



New Boots

by Tim Jones



“Why me?” Charlie muttered to himself. “Why me, why me, why me?”

“Waimea? We’re nowhere near Waimea,” Mr Ngaia said. “You should have studied the map, Charlie. You’re way out.”

“I have a map!” said Jason.

Of course he did, Charlie thought. Too-eager Jason had brought everything. His pack was almost as big as him. It was making him pant with every step.

Charlie’s own pack was fine, but he was hungry, and his new boots pinched. Plus his mates were way ahead, having a great time – and here he was stuck at the back with Mr Ngaia and the new kid. Charlie had plans to race Kaine and Isaiah to the hut. At this rate, he was going to be last.

Charlie turned to Mr Ngaia. “I’ve kept Jason company all the way. Can I catch up with the others now?”

Mr Ngaia shook his head. “Remember the Scout law. Be positive. Accept challenges ... who knows the rest?”

“I should,” Jason said. “Accept challenges if they’re not too hard – maybe?”

Charlie snorted. “Accept challenges with courage,” he recited. “Be a friend to all.”

“Exactly,” said Mr Ngaia. “And your challenge, Charlie, is to stay with Jason all the way to the hut.”

“But *you’re* here.”

“My job is to bring up the rear. Your job is to stay with Jason.”

They walked on in frosty silence. Far above, the sun was setting over the Alps, tinting the snowy peaks a soft pink. Kea wheeled high above the fringes of the forest. The air was cool and smelt of dirt and leaves. Charlie couldn’t enjoy any of it.

Mr Ngaia called for a stop. While they rested, he tried to break the ice. “So, Jason,” he said. “Why did you join Scouts?”

To ruin my life, Charlie thought.

“Dad,” said Jason. “He reckons I read too much.”

“And how about you, Charlie?”

“Dad too,” said Charlie.

Mum let Charlie play video games after he’d done his homework, but his dad – who had him at weekends – was forever dragging him outside to do stuff. “She’s letting you go soft,” he told Charlie. “I knew this would happen.”

It was his dad who contacted the local Scout troop. Charlie still remembered the two huge rows his parents had about it. His mum didn’t have time to take him, and his dad never helped out during the week.

“It’ll be dark soon,” Mr Ngaia said. “Let’s get going.”

“OK!” said Jason. But when he tried to get his pack on his shoulders, he couldn’t do it. “It’s too heavy!” he wailed.

“What have you got in there?” asked Mr Ngaia. “Let’s take a look.”

There was a camp stove and a gas canister. A packet of chocolate biscuits. A tent.

“A tent?” demanded Charlie.

“Can’t you read? The notice said we were staying in a hut.”

“I know,” said Jason, “but Mum thought it might come in handy.”

Mr Ngaia took the tent, stuffing it with difficulty into his own pack. Charlie took the stove and the gas and Jason’s three pairs of rolled-up socks. By the time they started off, it was getting dark. Charlie was glad of Mr Ngaia’s powerful torch.

They walked on, Charlie’s boots pinching harder with the added weight. He hadn’t wanted to wear them. He didn’t want blisters. But Dad insisted. “I didn’t pay top dollar so you could leave them behind. You need to harden up, Charlie.”



Finally, they saw the hut, silhouetted against the last of the light. Smoke rose from the chimney. Light poured from the windows. Somewhere in the distance, a kea squawked, mocking them.

Maria spotted their footsore party first. “Man, what happened to you guys?” she asked.

“Jason’s pack did,” replied Charlie. He pulled off his boots and threw them on the verandah. Then, at last, he went inside.



After lights-out, Charlie lay next to Jason. He was tired, sore, and resentful. All the good bunks – the ones on top next to Charlie’s mates – had been taken. He listened to the sounds around him: Maria and Alison whispering, Isaiah telling Kaine a ghost story that Charlie couldn’t hear properly. Then Jason started snoring – the final straw. Charlie rolled over and punched him on the arm.

“Why did you hit me?” came Jason’s quavering voice.

“You need to harden up,” said Charlie. “And if you can’t do that, at least shut up.”

“Shut up yourself,” said Jason.

After that, silence.

Charlie woke suddenly. Faint morning light filtered through the windows. He heard a noise: thump, roll, bang. A pause. Then thump, roll, bang again. The thump and the roll came from the roof. The bang was right outside the door.

And was there something else? A squawk? Laughter?

Jason was awake, too, and he looked frightened. "What is it?" he whispered.

"You'll be too chicken to find out," Charlie said, "but I'm not." As he clambered out of the bunk, the noise came again. This time it was duplicated: two thumps in succession, then the sound of two objects rolling heavily down the roof. One stopped, while the other kept on rolling before crashing to the ground.

Another squawk. Something scabbled on the roof, and the second object completed its roll-and-crash mission. Charlie threw the door open, and Mr Ngaia followed. The other Scouts trailed out to see what was going on.

They were confronted by birds, at least half a dozen of them.

Big, strong, brightly coloured kea. And there, on the ground between them –

"My boots!" Charlie cried.

Before he could react, one of the kea grasped the right boot in its powerful claws. With a vigorous flap, it flew up and dropped the boot onto the hut roof. It rolled down the steep slope, crashing right at Charlie's feet.

It was only then that he realised two of the other kea were tearing long, V-shaped strips from his other boot's lining. Even the tough, outside leather was suffering.

"No!" Charlie wailed. He rushed at the birds, and they flapped and squawked their way into the air, laughing. They wheeled once above the hut before disappearing towards the mountains.

Charlie examined his new boots, now ruined. What would his dad say? What would his dad do? He felt tears prick at his eyes.

"Didn't you hear me say not to leave valuables on the porch?" asked Mr Ngaia. But Charlie had been too busy feeling furious with Jason to pay attention.



“Why me?” Charlie muttered to himself as he stumbled on another rock. “Why me, why me, why me?”

At least this suck tramp was almost over. They were back at the river flats. He could see the line of trees that edged the car park at the end of the road. But here he was, miles behind the others, stuck with Mr Ngaia – and Jason, of course. Charlie was limping. His boots squeaked with every step. He couldn’t wait to swap them for the trainers he’d left in the car.

“I bet you’re glad I had that duct tape,” said Jason for the tenth time.

After the kea, Charlie had thought things couldn’t get any worse, but they did. It was Jason who’d saved him ... Jason’s mum who’d packed a roll of duct tape in case Jason’s tent got ripped ... Jason who’d tipped the contents of his pack onto the floor to find it.

It was Jason who’d taped Charlie’s boots up; Jason who’d lapped up the attention for saving the day. And now Jason walked beside Charlie as if they were best mates.

“Hey, Charlie. Charlie!”

“Yes,” Charlie said wearily.

“It was good I had a pocket knife too. That duct tape wouldn’t have been much use without it, eh?”

“Jason,” said Mr Ngaia. “I think Charlie’s said thank you enough times already.”

“Oh. OK, then,” said Jason.

For a few minutes, there was peace. The only sounds were Charlie’s squeaking boots, the occasional piping of birds, the chuckling of the river in its gravel bed ...

“I’m looking forward to the drive back,” Jason said.

Charlie let that one pass. He could imagine all too well what the drive back would be like: three hours of teasing from Isaiah and Kaine. When that was over, there would be an evening spent waiting for his father’s inevitable question.

“So how were the new boots?”



illustrations by Andrew Burdan

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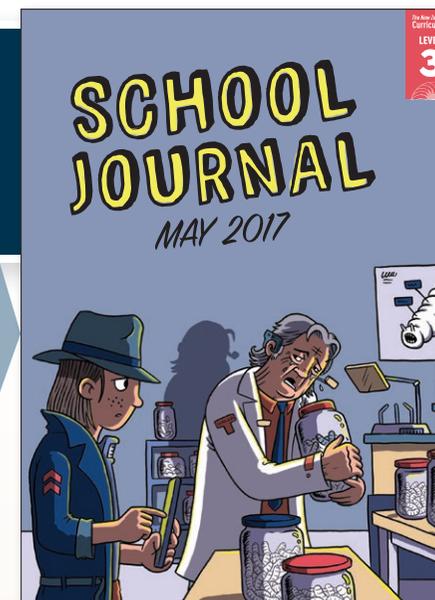
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