

How New Zealand Brought Me Back to Life

TRAVEL Adventures

Walk It Off



Ann Kathrin
Saul



MANA

Ann Kathrin Saul

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How New Zealand Brought Me Back to Life

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Annotations

The book is based on a true story using diary entries, trail notes and photos to bring the story along. No event was made up but smaller details have been left out if they were not important for the story. When direct speech is used it might not reproduce the exact words but the context stays as it occurred. Some but not all names have been changed in order to guarantee the speakers anonymity.

Inhalt

Prologue.....	9
1 The End of the World.....	12
2 The Land of the Long White Cloud	15
3 Angel Judie.....	20
4 The Gateway to the Trail	24
5 Reset	30
6 Helpless Helper	50
7 Bumblebees in the butt	67
8 Fortune	81
9 Encounters.....	95
10 Distraction	111
11 Holidays	127
12 Among Kiwis	132
13 Land ahead	145
14 Turning point.....	151
15 Above the Clouds.....	158
16 Ups and Downs.....	175
17 Water.....	195
18 Small World	201
19 Free.....	219
20 Coming Full Circle.....	231
21 The Way is the Goal.....	240
22 Blue Sky.....	245
Acknowledgements.....	266



TASMAN SEA

PACIFIC OCEAN

200 km

100 mi

Prologue

And to make an end is to make a beginning.

T.S. Eliot

Only three more metres to the other side. I am lifting my right foot and am trying to set it sideways. The current rips it away. I am staggering but I manage to keep my footing. Again, I am trying a sideways step – with the same result. The river takes my entire strength. Also my left foot which was holding me firmly to the ground so far is starting to slide over the ground. For the first time in my life I see myself facing a situation for which I don't have sufficient strength. Fear is rising inside me. The current is pulling relentlessly on my feet and walking poles. I am standing in the middle of the river and am trying to keep my footing as I realise that my energy levels are dropping rapidly to zero.

A couple of months ago I was standing at a similar point in my life when I had no strength left at all. Neither physically nor mentally. I couldn't go on any more. Never had I fallen that deep. Never had anything hurt that much. Nevertheless, in this powerlessness I raised an unknown strength and did something that literally saved my life: I left my previous life behind me.

It happened on a sunny day in September. Haggard, with dark circles around my eyes and a forced smile on my lips, I hugged my dad and my stepmother. Behind me the glass façade of the terminal building of Frankfurt airport was reflecting the blue sky. All around us were parked cars. It smelled of exhaust fumes. I was tense. My hands unconsciously clenched to fists. The smile on their faces hid the sorrows that were raging behind their foreheads. My stepmother kept emphasizing that I could always come back and that I could abolish my plan at any time. That I wouldn't have to do anything that I didn't want to do.

At this moment I didn't care about anything anymore. When somebody asked me about the risks or pointed out potential dangers to me, I always answered with the same phrase:

'I don't have anything to lose anymore.'

And I meant it that way. On the one hand I tried to get rid of the fear of the unknown adventure. Like in the sense of ‘If really something should happen then it might be supposed to happen that way and be probably for the best.’ On the other hand, this was the truth. I had lost the most important persons in my life and with this loss I had abandoned and given up everything that was very dear to me so far.

After I had said goodbye, even to the dog eventually, I shouldered my backpack. ‘So heavy – how shall I ever make it?’ A thought I had had many times in the last few days. My concerns hadn’t really become less because everyone who had seen me with my backpack was astonished and held forth about its size and weight. Trying to appear confident, I walked towards the entrance of the departure hall. Without turning around a last time I disappeared into the building. As the sliding door closed behind me, also the chapter of my previous much beloved life closed for ever.

Seat 35 J. I grabbed my headphones and e-reader from my backpack, put it in the overhead compartment and let myself slump into the seat. Short, friendly ‘Hello’ to my neighbour in the window seat. Ginger blonde hair, three-day beard, about my age. ‘I am thirty and in this situation.’ I reminded myself painfully. Never had I imagined my life at thirty like this. Only five months ago I had also sat in a plane, next to me my husband Ben. We were looking forward to celebrating my thirtieth birthday in seven different time zones.

Back then I passed the time watching a movie starring Reese Witherspoon. “Wild”. The plot was about Cheryl Strayed, a 26-year-old American who realised that she couldn’t go on with her chaotic life that followed the early death of her mother and so she decided to walk the Pacific Crest Trail – one of the three great long distance trails in the United States – without any previous hiking experience. This was 1995 and a true story. I was absolutely fascinated by this story and a long time slumbering desire for endless hiking and pure Nature awoke in me again. As a child I had seen photos of my parents walking with backpacks, stove and a tent the GH20 on Corsica for a couple of weeks. Since then there was something inside me that also wanted to hike long distance, but it was slumbering in my sub conscious-

ness. This desire became a bit more vivid again when Ben and I were watching a documentary about hikers on the Appalachian Trail, the other one of the great long distance trails in the USA. We both liked hiking but initially we couldn't imagine such a torture for our scarce annual leave and chose an in-between; multi-day hikes in Peru, Vietnam and South Africa with light day packs. We decided spontaneously to walk the first 240 kilometres of the Saar-Hunsrück-Trail, one of Germany's many trails through its ranges. While both of us were already mentally broken we anticipated that it would help with what we knew was to come in the following months. I can't say whether it was distraction therapy or some form of self-punishment but we were fully committed to the task. We were hiking for the very first time with full equipment on our backs, Ben and I dragged ourselves up the climbs of the low mountain range. Everything hurt, the neck, feet, Achilles' tendons, hip joints and knees. Blisters, grazes, swollen feet and blue toenails were our permanent companions. We were suffering and didn't talk much, each of us bothered by our own thoughts and sorrows. The physical wounds and Nature herself purified largely our oppressed souls and we were both certainly relieved that we didn't have to walk on when we finally slumped into our seats on the train that would take us back to our car.

Exactly one year after the Saar-Hunsrück-Trail I said to Ben on the plane:

'Wow, this movie is kind of precisely my life at the moment. With the exception that you didn't leave me and I didn't become a drug addict. I should have taken a break and should have done something like that. But I wouldn't be brave enough to do something like this on my own, I think.'

Never would I have thought at this moment that I would do exactly this only a few months later.

It was the only chance. I had lost my mother, my husband, my lust for life and in the end, myself.

1 The End of the World

What lies behind us, and what lies before us, are tiny matters compared to what lies within us.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Feeling numb I listened to the music that was tootling out of my headphones while my gaze got lost in the long aisle of the plane.

The beginning of the end had happened four years ago. I was 26, had found a job as a physiotherapist after I had finished my studies. That job was fun and fulfilled me. Together with my boyfriend Ben I lived in a beautiful flat in the heart of Munich. To merely look at Ben and to feel his genuine love made me infinitely happy. Of course there had also been arguments but all in all we lived a very harmonic, passionate and also humorous relationship.

It was the end of August and I arrived back home from work. I unlocked our entrance door, heard the familiar click of the lock and smelled the scent of our home as I entered, a mixture of food, wood and clean laundry. Just as I put my backpack on the floor in the hallway, I heard the phone ringing. I opened the door to the living room and walked towards the shelf on which the phone was lying. The dark wooden floor was creaking under my steps. I answered the phone and heard the familiar voice of my mother. She was living in the very North of Germany, where Ben and I grew up, and she contacted us on a regular basis to hear how we were doing at the other end of Germany. After exchanging common information – ‘how are you, how is the weather, what are you doing?’ – came a point where I felt that my mother was looking for the right words. And finally they came matter-of-factly and determinedly from her lips:

‘I saw the gynaecologist today ... I have a lump in my breast.’

With weak knees I sat down on one of the wooden chairs in the middle of our living room and stared unbelievably at the world map on the wall.

‘Shit,’ was all I could force out of my mouth. Mum had never been seriously sick in her life, not even a flu or a cold. She ate healthily,

didn't smoke anymore since the pregnancy with my older brother and rowed hundreds of kilometres a year. What she was telling me now just couldn't be true. All of a sudden my family was vulnerable, including myself.

'Yes, well said,' Mum's voice was cutting into my thoughts.

'Do you already know if it's malignant?' I wanted to know, all these images of my knowledge about breast cancer were being rapidly projected like a movie in front of my inner eye.

'We are still waiting for the result but it looks pretty much like it. Dr. Rothenkamp has already made an appointment for a surgery in one and a half weeks – just in case. First I'll be on the Pippilotta with my tenth grade next week.'

This was typical for my mum. She was one of the most devoted persons that I knew to date. The class trip with her tenth grade on her beloved sailing boat was something that she would not let be taken away from her, not even from a life threatening disease.

'But is it alright to wait that long?' I asked worried and saw the metastases happily wandering through her body.

'Well, Dr. Rothenkamp says that the lump is already that big that a week more or less won't change a thing.'

That didn't sound very positive. I asked her some more details and said at the end of the conversation:

'I'll be there when you have your surgery.'

'Oh Mouse, you don't need to do that. It's not that easy for you to get a day off ...' Again, typical for Mum. If it was up to her, nobody should ever be worried or concerned about her and even less should anybody leave or miss something for her.

'I'll definitely come. It'll be alright somehow.' I said with determination in my voice.

'Okay, thanks, love you.' she said tenderly.

'Love you too, Mum.' We hung up.

Totally confused I was still sitting on the wooden chair in the middle of the living room. Like through an ear muffler I heard a key turning in the door lock and Ben entering soon after. I didn't even realise that he had returned from work earlier than usual. As he stepped into the

living room we looked deep into each other's eyes for a long time. I felt that he was trying to read my face.

'Mum called me. She has breast cancer.' I said in a low voice without any greeting.

'I know,' answered Ben and took me into his arms. As soon as I leaned my head against his breast the tears came which kept coming again and again over the next years. This was the end of my relatively carefree life. My mother was not the same woman anymore in my eyes: She was vulnerable and now it was my turn to protect her from the worst.

In the end this was beyond my power and almost three and a half years later I stroked the cold cheek of my deceased mum. This was on Christmas Eve 2014.

Mum would have turned 67 in early September 2015. In comparison to me she loved to celebrate her birthday big time and stood in the kitchen for many days to prepare the most delicious meals and cakes. After her death my brother, Dad, his wife, mum's partner and I went out for dinner on her birthday. On the one hand it was for commemorating Mum and on the other hand it was my farewell dinner. That morning I had laid my favourite flower, a sunflower, on Mum's grave and had said goodbye to her. I didn't know if I would ever return to her grave. That was not Mum anyway. She was in everything else, in the wind, in the trees, in me, but not in this cold hole in the soil.

And now I was sitting on that plane, far away from her grave. Ten and a half hours. Short stopover in Seoul, South Korea. With every kilometre that the plane covered and that took me further away from Germany I felt better. As if a huge burden fell from my shoulders bit by bit. Like many times before I was surprised at how much distance can change your perception of your life. And I was to go even further. To the other end of the world.

2 The Land of the Long White Cloud

Only by being alone we can find ourselves. Being alone is not being lonely, it is the biggest adventure!

Hermann Hesse

I disembarked in Auckland early in the morning on the 22nd of September 2015. Exactly eleven years ago to the day, I had walked into the arrival hall of Sydney airport after a similar long flight. As I hadn't chosen the dates myself, I was really encouraged by this coincidence. I saw it as a happy omen because my nine-months stay in Australia, that I opted for after I had graduated from high school, had been a truly crucial part in my life. The other thing that I interpreted as a good sign was that my birthday was to the day five months ago. On this day now, my life should restart from zero, my second birth.

Te Araroa, the long pathway – New Zealand's trail. Walking the trail to find myself again – this would be my life for the following months. On the very day when Ben told me that he couldn't keep on going with our relationship, I had looked on Google for long distance trails. In my head I had been going through my options and I ended up with three: Firstly, to be sorry for myself, lying in bed crying, almost starving slowly and eventually carrying my burden for the rest of my life. Secondly, to fight for us and possibly to get hurt again even more and thirdly to give up everything and do something crazy. A reset.

Immediately, I had thought about the movie with Reese Witherspoon. Because it was already the end of July and first autumn and then winter would come to the Northern Hemisphere sooner or later, it was clear to me from the very beginning, that I would fly to the other side of the world. 'The further away from Germany the better!' thought I. I wished to be far away from the pain and the people who really did everything to make me feel better but who reminded me of the most important persons in my life at the same time. – The ones I had lost forever in just seven months.

Back then, my eyes flew over a top-10-listing of the world's best long distance trails. Appalachian Trail, Pacific Crest Trail, Continental Divide Trail, Camino de Santiago – definitely nothing for me. Two trails caught my attention: The Tokai Nature Trail in Japan and the Te Araroa in New Zealand.

The first sentences that I read about the Te Araroa described a trail that was made for me. The relatively young trail mainly goes off the beaten track and leads through the most diverse New Zealand landscapes starting in the North of the North Island and ending in the South of the South Island. Existing trails had been connected with new ones to form a long pathway. Almost virgin Nature and less people than on the other famous long distance trail in the world were waiting for me. Furthermore, since leaving Australia eleven years ago and having had no time to make it back again, I always wanted to go to New Zealand. When I met Ben for the very first time, he had just returned from a one year 'Working Holiday' stay in New Zealand and was absolutely taken by the country. Shortly before Mum died, she told me, that she and her partner had planned to go to New Zealand for a longer time to explore it with a campervan. – My mother, who had travelled a lot and lived for it but who had never been outside of Europe! Back then, the thought made me happy and deeply sad at the same time because I knew that her wish wouldn't come true. Due to my mum's unfulfilled wish, my decision to go to New Zealand felt right even more. The die was cast!

The following day I quit my job, the semi-detached house that we rented and all kinds of memberships. I packed my personal belongings in cardboard boxes which I stored partially at my dad's place and partially at a self-storage. In a radical manner I sold sterling cutlery and further belongings of my mum. I didn't want to own anything at all anymore – and I needed money. The voided mortgage saving plan of my mum would finance the other bits of my journey. I sold nearly all clothes and objects that Ben had given me as a present, or I gave them to op-shops. Ben with the support of his friends and family had to handle everything else. It was too excruciating to sort through all these memories of a wonderful time that were saved in books, furni-

ture, music, souvenirs and plants. We had moved from Munich back to our hometown not even one and a half years ago and we had bought expensive furniture and had put a lot of love, time and money into the garden to make it cosy. At this time, we believed that we would only move one more time during the next ten years, and that would be to our own house. Half a year after having cleared out and dissolved the semi-detached house of my mum, I didn't feel capable of doing it again and certainly not with my own household.

The feeling of not being worth anything anymore, of being left, bent me literally. The encounters with our neighbours or other acquaintances who had no idea what had happened and whom I had to tell about the breakup were a torture. More and more I withdrew into a bubble where I lowered my gaze to the ground and continued my daily twenty hours of packing routine. The preparations for the trail kept me alive: I booked the earliest possible open-return flight to New Zealand and applied for a visitor's visa for nine months; I took out an overseas health cover for long-term stays and registered myself as unemployed; I downloaded the trail notes onto my e-reader and the GPS data onto my newly bought Garmin. I gathered and cleaned my gear which was not perfect for a long distance trail but I already had it from my previous multi-day hikes. What I didn't own and definitely needed, I bought bit by bit. I even wrote down my last will by which I pronounced my brother as the sole heir of my little belongings. Tears fell onto the paper which I put into an envelope for him with the following words written on the outside:

*In case anything should happen to me ... If I return safe and sound
– and I will try my best – just tear the envelope. Just as a precaution ... I am not intending to die. Love you. Your little sister.*

I was scared by the things lying ahead of me. Even though I had experience in hiking and traveling abroad I had never hiked on my own before. The hiking I had done had been mostly with Ben. Now I felt worn out physically and mentally and hiking in a foreign country with wild rivers and very remote areas would bring me to my limits and beyond. I encountered the risk of dying with my deep pain and the

motto 'I have nothing to lose anymore'. There was no other choice for me. And should it really happen that I died, then at least I would have seen another part of the world and would be merged with Nature.

Weeks before my departure, I finished long bucket lists until I was ready to leave the semi-detached house. It was five weeks till my flight but I couldn't stay "at home" any longer. I had no home any more. I couldn't even live at my dad's and his wife's place because everything there reminded me of either Mum or Ben.

So I fled to Hamburg and lived at my brother's or at my best friend's place. I read a lot and tried to get an idea of the trail. With specific stretching exercises and manual therapy of certain joints I tried to prepare my weak parts that could become issues on the trail.

As soon as I did nothing, the sadness and the stabbing pain came back again. Daily I walked restlessly numerous kilometres through Hamburg and alongside the Elbe River to numb my body and mind. I felt lonely like never before. It was summer break and most of my friends and my family were away on vacation when everything had happened.

All of Ben's and my mutual friends acted outstandingly, didn't take a side, couldn't understand what had happened just as little as I could. And still I couldn't meet them because it hurt too much to hear from Ben. I told those friends of mine who didn't live in Hamburg or the North what had happened either shortly before leaving or not at all. I couldn't stand their dismay. Again and again I patiently told the story hoping that it gave my friends the feeling that they helped by asking and listening. Dead inside I rattled down monotonously the details. My friends and family were awesome. Everybody was offering help. Everybody cared and worried for me. Everybody was trying to cheer me up. But nobody could help. It hurt to see the sad realisation in their eyes. Nobody could open this black fist that was crushing my heart and choking me. Help had to come from somewhere else. I felt like finding this help in the distance and in Nature. When I said goodbye to my closest friends in my last weeks in Germany I felt no sadness. There was just nothing inside me anymore. An emptiness. Numbness. Time to leave.

And now I was standing at the other end of the world after a thirty-hour flight. As we had travelled a lot together my first thoughts that were flashing through my mind in the queue for immigration were about Ben. It felt strange to explore a country without him. 'From today on everything will get better!' I encouraged myself and went patiently through immigration and customs. I showed my tent and boots that I had thoroughly cleaned in the knowledge that New Zealand has strict controls. Bio organisms that might be sitting for example in the soil under the soles of the boots could have disastrous consequences for the eco system of the islands. But everything was fine. The friendly customs officer was happy with my boots and I also got my tent back without complaint. Through a sliding door I stepped into the arrival hall. All around me the people who had arrived with me were kissed, hugged or welcomed by handshakes. My name wasn't written on any of these signs held by the waiting crowd. Nobody would hug me. I was in a country where I didn't know a single soul. I was all on my own. The scenes of welcome and farewell that take place at an airport had always touched me, even when everything was still good. But now I was watching with an emotional emptiness these families, couples, colleagues, who reunited shedding tears or laughter. I felt like an Alien that had just landed on Earth and was observing human behaviour closely. After withdrawing New Zealand Dollar, I left the airport building and for the very first time in my life I breathed in New Zealand air as deeply as I possibly could. It felt awesome.

3 Angel Judie

You can only see things clearly with your heart. What is essential is invisible to the eye.

Antoine de Saint-Exupery

In Auckland I spent the next days buying missing gear – a stove, a cup, a Merino shirt, a SIM-card – and getting an overview of possible trail food. It was relatively cold – about 12° to 16°C – and it was drizzling for two days. Doubts about starting too early rose in me. On the other hand, I didn't know what to do with myself and heard the trail calling. As I was enjoying the first rays of sun sitting on a bench at Auckland harbour, I looked across to the other side to Devonport and imagined how splendid this feeling must be to arrive there on foot in a couple of months and to take the ferry to Auckland. Right to where I was sitting now.

After my first two days in a budget hotel on central Queen Street I moved to Judie who rented out three rooms via AirB'n'B. Carrying my backpack, I walked two hours from door to door. The sun was shining. For the most part I walked on the trail that I would follow through Auckland a while later. Up and down it went, through street canyons, crossing the motorway, through the Domain park in the middle of which the Auckland museum was presenting itself in an imposing way. My backpack felt really heavy. And I hadn't even packed food and water yet! I regarded it as a symbol of the mental burden that I carried. And it felt kind of good actually.

In Judie's house I was welcomed by two of her guests, Jasper from the Netherlands and Ahmed from Saudi Arabia. Judie was at work at that moment and I would get to know her later at night. Jasper showed me the floodlit and elegantly furnished house and led me to my room eventually, saying: 'You've been upgraded to the ensuite room by the way because Ahmed is staying in the room that you've booked originally for longer than expected.'

It seemed that good luck was on my side today and I was happy about the welcome fortune. I dropped my backpack and walked to

the next New World supermarket to buy something to eat. As I read the prices for fresh fruit and veggies, I got slightly shocked. Though I had already heard that New Zealand was also called the Switzerland of Oceania I had never thought that a New Zealand grown kiwi fruit would be more expensive if I bought it in New Zealand than in Germany. Passionlessly I walked up and down the aisles in the hope of finding something that would at least slightly trigger some of the long lost appetite.

After having spent way too much time at the supermarket, I returned to Judie's place with an avocado, crispbread and some cheese. I had just finished my lethargic dinner and was doing the dishes when Judie came flying zestfully around the corner and welcomed me with such a genuine cordiality that I couldn't help smiling broadly. Immediately, a spark of sympathy sprang over to me. Her lively blue eyes that were framed by fine features and blonde, elegantly curled and shoulder length hair were omitting warmth and genuine interest. Her feminine shape that didn't show a trace of superfluous fat and her perfect skin let her appear like mid forty, even though – to my astonishment – she was already sixty. During our first conversation I already saw Judie as a symbol of pure lust of life. She was intelligent and sensual and determined at the same time. In her presence, I felt incredibly comfortable and was happy again that I had shown a lucky hand when choosing my accommodation.

Using Judie's house as a base, I went on little hikes to the parks and enjoyed the view from the green volcanoes that define together with the skyline and Harbour Bridge, Auckland's cityscape. On top of the grassy volcanoes, I tried to look as far into the distance as I could: I followed the coastline with my gaze and continued to the ranges in the South because I wanted to see where I would come from and where I was supposed to go to. On my sixth and last night in Auckland, Judie made dinner for the two long term guests and me. While enjoying a glass of wine and a tasty Persian meal, we had inspiring conversations. I felt comfortable. Judie had a very open and welcoming way and was an interested as well as interesting dialogue partner. Shortly before we started doing the dishes, Judie looked me into the eyes and said:

‘Ann, one reason why I made this dinner was that I wanted to ask you if it would be okay if we could stay in contact so I know you are safe?’

Touched by this cordiality and care I answered with a big smile on my face:

‘Wow, thank you so much! Definitely. Everybody in Germany would love you right now and hug you immediately!’

Judie smiled: ‘It’s a safe country in general, but to be out there in the bush and all on your own can be really rough. It is better if someone in New Zealand knows where you are.’

I still couldn’t believe my good luck. In Germany I had felt so lonely and left alone even though everybody had offered help and emotional support, and now there was this wonderful person who I just knew for a couple of hours but by whom I immediately felt understood and supported.

‘I will send you an SMS before every trail section and will tell you from where to where I intend to walk and when I will arrive presumably. As soon as I reach civilisation I will send you another SMS. If you won’t hear from me, give me one more day and if you still haven’t heard from me then you can call Search and Rescue or the police.’ I felt dumb to say that because it was Judie’s home country and she would know best what to do in such a case.

‘That sounds like a good idea.’ Judie agreed.

‘Yes.’ I was pondering a second, ‘And I’ll give you the phone numbers of my brother and of my brother-in-law so you could contact them in a case of emergency.’ I realised that the conversation was heading towards a negative direction and I added quickly with a tender smile: ‘But of course, I hope that it won’t get that far.’ Deep inside me I wasn’t very convinced myself by my own words.

My thoughts wandered to the trail notes that I had read only for the upcoming first two weeks. It was about to be a very new experience for me: searching for water, freedom camping, navigating, crossing rivers, bashing through dense bush and walking over farmland that had sheep, cows and – my worries had increased as I had read this – steers and bulls grazing on it. Since I had been run over by a horse as a kid and as a teenager been chased around a pasture by a

bull, I had the biggest respect for these animals. They were just too big in my opinion.

Nobody in Germany knew what the trail was like exactly. Sometimes I got upset when people said to me: 'Have fun in New Zealand!' They hadn't understood that this was no holiday for me and that I was frightened but had no other alternative. Quite often I had the vague feeling that it would be the best for everybody when I wouldn't be in Germany anymore. As if a big wave of relief would go through the rows of my friends and family-in-law. Everybody could keep on with their happy life as if nothing had happened and nobody had to show consideration nor care for me. At least this was the impression that was growing in my dark mind. I didn't want to be anybody's burden. Furthermore, I was the replica of my mother in her early years. In the acute stage of mourning, it must have been tough for close relatives and friends to cope with this optical illusion. Only after some time had passed to give everybody the chance to move on, I would be able to cheer up Mum's social environment with the fact that she was living on in me. But this point of time was still in an uncertain distance.

I pushed away my dark thoughts, smiled bravely and drank another glass of Merlot with Judie. These motivating conversations I had with her and her keeping me good company were beneficial for me. As we were leaving the kitchen to make ourselves ready for bed, Judie turned around to face me and said:

'So, just that you know: New Zealand is a relatively small country – wherever you are in the North Island, you are maximum eight hours by car away from here. So no matter what happens, just tell me if you need my help and I'll come to get you.'

Overwhelmed by this devotional helpfulness, I hugged Judie and mumbled a 'Thank you so much.' into her shoulder. I had just closed the door to my sleeping room as I was already texting the good news in our family group on Whatsapp, to take away everybody's worries. That night, the last sentence I wrote into my diary was the following:

'Stupid thought, but maybe she is ,sent' by Mum?'

4 The Gateway to the Trail

We never lose our loved ones. They accompany us, they don't disappear from our lives. We are merely in different rooms.

Paulo Coelho

Early the next morning, I took the 'Naked Bus' from Auckland heading north, to Kaitaia. Judie had insisted on taking me to the bus stop in CBD. In the middle of the morning rush hour, Judie pulled over and stopped at the side of the street. To avoid building up a traffic jam, I said goodbye to Judie hugging her quickly, drag-lifted my heavy backpack out of the trunk and waved at her before she disappeared into the dense traffic jungle. I crossed the street and queued up behind some waiting backpackers at the bus stop. Again, I felt like an Alien that was just observing but not participating. How different those backpackers and I were, came to my mind again and again. I had been like them once. But now, I was neither easy-going nor was there a pleasant anticipation for what would await me at my next stop. I had to accomplish a mission, my 'therapy'.

It was cold and raining. The female bus driver took my backpack with a sound of heavy weight lifting from me and stored it in the belly of the bus as I was already looking for a seat in the rear of the bus. Right on time, the bus started moving and we left Auckland via Harbour Bridge, from where I had an impressive view of the Skyline and the rest of the city.

While listening to music that was coming out of my headphones, I observed the landscape that was zooming by and imagined how it would be to walk along here in a couple of weeks from now. At this point it was an image that felt unreal. The windows of the bus were foggy and a wet cold reflected from them. At the bus stop in Kaitaia, all those, roughly, nineteen-year-old Germans who had been with me on the bus were picked up by their probable future employers or host families. Again, I was the only one who wasn't awaited by anybody. As it was still pouring with rain, I put on my raincover for the backpack, shouldered it and walked the two kilometres to the hostel where I had

booked a room. Always following the main street, passing the little shops. Except for a few Maori, who were sitting or standing under the awning in front of the shops and looked at me interestedly and greeted me, the township appeared to be dying. Maybe intensified by the grey, cloudy sky, Kaitaia seemed miserable and poor to me. Would all of the townships through which I would walk look like this? I started to have a weird feeling. To camp out here somewhere in the proximity if there wouldn't be any other accommodation didn't feel very safe. I knew that, compared to Australia and other countries, there were no dangerous animals in New Zealand. The species human however was rather a worry to me. Some experiences in my past had led to initially suspect the bad in people. 'But,' I was thinking as I walked along the sidewalk, 'I have nothing to lose. It can't be worse than anything that I have left behind.' With this I swiped every doubt away. This attitude worked.

I arrived at the hostel and the first thing I realised was the German band 'Kraftclub' whose songs were booming at maximum volume out of one of the nearby buildings. 'Have I taken the wrong bus?' was I thinking in an amused way and pressed the reception bell.

The 5000 inhabitant-strong community of Kaitaia is the most northern place that one can reach by public transport and to a Te Araroa tramper it is the gateway to the starting point at Cape Reinga. The cape was another hundred kilometres away from Kaitaia and I was hoping to find somebody at the hostel who owned a car and could take me there. Out of this reason, I checked in for two nights and got a room with two bunks all for myself. I dropped my backpack next to my bed and headed towards the kitchen. Nobody there. So I walked to the supermarket. The Pak'n'Save supermarket was like a day-trip for me. It was not far away from the hostel but I walked through every single aisle looking at everything attentively and reasoned whether it would be of any use on the trail or not. Finally, I left the Pak'n'Save after what felt like an eternity, carrying porridge and tea for breakfast, two-minute noodle soups and freeze-dried 'Backcountry Cuisine' meals for dinner, several cereal bars and a bag of Scroggins for snacks and a bottle of wine for my last two nights in civilisation.

Back to the hostel, I noticed that it had filled with more life now. Several small groups of nineteen to twenty-year-old Germans in dirty work clothes carried wearily their shopping bags to the kitchen. 'Maybe New Germany would be a more appropriate name for this country.' I thought silently.

I placed two chairs in the patio in front of my room, grabbed a wine glass from out of the kitchen and sat down. The hours passed by with reading and drinking wine – a Pinot Noir from New Zealand that I treated myself to because of my best friend's birthday as well as my own restart.

My Kindle got broken on the plane and so, with a heavy heart, I had left it at Judie's. The idea of lying in my tent reading at night after a long day of tramping held something very soothing for me. Books were my friends. But as I already encountered difficulties to store my entire gear in my backpack and as the weight was worrying me, I had decided to do without books. For the bus trip and the two nights in Kaitaia, I had bought, for the short term, 'Aleph' by Paulo Coelho in Auckland nonetheless. Andreas, who had been my rowing coach when I was a teen and still was a very important person in my life now, had read it. Back then in Germany, he had told me about the story and what he had drawn out of it for himself. Now, the book was fascinating and inspiring me as well and I quoted two helpful passages of the book in my diary:

Is it possible to fix love and make it stand still in time? Well, we can try, but that would turn our lives into a hell. I haven't been married for more than twenty years to the same person, because neither she nor I have remained the same. That's why our relationship is more alive than ever. I don't expect her to behave as she did when we first met. Nor does she want me to be the person I was when I found her. Love is beyond time, or, rather, love is both time and space, but all focused on one single constantly evolving point – the Aleph.

I thought about these stereotype sayings in a relationship á la 'I don't want you to change because of me.' This saying had dominated our

relationship for the last half year. Ben and I had always talked open-minded and genuinely about the seven-year itch. Once, we had picked up somewhere that during seven years – not necessarily in the seventh year of a relationship – every body goes through an enormous hormonal change. This hormonal change could lead to having an aversion to one's partner's smell or to disliking certain food. It could lead to reconsidering priorities in life and to rearranging them, sometimes in quite a radical way, even though one's partner would not fit into this new order anymore. Back then, we had reaffirmed each other that something like this couldn't affect us as long as we talked about everything. And then out of a sudden it was all over after six and a half wonderful years with ups and downs. We had changed. And I wanted to change again. Not for Ben – but together with him. I wanted to find my way in life again after I had lost my symbolic home, my mother and myself.

We never lose our loved ones. They accompany us, they don't disappear from our lives. We are merely in different rooms. For example, I can't see who is in the next carriage, but it contains people travelling in the same time as me, as you, as everyone. The fact that we can't speak to them or know what's going on in that other carriage is completely irrelevant. They are there. So what we call „life“ is a train with many carriages. Sometimes we are in one, sometimes we're in another, and sometimes we cross between them, when we dream or allow ourselves to be swept away by the extraordinary.

I hadn't pondered a lot about death and dying so far in my life. But somehow, there had always been a part in me that believed in, or at least wished for, a life before and after death. After the doctor had told my mum that her life expectancy was rather weeks than months and as we were lying in each other's arms, I told her half-jokingly:

'If there is a life beyond death, we will definitely see each other again there. Maybe not in this exact constellation – maybe you will be my daughter then or I'll be your cat. But we'll definitely see each other again!'