



Eef

uncovers her iron will

by Claire Delahunty

Eef imagined she looked a bit like a stick of celery wearing a brick when she put her pack on her back. She hadn't crammed too much stuff in—just enough, yet it seemed so big and much more solid than her own body. She had everything in it, that she would need to walk across New Zealand for the next six months.

Six months! It had only just hit her that she would be roaming in the big, wide outdoors for half a year. She chuckled to herself. Eef was always planning big adventures, and only realising how huge they were when she stood right in front of them, ready to take the very first step.

Now she had her pack on, it felt much heavier that she remembered. She looked at her friend PJ, who would be coming on this journey with her. Hmmm. He looked more like a camel, she decided. His pack was like a hump—it didn't look so oversized as hers. She was almost relieved to hear him let a big breath out and turn to her to say: "Why does this pack feel heavier today than it did when we tried them on last week?"

So it wasn't just her. Eef laughed again and shrugged. "I think everything must feel different when an adventure is about to begin. It's not training or practicing. This is the real thing!"

She and PJ stood at the far north of New Zealand at Cape Reinga, and looked south: they were going to walk all the way to the other end of the country, 3000 kilometers! It didn't quite seem real. Whole seasons would go by while they walked up mountains, through rivers and by the ocean.

It seemed right to begin their journey at a place in the world where two oceans literally bumped into one another. Standing at the Cape Reinga lighthouse, they could see the Tasman Sea walloping into the Pacific Ocean. Sure, the water was all the same colour, but Eef thought she could hear the thunder of different waves meeting. It was like two wild horses running into one another. She couldn't wait to start walking: **free as the wind and wild as the sea.**

Eef had grown up in Belgium, a little country in Europe—there was nothing this rugged back home. Even though she was a bit scared of what was to come, she turned her face into the salty-smelling wind and smiled.

But that day was long and hard, and Eef couldn't keep smiling the whole way through, not while her back ached and her feet hurt. She and PJ walked along the white-and-grey sand beside the sea, and they couldn't believe how hard their legs worked.

By the time daylight started to fade and the walkers made it to the little cabin they were going to sleep in that night, Eef felt she had never been so tired in her life. She sighed with relief as she slipped her boots off and rubbed her toes and ankles. It was all they could manage to heat up some noodles and eat some fruit for dinner before tumbling into their sleeping bags. She could hear the shush-shush sound of the ocean close by, singing her a lullaby, but once she fell asleep, all Eef dreamed about was sand!

In the morning, the sun smiled at her and light twinkled off the water of the coastline. But she glared at the sun and glowered at the water. She didn't want to smile today. PJ shrugged on his backpack and Eef did the same, but she let out a little groan. Eef was determined to do this, but why did it already feel so hard? The second day hadn't even begun.

As other walkers passed them through the morning, Eef tried to ignore the fact that she was walking with a limp. She and PJ were back on the shoreline, slogging through more sand. Other walkers greeted them with cheery "good mornings!" and she smiled back through gritted teeth.

As they sat down on a rock to eat some nuts and drink some water, Eef looked PJ in the eye. "This is hard!" she said. PJ looked back at her – "I know!" He said. "But I can already tell it's going to be amazing. I'm so glad you suggested we go on this adventure."

Eef looked at PJ with a start. That's right, this had all been her idea! She was always the most adventurous one. She had never imagined a time when she might be the slow one in the group. When she might be the one struggling to keep up. Yet that's what happened as the day wore on. By the afternoon, Eef's ankles were screaming. Her heels were so sore from the endless hours pushing through tough sand.

She was quiet that night as she got ready to sleep, and PJ looked at her with concern. "Your feet are really hurting, huh?" Eef nodded glumly. "Well you know, we have plenty of time, we could always stop for a little rest, no problem." Eef nearly spat out her cup of tea. She spluttered and looked at PJ with wide eyes. "A rest?" her voice came out higher than she had intended. "What do you mean? This is day-two of our huge adventure, there is no way we're stopping." PJ shrugged, a worried look on his face. "Besides," she said "I have an iron-will. There's no slowing me down."

Eef had always been proud of her determination, and she wasn't about to rest now. Even though her muscles yelled at her to stop and even though she was tired and dispirited, she couldn't imagine not pressing forwards. She lay down in her sleeping bag, muttering to herself. "I'm not soft. I'm not going to rest when we've only just begun. That isn't me!"

But in the morning as Eef stretched and stood up, she almost cried with the pain shooting through her feet and ankles. Quick! Before anyone could notice the tears in her eyes, she headed outside to get some fresh air. Experimenting gently, Eef rotated one foot and then the other, each with the same result. Hot pain shot through her tendons and more tears sprang to her eyes. When she came back into the hut, Eef found PJ talking to some walkers who had passed by. Everybody could see the tears still clinging to her eyelashes.

"What's wrong?" PJ gasped. Eef just shook her head. "I can't do it. My ankles are so strained, I'm not going to be able to go on." She sat down with a thump, feeling the sympathetic looks coming from the other walkers. But quickly she noticed everyone shaking their heads, kind smiles on their faces.

"What?" she asked, feeling slightly annoyed. This was serious! "Well," said one of the women who had stopped by to say hello, "you should just rest for a day or two, and then you'll probably be right as rain." She gave an encouraging thumbs-up.

PJ nodded in agreement. "Like I said Eef, you can take a day or two, and then we'll keep going. It's no big deal at all."

No big deal? Eef could hardly imagine anything worse—this was not how she'd pictured the beginning of their adventure. She was used to feeling strong and unstoppable. And yet, she knew the other walkers were right. She couldn't go on the way she was.

She felt like such a failure as she sat all day in the hut, watching the colourful packs of all the walkers passing by. What about her determination? So much for her iron-will. She felt helpless watching others go on with their adventure. That evening, Eef soaked her feet in water warmed on a little camp-fire before crawling into bed, snuggling down for a good sleep. In the morning, she had to admit the pain in her feet was a little better.

She spent another blue day staring after the other walkers. Everyone looked so purposeful, like they knew just where they were going. But she was stuck. Another night passed, and the next day her aches and pains felt even better. She realised she was starting to think of the next part of the trail. She could picture herself pulling her pack on and walking. The following day she was restless, and couldn't stop pacing around. Her body was almost healed.

That afternoon, PJ casually asked when she wanted to start walking again.

"Tomorrow!" she said with a smile.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes!" She couldn't sit still for any longer.

The next day Eef rolled on her socks and laced her boots up with glee. And when she put the pack on? She didn't mind at all that it still felt heavy. She knew if they went carefully, at their own pace, her body would get used to it. With each step, Eef could feel her heart growing lighter. She walked all day, slowly regaining her strength, and the smile never left her face.

"You should be proud of yourself," PJ told Eef at the end of their walking day.

"Why?" she asked, a little bit surprised.

"Because," he explained, "only someone really determined would be patient enough to stop and wait when the adventure had barely begun. If you'd pushed on, you would have injured yourself badly, then you would have had to quit. It's because you have an iron-will that you could wait until the right moment to keep going."

Eef laughed as she realised PJ was right.

She had thought her iron-will was broken, or that it had left her while she rested in the hut, but of course it hadn't. Sometimes being determined meant waiting, not pushing ahead. Sometimes it meant slowing down when everyone else was going faster. What really mattered was not losing sight of where you wanted to go. It didn't matter how long it took you to get there.

And six months later, that little celery stick wearing a brick had patiently made her way over the mountains and through the forest to the finish.

There she hugged the other hikers who had told her to be patient, and never doubted her iron-will again.

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Eef De Boeck

Eef De Boeck is a Belgian adventurer and sled dog guide based in Sweden. After studying history and political science at university, Eef decided to move to Lapland, where she grew to love the magic of Scandinavia's wintry north. In 2014, Eef and her partner Per Jonas, or 'PJ', decided to walk New Zealand's rugged Te Araroa trail, 3000 kilometres from Cape Reinga on the North Island to Bluff on the South Island. The journey took Eef six months and proved to be a transformative experience in her life. Eef is a young woman hungry for more adventures, and she plans to hike across Nepal from the eastern to western-most points in 2017. She is also an advocate for wider access to good quality outdoor gear made for women. Eef would like to become a mountain guide and run a hiking education centre. One day she also hopes to run a team of her own sled dogs in Norway.



Where would you like to hike, in the world?

What is the hardest thing you have done?

When have you demonstrated patience?
