

Upfront

This both happened in real life and is an extended metaphor.

As they were readying for a hike, the rain came. Not light rain, but a soaking down-pour.

The trail would be a DIY affair; there was no marked route nearby. A waterfall spewed from a crack at the top of the mountain, providing a destination. A remote road ran beside the base of the upslope; there might be a good place to enter the forest somewhere along its edges. From their vantage, the landscape was dominated by sheets of smooth rock. It would be slippery, but there were patches of green in between the cold grey. The only way to reach the road was by small, inflatable boat. They couldn't see a dock, but a slab of concrete at the water's edge seemed a logical place to tie up.

One wanted to go; one was ambivalent, at best. They would be moving in a few hours and likely never see this place again. The weather was wildly unpredictable. Later, it might clear; but it very well might not.

"Come on, let's go," implored the eager one.

The other responded with an unsure silent stare.

"It's now or never," the first one said again.

No reply.

"Why wouldn't we?!" the keen one asked, mostly rhetorically.

The other one stood quiet and firm.

"I promise it's doable, and we'll turn around if it's not."

The hesitant one broke eye contact to search the distance, as though the answer was hidden beneath the soggy pines.

"I would never take you somewhere you aren't capable of going," said the one who kept saying things. "Invariably, you do the stuff you tell yourself you can't."

Wait for a window that would never open, or seize this once-in-a-lifetime moment now? The choice was obvious, thought the zealous one, cautiously confident the other would fall in line.

"Okay, let's go," said the previously silent one. And then, with a change in tone from conciliatory to regretful, "Are you sure it'll be okay?"

"Yes...definitely."

"Should I change into waterproof pants or is water-resistant good enough? How will we find our way back?"

The enthusiast said, "'Waterproof' isn't really a thing. It's wet...you'll get wet, but it'll be fine." The second question remained unaddressed.

Another spell of conspicuous silence occupied a noticeably lengthy pause.

The one who was slowly warming to the hike idea said, "Okay," and yanked closed a zipper on a Gore-Tex shell.

The narrow road rounded a bend, slowly revealing another long, unbroken stretch of itself with no obvious entry into the dense woods. The mountain's top drew a line across the sky opposite the stretch of sea at its feet. The pair of hikers walked between the two, conscious that these markers indicating 'up' and 'down' would be their only navigational aids.

Suddenly, a gravel spur jutted left and up. Among the many shades of green, a few brushstrokes of apple red hinted at possibility. Possibility realized in a few minutes as an abandoned barn. The couple proceeded carefully to it, and then past it, through a meadow where sheep once grazed.

Each footfall yielded a different result. Sometimes, they sunk into mud more than ankle deep. Occasionally, the soggy sod provided surprisingly sturdy support. They slipped helplessly on the rocks. But upward

they pushed until they connected with a cascading stream.

The one who had previously been convinced to come along made a reasonable point. "We forgot water." It was true.

The other said, "This brook is a pure as it gets." And then, with confidence if not facts, "The moss and dirt are natural filters...it's completely pure."

Even if this were wrong, the drink proved delicious. They fervently scooped gulps to their mouths.

The climb was tricky. More than once, they retraced footsteps to find a way forward after an impasse. They crossed the stream a few times without the convenience of a bridge. It was 55 degrees and the water matched the air, but exertion kept them warm.

They were sure the small mountain had a top; they remembered seeing it from the boat. Keep ascending...that was the dominant thought...until the only available next step was down.

It's impossible to explain with words what they saw. It was unlike anything they encountered before or since. Trees coated with thick, lime green life. Blankets of ferns in brilliant gold. Berries, both blue and red. Fungi like an illustration from a fairy tale. A lone grouse rustled from its sleep.

And then the forest yielded to a bald peak.

The calculus was simple: The stream must run to the bay; follow it down from the summit and you'd get where you were supposed to be. Execution was more challenging than theory. The descent more treacherous than the climb, especially on tired legs.

They made it. Up and down. And their tender was visible, if not right where they wished it to be. They were sopping, safe, and supremely satisfied. As usual, the reward more than compensated for the risk.

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