter to each other than they had as they climbed. Eleanor vibrated up and down with excitement.

The circle broke and peeled open—Eleanor, then Nathan, then Lydia, then Matt in a row on the edge of the overhang. The four students looked out and took in the entire city of light below.

The lights twinkled and danced, moving excitedly throughout the town. All of the lights seemed to come together somehow, as if they had been put up by the same person. It looked like a miniature village, the kind in department store windows at Christmas. Cars moved up and down the roads with their headlights and brake lights blinking amber and white. Houses, decorated for Christmas, added more colors and designs—the red of a Santa Claus here, the green of a Grinch there. Likewise, churches spotlighted nativity sets, presumptively showing the holy family, but from this distance, only the lights themselves mattered. From this distance, the colors didn't seem to belong to individual images but instead were part of a huge collage that told a bigger story. The stars above the cityscape added their own light, but the city itself was the show. The people's collective joy of Christmas radiated upward. Even from the mountaintop miles away, the town felt alive with a light that came from far beyond the bulbs and sockets in its buildings.

“The view from here on a summer day isn't bad,” said Nathan softly, “but it's nothing like this. This makes Christmas real to me.”

The friends stood on the cliff bathed in moonlight, arms around each other. No one spoke, taking in the view and trying as hard they could to chisel the moment deep in their memories. The three newcomers smiled broadly. Nathan, while satisfied, exuded a deeper kind of contentment. The city below beamed its light at them, and the foursome on the mountainside glowed back.