

Flotsam

They drifted. The model boats floated – for now, at least – on hulls made of pages from The Dom. Post.

“You city folk haven’t a chance otherwise,” Dan, our guide, chuckled as he pulled the newspaper, as well as some tape, from his backpack. “I went into town just to buy this specially for you guys”. Tamara strode over to a nearby tree. She amputated a stick from its skeleton and retrieved one of the leaves littering the ground. The leaf was orange. The boats, which all looked pretty much the same since Tamara had the best idea so we had all just copied her, had masts of sticks and sails of leaves. But these were merely for show. Although there was wind, judging by how the plumes of wispy smoke from the fires we used earlier to heat our milos were tangled in knots, the boats were instead dragged downstream by the slow but steady current. I caught the periodic dripping of overhanging leaves weeping dew into the river, like the sound of a ticking clock which is always present but rarely audible. Drip, drip, drip. Pitter-patter.

“Gah,” Noah spat. Despite jostling the rest of us – even poor Priyanka! – to clamber over the rocks leading down to the river and place his boat on the water first, he could only watch as his ark drifted below the outstretched branches and drops began striking it, a meteor shower which pummelled the boat until the last glimpse of orange was drowned and the dripping sound of water hitting water resumed.

I caught Tamara concealing a smile – the glimmer in her hazel eyes gave it away – as Dan led us away from the river and we continued our walk through the bush. It was overcast but muggy. Out in front, Noah sauntered, kicking stones and, rangy, snapping the twigs which intruded into his reach. Tamara paced, side-stepping rocks and, lithe, skirting the naked trees which encroached on the track. However, Priyanka trailed behind even me. A pair of exotic orange bangles jangled on her arm. The ground was baked like clay in a furnace, and my footsteps thudded louder and louder. But the jangling of bangles from behind me faded, becoming quieter and quieter. Poor Priyanka.

“Hey Dan, I think we should stop for a moment.” I glanced back at Priyanka.

“What a surprise,” Noah sneered.

“Hey, it’s for Priyanka,” I countered.

“Nah, I call BS. Priyanka’s all good to keep going, aren’t ya?” Noah turned to Priyanka, who stared blankly and soldiered on. He wheeled away, in his mind vindicated – as always.

We continued our walk through the bush. Dan broke the silence.

“Guys, I can tell you’re getting a bit bored, so let me tell you a story.”

“We’re not at primary school anymore,” Tamara muttered. She wasn’t wrong.

“This land was once ruled by a glorious tribe. They arrived here in waka, made of wood which was perfectly curved, a canvas of intricate carvings and so polished that it glowed orange underneath the celestial map and compass used to navigate the seas...” He rambled on. “But now it’s completely different: everything’s changed since then apart from the river, which still runs the same course through the land. It never pauses, not for a moment, and will never stop running, as sure as time never stops. We’ll see it again today, and I guarantee it’ll be exciting.”

We continued our walk through the bush. By now we were off the track, taking a shortcut through the spiky thickets of thirsty trees. Dan was, again, the first to speak.

“You know, this is all that’s needed to guide us back to the campsite.” He flourished a map, laminated yet crumpled, and a compass, framed by a ring of orange rust. “Anyone want a go at taking charge and leading...”

“I’ll do it,” Noah interrupted. He snatched the map. But in the process, he knocked the compass cradled in Dan’s hands onto the ground. Noah scooped it up and, after surveying the map for a moment, he marched off with his eyes still scanning the map before Dan could object. We followed. Dan walked alongside me, babbling on about the flora we encountered. Tamara dropped to the back and, insisting that Priyanka must be terribly tired, offered to carry her bag, but Priyanka soldiered on.

“Do you even know where we’re going?” Tamara snapped at Noah, before regaining her air of indifference.

“Course I do,” Noah shot back.

“Maybe it’s time for Tamara to have a turn,” suggested Dan, and Noah was usurped as general.

It turned out that the compass had been broken. Dan took over and after drifting for a while we eventually returned to the track. Tamara entrusted me with the map. I beheld the picture; the campsite, a refuge of ochre in the corner, was surrounded by a patchwork of green hues broken only by a slash of blue cutting across the entire height of the page like an errant brushstroke sabotaging a masterpiece. Having prayed that we were on the right side of the river, I was done with the map and decided to let Priyanka have a look before returning it to Tamara. But the breeze instantly plucked the map from her trembling fingers. A gust of wind carried the map forward and – apart from Priyanka, who was wooden – each of us tried, but failed, to snatch the map. The map was gone. Tamara glanced back at me. Her eyes dimmed in disappointment. Stupid Priyanka.

We continued our walk through the bush. I was light-headed. I had not eaten all day. There was a rushing sound in my ears, faint at first but growing louder, like the sound that you hear before passing out. Dan quickened his pace. I couldn’t muster the energy to groan. Then I realised. We rounded the corner and a few metres down below I saw the source of the noise. It was the river. Whereas before the river was flat and slow, now it was a taniwha dashing downwards, hissing and bellowing as it sliced through the land, thrashing the protruding rocks and producing a sheer shroud of mist.

“And now, for the highlight of the day, we have the river crossing!” Dan gushed. He explained how we needed to cross in groups of two or three, as the current was too strong to fight it alone.

“Why don’t the three girls go together?” Noah smirked. Huh, three? Noah looked at Tamara and then Priyanka – and then at me! How dare he!

“Is that because you’re too scared to cross without Dan? Why don’t you prove how gallant you are and help Priyanka across?” Tamara retorted. Dan intervened to arrange the groups, going with Priyanka himself which left Noah and Tamara in the same group, and me lumped in with them – again. It could have been worse – at least I didn’t have to drag Priyanka across. Dan and Priyanka linked arms and began to wade across the river on a series of submerged rocks, waist-deep. Dan knew exactly where each foothold was. Suddenly, Priyanka lost her footing. It was bound to happen. Her arm plunged into the water and the current pulled it downwards, but Dan yanked the other way and they steadied themselves. Priyanka soldiered on and even began to glide across the river in a strangely silent motion; there was only one bangle on her arm now. Then it was our turn. I retraced Dan’s path in my mind. I noted one step, and the next, and then... no, I was trapped. Trapped, and the taniwha was going to drag me downstream. Claw me downstream. God. Noah and Tamara, one to either side of me, tugged in different directions as they battled for control, two wannabe skippers

grappling for the helm of a dinghy as it floundered towards annihilation, creaking... cracking... crumbling. And the taniwha swallowed us whole.

The river lazes through the forest. The glassy surface of the river reflects most of the sun's rays, but some light permeates down to illuminate an image of a warped ellipse being carried by the slow and steady current. It had been a bangle. Only flecks of orange remain. It nudges past a plank of wood jutting out of the bank. The wood was once perfectly curved, a canvas of intricate carvings so polished that it glowed orange, but the furrows are now filled with fungi and flies colonising the wood. It is deformed and defaced by decay. And the bangle continues down the river. Drifting.