

I walk up this endless mountain of ice without complaining. I try not to think about the heavy pack digging into my shoulders. I also try not to think about how thirsty I am, how difficult it is to catch my breath, how I feel like throwing up and how my eyes burn from the blinding light reflecting off the snow. I walk without speaking; I only tell myself that I will reach the summit just like the others. I try to keep up with my elders in order to prove to them that they were right to take me along. I carried on so much—insisting that I was strong and hardy enough—that they finally gave in and took me along with them. We have now been walking for three days. Today we will finally reach the summit—now is not the time to give up. To find the last bit of strength I need for the climb, I once again tell myself my favourite story, the one that got me this far.

I am the youngest of Mr de Saussure's porters. I grew up in 'Chamouni', in the valley. The great scientist from Geneva has been coming here for years with his instruments. Before I was even born he was already talking about going to the summit of the cursed mountain. For that is what we call it around here, the 'cursed mountain'. But the scientist prefers to call it 'Mont Blanc'. He had offered a generous reward to whoever would help him to find the route to the summit. But years went by and no one managed to find the route. It was only last summer that the summit was reached for the first time. No one was brave enough to venture into the icy landscape for fear of being overcome by the sleep that can take hold of you at such heights—the sleep that means death is near. To stay alive, I tell myself this story, for I need to keep my mind as active as my body. It is well known that those who venture onto the mountain high above the meadows face all sorts of dangers. My grandfather and uncle died in a rock fall while out hunting chamois. And my older cousin once had a close call, too. He had gone out to look for the beautiful crystals you find in the cracks between the rocks so that he could sell them to wealthy foreigners. A snowstorm took him by surprise, but luckily he managed to find his way home. He knows how to outsmart the mountain and its dangers, and he is a member of this great expedition today. He is in charge of carrying the ladders and deciding with the others where they should be placed when crossing crevasses. He also carries the long poles that Mr de Saussure holds on to during particularly difficult sections of the climb. My cousin was the one who convinced the others to let me come along on the expedition. So, here I am—proud to serve as one of Mr de Saussure's 18 porters. The scientist's perseverance was great enough to overcome all of our fears, so it is also for him that I am determined to go all the way to the summit. But what is he looking for up there, this man who has come from Geneva? He often says that 'the mountain is nature's laboratory'. As I don't understand what he means by that, I try to observe everything he does. Each time we stop, while we are busy catching our breath, he takes careful notes of what he sees around him in a small notebook, and he copies down the numbers he reads on his instruments. Are they telling him things we can't see with our eyes?

Mr de Saussure even invented his own instruments, which he will use for the first time today. I noticed one of them right away—one that I liked in particular. It is very different from the others. Most of the scientist's instruments are made of wood, metal or glass. They are packed away like large, heavy jewels in their velvet-lined travel cases. But this one is as light as a feather and is wrapped in fine paper. As we were leaving, my cousin's glance met mine and he instantly understood what had happened. The scientist had put the instrument in my pack. I must take care not to lose my balance despite the dizziness and nausea. Most importantly, I mustn't fall; I mustn't slip. If the contents of my pack were to spill out onto the snow, the instrument would be permanently ruined.

I look up and I see that the first of 20 men in our long line have almost reached the summit. My cousin gestures to me from afar—my heart beats faster at the thought of joining him up there. But I must remain calm and stay focused on my thoughts. I only hope that Mr de Saussure still has enough strength for the final stage of the adventure he has been awaiting for so long! Once he gets to the summit, he will still have to set up his instruments and take his measurements. And I will have to be patient until he takes out my favourite—the one I am carrying in my pack. Unlike the other instruments, which were built by craftsmen in Geneva, London and Paris, Mr de Saussure invented and even built this one himself. Maybe that is why he wrapped it so delicately, almost lovingly. He gave another instrument of the same type to his eldest son, instructing him to use it in 'Chamouni' at the same time as him: 'at solar noon', he said (along with other things I didn't understand). So, I have to keep a clear head up at the top and watch Mr de Saussure closely to see what he does. For it is by observing the scientist at work that I will learn how to use the one I plan to build for myself. And build one I will! I also plan to build a second one for my cousin the same as the first. I must reach the summit as quickly as I can so that I can talk to the great man about my idea. I will tell him that to use his instrument, all you need is a good pair of eyes and a curious mind—you don't need to be a scholar.

The moment has finally come. Above the sparkling ridge of ice, the sky is blue—almost black, in fact. It is this

darkest of blues that has scared off people from the valley who have tried to find the route to the top—they believed that it was caused by the demons of the cursed mountain. But this sky doesn't scare me. I have faith. After all, I am still alive and overjoyed to have made it all this way! I am also glad to know that as soon as I return to the valley, I too will use Mr de Saussure's cyanometer to measure the blue of the sky—just as the great man himself will do for the very first time here today.

Anne Fauche

