



The Longest Walk

by Rebekah White

It's still dark when Elizabeth wakes up. She hears the sounds of people sleeping: long breaths and sighs. Her mum, Jorinde, is pulling on a jumper. Chris, her dad, is stuffing gear into his pack. It's almost time to start walking. Careful to be quiet, Elizabeth finds her pack and carries it outside into the frozen air.

In front of the hut, there's a huge field of golden **tussock**. Mountains surround the field, and the sky is pale pink. Elizabeth runs down to the river to fill her water bottle. Her parents and brother join her. Johnny is six, and he's so sleepy his eyes are half-closed. Their plan is to walk, before breakfast, to the top of Poukirikiri/ Travers Saddle, high above the Nelson Lakes.



Stretching forever

The Rapsey family has been walking for exactly three months and one day. They're following a route called Te Araroa, which means "the long pathway". It's the longest track in the country, starting at Cape Rēinga at the top of Te Ika-a-Māui and finishing at Bluff, right at the bottom of Te Waipounamu.

Today the family is beginning one of the track's most difficult sections. They will cross two mountain passes in Nelson Lakes National Park. They're in a hurry because the forecast says rain, and they want to be over the first pass before it arrives.

When her parents first asked Elizabeth if she'd like to walk Te Araroa, she thought it would be fun. She'd done lots of tramping before. But it didn't start out as fun. On their second day, they walked 27 kilometres along Te Oneroa-a-Tōhē. The sand stretched forever in each direction. Elizabeth assumed they'd rest the next day. Instead they walked even further – another 30 kilometres.

CAPE RĒINGA



BLUFF

Tiny towns and red rocks

Te Araroa became easier after those first days – and more interesting. In Northland, the Rapseys walked through lots of tiny towns and rolling hills. Then they reached Tāmakimakaurau, with its tall buildings and suburban streets. After that came the farmland of Waikato and the ancient trees of Pureora, where Elizabeth and Johnny listened for the kōkako. They passed Mount Ngāuruhoe and Mount Tongariro, emerald-coloured lakes and red rocks. When they reached the Whanganui River, the track became water, so they hired a canoe and began to paddle.

Elizabeth makes sure the family walks every step of the way. One time, they got a ride along a busy section of the highway because someone said that would be safer. When they got out of the car, Elizabeth burst into tears. She'd wanted to walk the whole way. Then she and Johnny would set the record for being the youngest people to finish Te Araroa. So the next morning, they went back and walked the section they'd skipped.

Most nights, they camp in their tent. Sometimes they stay in tramping huts or houses. At the end of each day, Elizabeth and Johnny play: in a pine forest, or next to a creek, or in a hut. They wear the same clothes, and they wash in rivers or the sea. Occasionally they shower in a campground.



Night ninety?

Today, the track zigzags up to the saddle. The Rapseys climb until they reach a field of giant boulders. Some of them are split in half like apples, and Elizabeth scrambles into a gap. Up close, the boulder is covered in fine lines like a spiderweb turned to stone. There's a mountain shaped like a pyramid. Elizabeth checks the map: it's called Mount Travers.

From the saddle to the Sabine Valley is a long way down, but the forest shades the family from the sun. When the wind blows, tiny beech leaves glitter in the air all around. While they walk, Johnny tells the story of their trip. He likes to remember, in order, all the places they've stayed: the place where they played in the high grass, the campground, the caravan, the forest where there was no water and they had to scrape the mud from their legs before going to sleep. They're trying to decide which number night this one will be. Ninety or ninety-one?



Two lakes

The next morning, the sky is a clear, bright blue. They're camping beside Rotomairewhenua/the Blue Lake, which has some of the clearest freshwater in the world. The lake is 7 metres deep, but even if it were 70 metres, you'd still be able to see the bottom. Elizabeth watches a stone sink. The water looks like air with a colour.

It's time to tackle the second pass. They clamber up a steep wall of jumbled rocks. Small, bushy plants grow in the cracks. They have shiny leaves and twisted branches. Elizabeth notices the **flora** changing as she climbs. Higher up, plants are small; they look as if they're crouching against the wind.

Above the **moraine** there's a bigger lake. It's called Rotopōhueroa/ Lake Constance, and it shines like a sheet of metal. The track turns sharply and leads straight up. They disappear into the cloud.



Inside the cloud, it's very quiet. All sound is dulled except for Johnny's whistling. Elizabeth can hear him up ahead. He only stops when he's making calculations in his head. How many litres of milk can you make from a bag of milk powder? What's a hundred divided by six? Elizabeth concentrates on climbing the **scree** slope. The loose stones make it slow going. Sometimes, she slides part-way down after a step. Her boots dislodge stones that tumble down, down, down.

Johnny pauses for a moment and turns around. "It's a bit steep," he says. "Yep," says Dad.

Elizabeth gets on with it. Her legs don't ache any more. They used to, at the start, but now they've learnt to keep going all day. She dashes up the last bit of scree, and then she's there at the top. The clouds have cleared. On one side, she can see the two lakes. There's new country on the other. Elizabeth spots a stream. It might have some swimming holes. Just below her is a patch of clean white snow. She sprints down to it. Johnny's right behind.





Deep south

Walking in the South Island has been very different from the North. The open land is golden brown instead of green, and the forest is tall beech. There are fewer towns and people. In Southland, the family decides to break their record and walk 40 kilometres in one day.

The days and weeks pass until Elizabeth wakes in Invercargill with 25 kilometres to go. Then they'll have reached the bottom of New Zealand. It's been five months minus a day since they set off from Cape Rēinga. Last night was number 152.

They leave the city behind and cross an estuary and a train line, and then the track joins the highway. Walking beside a highway is the opposite of walking in the mountains. Elizabeth holds her mum's hand or her dad's, and they stay inside the white line that marks the edge of the road.



When a car is coming, they step down into the ditch to get as far away as possible. They brace themselves against the roar and slam of the wind as the car passes. Beside the highway, in the grass, there are hub-caps, squashed cans, empty cigarette packets, banana skins. There isn't anywhere to rest, to go for a swim, or to play games. In the hazy distance, they can see Bluff. The small town looks like it's floating.

Bluff

In the late afternoon, they reach a footpath. It's flat and smooth, luxury under Elizabeth's feet. Johnny flops down in the grass. He's tired. Across the road, containers are stacked like Lego at Bluff's port. There are only 3.2 kilometres left to walk in the whole of New Zealand, but Johnny won't get up. This drives Elizabeth crazy.

"If you come now, I'll let you get there first," she promises him.

He isn't paying attention. "I like the word Bluff," he says.

"Because it means we're almost there?" Dad asks.

The small houses in Bluff look over the ocean, towards Rakiura/Stewart Island and Antarctica. The day is fading. Elizabeth can sense the end and breaks into a run. Johnny dashes after her.

The road dips, and there's the Bluff signpost, pointing in every direction. Elizabeth reaches it first and swings around it. For a few moments, she's the youngest person to have walked the length of the country. Then Johnny catches up. Now he's the youngest.

"How many kilometres?" Mum asks, dropping her pack to the ground one last time. "Twenty something?"

Elizabeth scoffs. "Three thousand," she says.

Glossary

flora: the plants in a particular place

moraine: the rocks and other debris that a glacier leaves behind

scree: a lot of small, loose stones on the side of a mountain

tussock: a kind of grass that often grows in alpine places

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