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Gone Bush

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Gone Bush

The roaring of the Kohaihai river fills my ears as I stand motionless before it. I look down at my worn-out Merrell hiking boots, so warm and dry. They are caked with mud and sand, beaten down by dozens of miles of hiking, but oh, they are so wonderfully dry.

For now.

I stare at the churning, white-capped river as it crashes its way down to the Tasman sea. Half of the group has already crossed and is pointing at rocks that they intend for me to jump across in an endless effort to preserve my dry hiking boots. It's going to be a long four days on the Heaphy Track, and I dread the thought of having to do it all with water-logged boots.

I begin to slowly wind my way across the river, hopping from rock to rock, my heavy pack pitching my center of balance dangerously close to the raging river beneath me. I feel my feet slip from under me as someone shoves me feet first into the freezing torrent.

"Take your concrete pill love, can't be afraid to get your feet wet," says Maggie, our guide for the first day of our eighty-kilometer (fifty-mile) backpacking trek across the northern aspect of New Zealand's South Island. Maggie could best be described as pragmatic, from her plain-looking outdoor attire to her blatant disregard of my desire for dry feet. She has a presence that fills the room, and does not make nor accept any excuses: something I admire and respect. I shoot her the iciest look I can, hoping she can feel my frustration boring into the back of her head. I did not know it yet, but Maggie's no-nonsense attitude would soon teach me more about myself than I ever could have imagined. I stumble to the shore, my boots audibly sloshing, groaning as I realize that there is also about a tablespoon of sand that found its way into the top of my boots. But there is no time to change socks, or dump out my sandy boots. We have a long trip ahead of us.

We had just begun our backpacking trip across the breathtaking Heaphy Track, an eighty-kilometer long stretch of hiking (or as New Zealanders call it, tramping) track dominated by some of the most diverse plant life in the world. Every five miles brought a dramatic change in foliage, from towering Nikau palm forests, to windblown tussock plains, to lush beech canopies. With every moment, the scenery was changing. And so was I.

It was my third week in New Zealand at this point, and I had spent the first three weeks in awe of the incredible complexity of the country. I was lucky enough to see it through so many lenses, whether it be from the point of view of ecology, economics, politics, culture, or my own

personal point of view. I found myself captivated from the moment I landed; there was something magical about this country, something real. Something incredibly healing, and in the three weeks I had already been there, I had grown so much. I felt ready to attack the Heaphy Track, even though I had no idea what to expect.

We continued to tramp through the swaying palm forests, ending our hike with a much-needed stroll down the beach. We peeled off our wet hiking boots and socks and found ourselves sinking our toes into the sand, returning ourselves to the barefoot-walking roots of humanity as we strolled along the beach for the few final miles, our smiles reflecting our pure contentedness. The sand soothed my water-logged skin, and my shoulders relaxed as if my crushing pack were suddenly ten pounds lighter. I believe it was the simplistic quality of the experience that renewed our strength. When we invited ourselves to become one with nature, even just by walking barefoot, nature returned the favor and washed our spirits clean.

The next day, we stood in a circle as we prepared to depart for another long day of hiking. It was a beautiful day; the sun had just finished its ascent into the cloudless morning sky. As the infamous sandflies began to bite every inch of our exposed skin, the students all began to dance about in an effort to escape the biting flies. We were promptly reminded by Maggie to “take our concrete pills and sort it,” so we did our best to stay still as the tiny pests swarmed us. I found myself constantly wanting to prove my mettle to Maggie, so that she could see that I am stronger than I appear. I realize now that it was probably not Maggie that I wanted to prove myself to, but myself. I wanted to come away from this experience with a notable difference in my ability to conquer adversity. I took my metaphorical concrete pill, and stood motionless as the sandflies descended upon us.

We bowed our heads as Maggie recited a prayer in the language of the first group that arrived in New Zealand, the Maori. The prayer, which was different every time she recited it, acknowledged the most important aspects of our lives: the spirit world, our ancestors, our community, our family, our friends, and ourselves. Maggie asked for safety and health during our travels, requesting that we be protected after she parted ways with us later in the day.

I was reminded of a section of a traditional Maori prayer in which one acknowledges his or her forest, mountain, ocean, and river: the pieces of nature that make a person who he or she is. I thought of my forest that I grew up in, across the world in Oregon. I thought of my mountain, Mt. Hood, that loomed over me during my studies in Portland. I thought of my ocean,

the Pacific, where I learned to surf. And I thought of my river, the Molalla river, where I spent so much of my childhood, catching fish and swimming. With each of these places in the back of my mind, filling me with strength, I began to walk the twelve miles to our next stop.

Maggie parted ways with our group, saying she would be waiting for us in forty-eight hours when we reached the end of the Heaphy Track. Before she left, I asked her a few questions about the Maori prayer she had recited. She told me what each line meant, and explained the significance of the phrases. I began to wrestle with my pack, trying to retrieve my journal so that I could record her statements before they escaped my memory. She instructed me to keep walking, mumbling “you won’t forget.” Her statement had a (perhaps unintentional) force to it. It represented to me the respect and admiration that New Zealanders hold for the Maori, and the spiritual connections they have made with places such as the one I was currently tramping through.

We were told to stagger our departure times so that we could have the opportunity to walk in solitude for the next several miles. I set off into the palm forest, alone with my thoughts once again. I preferred walking this track alone; it finally gave me a chance to reflect on the life I had been living for the past twenty years, one that has moved so fast that I have had few chances to truly appreciate it. I smiled as the morning sun crept through the dense canopies, warming my skin. This was the perfect moment. All of my moments seemed to line up, connected by this thread of awareness that I was finally able to grasp at. I was walking, as if that’s all I had ever done, and all I ever need do for the rest of my days.

That’s really what we did on those four days: we walked. Walking, walking, walking, never arriving, never arriving. I whispered that to myself when the miles began to wear on my feet, my shoulders, my mind. I sang it in a little tune, distracting myself from the pain that inevitably seeped into my peaceful thoughts. At first, carrying all of my possessions in a pack on my back excited me; I thought of myself as a turtle, or a hermit crab, carrying my life on my back. But as the hours turned over into days, I felt my spirits dwindle. The pack began to feel more and more like a ball and chain, something I had to drag along with me. When we stopped for a rest (which we did only a handful of times each day) and I was able to toss my pack to the ground, I experienced a strange halting gate, as if my pack had become a part of my body. Without my pack, I had forgotten something as simple as walking.

During those four days I felt the true weight of our materialistic lives. As I packed for our trek I felt as if I were taking only a few of my possessions, even though I had come to New Zealand with what already felt like a bare minimum of items. I realized that I was carrying as few items as I could bear to live (somewhat) comfortably with, and yet their weight was still crushing. I thought of all of the “stuff” I owned, spread between my dorm room, my childhood home, the bus where we had left our luggage. If I were to put every material item I owned on my back, it would crush me to death. If the physical nature of these items was enough to destroy me, what about the emotional nature? I could feel the weight of our society’s materialism on my shoulders with each arduous step.

The miles fell away beneath our feet, and the sandy palm forest transitioned into a dense wall of beech trees. They towered above our heads as we ascended into the sky, where the land again flattened into desert-like tussock plains. On the final day, we descended back down through the thicket of green. My body had taken quite a beating, and my feet looked and felt as if they had been through a cheese grater due to the ragged blisters that covered nearly every inch of them. Every step was an explosion of agony, and I found myself faced with the most difficult challenge of the entire trip: my own mind. I became imprisoned by my thoughts, unable to focus on anything but the pain. I found myself contemplating the nature of pain, and realized it was my perception that was truly flawed in this situation. My body was sensing damaging stimuli and was sending me painful sensations so that I may escape further damage. I tried telling my body that I was aware of the damage, that I had done everything I could to protect my wounded feet with moleskin and tape, but that I needed to get off of this trail in order to be safe; this pain was actually doing me more harm than good. I said that to myself, repeated it in my head.

I distracted myself by thinking of everything I had accomplished up until this point, simply by putting one foot in front of the other. I had walked nearly fifty miles, and by the end of the day I would have completed the entire fifty-mile track. I had learned how to take my metaphorical concrete pill and ignore my discomfort and pain, and instead focus on the breathtaking beauty that was constantly surrounding me. And most of all, I had conquered myself. I no longer searched for the easiest pathway through rivers, I stomped straight across them. I realized that I was different now, bolder. More like Maggie: at ease in the mud and the rain and the cold of the track. The New Zealanders have a saying for someone who has abandoned the comforts of modern life for the wild - they say the person has “gone bush.” As I

crossed the final bridge, the end of my long journey within sight, I looked out over the raging river.

“I think I’ve officially gone bush.” I thought to myself. And then I kept walking.