

Into the Silence (fiction)
Annah Gerber

It was silence that beckoned to me, silence that I craved after five years of the ceaseless, pointless bombardment of war. Four years I wandered the earth, a pathless wanderer in search of a corner where I could heal my wounds and find solace amongst the silence.

Arriving in New Zealand in the summer of 1949 I reached the small village of Mt Cook and began to climb again, as I had in my younger days. High above everything I immersed myself in the beauty and pure simplicity of climbing. I felt at peace there, freed from the memories that tried to intrude on my waking consciousness. Climbing filled me with a single-minded intensity I pursued to reject the nightmares of war that held me trapped in a mental merry-go-round.

I hobbled into the lobby of the Hermitage after having returned from a solo trip over the Fitzgerald Pass earlier that afternoon. The sun was streaming through the crystalline windows onto the backs of a few slightly scruffy, tall and gangly looking fellows who were holding the bar upright. I sat down next to them and ordered a single malt from the barman as they continued their conversation next to me.

“Not a bad route for a bit of a challenge eh George?”

“Interesting Ed, yes... but... all three peaks in one day might be a stretch.”

“Ah well, only one way to find out...”

I realised that the pair were climbers planning their next excursion. They looked fairly hardy and were drinking a nice drop of Laphroaig so I thought they may be worth quizzing.

“Excuse me...?” I said.

The taller of the two looked over and gave me a friendly nod as he raised a bushy brow in reply.

“I couldn’t help but overhear and was wondering if you were looking for anyone else on a trip? I’m in town for a while climbing you see...”

I trailed off, realising I sounded a little stilted but the informality of ‘kiwi’ speak was still taking some adjustment.

“Well, we are pretty well sorted mate but I know another chap, Martin, whose looking for a partner mad enough to attempt the East Face of Sefton if you’ve done some climbing. My name’s Ed by the way, and this is George” He smiled broadly as he extended a big calloused hand in greeting.

“A pleasure Ed, George. My name is Iain” I replied smiling in return, caught unawares by the infectious nature of his grin

“Looks as though you chaps are getting out and about a fair bit?”

“We’re just making the most of it, love going for a bit of a wander,” said Ed with a twinkle in his eye. He raised his glass in a salute, casually drained the dregs and strolled out of the bar. I wasn’t to see him again but four years later he was on the front page of every paper in the world having given the Queen her most unique of coronation gifts.

I located Martin the next morning and with a clear weather window we decided to head in that afternoon to bivvy high up the mountain. It was like an arranged marriage of yesteryear, meeting just before embarking on an arduous journey. For me that was part of the challenge. The fact that Martin turned out to be German only seemed coincidental at the time. I was focussed on the climb and gave it no further thought until we were settled in our bivvy that night.

“You are British?” Martin asked.

“Yes”

“And the war, you fought?”

“Yes”

His succinct questioning was already too close to the bone and my monosyllabic replies were designed to dissuade. I was no match for his Teutonic determination.

“Where?”

“I flew with the RAF, Lancasters.”

“And I the Messerschmidt ME110 with the Luftwaffe, a better all rounder I think. My family lived in Hamburg. I came home to nothing. There is nothing there still.”

Martin talked in a detached manner. It was as though there was a cathartic need for him to tell me of this curious connection we shared as pilots. I chose not to engage, chose not to know, chose avoidance, chose not to respond.

There was a whirlwind of thoughts floating between Martin and myself but neither of us voiced them. They remained unspoken, hanging like gossamer threads under the blade of a guillotine that was only a whisper away from falling. I felt a sense of animosity emanating from him and could barely refrain from letting all my anger out at him in a torrent. I closed my eyes, knowing that silence was my friend and that to broach the unspoken would lead us both down a dangerous path.

Arising at one for an alpine start the climbing gods revealed pristine night with a full moon rising in the east and the stars guiding the way far above. Their benign presence was soothing as our boots crunched across the snow with a steady rhythm. I felt a sense of peace begin to steal over me as it so often did in the presence of the mountains. I was in the lead and could ignore Martin’s presence behind me while we moved smoothly across the glacier to the steeper slopes. Attaining the summit was

serene and I felt enervated, removed from the earthly body that held me captive to memories. In that moment the silence I sought was upon me and Martin shared it.

We began our descent shortly thereafter, aware that we needed to get down before the slopes softened too much. Arriving at the crux we down climbed gingerly. Ice was beginning to fall with greater frequency and the danger was apparent. Martin's skill was equal to my own but his fitness was greater and I found myself straining to keep up with him.

With a feeling of relief the glacier begin to take shape beneath our feet. Martin took the lead and I followed behind with the rope coiled carefully around my shoulders. As I walked I began to think about the man whose steps I trod in. He had bombed London; there was a chance that his had been the fateful thumb that released the bomb that tore my newborn son's limbs from his body. Even the presence of peaks still to be climbed could not quell my growing disquiet and simmering anger. My wandering mind was drawing the guillotine of unspoken thoughts ever closer.

The rope jerked in my hands and I fell forwards, desperately jamming my axe into the soft surface to find purchase. My knee twisted viciously before I was able to halt the impact. I scrambled into an anchored position and felt weakness begin to steal over my body as the pressure fell on one leg and the pain intensified. I looked for Martin and with a sinking feeling saw the rope leading a snake's tail into the gaping maw of a crevasse whose depths melded from blue to black. The ice cliffs above were still intent on making life difficult for anyone who decided to remain sedentary. Although our dalliance was not by choice the mountain didn't care, we were in imminent danger. I couldn't lift Martin out on my own with a twisted knee and from the sounds he was making the pain was too great for him to prussik out. I found myself in the scenario that every mountaineer hopes will never eventuate. What was stronger I asked myself: the humanity and common bond of the alpinist, or the flame of hatred I held sheltered for the man whose existence represented the destruction of my family?

"I cannot climb out Iain," Martin spoke with teeth gritted "My leg is fractured, perhaps my wrist also. You must go, call for help."

I looked up to the distant hills and saw dark clouds billowing over the divide. I knew that they heralded a storm coming in swiftly, there was no time to go for help. The knife that hung on my belt held my gaze as the pain in my knee intensified. The choice was mine, and mine alone. Did I cut the rope and save myself, or attempt to get Martin out and risk my own life? The unspoken thought was at the forefront of my mind; he had bombed my home and my family was dead. Was I really a better man?

I descended into the silence as my aesthetic voyage of self-discovery came in contact with the harshness of life. Martin was a part of the silence that my soul needed to find solace. Only with balance could I find peace. My anger drained away with the realisation that we were both the same man. Two halves pitted against the whole, both products of man's inhumanity to man, both causes of it. I hitched the rope around the haft of the axe and put in an anchor as I crawled to the lip of the crevasse with a determination for redemption.

The small print

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