

# The Journey

*by Fervesco*

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*Chapter 1 of 1*

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The colourless countryside whooshes past my window. The singing stopped thirty minutes ago, the game of I-spy ten. The radio long since dwindled into no more than incessant static. All that breaks the monotony now is the occasional possum splattered on the road, its innards a smorgasbord on a tar-seal table waiting for the hawks to dine.

I am that possum.

"Mintie?" The half-empty bag is thrust back at me between cracked vinyl seats. Paul Scott Hancock. Seventeen. Named after his grandfather.

"I'll take one of those." One hand is removed from the wheel and flails blindly back at the bag, eyes still glued to the road. Ngaire Elizabeth Tuavai. Sixteen. Named after her mother. And her mother's mother. And her mother's mother's mother.

"Not now, thanks." Jasmine Smith. Me. Sixteen. Named after a shrub.

The road flashes by.

"Come on, Jas, cheer up! You never know, we might just find her."

Find her? Oh, goody.

"Leave her alone," Ngaire chides.

This trip was all Paul's fault. It was all that essay's fault. Write about your family. Ngaire had turned in twelve (twelve!) pages all about her whanau on the East Coast. Her great grandfather's mere hanging on the wall above the fireplace, her relationship to Samoan royalty, her aunt who still farms the family plot, her sister who's off studying at Otago, her grandfather whose team won the Golden Shears back in the Fifties, and her Aunt Hinemoa whom 'nobody ever talks about' and is therefore the topic of conversation at every dinner. A+.

Paul only wrote three pages, but the teacher was so impressed she didn't even insist he make up the minimum word count. Great Grandfather won a Victoria Cross, Uncle killed at Gallipoli; his entire family tree traced back to the seventeenth century, presented with pictures, portraits, diagrams and all. He'd pulled an A.

I got an F.

"Where is your work, Jasmine?"

"I don't have a family."

That look, you know the one. I wanted the floor to open up and swallow me whole. "Of course you have a family, dear. You just need to discover who they are. I want those two thousand words on Monday."

It was Paul's idea. "Let's go find your mum!"

Groan.

Ngairé pushed her sunglasses down her nose and chimed, "Is this really your best effort, young lady?"

"No, Miss."

"C'mon, we've only got two days. Let's just get in the car and GO."

"We can't just take off," I protested. It was a feeble attempt though; Paul has the answer for everything.

"I'll ring my dad, he's cool. He'll fix it with your folks."

And now here I sit in the back of Ngairé's beat-up car, the worn springs digging into my bum.

"Twelve k's to Bulls. We'll stop there and have some dinner."

I look up just in time to see the green Transit sign flash by. And there, on the left, is the McKenna's farm.

Bulls. Foster family number seventeen. Six months, two weeks, three days.

Henry's tractor is parked up outside the shed. Off in a distant field, surrounded by sheep, I see a Swandri clad figure accompanied by a black and white mongrel. George. He'd been my only friend in Bulls. It had become painfully clear three hours after my arrival that Henry and Yvonne were only in it for the money. God knows why, I've been told often enough the pay is crap. But George didn't care. He licked at my fingers like I was the best kid in the world. And I'd bet he had no idea which bitch he came from either.

Stuff George. He's just a dog.

The time passes numbly. Ngairé and Paul try to resurrect I-spy, but my heart isn't in it. Nearly every town we pass brings back memories.

Waiouru. Foster family number fourteen. Three months and three days.

Seven kids sit around the kitchen, perched wherever they can find a seat. Yesterday there were six glistening blond heads; today a flaming fluff of red has marred their purity. I feel sick to the pit of my stomach. Another new family. A chipped bowl of baked beans, from a catering sized can, sits before me on the table. I hate baked beans. I manage to choke down a couple of forkfuls before my stomach starts churning so much I don't think I'll be able to hold it down any longer. I quietly, carefully, set the plate aside, biting back the urge to vomit.

"Eat your lunch," the mother commands.

"I'm not hungry."

"Eat your bloody lunch! There's nothing else...." The look in the mother's eye is horrible.

I force down another mouthful.

The mother looks away, her face triumphant.

"Here," a teenage boy, Stan, whispers from next to me. He shoves an empty plate in my direction across the scarred wooden table and reaches for my mostly full one.

I look at him and smile, quickly sliding my plate across to him before the mother sees.

Too late. She wrenches the plate from in front of the boy so fast he's still left holding his fork. Her shrill voice is deafening. "Straight to your room, Jasmine!" She stuffs the plate inside the overflowing fridge and glares at me. I slip off my chair, swallowing tears. "She can have that for dinner!"

It's dark, very dark. Out in the tussock grass Jasmine sits, her bones are freezing. She's been here for hours. In the distance she can hear the rattle of gunfire from the military camp. She's under fire herself. All day she's just wanted to be alone and all day the mother has forced her to look after the little kids. Nice set up for her, Jasmine fumes. She gets a nanny and she gets paid for it.

She knows she should go back. Running away is pointless, they always find her. She dreams of riding the wild horses that gallop along the volcanic plateau, pursued by the government for destroying their perfect country. They pursue her too.

Her name is being called shrilly. Has been for a while. She should really go back now, but she's so cold. It would be so easy to curl up here, to become one with the frost. To never have to worry about being wanted again.

"Jasmine?" Then the mother's arms are around her. "Oh, Jasmine, you're so cold."

The mother hugs her and takes her back to the house and sits her before the fireplace. Jasmine watches the flames dance as the mother presses a huge cup of steaming Milo into her frozen hands.

I'm slurping at my L&P, sitting on the other side of the car now. Shouldn't have done that; there's even more errant springs here and I'm not totally sure what that stain on the back of Paul's seat is but for some weird reason it has me mesmerised like a gory car crash (the shrinks would have a field day with my head).

Paeroa. Foster family number nine. Two days, eight hours. An all time record.

Jasmine sits stiffly on the hard wooden bench. Across from her, in the armchair Noelene has dragged onto the porch, is Nana. Nana offers her an Anzac biscuit. "They're fresh out of the oven, dear." The biscuit is warm and Jasmine takes a bite, the chewy mouthful gluing her teeth together.

"It's so nice to have you here, Jasmine," Nana says in her withered voice, while gnarled fingers claw at the ragged crocheted rug. The skin on the back of her hands is tissue thin, the blue veins threatening to ooze through the gossamer layer any second.

Jasmine nods, unable to unstick her teeth. She leans forward, placing her word on the Scrabble board.

"I know how hard it can be, dear. Being shipped around. I didn't live with my own family either."

Jasmine is angry. She doesn't want to be patronised, she wants a home. "You have no idea how hard it is!" she yells, jumping from her chair. She upsets the Scrabble board, letters litter the porch, tears litter her face.

When I arrive back at Noelene and Nana's there's an ambulance in the driveway, its lights flashing ominously. Nana is lying on a stretcher, her skin pale and tinged blue. She's so little.

"Jasmine, go next door," Noelene quavers.

"Is Nana all right?"

Noelene's lips are pursed as she places a hand on my shoulder. "She'll be fine," she says.

But I don't believe her. I know I've done this to Nana. The CYFS worker arrives in the morning.

Back in the car I start counting the white crosses by the side of the road. Then I see it: the huge 'Thames Fishing Charters' billboard just before the bridge.

Thames. Foster family number six. Two years, eleven months, five days.

"Come on, Squirt," Uncle Tamati calls from the hallway of the bungalow. "Get a move on, those fish won't wait for us all day!"

"All day? It's not even light yet!" I pull on a pair of his old gumboots. They come up over my knees and my feet slop around in them like a clown. I've got on three jerseys and two pairs of trackpants. Uncle Tamati beams at me as I tramp into the hall.

"Perfect little fishergirl!" he announces, his bright smile lighting every inch of his broad face. He takes me by the hand and together we quietly sneak out the back door and make our way down to the beach and out onto the rocks. In the dim morning light we slip and slide, my oversize gummies skidding on the fiery-red carpet that has fallen from the Pohutakawa trees.

The salty sea air fills my nostrils as Uncle Tamati shows me how to bait the line and together we spend a chilly morning waiting for nibbles. Finally there is a huge tug at my line that threatens to pull me into the swelling sea.

"Looks like you've caught a Taniwha there, Squirt," Uncle Tamati calls, grabbing me around the waist before I can tumble in. Together we struggle with the line until a great, wriggling snapper is clasped between Uncle Tamati's gigantic fists. "It's a beaut, Squirt!"

Uncle Tamati lights a fire on the rocks and later we eat the cooked snapper for breakfast.

Jasmine bursts into the house, beaming with joy. She rushes down the hall, frantic to tell Aunty Kim all about the giant snapper. But there's a thud, followed by a tremendous smash. Jasmine sits there, blood dripping from her palms, shattered pieces of vase scattered on the wooden floor.

It's Uncle Tamati's most prized possession. It had belonged to Nanny Kura.

Jasmine bursts into tears and flees to her room.

"Hey, Squirt." The bed sags beneath Uncle Tamati's weight as he sits down next to her.

"I'm sorry!" Jasmine whimpers pitifully as he takes her hands and carefully wipes at them with a tissue.

"Not to worry, not to worry." His resonant baritone breaks through her sobs. "I could do with a hand fixing it though."

Sniffing, Jasmine follows Uncle Tamati downstairs and together, with a tube of glue, they painstakingly piece the vase back together. It's more complicated than any puzzle Jasmine's ever seen.

"Better than new, Squirt." Uncle Tamati admires our work when we're finished. "Now it looks like a real antique!"

I give him a huge hug.

The signs start racing by for Auckland. Sixty kilometres, twenty, ten...

I think of Uncle Tamati; of Noelene and Nana; the mother, Stan and the rest of the blonds; of Henry and Yvonne. I think of George. I look in the front seat and see Ngaire and Paul.

"Turn the car around."

"Come on, Jas, we're almost there," Paul insists.

"Don't you want to find your family?" Ngaire asks.

I grin at her in the rear view mirror. "I have."

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